



# A Spring in the Horn: Unpacking the Mass Protests and Transitions in Sudan and Ethiopia

By Rashid Abdi



Two mass protest movements have, in quick succession, forced regime changes in Sudan and Ethiopia, two of the Horn of Africa's quintessential "hard" states. A deep-seated disillusion with the security and developmental states drives the new "revolutionary" mood. What is less clear is where all the ferment and the popular demand for a new dispensation will lead.

In Sudan, the ouster of Omar al-Bashir has been followed by a partial retreat of the security state. In Ethiopia, the election of a reformist Prime Minister and a year of sweeping reforms have extensively eroded the power of the security deep state.

Yet, neither Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's extensive cull nor the Sudanese military council's modest targeted purge constitute a fundamental dismantling of the structures of the security state. More importantly, the transitions underway in the two countries, were, in the initial phases, at least, top-down attempts by the security state to engineer a soft landing with minimal disruptions.

Prime Minister Abiy's singular act of genius lay in the way he deftly subverted a strategy of piecemeal reform assigned to him by the ruling party and began almost single-handedly to unravel

old Ethiopia at breakneck speed.

The retreat of the authoritarian order in both Ethiopia and Sudan opens up huge possibilities: a generational opportunity for meaningful and positive change but also great risks.

In Ethiopia, a year of “deep” reforms under the youthful reformist Prime Minister has put the transition on a rocky but relatively steady positive trajectory. Overall prospects for good governance, civil liberties and human rights continue to improve.

In Sudan, the situation is less hopeful and remains, so far, uncertain. The hopes and expectations raised by the resignation of Omar al-Bashir after 30 years in power now grates against the reality of a potentially messy and protracted transition following a controversial intervention by the army. The Transition Military Council (TMC), made up of al-Bashir’s allies, is struggling against mounting popular discontent to manage an interregnum.

The Horn is at strategic crossroads. There is immense hope but also great fear. How Ethiopia and Sudan manage their fraught transitions and the prospects for success and reversal remain unknown. What is not in doubt is that a botched transition in both nations will crush the dreams of millions and their quest for liberty and a better quality of life. It will also embolden autocratic regimes and vindicate their ideology of stability.

The unprecedented upheaval and ferment in the two Horn of Africa states provide an extraordinary window into the complex, diverse, and obscure changes and currents shaking up society and traditional politics. These contextual dynamics must not be overlooked in the analyses of Ethiopia and Sudan.

### **Sudan’s turbulent interregnum**

Sudan and Ethiopia offer two fraught transition “models”: atypical, unstable and potentially reversible. While dissimilar in some key aspects, both are attempts at a top-down fix, reliant on continued goodwill and support of the military/security services and dominant parties. More importantly, the two transitions are not outcomes of political and constitutional settlements, and are likely to remain contested and unsettled for some time.

Sudan’s transition is in its infancy and is dogged by a host of challenges. Of the two countries, it is the one with the greatest potential for a short-term crisis, but, if successful, one that opens enormous possibilities for improved governance and stability.

Formal, direct talks between Sudan’s protest movement and the military began on 27 April but quickly hit a snag barely two days later. The key sticking points: the length of the transition (the military wants two years while the protest movement favours four years on the basis that more time is needed to undo the damage of 30 years of misrule); composition of the proposed Sovereign Transition Council (STC); and who should lead it.

On 30 April, the TMC issued a series of controversial and unilateral decisions that escalated the stalemate into a crisis. The council said the STC would be headed by the military and that 7 out of 10 posts would be allocated to the military (contrary to the Sudanese Professional Association [SPA]’s demand for a 15-member council, the bulk of whose members should be civilian). It further called on the SPA to dismantle barricades at the Army Command in Khartoum and to get protesters off the streets.

The generals had been angling for a longer pre-transition period from the start. This was largely based on the assumption that they stood to gain more from the tactical point of view; the SPA had

more to lose. But there are other pressing calculations. First, more time allows the TMC to sort out internal divisions. Second, it gives it the leg room to craft and fine-tune its negotiation strategy. Third, it provides the TMC with the opportunity to drag out the process and wear down the pro-democracy movement - the so-called "attrition option" that has served the military well in the past.

At the heart of Sudan's chaotic and bitter transition contest - indeed, the crisis of legitimacy/credibility - is the self-appointed TMC. It is made up of senior generals, all beneficiaries of the army purges in the last one decade by al-Bashir that elevated loyalists to key posts.

The decision by the African Union to extend the TMC's life by three months, is, therefore, a major victory for the military. It now has up to the end of July 2019 to set up an authority to oversee the transition and to agree to a roadmap with the opposition. A viable transition roadmap in Sudan depends on consensus between the five distinct actors/constituencies: street protesters; the leadership of the protest movement; traditional parties; the TMC; and regional actors. This will not be easy; it is almost certain that divergent aims, interests and calculations could prove a major impediment.

### **The Military Council: A reluctant reformer**

At the heart of Sudan's chaotic and bitter transition contest - indeed, the crisis of legitimacy/credibility - is the self-appointed TMC. It is made up of senior generals, all beneficiaries of the army purges in the last one decade by al-Bashir that elevated loyalists to key posts. They eased al-Bashir out and made a number of significant concessions. However, they controversially, stonewalled when it came to the speedy transfer of power to a civilian administration. Significantly, they have so far resisted popular calls for the dismantling of the so-called *Dawlah-al-Amiqah* or deep state - widely perceived as a covert power centre whose members include senior generals, seurocrats and politicians who exercise extra-constitutional influence on the state.

What the TMC's true aims are and what its interests and links with the deep state and foreign powers are, are all a matter for debate and conjecture. Far less speculative and hazardous, perhaps, is what it isn't.

The council is essentially a product of a deep crisis within the state - a hastily created crisis-response tool to reassert military influence and manage a fluid political situation. It pulled back from imposing a state of emergency and allowed the protests to continue. It quickly shed unpopular senior ex-regime figures (such as the intelligence chief, Salah Gosh). It released some (but not all) political prisoners and reached out to protest leaders. These were all positive and encouraging steps that demonstrate that the TMC has significant agency, is pragmatic and is amenable to a political settlement.

Yet, the clumsy nature of the coup, the confusion in the first 48 hours, as well as the incoherent pronouncements and policy flip flops since then point to deep internal frictions. Tactically, this could be an advantage for the coalition leading the protests, potentially giving them greater room to nudge the TMC towards reform and to influence the agenda. It could also pose serious challenges in the coming weeks and months, especially if, as some fear, the council becomes opportunistic and capricious and its cohesions become more frayed.

But there must be no mistake about the TMC's politics. Its primary goal is to maintain national "stability". It views retention of military power, influence and privilege as necessary to achieve that "noble" goal. There is no evidence that it shares the democratic aspirations of the majority of the

Sudanese people. It is instinctively suspicious of civilians and resistant to the idea of civilian oversight, and, even much less, civilian rule.

Sudan's military for three decades waged not just war but also engaged in multiple peace processes and political negotiations at the local and national levels, involving armed and non-armed civilian opponents. Under al-Bashir, talks were conducted in the same manner as war was waged. Invariably, three distinct tactics, with roots in war strategy, were deployed to outflank and eviscerate the civilian opposition: accommodation, co-option and containment.

The official discourse and rhetoric surrounding the series of "national dialogues" in train for nearly two decades offers a fascinating glimpse into the appropriation of martial metaphors - a progressive "militarisation" of politics. Domestic politics was officially referred to as "*jabhat al-daakhiliyah*" (internal front); political parties were reminded of the value of national cohesion and called upon to help "unify the ranks" (*tawhid al-saf*); dissidents were "cat's paw" (*mikhlab qit*) of foreign enemies.

Sudan's protest movement will be negotiating with a military that has set ways of dealing with civilian adversaries. Expectations that the military is willing to make a strategic and irreversible retreat from politics seems over-optimistic. The TMC's 30<sup>th</sup> April pronouncements and the subsequent hardening of language certainly sowed doubts about the prospect of that happening any time soon. The unilateral and escalatory nature of the council's statement goes against the letter and spirit of the negotiations. It may be a hint of an intense internal power struggle. It could also signal an attempt by hardline factions to assert greater control - a hypothesis lent some credence by the fact it was the TMC's second-in-command, General Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo aka Hemedti, who was personally involved.

Hemedti, the commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF - *Quwaat al-Da'm al-Sari'*), has in recent weeks emerged as the real power within the TMC, playing court to visiting dignitaries and diplomats. His swift maneuvers to consolidate power within the military and security services are anything but coincidental. He was, for example, "elevated" to a "member" of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). (An official SUNA news agency dispatch said that he was now "*uzw*" - a "member" of NISS - a vague term that is both odd and inexplicable.)

The RSF itself is affiliated to the NISS since it was established in 2013 from the rump of the Janjaweed militia. The original force of roughly 7,000 was drawn mainly from Hemedti's own Rizaygat tribe in Darfur (an important factor in itself that partly explains its strong internal cohesion and loyalty to Hemedti). It has a complicated dual command chain, answerable to both the NISS Director-General and the regular Army General Command. Al-Bashir increasingly relied on the RSF and the Popular Police Forces in recent years to quell social unrest and low-level armed insurrections. The bulk of the RSF is now fighting in Yemen alongside Emirati troops, a decision based on RSF's perceived counterinsurgency competence and adaptability to the Yemeni battlefield conditions.

Hemedti is young, ambitious and has powerful Gulf friends who are keen to see him play an influential role in the transition. He has a fearsome reputation, and is deemed both an able battle field commander and a skillful political operator. His rise to prominence since al-Bashir's ouster and high visibility within the TMC suggest a resurgence of hardline elements keen not to cede too much ground to the protest movement.

### **Old parties and the protest movement**

Sudan's bewildering array of political parties, which are weak and deeply fragmented, were caught off-guard by the protests. However, they seem keen to be included in the transition talks. The TMC

initially seemed to prefer a broad-based dialogue, in part because that could have neutralised the weight of the protest movement. It has since walked back and proposed a format that significantly shortened the list of participants, not least because of the risks of an unwieldy and fractious dialogue process that is impossible to conclude within the short timeframe it now has (three months).

Two distinct but complementary historical trends converged in the Horn protests: a massive demographic shift that progressively moved the youth to the centre of politics; and a technological revolution that provided them with the tools to effectively resist and organise. The sheer demographic weight and the volatility and restless energy unleashed by these changes cannot be ignored.

Sudan's protest movement and its leadership hold the initiative in the contest to shape the transition. The call for freedom, justice and peace (emblazoned on every placard) gelled a fragmented nation and triggered the Horn's most powerful and unprecedented mass protest movements. The expectations are high and the road to achieving them daunting.

The risk of fragmentation within the protest movement is also high. It is now made up of [two distinct groups](#): *Quwaa I'laan al-Huriyyat wal Tagyiir* (Declaration of Freedom and Change Forces-DFCF) and the Sudanese Professionals Association-SPA (*Tajamm'u al-Mihniyyin al-Sudaniyin*). They are now broadly aligned in their demands. However, TMC's co-option strategies and the attrition of protracted negotiation are highly likely to sow division.

Ethiopia's transition is the outcome of two severe crises that shook the regime to the core: over four years of relentless mass protests in Oromiya and Amhara regional states; and a sharp economic downturn. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) played a central role in the transition that engineered Abiy Ahmed's rise.

The SPA and the DFCF have so far done a remarkable job in leading a cohesive, disciplined and non-violent mass protest movement. They must not sell themselves short in the delicate negotiations now underway. They must safeguard their cohesion, eschew personal ambition, remain vigilant against the familiar co-option "traps", stay resilient and focused in the face of setbacks, and be hard-nosed at every phase of the negotiations.

### **Ethiopia's unstable transition**

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It started off well in the early years, combining a reformist zeal with an accommodative approach to politics. Its fortunes for over two decades was tied to that of the charismatic and talented Meles Zenawi. It owes its structural and organisational resilience, and more importantly, its internal consensus-style ethos, to him. The aftermath of the controversial elections in 2005 and the massive crackdowns on protests ushered in a long period of repression, deflected the party from its democratic goals, and progressively strengthened the hegemony of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). But even in its weakened state, the EPRDF proved its dependability as an instrument of crisis management at critical junctures. It engineered a smooth transition of power after the death

of Meles in 2012 and leaned on Hailemariam Desalegn to resign as Prime Minister in February 2018.

Abiy capitalised on the party's internal institutional strength and exploited the antipathy to the TPLF to build the tactical alliances necessary to seal his victory at the EPRDF Congress in February 2018. Ironically, Abiy's radical reforms, in particular, the planned swift transition to a conventional multiparty system, makes the future of the governing coalition perilous and uncertain. While the PM has orchestrated changes within the EPRDF and consolidated his grip over his own Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), many suspect the era of the dominant vanguard party may be coming to a close. Significantly, the Ethiopian Prime Minister has relied on a close-knit circle of politicians and inexperienced advisers to drive his fast-paced reforms, with minimal or no input from the EPRDF and other key institutions.

The benefits of a personalised elite-driven reform seem obvious. Abiy, arguably, needed the latitude and flexibility it provides to push through a raft of "deep reforms" and swiftly dismantle key pillars of TPLF's power in the military, security services and economy.

The potential drawbacks of a highly personalised leadership style and an elite-driven reform process lacking sufficient institutional buy-in and support must be obvious. It is inherently risky and alienates the very agencies indispensable to implementation and long-term sustainability. Understood thus, the risks to reform in Ethiopia seem not so much bureaucratic inertia as bureaucratic recalcitrance. Rumbblings of unease within the state and in the parastatals over key aspects of the reforms, from privatisation to the future of the ethnic-federalism system, reinforce these fears. The Prime Minister, rhetorically at least, is increasingly aware of this potential problem; he has stepped up meetings with key departments and pledged to deepen institutional engagement. However, his critics claim that the impromptu townhall-style meetings are cosmetic, and do not constitute structured policy dialogue.

### **Ethnic unrest**

Identity politics may act as a catalyst for change, but its huge capacity to complicate transitions that foment new unrest must not be ignored. Ethiopia is an egregious example. Aggressive and adversarial strains of ethno-nationalisms, resurgent in recent years, pose grave conflict risks. Many ethnic conflicts are traditionally driven by contested borders and resource competition. Ethno-regionalism/nationalism aggravate these conflicts and make them intractable. Prime Minister Abiy's stabilisation and consolidation efforts have had minimal impact in de-escalating the problem. Balancing multiple and contending ethnic interests proved far trickier than anticipated. His policy of accommodation to remedy historical injustices and allocate more government posts to marginalised communities and disadvantaged segments of the population won wider praise but either failed to mollify more militant and younger ethno-nationalist activists clamouring for deeper affirmative action, or reinforced resentment among other ethnicities.

This is particularly the case in Oromiya, where factions loyal to the Oromo Liberation Front that view the Prime Minister as a "traitor" to the Oromo cause, continue to stoke violence and undermine social cohesion. Several attempts to mediate an end to the ructions in Oromiya and reconcile the rival factions so far have produced shaky truces that failed to hold.

In Ethiopia, the economic crisis was largely induced by the frenetic pace of growth, skewed development, expensive infrastructure mega-projects and dependence on foreign (Chinese) loans. Abiy in early 2018 inherited a state that was virtually bankrupt, its foreign exchange reserve depleted and saddled with mounting and unsustainable debt-servicing obligations.

Meanwhile, the Abiy's anti-corruption drive and political consolidation strategy, perceived targeted at curbing the influence exerted by the minority Tigrayan ethnic community on the country's political and economic life, fomented serious backlash. The widely held perception that the premier's new friendship with the Eritrean President, Isayas Afewerki, is partly motivated by a common desire to isolate the TPLF, served to further inflame sentiments in Tigray. The region is now effectively a mini-state, its relations with Addis Ababa deeply fraught and antagonistic. On-off dialogue between Addis and Mekele and a series of high-level meetings in 2018 failed to smooth relations or diminish the potentially dangerous siege mentality developing in Tigray. The region is where the country's elite military units are garrisoned and where sophisticated heavy military hardware, including air combat assets, are kept (a legacy of the border conflict with Eritrea). An armed conflict - highly improbable but impossible to rule out - would be catastrophic.

## **Economic hardship**

Economic hardships remain core drivers of social unrest in Sudan and Ethiopia. Conditions for the vast majority of their populations progressively worsened in the last five years. Sudan's loss of oil revenues and subsequent deadlock over oil trans-shipment fees with South Sudan triggered the country's severest economic crisis in decades. High inflation, currency turbulence and a series of austerity measures that saw subsidies lifted on bread and other commodities hit the lower classes hard and fomented the mass protests that quickly engulfed the whole country.

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The short- to medium-term prospects look bleak, even though China's decision to [write off](#) some of the debt in late April and signals of support from multilateral financial institutions and donors promise some relief.

In Sudan, the UAE similarly stepped in to shore up the currency by depositing money in the treasury. Donors have equally signaled readiness to help.

The gravity of the economic crisis in the two states and the improbability of a quick and dramatic improvement portend huge risks for the transition. Yet, the kind of tangible and irreversible progress in their delicate transitions necessary to unlock donor support and foreign investment hardly exists now and is bound to take years, by which time conditions would have deteriorated further.

In Ethiopia, the continued proliferation of ethnic unrest and violence in economically productive regions has triggered massive displacement - estimated at 3 million. The government's inability to get on top of the situation is hugely destabilising in itself, but also certain to prove a major impediment to new foreign investment.

An emergency financial aid package for Sudan and long-term economic relief and stimulus package for Ethiopia seem the best options for the international community to shore up the transitions.

## **A youth revolt**

The uprisings in Ethiopia and Sudan constitute the Horn's first uniquely large-scale youth revolt; the first political coming-of-age of two youth generations embittered by economic hardship and the

inequities of the “hard state”.

Ethiopia, with [over 70% of the population](#) (out of a total of 110 million) under the age 30, and Sudan with [60% of the population](#) (42.5 million) under the age of 25, are examples of states where the demographic shift has been at its starkest, reflecting both the promise and destabilising potential of the so-called youth bulge.

Two distinct but complementary historical trends converged in the Horn protests: a massive demographic shift that progressively moved the youth to the centre of politics; and a technological revolution that provided them with the tools to effectively resist and organise. The sheer demographic weight and the volatility and restless energy unleashed by these changes cannot be ignored. The long-term viability and sustainability of the transitions hinge on how the disruptive impact of the youth bulge is managed.

The recurrent themes of the protests are familiar; they revolve around a set of socio-economic grievances that cut across the age-divide: jobs and better wages, economic growth, opportunities and autonomy, better services. Sudan’s [unemployment rate](#) is estimated to be around 21.4% or over 2 million of the productive labour force of 21 million. In Ethiopia youth unemployment [stands](#) at 19.5%

### **Social media and the diaspora**

The protest movements in Ethiopia and Sudan are beneficiaries of the digital revolution, effectively harnessing the power of the smartphone and social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) to challenge the regimes in power. These tools allowed them to organise, to break the state’s monopoly over information, and to generate their own multimedia content.

In the contest for narrative space, the state was severely disadvantaged. Its power of monopoly over communication (and access to sophisticated cyber-spying software) was offset by the technical savvy and ingenuity of the protesters. Frequent communication shutdowns that targeted SMS and Internet access proved ineffective. Protesters used VPNs and encrypted messaging apps and relied on diaspora supporters to bypass state censorship. Diaspora support in both instances was crucial and went beyond amplifying social media messages. Activists in North America and Europe mobilised funds, organised pickets and petitions, highlighted rights abuses, and raised the profile of these protests at the international stage.

The Oromo diaspora in the US, a close-knit community with its own influential media outlets, played a particularly pivotal role – a role recognised by Prime Minister Abiy himself when he made a “thanksgiving” tour of the US in 2018. A number of high-profile exiled figures have since been given high-level posts in the Ethiopian government.

Diaspora influence and power have not been without controversy, especially in Ethiopia. There have been claims that hardline activists disseminated fake news and inflammatory messages to stoke ethnic hostility and division. In Sudan, there is speculation (probably fueled by the military) that the diaspora is inciting intransigence and radicalising the protest movement.

The transition in Ethiopia has brought to the fore the simmering tensions between political classes inside the country and those abroad. Growing intra-Oromo divisions partly reflect both the type of rivalries, political divergence and clash of ambitions that could complicate the transition. A fracturing of the protest movement’s core support base remains a potential risk in a delicate transition such as Ethiopia’s but also the one in Sudan. The Sudanese reform movement has, so far, stayed remarkably cohesive. That unity is almost certain to come under great strain, especially in

the highly likely scenario of protracted and intensely contested transition. The Transition Military Council favours a fragmented and weak opposition. All the signs indicate that this is an outcome it is actively working to achieve.

## **Identity politics**

Sudan and Ethiopia are similar in a variety of ways. They are the Horn's most diverse states with a combined total of 99 major ethnic groups and over 200 languages and dialects. They still remain geographically vast and unwieldy, even after secessionist wars and peace settlements led to a partition that diminished their original size. Both share a long history of multiple armed conflicts and vast, ill-governed and severely underdeveloped peripheries – conditions that incubated volatile forms of identity politics, insurrections and social unrest.

Both countries also experimented with decentralisation models designed to foster self-rule and greater autonomy. However, neither Ethiopia's radical ethnic federal system nor Sudan's conventional one achieved the desired aims. Instead, they replicated the ills of the central state, bred their own inequities, inflamed ethno-regional nationalisms and reinforced core-periphery tensions.

Ethnic identity politics was a potent factor in the Ethiopian mass protests; it provided the glue and energy. What is fascinating is not just the complex ways in which group grievances intersect, feed off/bleed into wider discontent, but the subtle, somewhat counter-intuitive ways in which even hitherto antagonistic ethnicities, regions and religious groups managed to cooperate and transcend their differences.

Ethiopia's mass protests never evolved into a single nationwide movement like Sudan's. They were almost exclusively confined to Oromiya and Amhara regional states, which are dominated by two ethnic groups divided by a long history of mutual antipathy. Yet, activists in the two regions drew energy and succour from each other's protests; they cross-fertilized and learnt effective protest tactics from one another. (For example, Amhara region's ghost-town tactics that paralysed cities were replicated in Oromiya.) Gradually, a new sense of mutual empathy and solidarity developed between Oromo and Amhara protesters. The seminal moment was when protesters in the two regions chanted "Down Down Woyane" – proof that the two distinct ethnic discontents had coalesced into a single national demand.

In Sudan, the protest leadership quickly tapped into and harnessed the vast array of diverse grievances to weave a set of key national objectives. With a comparably freer civic space, well-organised trade union movement and professional associations with a proud tradition of political activism, Sudan's mass revolt took on a national character much more quickly than Ethiopia's.

What tipped the scales was not critical mass (though that was important) but the emergence of a proto-narrative that encapsulated shared national goals.

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## **Identity, protest and culture**

Sudan achieved in protest what eluded it for decades: a genuine moment of unity in diversity. The protest rallies in Khartoum were a microcosm of the nation, bringing together diverse ethnic and civil society groups drawn from all regions, social strata and professions. Darfuris, Kordofanis and Nubians, women and other distinct social groups, aggrieved workers and traders – all disenfranchised and rendered powerless and invisible by state policies – were catapulted onto the national stage. They all made common cause and rallied around a single political message.

But the mass uprisings in Sudan and Ethiopia were not just animated by political and economic grievances; activists in Sudan actually took slight at media characterisation of their protests as “bread riots”. They were also impelled by cultural discontent – a sense of humiliation and anger at the state’s perceived cultural homogenisation, discrimination and misogyny.

In Ethiopia, the Oromo unrest was fueled, in part, by long simmering grievances over the status of the Oromo language and state interferences in religious affairs, while in Sudan, state-driven Islamisation and Arabisation remained major sources of social frictions.

The act of protest was in itself psychologically and culturally transformative, providing an opportunity to assert cultural pride and reclaim self-confidence and autonomy. The Oromo pride movement in Ethiopia and the rise of women in Sudan exemplify the cultural forces shaping the politics of protests and transitions.

Prime Minister Abiy’s open embrace and appropriation of Oromo culture and his gender parity campaign are just two examples of the symbolic and practical policy impacts. Hopes are high that Sudan’s new breed of assertive female activists will capitalise on the national mood for change and harness their collective picketing power to influence the transition’s agenda.

No less important, the rallies served as a vehicle for collective catharsis and radical empathy; a space to affirm values of mutual interdependence, solidarity, and peaceful co-existence.

The slogan “*kuluna Darfur*” (we are all Darfur) at the rallies in Khartoum, hopefully, was not just a feel-good empathetic response, but marks a fundamental positive shift in the way communities relate to one another.

## **Religion and culture**

Religion – as a powerful galvaniser and conduit for protest and a repository of moral and ethical values necessary for a just society – has a long history in the Horn. The protests in Sudan and Ethiopia provide contrasting lessons in the resilience of religion and its potency to inspire and channel protest. But far more interesting is how the debate over the relevance of religion in governance continues to evolve.

The Oromo mass insurrection in Ethiopia gestated for many years; it fed off diverse, small and localised communal grievances before it snowballed into a national crisis. The big triggers – high youth unemployment, state-driven land grabs, punitive taxation, repression and violent crackdowns – are well known. Less noted and examined are the obscure and overlapping cultural and religious roots of the discontent brewing for close to a decade.

The political rebellion owed much of its resilience and success to the cultural revivalist movement gaining in momentum and influence in recent years. It drew energy, inspiration and self-confidence from the potent message of ethnic pride preached by Oromo elders like Abba Gadda.

Oromo traditional *Waaqeffana* religion, practised by a small fraction of the community (roughly less than 5%), played an important complementary role as a central pillar of cultural expression. Regarded as the indigenous faith of the Oromo nation, its rituals and spiritual teachings progressively galvanised millions. The *Irrecha* annual festival of harvests, with roots in the *Waaqeffana* religion, drew tens of thousands, and became a visible symbol of political and cultural consciousness and a focal point for the protests.

A series of Muslim unrests in Oromiya in 2012 quickly spread to other regions and continued to simmer for over 18 months. Much of the unrest was initially triggered by alleged state interference in Muslim affairs, but quickly aggravated by mass arrests of clerics and community leaders and the suspension of Muslim publications (such as *Ye’Muslimoch Guday*). The Muslim protests - viewed across Oromiya as evidence of the state’s wider malign intent against the Oromo - thus triggered the first spark that lit the fire of large-scale rebellion in 2014.

The Oromo nation’s ability to harness its cultural heritage and multiple faith traditions and to foster internal mutual respect and tolerance is unique. So too is the tradition of syncretism that indigenised Islam and Christianity and reduced the heat and social frictions generally associated with puritanism and proselytism. This cultural adaptability and inherent resistance to exclusivist manifestations of faith may partly explain why Salafism found Oromiya a less ambient and sympathetic territory to put down roots in.

The bid to project this benign and positive face of Oromo culture on the national stage was thwarted by fragmentation and factionalism, as well as by the political clout exerted by militant factions widely perceived wedded to an exclusivist ethnic agenda.

Prime Minister Abiy, a practising Pentecostal with Muslim heritage, represents this hybrid, pluralistic and healthy attitude to religion. While his fervent faith and the occasional unnerving messianic tenor to his speeches raised some concerns, the Prime Minister so far has acted with great sensitivity on matters to do with faith. He released detained Muslim leaders and appointed a record number to key state posts and reached out to the Orthodox Church.

Abiy’s medemer philosophy - based on values of love, compassion and solidarity in the New Testament - does not signal intent to “Christianise” or change the strong secular character of the Ethiopian state. The primary motive is to create a unifying principle around which the nation can rally.

A striking feature of Sudan’s protest movement is the near-total absence of Islamist slogans and the emergence of more assertive youthful female activists keen to raise their visibility, to subvert the strict dress code and to claw back their “*huquq al-mar’a al-maqsub*” (usurped fundamental rights of women).

However, the rise of evangelical churches and their aggressive proselytisation remain a source of anxiety within the influential Orthodox Church. But the greatest threat to religious harmony stems from ethnic conflict. Inter-communal violence in troubled pockets of the country in the last one year exacerbated religious tensions and triggered attacks on mosques and churches.

### **Islam in transition in Sudan**

The controversial intervention in Sudan’s transition in recent weeks by Gulf actors (principally UAE and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), ostensibly aimed at preventing the Muslim Brotherhood from staging a comeback, is both ill-advised and dangerous. First, there isn’t the kind of cohesive, highly-

organised Islamist opposition able to single-handedly gain dominance. Second, the TMC cannot be a guarantor of long-term stability nor can it serve as an effective bulwark against Islamism. Third, and assuming they cared to look deeper at the uprising and the social-political trends, they would have realised the depth of disillusionment with Islamist politics and generally with all traditional politics and parties. Finally, the Saudi/Emirati axis's meddling alienates huge segments of society and is counter-productive to their twin strategic goals: maintaining Sudanese troops in Yemen and isolating the Muslim Brotherhood.

A striking feature of Sudan's protest movement is the near-total absence of Islamist slogans and the emergence of more assertive youthful female activists keen to raise their visibility, to subvert the strict dress code and to claw back their "*huquq al-mar'a al-maqsub*" (usurped fundamental rights of women). The language and tone of discourse is deliberately non-confessional. These two complementary dynamics lend a mildly secular character to the uprising. For the first time in three decades, Islam is no longer a contentious subject for Sudan's youth. But we ought to be careful in not drawing hasty conclusions. More importantly, we must avoid using the binary secular-religious mindset as a prism to analyse events in Sudan.

That the battle over Sudan's future is being waged over traditional secular issues - liberty, justice and "bread-and-butter" issues - is emblematic, not so much of a society that is becoming secular, but one deeply disillusioned with the brand of Islam advocated by Hassan al-Turabi and enforced by al-Bashir for three decades. Sudan's youth are rejecting the politicised Islam that underpinned al-Bashir's quasi-Islamic state and the stifling social conservatism fostered by its intrusive policies.

Put differently, what we are seeing in Sudan is the early sign of a society that is self-correcting - seeking both to restore "health" to Islam and return it to its traditional orbit/sphere.

It is not yet clear who the secularists are in Sudan's transition. No group has so far articulated what one might call a clear secular agenda. It is conceivable that some in the protest movement, such as traditional left-leaning parties (that played a big role in the protests) and even elements in the TMC opposed to Islamism, may make common cause and lock out Islamists from the transition. Whether all these diverse anti-Islamist "stakeholders" can agree on a common strategy to address the issue of Islam and the state is hard to tell. An aggressive "enclavement" strategy that criminalises Islamism and locks out Islamists is certain to prove hugely destabilising. It risks driving Islamists underground and is bound to incubate the same toxic type of militancy and violence familiar in many parts of the Muslim world.

Sudan's best hope to achieve a viable and sustainable transition lies in a policy of accommodation that is genuinely inclusive. Islamist parties are predominantly moderate, and including them in the tent has the potential to lock them into the broader reform process, to temper their politics and to progressively isolate the more militant groups.

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