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What Algeria and Sudan Can Learn From Egypt

Lessons From a Failed Revolution

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Eight years after the Arab Spring transfixed the world, the Middle East has once again lit up with protest. In April, popular movements in Algeria and Sudan forced the ouster of two long-serving autocrats: Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who resigned [1] on April 2, and Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who was removed from power [2] on April 11.

These uprisings show obvious parallels with the 2011 revolution in Egypt that led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. In both, youth movements, opposition parties, labor unions, and human rights organizations have banded together to oppose kleptocratic and repressive authoritarian regimes. These diverse coalitions have channeled local grievances about unemployment, inflation, and police abuse into clear calls for democratization and political reform. And in both Algeria and Sudan—as in Egypt in 2011—generals have intervened to usher the dictators out of office, only to find themselves in control of their countries' postrevolutionary transitions.

These parallels are troubling, given how the story ended in Egypt. Following Mubarak's ouster, a poorly conceived transition to democracy [3] bred discord among Egypt's revolutionaries, and their divisions paved the way for a 2013 counterrevolutionary coup that restored military rule. The architect of that coup, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, went on to declare himself president and establish a regime that is, if anything, more violent and repressive [4] than the one toppled in 2011. Yet Egypt's failed democratic experiment also provides lessons. As Algeria and Sudan take their first tentative steps toward democracy, they can draw on these lessons to help keep their own transitions on track.

THE POWER OF THE STREET

One of the most important lessons from Egypt is that street protests have the power to influence the decisions of the military. After Egypt's generals forced Mubarak aside and took control of the government, the civilian protesters who had occupied Cairo's Tahrir Square—and provided the impetus for Mubarak's resignation—faced a dilemma. Should they leave the square or continue protesting? The young activist leaders who had spearheaded the anti-Mubarak movement soon discovered that in their negotiations with the military over the terms of the transition and the establishment of new democratic institutions, their greatest leverage came from their ability to remobilize the street. It was after watershed protest events that the generals felt most threatened and most willing to make concessions. In November 2011, for instance, popular protests on downtown Cairo's Mohamed Mahmoud Street forced the

generals to withdraw a set of "supra-constitutional principles" that would have guaranteed certain rights and privileges for the military in advance of the official constitution-drafting process.

Activists in Algeria and Sudan seem to be banking on a similar strategy. In Khartoum, the movement organized an enormous sit-in at the army's headquarters, which the military was only able to clear using extraordinary levels of violent repression [5]. Undaunted, protesters have responded by blocking roads across the city, and movement leaders have called for a nationwide general strike, insisting the civil disobedience will not end until the military installs a civilian government. Indeed, were it not for the persistence of activists' presence in the streets, it is likely that the military would have already succeeded in imposing a transitional government dominated by generals. And in Algeria, the regular nationwide Friday protests have continued [6] since Bouteflika's fall, despite attempts [7] by the military to ban the demonstrations and crack down on activists. These protests have raised a number of concrete demands, including a postponement of the presidential election, currently scheduled for early July, and a more complete purge of Bouteflika's henchmen and allies from the government. Whether these specific demands will be met, and more broadly whether the generals in both countries will be forced to give up meaningful political power to civilian leaders, may depend on how effectively these movements can continue to mobilize the streets.

KEEP IT TOGETHER

Another lesson from Egypt is that it is important for revolutionary forces to remain united. One major reason Egypt's military was able to sweep back into power on a groundswell of popular support [8] was that in late 2012 the secular wing of Egypt's revolutionary coalition fell out with the Islamist wing aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and the government of President Mohamed Morsi. Both groups, in the end, remained more committed to their own particular political visions and interests than they did to protecting the democratic institutions that the revolution had allowed them to install. The coalitions that have taken to the streets in Algeria and Sudan are just as heterogeneous as Egypt's was, and they similarly lack a strong organizational backbone. They will need to be proactive to maintain their cohesion and remain focused on the goals they have in common: establishing civilian rule, building democratic institutions, and holding old-regime officials accountable. Remaining rallied around these shared principles will be particularly important down the line, when the potentially messy and divisive tasks of drafting new constitutions and contesting elections begin.

Sudan's revolutionaries [9] have, thus far, demonstrated an impressive ability to speak with one voice. They have formed an umbrella organization, the Coalition for Freedom and Change [10], which has forwarded a clear set of demands and a program for reform. The coalition's primary coordinating role has fallen to the Sudanese Professional Association [11], a recently formed alliance of doctors, engineers, lawyers, and teachers, and youth movements such as Girifna [12]. In negotiations with the transitional military council, the coalition has presented a united front [13], insisting that any transitional government be made up of more civilians than generals.

Yet there are also signs of fissures [14]. Sudan has considerable ethnic and religious diversity—the uprising against Bashir included rebel groups from regions such as Darfur and South Kordofan, which are more skeptical of the military and have taken a harder line in negotiations, demanding justice for atrocities committed during military campaigns in their regions. On the other side, the relatively conservative National Umma Party, which ruled

Sudan during its last democratic interlude from 1985 to 1989 and endorsed the anti-Bashir protests in January, has been reluctant to push the generals too far. Recently, its leader Sadiq al-Mahdi came out against [15] the Sudanese Professional Association's call for a general strike to increase pressure on the military council.

Unity has been more elusive in Algeria. Most of the country's main opposition parties have little credibility owing to years of cooptation by and collaboration with the Bouteflika regime. Instead, the main participants in the antigovernment protests have been trade unions, human rights organizations, and youth movements—none of which have taken on a major leadership role. Some have suggested that the widely respected human rights lawyer Mustapha Bouchachi could be a suitable leader in a transitional government, but he has claimed that he has no interest [16] in such a role, insisting that Algeria's "young should organize themselves." And although all sections of the opposition seem to agree that a fair transition process should include the formation of an inclusive national unity government that would oversee elections to an assembly, which would then write a new constitution, tensions have already emerged [17] among activist groups over what role Islamist parties should play in such an interim government. In the end, if these diverse revolutionary coalitions have any hope of remaining unified, they need to stay focused on achieving the goals that brought them together in the first place: establishing permanent democratic institutions and civilian-led rule. Once consolidated, they can use these new institutional channels to contest one another's visions for the political future of their countries.

FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

The Algerian and Sudanese movements should also recognize the importance of cultivating foreign support. After 2011, Egyptians quickly learned that their revolution was never going to be left entirely in their own hands. Egypt's most important ally, the United States, initially hesitated [18] to back the uprising but eventually came around and cautiously supported a transition to democratic rule. But neither the secular nor the Islamist wing of the revolutionary movement was able to win the respect of U.S. diplomats, and Washington's ambivalence [19] toward the Morsi government likely facilitated Sisi's coup. At the same time, regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which strongly opposed the Muslim Brotherhood, actively worked to prevent democracy from taking root by providing resources and diplomatic support to counterrevolutionary groups and movements within Egypt.

In some respects, Algeria and Sudan may have it easier than Egypt. The United States has relatively few long-term interests in these countries and less to lose from their transition to democracy. In Algeria, Washington has ceded diplomatic leadership to France, which is taking a fairly hands-off approach toward the transition, worried that any interventions might be framed as neocolonial meddling. And the United States was a longtime opponent of Bashir's regime in Sudan. Although Washington moderated that stance [20] in recent years, it will not be sorry to see Bashir go. Both countries have more to fear from regional powers, which have already waded in and left little question about their intentions. Egypt is attempting to use its position as head of the African Union [21] to avoid having Bashir's removal called a "coup"—a designation that would require the military council to hand power over to civilians or risk having Sudan's African Union membership suspended. And just days after Bashir stepped down, Saudi Arabia and the UAE had pledged $3 billion in aid to Sudan's transitional military government.

Sudan's and Algeria's activists can pursue two tracks vis-à-vis foreign powers. The first is to resist the incursions of regional states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which have clear interests in preventing the establishment of genuine democracies in the Middle East. Protesters in Sudan, for instance, have taken to the streets [22] opposing the Saudi and Emirati aid packages and denouncing foreign meddling in the transition. Second, activists can and should cultivate relations with potentially sympathetic foreign powers. These could include the African Union, which has been a supporter of democratization elsewhere in the continent since the 1990s; the European Union, which supported Tunisia's successful post-2011 transition; and even the United States.

As the revolutions in Algeria and Sudan have raged, a number of Egyptian activists who were central to the movement against Mubarak have weighed in, with a mix of optimism [23] and regret [24], to share their advice. Today's revolutionaries might take heed. Their countries are at the very beginning of what may be long and arduous processes of building new democratic regimes. It is still far too early to say whether they will succeed, but learning the lessons of what went wrong in Egypt may help them to steer their countries away from a similar fate.

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