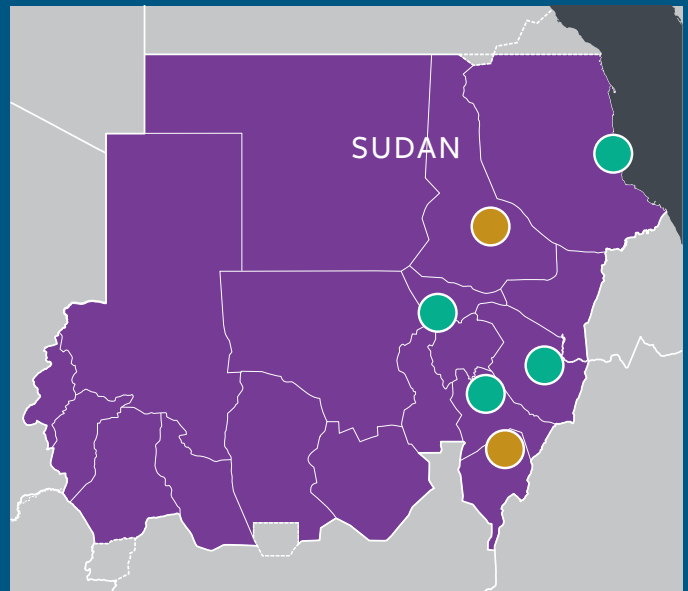


HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

Sudan Case Study

In April 2019, Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir was deposed in a coup d'état that was preceded by months of pressure from one of the largest social movements in recent history.



- December 2018 protest locations
- April-May 2019 sit-in locations

In August 2018, Omar al-Bashir, the long-time ruler of Sudan, announced he would run for a third term, but the ruling coalition was divided about supporting this move, which would require changing the constitution. In December 2018, mass protests against rising food prices broke out in several cities and on January 1, 2019, hundreds of civic and political organizations came together to form the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a committee that coordinated the subsequent nonviolent resistance movement. On April 6, hundreds of thousands marched on military headquarters in Khartoum and began a sit-in. On April 11, a faction within the military ousted al-Bashir and formed a Transitional Military Council (TMC), but sit-ins and strikes continued around the country in order to pressure the TMC to transition to a civilian-led government. On June 3, security forces destroyed the sit-in encampments, killing,

raping, and injuring hundreds of civilians. However, the FFC continued the resistance, successfully calling for nationwide civil disobedience and staging one of the largest per capita street protests in history on June 30. With the help of organizations from outside the country, negotiations between the FFC and the TMC resulted in a power-sharing agreement that was signed in August, 2019.

What contributed to this movement's unprecedented scope and scale? And why did it start in January, 2019, when economic discontent had been growing for years? Historically contingent events such as al-Bashir's decision to run for an unconstitutional third term, the subsequent split in the ruling coalition, and the government's decision to violently crack down on protests and shut down the internet further angered the broader public and fueled growth in the movement. These actions taken

between August 2018 and June 2019 combined with several precursors that laid the groundwork for a mass movement to succeed in Sudan.

They stayed attuned and responsive to both the government's changing political will and popular sentiment, while also bringing their strategic and tactical know-how to planning collective actions.

The most important precursor was that non-political entities that were widely respected, such as the Sudanese Professionals' Association (SPA) and student- and youth-led neighborhood resistance committees (NRCs), had been honing their organizing skills since 2013, when violent protests over the government ending subsidies on a number of basic goods led to a brutal government crackdown. Between 2013 and 2018, the SPA and other longstanding Sudanese peacebuilding and human rights organizations studied and trained other activists in strategy, movement building, and nonviolent resistance. The NRCs developed their leadership skills and practiced self-help and community organizing successfully replacing corrupt and ineffective government service providers in many areas. In the months following the August announcement, the loosely connected SPA and NRCs were able to implement strategies for coalition building, mutual aid, and tactical innovation that built on global lessons learned from the traditions of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, the Occupy movements, and the Arab Spring.

Second, these groups' own experience organizing resistance and enduring repression meant that they were able to withstand first al-Bashir's, then the TMC's, violence and persecution. In 2019, they planned for repression and had decentralized leadership so the movement could continue after the leaders' arrests. When it was available, the Internet allowed for national and international communication and coordination, but when it wasn't, the grassroots groups were prepared to take actions on their own in their home communities.

Third, the SPA constantly adapted its strategy and tactics based on what they were seeing in the grassroots parts of the movement. In 2018, they came out in support of workers and advocated for an increase in the minimum wage, but they shifted their demands when they saw momentum was building for more sweeping changes. They stayed attuned and responsive to both the government's changing political will and popular sentiment, while also bringing their strategic and tactical know-how to planning collective actions.

Finally, driven by the discourse developed by youth-led movements over the past decade, this coalition's ideas successfully challenged the regime on its own terms by calling out the hypocrisy of the "Islamist" regime, and by disavowing the violent and racist policies of the past with a new vision of what it meant to be Sudanese. During 2018-19, neighborhood committees, sit-in encampments, and social media became places where different groups of Sudanese people could share their experiences under the Bashir regime, create music and art together, and discuss what they wanted for their country's future. The movement's democratic and inclusive practices created a new vision of a Sudan where people could help each other without the predations of the government.

About the research project:

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This case study is part of [a larger project](#) examining when and why citizens mobilize to challenge the state in hard authoritarian contexts. The project compares 21 recent episodes of mobilization in order to understand the factors that contributed to the mobilization's growth. Four mobilization episodes (Ethiopia in 2015-2018, Vietnam in 2016, Sudan in 2018-2019, and Belarus in 2020) were selected for in-depth case studies. The summary presents a brief description of the episode and the main factors that contributed to the mobilization's growth.¹

1. The project was made possible through the generous support of the United States Government. Our donors do not influence the organization's research priorities, report findings, or policy recommendations. The positions of this publication do not represent the positions of the United States Government.