

## [The Sudanese Ousted a Dictator Last Year— Why Is Washington Still Imposing Sanctions?](#)

**Middle East scholar Stephen Zunes talks about Sudan's hopeful but uncertain future in the wake of its peaceful democratic revolution.**

*Sudanese cheer as Sudan's prime minister delivers a speech during a ceremony marking the first anniversary of the uprising that toppled Omar al-Bashir, in Khartoum, on December 25, 2019. (Photo by Ashraf Shazly / AFP via Getty Images)*



Stephen Zunes is a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco, where he serves as coordinator of the program in Middle Eastern Studies. In early January 2020, he traveled to Sudan to learn about the protest movement that ousted longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir last year. While the military regime that Bashir headed is still a powerful force in Sudan, it has been pressed into sharing power with a civilian government in formation.

Sudan's future remains undecided. The leaders of the protest movement remain vigilant and determined to press for democracy, but in a peaceful manner. The military is divided between those who wish to unite a free, or at least freer, Sudan and those who would prefer a stronger military position in the future government. I spoke with Zunes in late January and again in early March for this interview. —*Mitchell Plitnick*

**MITCHELL PLITNICK:** Given the bloody history of Sudan, it struck many people around the world as remarkable that the coup that finally ousted Omar al-Bashir from the power he had held since 1989 was not the result of months of intense fighting. Not that it was bloodless, but the Khartoum Massacre of June 2019 ended up leading to compromise rather than civil war. At the same time, the military successor to the Janjaweed [the brutal government-supported militia that has ravaged Darfur and was a bulwark of Bashir's dictatorship] still held significant power. How do you assess what happened in the revolution, where do you think it left Sudan?

**STEPHEN ZUNES:** I've studied unarmed civil insurrection for decades, looking at dozens of countries. Sudan may be the most impressive I've ever seen, particularly in regard to their nonviolent discipline, which is all the more remarkable given the country's history. These are not pacifists, but they recognized that violence would give the regime the excuse to unleash far greater violence that they couldn't match. The opposition did engage in armed struggle in the mid- to late 1990s, launching incursions out of bases in Eritrea, but it never got far. And in the most recent aborted unarmed insurrection, in 2013, the opposition fought back but were crushed very quickly, with hundreds of deaths in just a few days. So they basically learned from their mistakes. There had also been a lot of trainings by Sudanese groups in recent years, not only in conflict resolution and interfaith dialogue, but in active nonviolent resistance as well, such as how one responds to police violence.

The palace coup that ousted Bashir in April last year was of course welcome, but unlike in Egypt, where the opposition naively trusted the military, in this case they said, “No, we want civilian leadership, and we’re not going to stop our protests until we get it.” Ongoing demonstrations and sit-ins continued, resulting in the June massacre, but this seemed to underscore to the military that they would have to engage in massive violence to suppress the movement, which could lead to an even wider anti-regime action. The activists, meanwhile, concluded that they might not have strength for a clear-cut victory, considering how entrenched some of the former Janjaweed and other hard-line elements were in government. So they figured this was the best they could come up with: a civilian-led government with a majority on the three main governing bodies, albeit with strong military representation. They were also successful in their idea of postponing elections for slightly over two years, out of a desire to rebuild civil society and increase civic education to counter the current organizational advantages of the military and conservative Islamists.

**SZ:** The military is divided. Some don’t want to give back power to civilians, while others recognize that 30 years of military rule has been a disaster. They’ve lost one-third of the country [*the Republic of South Sudan became an independent country in 2011*], many of the nation’s best and brightest have gone into exile, the economy has tanked, and the country has become an international pariah. One thing that struck me was the sheer incompetence of the military government. Younger officers are not happy and seem like they would accept civilian leadership.

A very hopeful sign is that many of the organizers from the pro-democracy movement are still at it. They’re still going into neighborhoods and doing the organizing, labor unions are coming back to life, and there’s hope that civil society will be strong enough to act as a deterrent against the military taking back rule over the country. They’re saying, If you guys try to seize power, we’re not going to quietly go home. In 1964 and 1985, there were also civil uprisings that ousted military regimes, followed by a few years of democratically elected but unpopular ruling coalitions, and then the military took over again. So people are aware of this and are looking over their shoulders constantly. Ironically, one advantage that democratic forces have today is that their revolution was more protracted, allowing time to build cadre and networks. The others lasted less than two weeks. This recent revolution is more grassroots-focused, involving more women, generally more organic. My impression is that they have the wherewithal to form a stronger basis in which civil society can resist more effectively than previous times in which the military successfully made a comeback.

**MP: As an American professor of the Middle East, how were you received in your public appearances and in your private meetings? And what were you hearing about attitudes toward the Trump administration?**

**SZ:** I came primarily as a researcher and as a learner. I wanted to learn from people on the ground and how they did it. My hosts did ask me to give some public talks, which were well-received, and some fairly high-ranking people in government wanted to meet with me, as well as some leading academics and businessmen. In some ways I was a bit embarrassed, especially as a white guy in Africa, at getting the attention I was receiving. I kept stressing I came as a learner and wanted to understand how other oppressed people around the world could gain knowledge from their experience. Perhaps they were grateful that someone actually noticed. It’s really unfortunate the Sudanese revolution has not gotten more attention in US media. Frankly, I think it might have something to do with the fact that the idea of black people, an Arab people, a Muslim people, having agency, thinking strategically, and engaging in nonviolent resistance effectively just doesn’t fit into the Western narrative.

Quite a few people pointed out that Sudan is still under strict sanctions by the United States. Despite now having a moderate, secular, civilian-led government, Sudan is still listed as a state sponsor of terror. Ironically, the United States spends billions to prop up a military dictatorship in Egypt and sells billions in arms to the

Saudis and Emiratis in the Gulf, while a nearby democratic experiment is being punished by sanctions. The US sanctions make it difficult for other countries and international financial institutions to do business with Sudan. I was unable to use credit cards or ATMs while there. Sudanese working and living abroad can't even send money back to their families in Sudan without going through Qatari banks and paying transaction fees. The sanctions were the main thing people were really upset about regarding the United States. I've since learned that Trump is insisting that since Bashir allowed Osama bin Laden to operate in Sudan in the 1990s, the United States is demanding that this impoverished country pay millions to the United States for bin Laden's crimes. And now they're being added to the list of Muslim countries from which the United States effectively bans immigrants.

**MP: Do you think the US government sees Sudan's democracy in a negative light?**

**SZ:** Trump's fondness for authoritarians is well-known, and depicting Arab/African/Middle Eastern countries as chronically violent and teeming with angry extremists with a propensity toward terrorism helps reinforce the perceived need for the United States to intervene militarily and to back authoritarian governments and occupation armies. So one could argue that downplaying democratic movements and undermining democratic governments does play a function in justifying US policy. I certainly don't have evidence that this is a conscious motivation for what Trump is doing here, however.

**MP: What policies would you recommend the United States adopt toward Sudan to support the democratic forces there?**

**SZ:** First, do no harm. So lift the sanctions. Second, make it very clear to our buddies in Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi that interference in Sudan in support of military and autocratic elements, as they have done in the recent past, is unacceptable. In addition, I think sustainable development aid and other kinds of democracy assistance would help. I'm one of those who have certainly had some criticisms of the National Endowment for Democracy and similar congressionally funded groups, but some of their work has been positive. I don't buy into critiques that say democracy support can't be a good thing if it's not twisted by ideological or strategic objectives. Similarly, US foreign aid has often been a mixed bag, but programs that help rebuild the country's economy are badly needed. But even before talking about supporting democracy, the US simply needs to stop undermining Sudan's civilian government with sanctions and ally with democratic forces, not autocratic ones.

**MP: The Sudanese uprising last year was a broad and popular one. Has it retained its popular appeal and character? Much of the protests seemed to have been led by women and youth. We've seen that in many places around the world in recent years, but not often with the success Sudan has seen so far. What would you say was different in Sudan, in terms of the political conditions or the tactics used by the protesters?**

**SZ:** Yes, Bashir was in power for 30 years, and it was generally seen as a strong dictatorship, so the victory by democratic forces was pretty remarkable by any measure. I think it challenges a lot of false notions about civil insurrections, such as the sense that it can't happen in countries with enormous poverty, high illiteracy, weak civil society, ethnic strife, ongoing civil wars, little international media attention, and an unusually brutal and repressive dictatorship. Sudan was all those things. And yet they won.

I think part of it was that people were at the end of their rope. It wasn't just that the government was so cruel, but it was so incompetent. It was like the uprisings in the black townships of South Africa or the occupied Palestinian territories in the 1980s, where young people just felt they had nothing to lose. And the regime was pretty weak in a lot of ways due to its manifold failures at governing. Combined with the nonviolent discipline of protesters and the leading role of women, this resulted in a weak sense of loyalty from much of the rank-and-file police and soldiers. But the victory of the pro-democracy forces was more about skills than conditions. They were successful because they were united, courageous, and very smart strategically.