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**The Impact of the Arab Spring on  
Africa: Thinking About Sudan as a  
Possible Arab Spring in the Making**

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## Executive Summary

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Public commentary about the current situation in Sudan often uses the Arab Spring metaphor to describe the potential for dramatic political change there. Nonetheless, there has been limited exploration of the developments that would need to occur for Sudan to follow the Arab Spring path. This reflects in large measure an assessment by many that the Arab Spring experience in the Middle East and North Africa is unlikely to have a major impact either in Africa as a whole or in Sudan specifically.

There is no single template for the developments that have been characterized as Arab Spring, and political change in the Middle East and North Africa is proceeding along a number of different paths. Nonetheless, the Arab Spring concept, at least as it emerged in Egypt and Tunisia, posits the explosive emergence of mass social mobilization involving new organizational constructs whose activities and internal and external support derive in part from the exploitation of social media tools. Applying this construct to Sudan suggests the value of focusing on the following questions:

- What might be the event or symbol that could act as a trigger for more widespread and sustained protests?
- Does the largely student-led opposition have the ability to solicit engagement by broader segments of society to participate in acts of protest that require a willingness to confront local security forces?
- Has the opposition developed the capability to successfully integrate the use of social media and traditional organizational structures in ways that could innovatively challenge the government?
- Is the government willing and able to significantly degrade the opposition's use of social media to organize and publicize its activities?
- Have those opposed to the Sudanese government developed the strategy and symbols that could make them a national movement?

Currently there is little evidence to suggest that an Arab Spring-type mobilization against the government in Khartoum is imminent, but the departure of President Bashir would likely be seen by the opposition as an opportunity to step up its game. Moreover, Khartoum's apparent reliance on foreign sources to sustain its finances is a vulnerability that is unlikely to diminish. A particularly risky scenario for the regime would be the emergence of widespread demonstrations – either in anticipation of or in the wake of

Bashir's departure – resulting in significant deaths and an attenuation of the limited foreign financial support that it currently receives.



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**GLOBAL COVERAGE ANALYSES PROGRAM – AFRICA**

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**THE IMPACT OF THE ARAB SPRING ON AFRICA**

**THINKING ABOUT SUDAN AS A  
POSSIBLE ARAB SPRING IN THE MAKING**

**JOHN KRINGEN  
BRITTANY GREGERSON**

**JANUARY 7, 2013**

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## **Thinking About Sudan as a Possible Arab Spring in the Making**

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As developments over the past several months have demonstrated, the Sudanese government is under considerable stress.

- The Sudanese economy has declined significantly in the wake of independence of South Sudan and the associated loss of significant oil-related revenue. While the Sudanese Finance Minister recently claimed limited economic growth in 2012, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated an 11 percent contraction for 2012. Inflation has accelerated as a consequence of government subsidy cuts and a declining exchange rate, with significant consequences for a population that already has many members operating on a slim economic margin.
- In the wake of the government's austerity measures, protests – particularly by student groups – have been a recurring event in Sudan during the second half of 2012. These protests, which have prompted government repression, have not yet resulted in significant and sustained pressure on the government.
- Reports of in-fighting within the political elite have grown. Alleged coup-plotting reportedly resulted in several arrests in November 2012. Conflict within the elite has extended into some aspects of Sudanese foreign policy, where Sudan's relationship with Iran has become a matter of public debate.
- Adding to the climate of political tension have been claims – and counter-claims – about the health of President Bashir.

Public discussion about the potential for instability in Sudan has generally suggested two possible paths in which current Sudanese economic and political stresses could play out. The first, and more prominent, stream of thinking largely focuses on the potential for instability resulting from developments that largely fit within the historical patterns of political conflict in Sudan – such as the potential for a military coup, possible military successes by armed opposition groups, political intrigue within the ruling National Congress party, and machinations within the government-associated Sudanese Islamic Movement (SIM) where a reported regime loyalist was selected in mid-November as the Secretary General in order to make sure the organization stayed by the government's side.<sup>1</sup>

Less attention has been given to the possibility that Sudan could face an Arab Spring-type scenario. Although the Arab Spring metaphor has been frequently applied to



Sudan by public commentators, there has been limited discussion about the specific developments that would need to occur for similar change to occur in Sudan. This appears to reflect skepticism about the impact of the Arab Spring on Africa generally, and on Sudan specifically. One school of thought argues that decades of democratic institution-building in sub-Saharan Africa make it unlikely that those countries will collectively experience the equivalent of the North African Arab Spring.<sup>2</sup> A second perspective argues that there are three structural obstacles to Arab Spring-style mobilization against repressive African governments: 1) opposition elements lack the element of surprise that their North African colleagues were able to exploit; 2) African governments have maintained tighter control over their militaries; and 3) the human capital and the information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure critical for energizing mass mobilization are inadequate.<sup>3</sup> With regard to Sudan, President Bashir's public warning in July 2012 that there would be no Arab Spring in Sudan – but only a hot summer that would burn Khartoum's enemies – certainly suggests that the element of surprise has been lost.<sup>4</sup>

### **If an Arab Spring were coming to Khartoum, how would we know?**

There is no single template for the developments that have been collectively characterized as Arab Spring, and currently political developments in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa are evolving in very different ways. Nonetheless, the Arab Spring phenomenon, particularly as it emerged in Egypt and Tunisia, posits the explosive emergence of mass social mobilization involving new organizational constructs whose activities and internal and external support derive in part from the exploitation of social media tools. With this general construct in mind, it is possible to identify several potential indicators that could suggest that significant change is on its way.

### **The Emergence of a Trigger: Where is the Sudanese Bouazizi?**

For much of the Middle East and North Africa, the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010 proved to be a trigger for similar acts of protest and social mobilization across the region. In a region of the world where self-immolation is a form of suicide undertaken more frequently by females, Bouazizi's act of protest led to a wave of similar attempts by men throughout the Middle East and North Africa. In the months that followed, dozens of such suicides were attempted – with Algeria and Morocco being particularly prominent venues. The power of Bouazizi's act reflected in part his status as a street vendor who operated at the margins of the Tunisian economy and was victimized by the local police.<sup>5</sup> Although many in Sudan occupy the same economic space and face similar mistreatment by police and security forces, there have been no reported self-immolations in Sudan since Bouazizi's death – suggesting that this particular trigger might not have the same resonance in Sudan. On the other hand, the

absence of a track record of self-immolation as a form of protest in Sudan might also suggest that its appearance could be particularly significant.

### **Augmentation of the Protest Labor Pool: Where are the Ultras?**

An important factor in the success of the mobilization of anti-government protests in Cairo in early 2011 was the ability of protest organizers to attract the support of groups that could serve a role as street fighters in Tahrir Square. A key role was played by the Ultras, organizations of Egyptian soccer fans who had long experience in confronting local police and rival football supporters.<sup>6</sup> Although social media websites indicate the existence of similar groups of supporters for at least some of the football teams in Sudan's Premier League, information about them is sketchy, and there is no reporting to suggest political activities by these groups. Over the past year, protest activity against the government has been led chiefly by student groups. While some reports claim that intensifying economic pressures have motivated a more diverse cross-section of the Sudanese population to join the protests, they are still largely viewed as conflicts between university students and the regime.<sup>7</sup> An ability to broaden that base of support and to bring in other segments of society – such as trade unions, SIM dissidents, or even football fans – would enhance the viability of protest activity against the Sudanese government.

### **Mobilization: No clear evidence of a new protest paradigm**

Historically, much protest activity in Africa and elsewhere has been orchestrated by established organizations such as political parties, labor unions, and student organizations. While the role of social media in facilitating Arab Spring protests has been exaggerated and certainly varied significantly from country to country, it is clear that in places like Egypt and Tunisia, social media played a role in facilitating protest participation, creating a sense of social solidarity among groups opposed to the government, and engaging the international community and mainstream media to publicize opposition activities and viewpoints.<sup>8</sup> Academic studies of the role of social media in mobilizing protest activities have highlighted the development of new models of protest organization that either involve a blending of social media and traditional organizational structures or rely primarily on social media to organize such activities.<sup>9</sup>

At this point, both social media and traditional organizations (e.g., student groups) are involved in facilitating anti-government protests, but it does not appear that sufficient synergies have yet developed that could significantly accelerate anti-government social mobilization. Twitter and Facebook – both of which have been key to outreach strategies of groups including Girifna, the student-led Sudanese nonviolent protest movement – have limited penetration in Sudan, reaching 0.1 and 3.1 percent of the population, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Although low, the Sudanese Facebook penetration rate is only slightly below that of Egypt in early 2010, and Facebook subsequently became an important

protest medium in Egypt during its Arab Spring protests. Sudanese activists appear to recognize the currently limited utility of these tools for mobilizing people domestically, and their greater value for putting pressure on the international community to come to their aid.<sup>11</sup>

### **Government Control of the Internet: Still sustaining its grip**

To the degree that anti-government protest movements are facilitated through the use of social media, the level of internet access in the country and the government's ability to impair the opposition's use of social media can be important factors. Roughly 9 percent of Sudan's population were users of the internet as of the end of 2011, but internet use was highly concentrated in Khartoum,<sup>12</sup> suggesting the challenges to nationalizing opposition to the government. Moreover, the Sudanese government actively monitors and filters the internet; in the wake of the Arab Spring, these efforts have increased, and, in the summer of 2012, the government blocked a number of opposition websites and detained individuals associated with those sites as well as traditional mainstream media.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the case of Tunisia, where the government had a well-developed capability to monitor and control internet activity, indicates that a government's control of the internet does not guarantee long-term success in suppressing opposition.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the Tunisian President's public decision to abandon efforts to control internet communications proved to be a forewarning of his departure from the country the next day. Girifna co-founder Nagi Musa told an interviewer last summer that, although the group feared the impact of the regime's efforts to limit communications, they were confident that protest activities would continue: "Sudan did have the experience of two revolutions in the past, where we had big demonstrations, like in Egypt and Tunisia. And there was no Net at the time, no mobile phones. The majority of Sudanese are still not using the internet. It is very helpful for getting the picture out, in moving international pressure towards this government ... [but] if the government cuts down the internet, [the protests] will not stop."<sup>15</sup>

### **Capturing Emotion: Where are the unifying protest symbols?**

In order to gain widespread popular support, opposition movements need not only to articulate the right issues, but also to foster a sense of national identity that allows them to capture support from a broad swath of the population.<sup>16</sup> The historically divided character of Sudanese society makes this a particular challenge, but the experience of the Arab Spring in North Africa suggests that, even in fragmented societies, protesters can, for a period of time, effectively present themselves as being representative of a national movement. This could evolve in several ways:

- A unifying symbol emerges. In Tunisia and elsewhere, the self-immolation of Bouazizi came to represent widespread sentiment of outrage against misdeeds of

the Tunisian government. On a smaller scale, this was played out in Egypt in the “We are all Khalid Said” social media campaign to protest the death of a man at the hands of the police. Attempts by student activists to rally support around similar events in Sudan – most notably the “Free Usamah” campaign to pressure the government to release Usamah Mohamed, a well-known blogger and activist – have gotten some traction online, but had negligible effects on the ground.

- Capture existing national symbols. One successful protest tactic is to take advantage of existing national symbols, such as sports teams, and events like national days of celebration. The annual celebration of Sudan’s independence on January 1, 1956 is the sort of event that anti-government protesters are trying to take advantage of – so far with limited success. For example, on January 1, 2013, the Sudanese government reportedly arrested 20 protestors in Omdurman who were conducting an Independence Day demonstration. Sudanese activists’ most significant success in this area has likely been “Sandstorm Friday” – a day of protests on June 22 so named for the sandstorms that typically reach their peak in Khartoum around that time each year. The anniversary of Bashir’s regime on June 30 was also a protest day chosen for its significance in the national consciousness.
- Become a symbol of national resistance to harmful foreign influences. Resistance to foreigners has long been a significant force in facilitating revolutions around the world. Given Sudan’s colonial history, there could be some potential for the opposition to take advantage of the many ways in which Sudan’s government and economy are currently being buffeted by a diverse array of foreign actors – for example, United States and European Union sanctions, reported Israeli airstrikes on Sudanese territory, Gulf states’ significant acquisition of Sudanese land to meet their own food requirements amid domestic shortages and price hikes, and the appearance, if not the reality, of growing Iranian Shiite influence on the government. The diversity of these various challenges to Sudanese sovereignty would make coherent messaging a problem, but the disquiet that has already surfaced publicly in recent months over Iran’s courtship of Sudan suggests that there might exist national and religious sentiment that can be leveraged. To date, however, there is little evidence to suggest that those opposed to the government have tried to capitalize on this theme.

### **When might some green shoots of spring appear?**

Looking at the situation in Sudan, there is currently little evidence to suggest that an Arab Spring-type explosive mobilization against the government is imminent, despite the fact that its economic and political conditions are comparable to those in countries where significant political change resulted. It could be that the Arab Spring framework does not

apply to Sudan and that events will largely play out within context of a struggle for influence within the existing Sudanese elite, as happened in Myanmar for several decades.

Nonetheless, there is a reasonable possibility that that circumstances in Sudan could change in ways that might open the space for an Arab Spring-style mobilization.

- The departure of President Bashir. The rumors and counter-rumors about President Bashir's recent surgery and health are indicative of the significant political sensitivity to his possible departure from office. While we lack insight into the realities of Bashir's health situation, his death or incapacitation would almost certainly create a sense among the various elements opposed to his rule that the time to act had come. Even if his presidency is not imperiled by health issues in the short run, the announcement that he will not run for office in 2015 will create frictions that will increase over time.
- Student groups and trade unions join forces. These two sets of groups have been instrumental in past revolutions in Sudan. Student protests alone have had limited impact, but such protests, combined with nationwide civil disobedience and labor strikes, could significantly increase the pressure on the government.
- Excision of the remaining few threads of external financial support. In the wake of the impasse with the South Sudanese government over the payment for oil transit fees, the Sudanese government has been desperately seeking external financial assistance, particularly from the Gulf states. While the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Iran have not publicly detailed any provision of funds to Sudan, press reporting suggests that Khartoum's entreaties have not resulted in significant infusions of cash, with the possible exception of Qatar who earlier promised to provide some \$2 billion as part of its initiative to mediate the conflict in Darfur. All signs are that the GCC countries continue to engage Sudan in terms of investment, and development aid, but the GCC's late December 2012 statement against Iranian interference might suggest a harder position on the provision of financial support to Sudan in the future, given Tehran's continued security engagement there.

A particularly risky scenario for the regime would be the emergence of widespread demonstrations – either in anticipation of or in the wake of Bashir's departure from office – resulting in significant numbers of deaths as the regime cracked down on the protests. In this scenario, even Qatar might be reluctant to continue its financial assistance, and overt support from Tehran to the regime could inflame the situation. Despite the late December 2012 claim by the Sudanese Finance Minister of a “huge” loan from a Chinese oil company, China would likely be reluctant to fully offset any significant declines in external financing.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> “Regime Loyalist Chosen to Head Sudan Islamists,” Paris AFP (World Service) in English, 19 November 2012.
- <sup>2</sup> ACSS Special Report, *Africa and the Arab Spring: A New Era of Democratic Expectations*. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, November 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> Phil Clark, “An Arab Spring South of the Sahara?” *Public Policy Research*, Volume 19, No. 1 (2012), pp. 72-75. For a Sudan-specific commentary, see Menleaos Agaloglou, “Why Sudan’s Arab Spring Is a Fantasy,” *The Africa Report Online* in English, September 27, 2012. This article notes that many of the economic and political conditions that brought people into the street during the Arab Spring are present in Sudan, but argues that the Sudanese population is skeptical about the prospects for positive political change and that Sudan’s limited middle class population and internet infrastructure are impediments to sustained and effective social mobilization.
- <sup>4</sup> “Sudanese Leader Says No Arab Spring in Country, Warns of ‘Hot Summer,’” Khartoum Suna Online in Arabic, July 11, 2012.
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- <sup>9</sup> W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, “The Logic of Connective Action,” *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol 15 (2012), pp. 739-768.
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- <sup>11</sup> Laura Heaton, “#SudanRevolts: Q + A with Activist Nagi Musa on Sudan’s Friday Protests,” *Enough Project* blog, July 13, 2012.
- <sup>12</sup> BBC Monitoring, “Media Environment Guide: Sudan – Oct 12,” *BBC Monitoring* in English, October 10, 2012.
- <sup>13</sup> “How Sudan’s Bashir Survived the Arab Spring,” *Al Jazeera Online* in English, September 26, 2012.
- <sup>14</sup> Ben Wagner, “Push-Button-Autocracy in Tunisia: Analysing the Role of Internet Infrastructure, Institutions, and International Markets in Creating a Tunisian Censorship Regime,” *Telecommunications Policy*, 36 (2012), pp. 484-492.
- <sup>15</sup> Heaton, op cit.
- <sup>16</sup> Randall Collins, “Time-Bubbles of Nationalism: Dynamics of solidarity Ritual in Lived Time,” *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol 18 (2012), pp. 383-397.

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