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SEARCHING FOR A SECOND CHANCE: THE DILEMMA OF THE ISLAMISTS IN POST-BASHIR SUDAN

POLITICAL ISLAM MOVEMENTS

IN THE SECOND WAVE OF **ARAB UPRISINGS**

الشرق
للأبحاث الاستراتيجية

AL SHARQ
STRATEGIC
RESEARCH

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Introduction

The political history of Sudan since its independence in 1956 can be divided into two phases with distinctive features and dynamics: the first phase lasted from 1956 to the military coup of 1989, and the second phase from the beginning of *Omar al-Bashir's* rule in June 1989 until the popular uprisings that unseated him in April 2019. The first phase witnessed alternating periods of civilian and military rule with a clear predominance of military dictatorship (Table 1). The two popular revolts that put an end to military regimes in October 1964 and April 1985 led to short-lived civilian governments that collapsed rapidly because of paralyzing political struggles and fatal inefficiency.

Table 1: Forms of Government in Sudan

1956 - 1958	Civilian governments under Prime Ministers <i>Ismail al-Azhari</i> of the DUP and <i>Abdallah Khalil</i> of the NUP
1958 - 1964	Military rule under Major General <i>Ibrahim Abboud</i>
1964 - 1969	Civilian governments headed by the NUP
1969 - 1985	Military regime of Colonel <i>Jaafar al-Nimeiry</i>
1986. 1985	Transitional period led by General <i>Abdal-Rahman Siwar al-Dahab</i>
1986 - 1989	Civilian governments headed by <i>Sadiq al-Mahdi</i> of the NUP
1989 - 2019	Military regime led by <i>Omar al-Bashir</i>

The second phase of Sudan's political history, which started with a coup by the Islamist National Salvation Front or *al-Inqaz* and lasted for thirty years, can itself be divided into two stages: the period from June 1989 to December 1999, when the regime was dominated by Sheikh *Hassan al-Turabi*, and the period that constitutes the last 20 years of *al-Bashir's* presidency, commencing with his decisions to dissolve the parliament and exclude *al-Turabi*. The Sudanese regime during the first of these stages, also termed the "first Islamic republic", was considered totalitarian because it adopted a dogmatic ideological project. The "second republic" under the uncontested rule of *Omar al-Bashir* was merely authoritarian.¹ The latter period was marked by an ideological vacuum, political pragmatism and a re-definition of the regime, as the Islamist determinant gradually became peripheral.²

Under the *al-Inqaz* regime, Sudan experienced several serious crises. Numerous armed rebellions challenged the authority of the central government in Khartoum demanding a fair share of power and wealth. Besides the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which fought for decades for the independence of South Sudan, other armed conflicts erupted in Darfur in 2004, in South Kordofan and in the Blue Nile. While South Sudan succeeded in gaining its independence after a bloody protracted civil war in 2011, the conflict in Darfur was associated with massive atrocities and human rights violations. As a consequence, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant against President *al-Bashir* in 2009.³

Sudan also suffered from repeated economic sanctions by successive US governments. In the 1990s, Sudan was put on the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, accused of providing a shelter for many Jihadi Islamists (including *Osama Bin Laden*) and of involvement in many terrorist attacks. Under the George W. Bush administration, the sanctions were further increased on account of the war in Darfur. These sanctions hit the Sudanese economy badly, deepening poverty and the crisis of underdevelopment.⁴

As a result, waves of protests broke out in 2012, 2013 and 2015, calling on *al-Bashir* to step down despite his and his party's - the National Congress Party

(NCP)- tight grip on power. waves of protests broke out in 2012, 2013 and 2015, calling on him to step down. Finally, the uprisings in 2019 succeeded in overthrowing the *al-Inqaz* regime.

The Evolution of the Sudanese Islamist Movement

Much like Sudanese politics in general, the Sudanese Islamist Movement (SIM) has been shaped by a history of animosity and schisms that has resulted in the mushrooming of multiple groups and parties. Schisms accompanied the SIM from the moment of its inception as a counterpart to the traditional Islamic parties – the National *Umma* Party (NUP) of the *al-Mahdi* family and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of the *al-Mirghani* family – that had dominated Sudanese politics since pre-independence.

Organizations affiliated or analogous to the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) started to form in Sudan in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However, the relationship with the mother organization in Egypt and the degree of commitment to its ideology were a source of division among these organizations. During the October revolution against *Ibrahim Abboud* in 1964, the Islamic Charter front (ICF) was formed under *al-Turabi's* leadership and became more engaged in partisan politics. Although the Front became an important political actor between 1964 and 1968, internal disputes emerged at its conference in 1969.

The military coup of *Jaafar al-Nimeiry* that took place in the same year forced the divided factions to forget about their disputes and work with other Sudanese parties to downfall the regime. Nevertheless, following *al-Nimeiry's* national reconciliation with the Islamist opposition in 1977, *al-Turabi* sought to transform the movement into a political and economic force rather than a *da'wa*-oriented social movement.⁵ The traditional faction within the Front was dissatisfied with *al-Turabi's* leadership and his pragmatic attitude and attempted to replace him. The conflict between the *da'wa*-oriented members represented by the General Supervisor *Sadiq Abdallah Abdul-Majed* and the politically-oriented *al-Turabi* reached a peak in 1980, when the former faction defected to establish another group, which used the official name of the MB in Sudan and joined the International Organization of the MB.⁶

Al-Turabi's organization was successful in infiltrating the state bureaucracy, the economic sphere and the ranks of the military during the latter years of the reign of *Jaafar al-Nimeiry*, prior to his ousting by a popular uprising. In 1985, it changed its name to become the National Islamic Front (NIF). Eventually, it succeeded in seizing power in the coup of 1989, which was plotted by *al-Turabi* and executed by *al-Bashir*.

On the other hand, the Sudanese MB suffered a serious crisis in 1991 when a radical wing under the leadership of Sheikh *Suliman Abou Narou* took over the group. Mixing the MB's ideology with other Salafi and Jihadi doctrines, *Abou Narou* was accused by the traditional leaders of abandoning the moderate line of the MB. This radical faction later defected and gave rise to a number of groups: some officially adopted the Salafi Jihadism ideology and involved in many terrorist attacks, while the others returned back to the MB after two decades.⁷

In 1999, the civilian and the military leaders of the Islamist regime of *al-Inqaz* fell out. When *al-Turabi* attempted to induce some changes in the political system to limit the authority of President *al-Bashir*, the latter responded by declaring emergency rule and forcing *al-Turabi* out of power. This separation, or *al-Mufasalah*, resulted in the establishment of a splinter party, the Popular Congress Party (PCP) by *al-Turabi*, while *al-Bashir* established the Islamic Movement (IM) as a broader Islamist base for his NCP.⁸

In the following years, the animosity and conflicts among the rival Islamist groups increased. Feuds and schisms also resumed within the NCP.⁹ The signing of the peace agreement between the NCP and the SPLM of South Sudan in 2005 prompted two groups to split off from the NCP: the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), formed of fighters in South Sudan and the Just Peace Forum (JPF) led by *al-Bashir's* maternal uncle *al-Tayeb Mustafa*. These groups called for separation between the North and the South of Sudan on the grounds of religious homogeneity. However, neither could rally a sizeable support base and both remained marginal, albeit vocal.

Conflicts, bloodshed, authoritarianism, corruption and economic hardship were a hallmark of the failed Sudanese state in the years to come. In 2011, South Sudan voted for separation, and Sudan lost a major source of oil revenue. By 2012, it had become clear that *al-Bashir* had alienated his support base. The numbers of his critics within the NCP were multiplying, especially as Islamist figures were gradually being side-lined in favour of loyal military and security figures close to *al-Bashir*.¹⁰ Little of this criticism rose to the surface. However, a memorandum allegedly signed by a thousand anonymous members of the NCP and “veterans of the NIF” came to light calling for the establishment of a citizenship-based state respectful of civil rights and liberties, criticizing the rampant corruption and lust for power, and demanding reforms.¹¹

Meanwhile, reformists within the IM attempted to gain control over the organization, with *Ghazi Salahuddin al-Atabani* as their main candidate for secretary-general. However, the attempt was thwarted when the Eighth General Conference, convening in 2012, introduced amendments to the IM constitution that destroyed any possibility of autonomy from the NCP and the government.¹²

Elsewhere, 2012 also saw the formation of the Islamic Constitution Front, led by the MB and joined by Salafi groups. The Front called on *al-Bashir* to make the Sudanese constitution “solely based on Islamic law” after the cessation of South Sudan, and threatened to depose him if he did not do so.¹³ However, this Front was not long-lived and did not pose any serious challenge to *al-Bashir*. In a blow to *al-Bashir*'s attempts to revamp his support base, his senior advisor *Ghazi al-Atabani* then established his own party, the Reform Now Movement (RNM). *Al-Atabani* had been expelled from the NCP following his public criticism of *al-Bashir*'s brutal repression of the protests of 2013 in a memorandum also signed by 30 other reformers within the NCP. His party constituted the most serious schism in the NCP since the break with *al-Turabi*.

Against the backdrop of the 2013 protests, an alliance of Islamist opposition groups was also formed under the name of the Sudanese Islamic and National

Forces Alliance (INFA). It comprised 20 parties including the JPF and the MB. It criticized *al-Bashir's* economic policies and declared itself the appropriate replacement for the NCP regime.¹⁴

Desperate to fend off a crisis ahead of the elections scheduled in 2015, *al-Bashir* announced a National Dialogue on January 27th, 2014. During this period, the main opposition coalition was the National Consensus Forces (NCF), formed by a coalition of 17 opposition parties including the Sudanese Communist Party, the Baath Party, and other leftist organizations. The NUP and the PCP were also included, but their membership was suspended in April 2014 after they decided to engage in the National Dialogue with the ruling NCP.

Many Islamist groups joined the Dialogue in the hopes that it would lead to power-sharing. Among these were *al-Bashir's* bitter enemy, *al-Turabi*, reportedly also concerned about rescuing his tattered legacy. Some opposition parties argued that participation in the National Dialogue process might be the best way of saving Sudan from the brink of the abyss. The NUP, the PCP, the RNM and the JPF decided to participate in the preparatory meetings of the National Dialogue but demanded the implementation of confidence-building measures as a condition for their continued involvement. Their chief demands were for public freedoms, the release of political prisoners, a ceasefire in the war zones and the overseeing of the Dialogue by an independent entity. When these conditions were not met, these parties withdrew, with the exception of *al-Turabi's* PCP, which agreed to join the National Dialogue unconditionally. The NUP withdrew from the Dialogue after the detention of its leader *Sadiq al-Mahdi* in May 2014. The RNM took part in the "7+7 mechanism" drawing the road map for the Dialogue but withdrew as soon as presidential and general elections were announced for April 2015.

By contrast, the remaining NCF parties (including the Communist and the Baathist parties), like the armed groups of the South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, refused either to take part in the three-year National Dialogue or to join the government from day one, insisting on the removal of *al-Bashir*.

The Dialogue proved to be a mere tactic on the part of *al-Bashir* – yet a successful one. It brought about the reconciliation between *al-Turabi* and *al-Bashir* in 2014, officially neutralizing one of the main opposition parties of the past 15 years. It secured *al-Bashir's* re-election for another term in 2015, along with the required constitutional amendments, and was eventually successful in luring the Islamist defectors and former allies of the NCP into a share of government.

The last rift worthy of mention in the SIM occurred in 2016, between the MB's General Supervisor Sheikh *Ali Gawish* and its Shura Council. Accusing the Council of attempting to transform the MB into a political party and to sever its ties with the International Organization of the MB, Sheikh *Gawish* issued an order for its dissolution. The Shura Council responded by removing Sheikh *Gawish* from office, together with many members of the Executive Bureau, and installing Sheikh *al-Habr Yusuf Nour al-Daiem* as provisional General Supervisor. These decisions were supported by the traditional leadership of the MB, including Sheikh *Sadiq Abdallah Abdul-Majed*. Later, in 2017, the MB appointed *Awadallah Hassan* as its new leader. Although Sheikh *Gawish's* group was by and large smaller and less politically active, it succeeded in gaining the recognition of the International Organization of the MB. After Sheikh *Gawish's* death in December 2018, *Adel Alallah* was elected General Supervisor¹⁵

The SIM landscape also includes a few Salafi groups which were largely apolitical, but their political presence became increasingly noticeable after the South Sudan peace agreement of 2005. The largest group in the Salafi trend is the *Ansar al-Sunna* Association, which was established in the 1940s and is estimated to have two million members. It adopted a quietist attitude towards the *al-Inqaz* regime and occasionally secured representation in government. A notable offshoot of the *Ansar al-Sunna* Association is the *al-Wasat* Islamic Party, which took an anti-government position and developed a progressive discourse that embraced democracy and pluralism.¹⁶

The December Revolution: Causes and Events

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The year 2018 saw a rapid depletion of foreign exchange reserves and a series of devaluations of the Sudanese pound, coupled with cuts in bread subsidies and other austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).¹⁷ Prices rocketed, and living conditions became harder for a growing proportion of the population. On the political front, the announcement of the nomination of *al-Bashir* for the 2020 presidential elections, contrary to the constitution and the promises of the National Dialogue, was a source of disappointment. While the initiation of the National Dialogue had allowed *al-Bashir* to ride out the dangers of running for another term in 2015, his desire to stay on for yet another term proved to be a spark in a powder keg.

By October, the rate of inflation had reached 70%.¹⁸ On December 19th, fuel and bread riots broke out in Atbara in north-eastern Sudan. Within three weeks, they had turned into a popular uprising that spread across the country.

By early January 2019, the opposition political parties had caught the fever. Two large coalitions came into being. The first was the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), formed on January 1st, 2019 by the NCF, the Sudan Call, the Sudanese Professionals Association and the Unionist Association, among others.¹⁹ The Sudan Call was a broad umbrella of opposition groups that had been formed in Addis Ababa on December 3rd, 2014 and was headed by *al-Mahdi*. It included the NUP, the Sudanese Congress Party and the Revolutionary Front, which was a coalition of armed movements (the JEM, the SPLM/northern sector and the armed Darfur movements).²⁰

The second large new coalition was the National Front for Change (NFC). This was another umbrella opposition group led by the RNM. Preparatory meetings for its formation began on December 22nd, 2018, just a few days after the eruption of the uprisings. Twenty-two parties, civil society organizations and grassroots movements took part. The official announcement of the formation of this coalition also took place on January 1st, 2019.²¹

A third political alliance worth mentioning here is the Coalition Forces 2020. This alliance was made up of 26 loyalist parties that had participated in the National Dialogue and the ensuing National Consensus Government. It was formed in September 2018, three months before the spark of the revolution, under the leadership of *Ghazi al-Atabani* of the RNM, in preparation for the elections in 2020. However, the RNM defected from this alliance when it decided to leave the National Consensus Government and establish the NFC.²² Three days after the formation of the NFC was announced, the Coalition Forces 2020 removed *Ghazi al-Atabani* from its presidency, refusing the call of the revolution for *al-Bashir* to step down and insisting on maintaining the constitutional reformist path.²³

The crackdown and police brutality failed to clear the people off the streets as had happened during earlier protests in 2013 and 2015. In February 2019, President *al-Bashir* took a series of decisions in a desperate attempt to stop the revolution. He declared a state of emergency, dissolved the National Consensus Government and the States Councils, and appointed 18 new governors belonging to the military and security establishment. He also stepped down from the presidency of the NCP.²⁴

These decisions failed to halt the revolutionary wave. Inspired by the resignation of Algerian President *Abdul Aziz Bouteflika* on April 2nd and the anniversary of the popular uprisings against *Jaafar al-Nimeiry* on April 6th, the protestors gathered momentum and marched to the military headquarters in Khartoum for an open sit-in. One week later, on April 11th, *al-Bashir* was ousted and arrested by a military junta as Defence Minister *Ahmed Awad Ben Auf* announced a military takeover of the country for the next two years.

Despite this course of events, the distrustful protesters stood their ground and maintained their sit-in, demanding a transition to a civilian council until elections could be held. The FFC rejected the military coup and announced that the protests would continue. On the second day, General *Ahmed Awad Ben Auf* was forced to resign and the Transitional Military Council (TMC) announced his readiness to negotiate power-sharing arrangement with the FFC.

Hard Choices: How Different Islamist Groups Interacted with the Revolution

On the eve of the uprisings, the five main Islamist political forces were the NCP, the PCP, the MB, the RNM and the JPF-led Coalition Forces 2020. The four groups other than the ruling party reacted to the revolution in various ways. The PCP and the JPF remained generally loyal to the regime while calling for some reforms, but the RNM and the MB instantly defected and called for regime change once the uprisings broke out.

Although PCP youth cadres did participate in the protests, and one of their regional leaders was killed by the police, the party did not officially withdraw from the government until the collapse of the regime.²⁵ *Ali al-Haj*, the Secretary-General of the party, chose the middle ground. On the one hand, he repeatedly criticized the violence of the security forces, demanded a real political reform, and apologized to the victims and the detainees of the uprisings.²⁶ On the other hand, however, the party did not defect from the *al-Inqaz* regime, despite threatening to do so if its demands for reform were not taken seriously.²⁷ Consequently, dozens of PCP youth cadres resigned in protest at the moderate and indecisive stance of their party.²⁸

Similarly, the Coalition Forces 2020 took an initiative for reform in March, proposing to extend the mandate of the current constitutional institutions and to cancel the general elections set for 2020. Instead, the JPF-led group suggested a two-year transitional period managed by a presidential council headed by *al-Bashir*.²⁹ At a joint meeting, the PCP supported the Coalition Forces 2020 initiative and called for a negotiated solution to the ongoing crisis.³⁰

By contrast, as already stated, the RNM decided to defect from the regime and join the uprisings only a few days after they had erupted. At the press conference of January 1st, 2019 held to announce the formation of the NFC, *Ghazi al-Atabani*, who was later elected head of the NFC, announced the withdrawal of the RNM's members from the government.³¹ During this press

conference, the NFC demanded the dissolution of the National Assembly and the States Councils, the formation of a transitional government and the establishment of a national consensus council.³²

The response of the NCP was aggressive. The Head of the Media Sector in the party charged the NFC with violating the national consensus by demanding the dissolution of the government and parliament, and accused its leaders of political opportunism. “The RNM’s share in the government is already limited, and its withdrawal is insignificant”, he added.³³ Al-Bashir also fiercely attacked those withdrawing from the National Dialogue agreement, alleging that they were jumping ship because they thought it was sinking, and adding that this was not the first time they had behaved in this way.³⁴

Although, the RNM had defected from the *al-Inqaz* regime early and mobilized its supporters to join the demonstrations, some elements of the FFC – particularly the leftist-dominated Sudanese Professionals Association – refused to have the NFC as a member in the FFC because it contained offshoots of the ruling NCP.³⁵ To overcome this objection, *al-Atabani* met regularly with *Sadiq al-Mahdi*, the leader of the Sudan Call, a founding member of the FFC, to coordinate their political positions.³⁶

The MB followed the same path as the RNM, joining the NFC and mobilizing its supporters to join the uprisings. The group’s leaders, including General Supervisor *Awadallah Hassan*, participated in the protests themselves and delivered harsh speeches against the *al-Inqaz* regime.³⁷ In January 2019, the Shura Council of the MB decided to withdraw from the National Assembly, the States Councils and the Khartoum Legislative Council, and mandated the Executive Office of the MB to choose the appropriate time to put this decision into effect.³⁸

The different reactions of these factions to the revolution can be explained in part by the ways in which they evaluated the SIM’s experience in power. For example, a few days before *al-Bashir* was ousted, a prominent NCP figure

gave an apologetic explanation for the uprisings. For him, people revolted for economic reasons – the shortages of bread and fuel, and the lack of monetary liquidity. However, he said, these economic problems were abused by the opposition to mobilize the angry people behind their agenda. He held radical leftist groups that had infiltrated the protests responsible for the acts of looting and destruction.

The causes of the economic crisis, according to this figure, included the ruthless sanctions that had been imposed on Sudan for decades and the failings of inefficient, badly-chosen officials. Other concomitant political factors existed as well. In recent years, the autocratic tendencies of *al-Bashir* had increased greatly, and he had become more dependent on the military and security institutions. As an example, there were many dissenting voices within the NCP who objected to changing the constitution to allow the President to run for re-election in 2015. These political and economic grievances, he admitted, had pushed the younger generation of Islamists to support the uprisings.³⁹

In contrast with this defensive attitude, another IM leader, *Abdul-Jalil al-Nazir al-Karuri* was more critical of the Islamists' experience in power. He gave two main reasons for their failure. First, the NCP members had deserted the ideal of *al-Shura* (consultation) and given *al-Bashir* absolute, unquestioned power. They had invented the concept of "tacit consensus", meaning that if a given group does not complain about the decisions taken by their leaders, this indicates its approval.

Secondly, after a period of thirty years, the amalgamation of the "Three Hs" (i.e., *al-Harakah* or the Movement, *al-Hizb* or the Party, and *al-Hukomah* or the government) had proved ill-advised. The merger of the three, in his view, had deprived the IM of its autonomy and of its ability to supervise the NCP and the government and to review their policies from a religious angle.⁴⁰

In the reform memorandum which he submitted to *al-Bashir* in September 2013, *Ghazi al-Atabani* criticized the austerity policies adopted by the regime and the security forces' harsh treatment of the peaceful demonstrations that

had broken out in opposition to these policies. However, the memorandum also carried a more fundamental message to the President. “The *al-Inqaz* regime came to power,” it argued, “with a great promise: the implementation of the Sharia; nevertheless, the recent measures applied by the government and its subsequent repression of dissidents is far from the Sharia ideals of mercy, justice, the sanctity of blood, and the realization of the right to expression of opinion.”⁴¹

Mohammed Abou Salih, the former Minister of Strategic and Information Affairs of Khartoum State, has offered a more comprehensive account of the failure of the *al-Inqaz* regime. He believes it to have been caused by more fundamental issues than a lack of proper policymaking and implementation. First of all, the *al-Inqaz* regime had based its claim to legitimacy on being an Islamist system without ever having an appropriate or adequate understanding of what an Islamist regime means. Second, due to its adoption of the concept of *al-Tamkin*, or empowerment, the regime failed to manage the diversity of the society – a fatal mistake in a multi-racial, multi-cultural country like Sudan. Third, prioritizing ideological loyalty over professionalism significantly weakened the civil service, which was infiltrated by ordinary, low-calibre officials. Fourth, the lack of transparency and accountability undermined the morals of the ruling party, which became dominated by self-interested networks, leading to widespread corruption and damaging the reputation of the SIM.⁴²

Al-Tijani Abdul-Qader, a prominent Islamist scholar and an ex-member of the NIF, has proposed an interesting explanation of how interest networks came to dominate the Islamist ruling party using *Ibn Khaldun's* theory of *al-Asabiyyah*. In the beginning, he argued, the NIF represented an ideological *asabiyyah*, whose members showed a high level of solidarity and loyalty. After taking over the state, *Omar al-Bashir* became the symbol of the *asabiyyah* and the center of power, and the *asabiyyah* members served as his close assistants. As time passed, according to this theory, the ruler started to act more independently and authoritatively *vis-à-vis* the members of his supporting *asabiyyah*. As their marginalization increased and their share of power diminished, they became increasingly dissatisfied. Rising disputes and defections weakened the unity and solidarity of the *asabiyyah*, and the ruler resorted to substituting his original *asabiyyah* with a new one owing

its loyalty to him personally. The members of the new *asabiyyah* were not united behind any ideology or common identity; instead, they were bound by their interests. According to *Abdul-Qader*, this theory may explain the repeated defections and the increasingly rampant corruption which characterized the NCP over the course of three decades.⁴³

The SIM's Strategies During the Transition

The transitional process began on April 27th, 2019 with the start of a difficult process of negotiations between the FFC and the TMC over a transitional administration. In May, the negotiating parties agreed on a three-year transitional period to be led by a Transitional Sovereign Council (TSC), a cabinet and a 300-member transitional legislative council. Two-thirds of the members of the legislative council were to come from the FFC, while the remaining seats would be occupied by parties that were not members of this alliance. However, deadlock was reached over who was to control the TSC.

The struggle was not confined to the negotiating table; it went on primarily in the streets. Sit-ins and strikes persisted unabated, and even intensified, notwithstanding the violent display of power by the military. The standoff culminated in a massacre on June 3rd, when the paramilitary forces of the *Janjaweed*, led by General *Muhammad Hamdan Daglo* (also known as *Hemetti*), the vice-president of the TMC, reportedly killed up to 120 protesters in the capital Khartoum and left scores wounded. This led to the collapse of the negotiations and the launching of a civil disobedience campaign.

The popular dissent escalated throughout the tumultuous month of June. On June 30th, the opposition alliance organized a major show of force with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets. June was also marked by several thwarted coup attempts, according to the TMC. Mediation efforts by Ethiopian Prime Minister *Abiy Ahmed* and the African Union eventually succeeded in persuading the TMC and FFC to agree to a set of proposals presented by the mediators and to sign a power-sharing deal on July 17th, 2019. However, the Revolutionary Front and the NCF expressed reservations about the signing of the agreement, prompting the FFC to call off meetings with the TMC.⁴⁴ In August, an agreement was finally sealed envisaging the establishment of three

transitional bodies – the TSC, a cabinet and a legislative body – to run the country for a 39-month transitional period leading up to elections. The TSC, consisting of six civilians and five generals (with one of the civilian members named by consensus), was to be headed by a general for 21 months and a civilian for 18 months. Under the deal, the prime minister, *Abdallah Hamdok*, and the rest of the cabinet were named by the FFC except for the ministers of Defence and the Interior, who were chosen by the military.⁴⁵

Although many Islamist groups joined the protests against the *al-Inqaz* regime, the transitional arrangements excluded all the Islamists without differentiating between those who had been in power and those who had been in opposition. This can be attributed to the distrust and decades-old ideological rivalry between the leftist and Islamist currents. Also, until the uprisings broke out, most of the Islamist parties were regarded as a loyal opposition on account of being part of the regime-sponsored National Dialogue and the ensuing governments. The regional dimension may have been another factor, since the transitional administration has been keen to strengthen its relations with countries that have led the regional campaign against Political Islamic movements (namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), in order to gain their political and economic support.

As a result, neither the Islamists in the NFC (i.e. the RNM and the MB) nor those in the Coalition Forces 2020 (JPF) or the PCP – let alone the NCP and the IM – were involved in the negotiations between the TMC and the FFC. Shortly after its formation, moreover, the interim government started a systematic campaign against the Islamist parties, organizations, and political leaders.

On November 29th, 2019, a joint meeting of the TSC and the cabinet adopted the Law on Dismantling the *al-Inqaz* Regime. Under this law, the NCP and all affiliated organizations were dissolved, and their assets were confiscated. The Law also banned those considered symbols of the ousted regime from practicing politics for at least ten years.⁴⁶ As a consequence, on December 10th, 2019, the Head of the TSC, *Abdul-Fattah al-Burhan*, formed a Committee of Disempowerment to liquidate institutions and NGOs with alleged links to the dissolved NCP. In a matter

of a few weeks, this committee dissolved or confiscated the property of dozens of NGOs, trade unions, youth leagues and media outlets, including the Islamic Call Organization and the TV satellite stations *al-Shorouq* and *Tayba*.⁴⁷

Meanwhile, frequent arrest campaigns were carried out by the transitional administration targeting the NCP and IM leaders, especially in the wake of *al-Bashir's* overthrow in April 2019 and again after a failed coup attempt in July 2019. The arrested leaders included the Secretary-General of the IM, *al-Zubair Ahmed al-Hassan*, as well as a number of top military generals including Chief of Staff *Hashem Abdul-Muttalib*.⁴⁸

More alarmingly for the Islamists, the campaign of arrests started to target political leaders outside *al-Bashir's* party. For instance, the secretary-general of the PCP, *Ali al-Haj*, was arrested on the grounds of having participated in the 1989 coup. Similar arrest warrants were issued against other prominent leaders, among them *Ghazi al-Atabani*.⁴⁹

The exclusion of the opposing Islamist forces from the transitional administration and the indiscriminate targeting of their leaders pushed them closer to one another politically. Almost all the Islamist factions rejected – or at least expressed concerns about – the Constitutional Document Agreement.⁵⁰ The NCP, for example, criticized the Agreement because it was exclusively bilateral between the TMC and the FFC, and ignored the other political elements in Sudan. Furthermore, the transitional administration had introduced major changes in the political regime, such as the shift from a presidential system to a parliamentary one, without a popular mandate. The NCP statement also noted that the new Constitutional Document did not include the article referring to the Sharia, which might open the way to the installation of a regime with secular tendencies.⁵¹

Other Islamist parties and groups also issued numerous statements critical of the transitional administration. They accused the FFC-dominated government of exclusion, of abusing power in order to retaliate against the Islamists and serve their own narrow partisan interests, of steering the revolution away from its goals, and of overstepping its mandate by abolishing Sharia-related laws.⁵²

The transitional administration seems not to have been alone in failing to distinguish between different Islamist groups: a broad swathe of the Sudanese people appear to have done likewise. Many Islamist leaders and parties who had previously defected from the NCP found themselves attacked, on various occasions, by protestors holding them responsible for grievances committed under the *al-Inqaz* regime. Fifty members of the Shura council of the PCP, for instance, were injured when angry demonstrators threw stones at them and smashed their cars during their meeting in April 2019.⁵³

Faced with a hostile transitional administration and a massive erosion in their social support base, the parties and groups constituting the SIM adopted different coping strategies. The NCP and its affiliate, the IM, decided to retreat and temporarily abandon their engagement in party politics. In an official statement in July 2019, the IM announced that its priority, for the time being, was to self-reflect on its experience in power.⁵⁴ Some sources inside the movement stated in August 2019 that there was a tendency towards merging the IM and the NCP, transforming the party into a social movement and giving it another name such as “Ennahda” or “Justice and Development”.⁵⁵ At the same time, the NCP held internal elections at which its former leaders were replaced and Dr. *Ibrahim Ghandour*, the former foreign minister, was chosen to lead the party.⁵⁶ Against all odds, Dr. *Ghandour* and the newly elected middle management remained active and vocal on behalf of the party even after its dissolution in November 2019.

In contrast to the IM’s strategy of withdrawal, other Islamist factions started to engage more systematically in politics. The MB, for example, took some preparatory steps towards establishing a political party, the Authenticity and Development Party, in May 2019. More significantly, a coalition of Salafist groups and preachers (including *Mohamed Ali al-Gizouli* and *Abdul-Hay Yousuf*) established the Trend of the Support of Sharia and the Rule of Law (TSSRL) in late April 2019.⁵⁷

Despite facing the same challenges, the SIM factions lacked an overarching coordinating organization and a unified strategy. The TSSRL, for instance, resorted to a more confrontational approach towards the interim government. It staged numerous protests against the government’s policies and accused it of forcibly

imposing secularism on Sudan.⁵⁸ The MB, however, refused to join the TSSRL marches and criticized its approach as being harmful to the cause it aimed to defend.⁵⁹

Disagreements on the appropriate strategy for dealing with the transitional administration opened up chasms not only between the different factions in the SIM but sometimes within the same factions too. In July 2019, 17 members of the RNM's Shura council, including the party's political secretary, resigned in protest at its stance towards the Constitutional Document; they declared that they fully supported this document and the revolution without reservation.⁶⁰

The relationship between the Islamists and the military wing of the transitional administration was also complicated. On the one hand, the new military leaders – the Head of the TSC General *Abdul-Fattah al-Burhan* and his deputy General *Hemetti* – carried out many purges of high and middle-ranking Islamist officers.⁶¹ Furthermore, the TSC repeatedly accused the NCP and the IM of plotting a *coup d' état*.⁶² On the other hand, the Islamists generally seem to trust the military institutions more than the civilian wing of the transitional administration. For instance, during the troubled negotiations between the FFC and the TMC in May 2019, the Islamist leaders of the RNM and the TSSRL announced their support for the latter and expressed their objections to being ruled by leftist groups.⁶³ One year later, in April 2020, the President of the RNM, *Ghazi al-Atabani*, was to take the same position. While attacking the performance of the interim government, *al-Atabani* claimed that the Sudanese people had given the mandate to carry out the transition to the military and called on it to act upon this mandate.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Among the Sunni Islamist movements, the SIM emerges as a unique case – the only movement to have succeeded in seizing power and establishing its own regime. For three decades, the SIM had the chance to examine its doctrines and implement its programmes. The outcome was a great failure in the eyes of the Sudanese people and a very disheartening experience for the Sudanese Islamists.

Although the evaluation of the *al-Inqaz* regime is beyond the scope of this paper, it has touched upon many of the tensions inherent in this experience – tensions between the civilian and the military, the religious social movement and the political party, the politics of identity and the politics of policies, and the domestic and international dimensions.

The primary concern of the research has been to understand the ways in which different SIM factions reacted to the December Revolution and the strategies which they have adopted to survive the transition. Two main conclusions can be drawn here:

First, the SIM's reaction to the revolution was greatly affected by the rivalries and fragmentations within its own landscape. It was observed to be divided into three main categories: the Islamists in power (the NCP and the IM), the loyalist opposition groups (the PCP and the JPF-led Coalition Forces 2020), and the defecting Islamist groups (the RNM and the MB). The ruling NCP and IM played no significant role in the uprisings as *al-Bashir* marginalized them and resorted to his military and security institutions to protect him. *Amin Hassan Omar*, a prominent figure in the NCP, has revealed that the President did not consult the party leadership on his decisions to declare a state of emergency and to replace all civilian governors with military generals in February 2019, and that he described these decisions as a “white coup”.⁶⁵ As for the other opposition Islamist groups, they were split between those who remained loyal to the regime and adopted a limited reform agenda and those who defected and officially joined the revolution calling for regime change.

Second, as the transition got under way, the exclusion of all Islamists from the transitional negotiations and the way in which their institutions and leaders became targets, without making any distinction between those had been in power and those who had joined the revolution, brought the various Islamist factions closer. Their initial stances towards the power-sharing agreement between the FFC and the TMC varied slightly: the NCP, the RNM, and the TSSRL rejected it outright, while the MB and the JPF accepted it with reservations and were more open to cooperation with the transitional administration. However, faced with the increasingly hostile attitude of the transitional administration, almost all

the Islamist groups became very critical of the FFC-dominated government. More alarmingly, some Islamist leaders implicitly or explicitly threatened to resort to violence and called upon the military to intervene in response to government decisions to cancel Sharia-related laws.

After a year, the transitional process looks very unstable. The cracks within the FFC have widened, the ideological polarization between the Islamists and the leftists is deepening, and the political, economic, and security situations facing the interim government are becoming increasingly challenging. Furthermore, the military wing in the transitional administration is in a far stronger position than the civilian wing: it leads the TSC, the military governors of the States appointed by *al-Bashir* are still in place, and the proposed legislative council has not yet been formed, depriving the civilian political forces of an essential tool to influence policy-making.⁶⁶ If events continue to unfold in this unfavourable direction, the fourth period of civilian rule in the history of the Sudanese Republic may not, unfortunately, prove to be any exception to the past record: chaotic, plagued with disputes and inefficiency, and short-lived.

It is not clear whether the Sudanese Islamists will succeed in finding a foothold in post-Bashir Sudan; it all depends on how the whole transitional process proceeds. For simplicity, three different scenarios may be proposed:

In the first scenario, the transition goes ahead as planned. The transitional administration successfully delivers on the tasks assigned to it and lays the foundations of a civilian democratic regime at the end of the three-year interim period. In this scenario, the Islamists will remain an important sociopolitical actor, given their entrenched roots in society and strong organizational infrastructure. This scenario also entails a historic reconciliation between rival political trends, as well as between the armed movements and the central government in Sudan.

In the second scenario, the transitional process crumbles, and the military element of the interim administration takes power. The poor performance of the government, the deep divides among the civilian political forces and the

growing dissatisfaction of the people might embolden the generals of the TSC to stage a coup. In this case, a new authoritarian regime will be installed which will partially or totally repress all other political forces, particularly the Islamists, as the most challenging among them.

The final scenario is in some ways close to the previous one. The mismanagement of the transitional process might give the Islamists an opportunity to mobilize their supporters against the interim government or even to stage an Islamist-led non-hierarchical coup. The continuous purges of Islamist military officers, the damaged reputation of the ousted *al-Inqaz* regime and the unfavourable regional circumstances make this scenario highly unlikely. However, if the odds are overturned, the SIM could be back in power again.

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