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# Sudan's (Non-)Arab Spring: Lessons from the April 2019 and Other Uprisings

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The Sudanese people have a cultural trait peculiar and typical of them - a cultural practice that downplays the negative in favour of the positive, that treats individualism and egoism as less important than the general welfare of society and that readily sacrifices for another or the country. Western individualism scarcely appeals to the Sudanese sentimentality and sensibilities, whether they are southerners (jinubieen), westerners (garaba), or northerners (shamalieen).

In the words of Prof. John Lonsdale, the Sudanese, in their different social formations, used to live as negotiating ethnicities until colonial rule turned them into competing tribes. More than two hundred years of common history - notwithstanding the bad memories - are difficult to erase or turn away from; socially, they will always run into each other. However, the long history of bitter and violent struggles against foreign occupation, injustice, political repression and totalitarian regimes, unfortunately, failed to sublimate the Sudan into a nation-state although the people yearned for territorial unity. It is not by chance that the protesters in Khartoum hold the secession and independence of South Sudan as one of the criminal charges against the deposed dictator, Omer Hassan Ahmed el Bashir.

The political protests in the Sudan, which began last December in the working class city of Atbara, and the perennial power struggle that triggered political instability in South Sudan, speak to the

[failure of the Sudanese political elite](#) to manage the post-independence socio-economic and political engineering of the state. Myopia, religious-cultural narrow-mindedness and intolerance, which engendered political exclusion, social discrimination and economic marginalisation or neglect, culminated in the partition of the Sudan, the wars in Dar Fur, Nuba Mountains, and the Blue Nile and civil unrest in eastern Sudan. The crystallisation in the centre of a tiny minority at the helm of the country's political and economic power at the expense of the vast majority of the Sudanese in rural areas is the source of Sudan's predicament.

The mass action (processions, demonstrations and picketing) in Atbara, Khartoum and the major cities of the Sudan point to a salient political reality that characterised its regional distinct socio-economic and cultural development. The mass movements in the cities and towns in northern Sudan contrast exponentially with the military action undertaken in rural parts of the Sudan (southern Sudan, Dar Fur, Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile and eastern Sudan), reflecting the differential socio-economic and political evolution of the Sudanese state since the Turco-Egyptian era [1824-1885].

This reality points to the fact that a degree of social and economic development results in transformation of means and relations of production, and engenders a heightened social awareness and political consciousness. In this respect, it makes it easy for the people to establish a tradition of political organisation combined with action in support of socio-economic and political rights. This process occurred in northern and central Sudan in the form of the construction of the railway line from Wadi Halfa to Khartoum (1898), the Gezira scheme (1925) and the evolution of manufacturing light industries in Khartoum North, leading to the emergence of a conscious and politically organised working class that employs processions, demonstrations, strikes, picketing and civil disobedience in support of their demands for social, economic and political rights.

This is the third time in the Sudan that mass action in the form of a popular uprising (*intifadha*) ousted a military-based totalitarian regime. The first popular uprising was in 1964 (Ibrahim Abboud) and the second was Gaafar Numeri (1985).

On the other hand, however, rural Sudan (southern Sudan, Dar Fur, Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile and Eastern Sudan) is characterised by poverty and ignorance due to dominant traditional modes and relations of production, natural forces and superstition. As a result, social awareness and political consciousness is inordinately low; there is an obvious lack of tradition and culture of organised political action. Thus, to support the demands for social, economic and political rights, the people in rural Sudan use violence as their chief means of mobilisation for changing the political system.

This is the third time in the Sudan that mass action in the form of a popular uprising (*intifadha*) ousted a military-based totalitarian regime. The first popular uprising was in 1964 (Ibrahim Abboud) and the second was Gaafar Numeri (1985). The common denominator in these popular uprisings was the dominance of workers and farmers' trade unions, professional associations, the student's movement led by the Khartoum University Students Union (KUSU) and the political parties playing in the background. Without the workers' strikes, picketing and sit-ins, civil disobedience wouldn't be effective. Another feature of the two uprisings of 1964 and 1985 in the cities was that there were parallel military actions by Anya-nya (1955-1972) and the SPLM/SPLA (1983-2005), which contributed to weakening the incumbent regime. The National Islamic Front (NIF) seized state power in a military coup on 30 June 1989 and installed the Ingaz (salvation) system. It exploited the apparent weak performance of the Sudan Armed Forces in the SPLM/A spearheaded war of national liberation in southern Sudan.

## **Consequences of the paradigm shifts by the SPLM leadership**

In a [previous essay](#), I argued that the colonial education system, which essentially was Christian, anti-Arab and anti-Islam, coupled with the policy of annexing the southern provinces to British East Africa, instilled into the southern Sudanese political elite fear and hatred of the northern Sudanese. Thus, at independence, in a country dominated by highly educated northern Sudanese, this fear and hatred turned into a deep-seated inferiority complex in the southern Sudanese political leaders', notwithstanding the conspicuous power and wealth asymmetry between the two groups.

As a result, the southern Sudanese pursued a policy line that separated them from the northern Sudanese in a common struggle. For instance, in the run-up to independence (1947), there was a strong voice among the southern Sudanese politicians that the southern provinces would remain under British rule while northern Sudan gained its independence. The nationalist trend triumphed in the end and Sudan became independent as one country. This attitude among the southern Sudanese elite - of shunning unified political action with northern Sudan in favour of a separate and parallel struggle against the same oppressive political dispensation - has been the Achilles' heel in the Sudanese body politic. But even within southern Sudan, this attitude was echoed in the "kokora" (redivision), which culminated in Nimeri dismantling the southern region and the abolition of self-rule that the southern Sudanese had won in the Addis Ababa Agreement, rather than in unified political action together with northern Sudanese opposed to Nimeri.

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The paradigm shifts in the early 1990s, which the SPLM leadership struck following the collapse of the world socialist order, smacks of this attitude of separatism. The SPLM's ideological shift from revolution to neoliberalism coincided with the political shift from "united secular New Sudan" involving all the oppressed, political excluded and marginalised Sudanese to the right of the people of southern Sudan to self-determination. Had the southern Sudanese-dominated SPLM/SPLA honestly pursued a revolutionary agenda for destroying and restructuring the Sudan in order to meet the aspirations of its people for freedom, justice, fraternity, Omer el Bashir would have fallen in 1997 when he suffered serious military setbacks at the hands of the SPLA in war theatres in southern Sudan, Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, and at the hands of the New Sudan Brigade in eastern Sudan.

The ideological and political shifts (which made the war of national liberation a southern Sudanese movement, an obvious betrayal of the Nuba, Funj and Beja African groups in northern Sudan who joined the war on the basis of having been marginalised, oppressed and discriminated against), pushed the SPLM/A into negotiating liberal peace and a comprehensive peace agreement (CPA). It also rescued the Ingaz regime from collapse, extending its life and enabling it to wage war and commit war crimes in Dar Fur in 2003.

In fact, the secession of South Sudan left virtually intact the Ingaz system. It strengthened the Ingaz grip on power in the Sudan, enabling it to eschew the issue of democratic transformation on which the CPA was predicated. Once South Sudan was gone, the regime had no political military force to restrain its imposition of the strict Islamic code on the people of the Sudan. It immediately unleashed war on the SPLM/A-North in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile. The regime exploited the South Sudan-Sudan border war (2012) in terms of resultant acute economic difficulties in the Sudan,

and the eruption of the civil war in the Republic of South Sudan (2013) to strengthen itself *vis á vis* the armed and political opposition in the Sudan.

### **Genesis of Sudanese popular uprisings against dictatorial regimes**

According to Dr. Hassan Abdalla el Turabi, the Islamic scholar and chief ideologue and architect of the Ingaz system, “the Sudanese masses struggle to bring down military dictatorships while the traditional political parties create conditions for military coups”. To a large extent, this statement carries the truth of the dynamics of the Sudanese body politic since 1958.

Prior to contact with European colonialism, the Sudanese people lived as negotiating peaceful ethnic chieftaincies and kingdoms. However, this situation changed when a repressive and corrupt Turco-Egyptian administration (*Turkiya*) imposed itself.

The popular uprisings are rooted in the nature of the Sudanese people’s sophist Islam, which is dominant in northern Sudan, with its proximity to Egypt and Europe. As a faith, culture and state in one, Islam, unlike Christianity, has the capacity to arouse in people passions against rulers who are corrupt and unjust. This explains how Mohammed Ahmed el Mahdi succeeded to lead a revolt against the *Turkiya* (1824-1885) to establish an authentic indigenous Sudanese state (1885-1898). It is this progressive dimension of the Islamic faith that provides energy to enable the Sudanese to quickly mobilise into revolutionary political actions, like the Mahdist’s revolution (1881) and the White Flag Revolution (1924) to mention a few.

The re-conquest of the Sudan and the establishment of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899) opened the Sudan, particularly northern Sudan, to modernity and to the emergence of a modern working class movement under the leadership of the Sudan Railways Workers Trade Union. This had enormous impact on the evolution of people’s social awareness and political consciousness; the already advanced nationalist movement in Egypt augmented and accelerated Sudanese nationalism, which began under the aegis of the “unity of the Nile basin”.

The Sudanese people, mainly the intelligentsia, benefited from the education opportunities in Egypt, and indeed, most nationalist leaders obtained knowledge and influence of modern ideas from contact with Egypt, which had invested interest in restoring the Sudan to the Egyptian crown. Thus, and because of the terms of the Condominium Treaty, the Sudanese Army evolved as part of the Egyptian Army in the Sudan commanded by British officers but with a tradition of fidelity to the homeland rather than the colonial authorities. This worked to the advantage of the Sudanese nationalist movement, leading eventually to the White Flag revolution (1924), which played out in critical political situations, when as a national institution it was forced to choose between the people and the repressive regime in power.

These and many other factors that cannot be enlisted here shed light on the genesis of Sudanese popular uprisings. It must be mentioned that the pattern of these uprisings was by no means uniform, although it could be said with confidence that the military coups have invariably followed a similar pattern, usually as a result of the failure of political parties to manage power and the democratic process. The northern Sudanese people are highly politicised and organised, which makes it easy for them to craft political action even at the residential neighbourhood level. This explains the ease with which they quickly establish networks of resistance or solidarity.

The second democratic and multiparty political dispensation (1964-1969) was not really democratic. Like the first, it suffered serious political hiccups as the traditional-theocratic political parties (Umma and DUP) and Islamic Charter Front (ICF) jostled for

the promulgation of an Islamic Constitution to replace the Transition Constitution (1956) amended in 1964.

The dynamics and intricacy of Sudanese party politics pushed the then Prime Minister Ibrahim Khalil (Umma Party) to hand over power to Gen. Ibrahim Abboud on 17 November 1958 (ostensibly to take it back after six months after the political temperature had cooled down). The masses had to oust Abboud in October 1964, six years later. The October revolution, which the Sudanese people all over the world revere as a paradigm of its own, precipitated civil disobedience throughout the Sudan that paralysed the military government, forcing it to hand over power to a civilian government in eight days (October 21-28).

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The leftist stint at state power was short-lived, primarily because of the ideological split within the CPS eventually working to the advantage of the ICF, which exploited the ideological void in the May regime left by the communist and revolutionary democrats. Following the Port Sudan agreement (1977) between Numeiri and the National Front (right-wing political parties of Umma, DUP and ICF), Dr. Hassan el Turabi decided to join in order to eventually take over the May regime under the guise of political Islam.

Numeiri's abrogation of the Addis Ababa Agreement (1 June 1983), which established the Southern Region, and his imposition of Islamic Sharia laws (September 1983) created the conditions for his overthrow in a popular uprising on 6 April 1985. The dismantling of the Southern Region triggered war in Southern Sudan under the SPLM/A. At that time, the Sudan had gone into deep social and economic crises due to the structural adjustment programme (SAP) imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Sudanese pound plummeted from 0.35 to 1 against the US dollar and further down until the dollar exchanged for three Sudanese pounds. The government could not provide social services. Drought and famine had struck in Dar Fur and Kordofan, causing massive population migration to Khartoum. All these factors and war in southern Sudan culminated in the March-April 1985 popular uprising and the fall of the May regime.

The popular uprising did not uproot the regime as was anticipated. The regime's prominent ideologues and influential elements remained at large. The ICF leadership, now rebranded National Islamic Front (NIF), remained influential in the army and in the bureaucracy. The forces of the *intifadha*, ensnared by the army's top brass decision to side with the demonstrators after weeks of bloodshed, gave in too quickly and left the May regime intact even though it had been removed from power. No wonder that NIF ranked the third largest political force in the Constituent Assembly elected in 1986, although its leader Dr. Hassan Abdalla el Turabi, was trounced in a Khartoum constituency.

The third democratic and multiparty-political dispensation departed from the trajectory after October 1964, but again the Umma Party, now led by Sadiq el Shadegg Abdurrahman Mohammed Ahmed el Mahdi, never internalised the lessons learnt after the October 1964 uprising. His

prevarications and hesitation to implement the SPLM/A-DUP agreement of December 1988, notwithstanding the defeats his army suffered in war theatres, paved the ground for the NIF to usurp power in a military coup on 30 June 1989.

No human situation lasts indefinitely; political repression and all kinds of injustices end at some critical intersections and crossroads. The Ingaz lasted thirty years because of divided opposition to it; the southern Sudanese, who have been instrumental in the survival or demise of regimes and governments in the Sudan, unfortunately diverted from the Sudanese nationalist movement into secessionism...

The NIF, now rebranded Ingaz, is a modern political force in terms of its ideology and sophisticated political, security and intelligence organisation. It set to transform the Sudan in accordance with the *Sharia* and the *Suna*. It constructed a system of political repression, corruption, economic self-aggrandisement and set out to destroy or take over the tools of political resistance: workers' and farmers' trade unions, professional associations, and women's, youth's and students' movements. It carried out Jihad in southern Sudan, Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile. During its tenure, tens of thousands of young men and women perished. Through political repression, a network of political patronage and ruthless security/intelligence services the NIF managed to establish an Islamic totalitarian regime in the Sudan for thirty years despite the split within its ranks (1999) that witnessed Dr. Turabi's incarceration and the eventual formation of his Popular Congress Party (PCP) parallel to and competing with the National Congress Party (NCP).

### **The April 2019 uprising: Will it spell Ingaz's total demise?**

No human situation lasts indefinitely; political repression and all kinds of injustices end at some critical intersections and crossroads. The Ingaz lasted thirty years because of divided opposition to it; the southern Sudanese, who have been instrumental in the survival or demise of regimes and governments in the Sudan, unfortunately diverted from the Sudanese nationalist movement into secessionism, thus forfeiting their pivotal point of being the non-Arab and non-Muslim members of the Sudanese nationalist movement, which could have easily led to the construction of a Sudanese state based on the principle of "unity in diversity" – hallmarks of any democratic dispensation.

There have been attempted uprisings but to no avail since the Arab spring of 2011 that swept the regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen. This time, the architects and leaders of "change and peace", the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA), acted prudently so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past that permitted the "stealing" of the revolution. On 25 December 2018, which is not a public holiday in the Sudan after the secession of South Sudan, a group of twenty-one professionals (university professors, lawyers, doctors, engineers vets and others) released a public statement titled, "*Such that the people's revolution is not stolen: people's revolutionary consciousness is the only guarantee for our people*", in which they outlined five important points they categorised as the five principles of the fourth people's revolution.

These principles *inter alia* are: to overthrow the regime to stop the deteriorating socioeconomic and political situation in the country; never to allow change of the system from within, otherwise it is going to be Ingaz 2; although the pivotal role of the organised forces is welcomed in the overthrow and dismantling of the Ingaz system, changing the regime through a military coup should never be allowed; never to accept a Military Council on the basis of what transpired following the March-April uprising (1985), which eventually became May regime 2; the demand should be "a revolutionary council comprising the forces of change and whose mandate shall be national sovereignty.

The SPA and the Sudanese masses believe, and are convinced, that the revolution was not just to remove Omer el Bashir or the Ingaz regime for that matter, but to transform the Sudan's falsified reality and restore its national dignity. There are even calls for the Sudan to quit the Arab League and return to its African roots, which has received support from the masses.

The SPA is following the principles to the letter, as reflected in the decision to camp the protestors into the precincts of the Armed Forces headquarters in Khartoum since 6 April, which marked the thirty-fourth anniversary of Numeri's overthrow. This is a complete departure from the pattern of previous uprisings, which handed over power to the traditional political parties through fake or bogus elections. The traditional and theocratic political parties and the Islamic Charter Front had been using Islam, a faith to which the majority of Sudanese subscribe, as a political tool to dampen people's consciousness, making it easy to ensnare them into voting them to power. If the demand now by the members of the SPA to liberate Sudanese politics from religion is met in the new dispensation, it will go a long way in transforming Sudanese reality. (Religion is a double-edged sword.)

The SPA and the Sudanese masses believe, and are convinced, that the revolution was not just to remove Omer el Bashir or the Ingaz regime for that matter, but to transform the Sudan's falsified reality and restore its national dignity. There are even calls for the Sudan to quit the Arab League and return to its African roots, which has received support from the masses. The reaction to the events in the Sudan have been varied, from support for the military Junta coming from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Egypt to outright rejection of the Junta by the African Union (AU). The AU, in its resolution 5 (c) to *"freeze Sudan's participation in its functions if the Military Council does not surrender power to a civilian authority in two weeks from the date of the resolution"*, inadvertently supports the SPA.

My reading of the situation is that although the Junta continues to implement the demands of the protesters camped in its headquarters to arrest, incarcerate and confiscate the looted property of the Ingaz figures, nevertheless, they will procrastinate in handing power to the civilian Supreme Council of the State and a civilian cabinet until they are assured of their immunity from prosecution. It must be viewed that their intervention was to prevent a sharp split in the army and to keep the Ingaz intact. Most of the members of the Military Council were senior officers in the army and security forces whom Bashir appointed recently, ostensibly to protect his back. The Chair of the Military Council, Gen. Burhan, hails from Bashir's ethnicity, and may be counting on a possible split along ethnic and regional contours to occur within the ranks of the SPA and the protesters to drive a wedge and weaken the protest.

So far, the SPA and the Sudanese people are united in their demand that an Ingaz 2 shall never be allowed, which explains their demand to dismiss from the information and communication industry all those bureaucrats, journalists and news anchors linked to Ingaz 1. The deposed President Omer el Bashir and his two brothers, Ali Osman Mohammed Tah and Dr. Awad el Jaz, and many other Ingaz figures have been incarcerated in Kober Maximum Prison - a positive development and indication that SPA means business.

While time may be running out for the Junta on account of non-recognition and other diplomatic etiquettes, the SPA and the protesters camped in the army headquarters may continue to bask in the support of the Sudanese masses until they succeed to form the Supreme Council of the State - with or without a representative of the Junta - and a Constitutional and Legislative Assembly representing the forces of change, which in turn will elect a Prime Minister, a Deputy Prime Minister and seventeen civilian ministers of impeccable character. It remains a tall order to transform

Sudan's reality after thirty years of Ingaz

## **The impact of Sudan's uprisings on South Sudan and the region**

Although until recently (2011), South Sudan was an integral part of the Sudan, nevertheless, as I have mentioned above, its people had not completely integrated into the social and political fabric of northern Sudan. The Southern Sudanese invariably (except for small groups of leftist activists) pursued a separatist agenda, and therefore, don't count themselves part and parcel of the Sudanese nationalist struggle even though they may have participated in the struggle as individuals or as groups. They have, therefore, forfeited their share of the victory. Not only that but they also don't benefit in terms of acquiring political skills, such as tactics and strategies, in their struggles. This explains why political struggles in southern Sudan then, and now South Sudan, have invariably been violent ethnic conflicts and wars.

Before speaking about the impact of the Sudanese uprisings, it is important to analyse the context of the Horn and the Great Lakes Region in terms of political contacts and flow of ideas, without which it will be practically impossible to gauge the impact of social and political developments in any of the countries on the others in the region.

It is a fact that nationalist movements in the region were fragmented and isolated from each other although there was the overarching Pan-African movement whose objectives were continental liberation. It is obvious the national movements were stronger than the Pan-African movement, whose ideological messages did not permeate traditional, conservative and liberal African political thought. The relations in the region were and remain competitive and conflictual, revolving around inviolability of arbitrary colonial borders. Thus political formations in the region had much on their plates other than solidarity across common borders.

This may explain why important socio-political developments occur without concern, solidarity, or drawing important lessons to be employed locally. Sudanese uprisings did not have much impact on the political party organisation and action in East Africa nor did developments in East African countries impact political struggles in the Sudan. For example, the union of Tanzania and Zanzibar did not impact or influence the southern Sudanese desire to pursue secession. The second liberation struggles in Kenya in the 1990s never borrowed a leaf from the Sudanese struggle against Numei's totalitarian regime. For instance, it was not enough to remove section 2A from the constitution to relax the struggle against Moi's totalitarianism

Now times have changed and it is becoming clear that peoples' struggles and mass movements against dictatorship, personalised rule, and acute economic pauperisation of the masses emanating from the crisis of capitalism in the region at least share some characteristics and must therefore learn from each other in terms of setting strategies and tactics and solidarity with each other. The mass movements in Kenya and Uganda must learn to organise and build solidarity networks and shield them from the repressive security organs of the state, It is important to view a crisis in one sector as part of a crisis in the whole system. The political tool (civil disobedience) in the hands of Sudanese protesters was effective only because all subscribed to the principle of solidarity and all sections of society participated in it at the same time. Mass action in a sector must involve the professionals, the technicians, the workers - otherwise it will not succeed.

Organize Don't Agonise!!

Aluta continua!!



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