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Military coup in Sudan

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The Sudanese army [announced](#) on 11 April 2019 it had removed President Omar al-Bashir, Sudan's long-time President, from power. The announcement follows months of demonstrations against Bashir's Presidency and the Sudanese regime. Army general and Defence Minister Awad Ibn Ouf said the army will oversee a transitional government for the next two years and declared a three-month state of emergency. Protestors had been calling for a civilian-led transitional government.

UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt [tweeted](#):

Sudan's brave people have called for change, but it must be real change. A military council ruling for 2 years is not the answer. We need to see a swift move to an inclusive, representative, civilian leadership. And we need to ensure there's no more violence.

The UK Government, along with its Troika partners the US and Norway, had [previously](#) called on the Sudanese authorities to "deliver a credible plan for political transition. Failing to do so risks causing greater instability. The Sudanese leadership has a grave responsibility to avoid such an outcome".

President Omar al-Bashir has ruled Sudan since taking power in a coup in 1989 and is wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Under his rule Sudan was in a state of civil war until 2005. Fighting continues between government-backed forces and some rebel groups in the main conflict areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile (collectively referred to as the Two Areas) and Darfur. A short background on Sudan is available at the end of this paper. The Library has previously examined the political situation in Sudan and the international dimensions in more detail in '[Sudan: December 2017 update](#)'.

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement paved the way for a referendum in southern Sudan on independence in January 2011. South Sudan subsequently declared independence on 9 July 2011. Recent developments are available in Library paper '[South Sudan: March 2019 update](#)'. All Library material on Sudan and South Sudan can be found on the [Commons Library website](#).

This short update examines developments since December 2018 when the current protests began. At the time of writing the situation remains fluid and this paper will be updated periodically.

December 2018: protests begin

Continued frustration at the deteriorating [economic situation](#), the rising cost of living (specifically prices rises for bread and fuel) sparked [protests](#) in north and east Sudan on 19 December. These sparked further [anti-government demonstrations](#) in the capital and across the country, driven in part by the economic crisis but also by long-standing anger at the regime and plans to amend the constitution to enable Bashir to stand for re-election in 2020.

The forceful response of the security forces results in the temporary closure of schools and universities, a temporary internet shutdown, and the arrested dozens of protestors and opposition activists. Estimates vary but it is clear several protestors were killed by security forces. [Human Rights Watch](#) reporting 51 killed in December and January, while the Sudanese [government](#) put the number at 31. Four organisations led by the [African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies](#) report hundreds have been arrested and dozens killed in the month after the protests began. Doctors have been at the [forefront](#) of the protests and in February Channel 4 News [reported](#) 'shocking footage' of security forces firing inside a hospital.

The Forces of the Declaration of Freedom of Change, which describes itself as a consortium civil society, labour and political organizations "spearheading the ongoing popular revolution" against the President, issued a [declaration](#) on 1 January 2019 outlining their demands, beginning with the immediate and unconditional end of Bashir's presidency. The called for a civilian-composed National Transitional Government to govern for four years, until a democratic structure is established and elections held. The statement expands on the aims of the transitional government, including addressing Sudan's civil wars, reform the constitution and the political and judicial system, repeal all restrictions on freedoms of speech and expression, and bring those responsible for violence to justice.

UK response

The UK, along with Troika members the US and Norway, released a [statement](#) on 24 December expressing concern about response of the security forces and called for investigations into any abuses. The UN Secretary General Antony Guterres also [called](#) for calm and constraint.

The Lords discussed the situation in Sudan on [15 January 2019](#). Foreign Office Minister Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon expressed the Government's concern about the situation and called for "restraint in policing the protests, for the release of detainees and for accountability for those killed". The Minister observed "Sudan's response to these protests will shape our approach to engagement with the Government of Sudan in the coming months and years".

Baroness Cox, a vice-chair of the APPG for Sudan and South Sudan, [criticised](#) the UK's response and called on the Government to place specific requirements on the Sudanese Government.

February 2019: State of emergency declared

President Bashir responded to the continued protests by declaring a one-year [state of emergency](#). In a series of emergency decrees, the Government is dissolved, all 18 state governors are [replaced](#) with military and security officers, [emergency courts](#) and prosecutors are established and [protests are banned](#). The UK was among several nations expressing deep concern about the state of emergency (see below).

Protestors pledged to continue until Bashir was forced out. The [Sudanese Professionals Association](#) said, shortly after the state of emergency declaration: "we are calling on our people to continue with demonstrations until the main aim of this uprising, which is the stepping down of the regime chief, is achieved".

UK and international response

The Government formally reacted to the state of emergency declaration in statements made with the EU and the Troika and at the UN Security Council. The Government expressed concern with the increased role of the military and the curtailment of fundamental freedoms and called on the Sudanese Government to release political leaders, activists and journalists and allow the Sudanese people their legitimate right to express their views. Extracts:

25 February: [UN Security Council meeting on Sudan](#)

The proposals made by President Bashir in his speech on Friday [declaring the statement of emergency] will not help bring about the political consensus needed to stabilise the country. In the current environment, it is difficult to see how the proposed national dialogue can therefore be a success.

[...]

We continue to urge the government of Sudan to embark upon the political and economic reforms necessary to deliver true stability.

26 February: [Troika statement](#)

The return to military rule does not create a conducive environment for a renewed political dialogue or credible elections.

28 February: [EU statement](#)

Measures being adopted under the newly declared state of emergency, the increased role of the military in governing the country, further curtail fundamental freedoms and undermine the recent offer of a new political dialogue. They create a permissive climate for the security services to act with impunity against peaceful protesters. The latest attacks against unarmed students in the University of Medical Sciences and Technology and against peaceful protesters in Omdurman, are deeply disturbing.

Members of both Houses have tabled questions to the Government on the situation in Sudan.

FCO Minister of State Lord Ahmad [said](#) on 18 March “we will continue to urge the Government of Sudan to respect the Sudanese people's right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and to make political reforms that address the legitimate concerns of the protestors”.

The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa spoke to Sudan’s foreign minister on 25 February and the Sudanese ambassador was summoned to the Foreign Office on 7 March “to register the depth of our ongoing concern”, Lord Ahmad [said](#).

Several MPs, including members of the APPG for Sudan and Jo Swinson Foreign Affairs spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, signed a [letter](#) condemning “the government of Sudan’s disproportionate and deadly response to peaceful protest by tens of thousands of Sudanese people” to the Guardian on 1 February 2019:

We call on the UK government to do everything it can to pressure the government of Sudan to respect the freedoms of assembly, expression and association as laid out in Sudanese and international human rights law, and ensure any investigation into the killing of significant numbers of unarmed protesters is independent and credible.

Speculation about Bashir's future mounts

Africa Confidential speculated on Bashir's future in early March:

How and when el Beshir leaves power... is far from settled. The two critical factors are the strength of the opposition movements which have united around calls for his departure and el Bashir's vulnerability to an internal putsch by senior officers in the armed forces.¹

The International Crisis Group, in a [detailed analysis](#) of the protests and state of emergency, observed:

Faced with dwindling options, Bashir has chosen the path of confrontation. By declaring a state of emergency, he has concentrated power even more in his hands and set the stage for a bloody crackdown on protests.²

Africa Confidential has previously reported talk amongst diplomats of options to remove Bashir, including offering immunity from prosecution to persuade him to quit. This relates to the warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for the President for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Crisis Group has [suggested](#) using a potential deferral of his case at the ICC under Article 16 as an incentive to encourage Bashir to step down. Under [Article 16](#) the UN Security Council may request the court to defer an investigation or prosecution. Africa Confidential said this option would have little attraction for Bashir because it is not an indefinite suspension – such deferment lasts only 12 months and requires explicit renewal by the Security Council.³

Professor Nic Cheeseman of the University of Birmingham explored the roots of the crisis and Bashir's options for South Africa's [Mail and Guardian](#). He wrote Bashir's regime lacks "both democratic legitimacy and economic credibility" and has presided over a prolonged economic crisis. Bashir "now has his back to the wall", losing support from the public and within his own party:

The very tactics he is using to retain power will prevent him from effectively resolving the grievances that have forced people to the streets. He now has two options: to recognise that his time has come and stand down, or to hold on to the presidency at all costs and push his country into a period of civil conflict from which it may never recover.⁴

April 2019: sit-in at Army Headquarters

A sit-in at the Headquarters of the Armed Forces began on 6 April and divisions between the army and national security forces appear to have brought matters to a head.

According to a [BBC report](#), demonstrators accuse the members of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) and a militia supporting President Bashir of trying to drive them away, firing tear-gas and live bullets. Witnesses report army soldiers intervened to protect the protestors - protestors [talking to the BBC](#) report firing between the NISS and the Army, with one observing divisions between the higher ranks of the Army (supporting the regime) and lower ranks supporting the protestors. One protestor described it as "the biggest protest against the government in the history of Sudan".

Estimates of numbers killed since the 6 April sit-in began varies. The Central medical Doctors Committee said on 9 April that 21 people, including five soldiers, had been killed since the protests began on 6 April. They estimated 153 people were wounded and warned the death toll could rise. By contrast, the [Sudanese authorities](#) reported on 8 April that 7 people were

¹ "El Beshir mulls the endgame", Africa Confidential, 8 March 2019

² "Bashir moves Sudan to dangerous new ground", International Crisis Group, 26 February 2019

³ "Pushing Bashir towards the exit", Africa Confidential, 22 February 2019

⁴ "[Sudan is Africa's secret crisis](#)", Mail and Guardian, 10 April 2019

killed in clashes on 6-7 April, bringing their estimate of those killed since 19 December to 46 people.

The Forces of the Declaration of Freedom of Change [outlined their demands](#) on 8 April:

- Immediate and unconditional removal of the head of the regime and his government
- Formation of a council comprising of DFC forces and collaborating revolutionary forces, to work with regular forces and local/international actors to finalise the process of political transition and handover of power to a transitional civilian government
- For the armed forces to support Sudan's people and end its support to the regime
- For the regional and international community to support the demands of the protestors
- For demonstrators to hold their ground until the departure of the regime

Further clashes on 9 April

The Forces of the Declaration of Freedom of Change [accused](#) the regime of “the worst forms of violence against defenceless civilians” when security forces fired bullets and tear gas at protestors on 9 April. They reported five deaths, including 2 soldiers. The DFC said the protest outside the armed forces HQ will continue “[until the regime is declared fallen](#)”.

The Sudanese Professionals Association issued a [statement](#) on 9 April appealing for help from international and regional actors. The SPA said the regime has lost all legitimacy and rejected Bashir's calls to reopen the ‘discredited national dialogue’ describing such offers as neither genuine nor acceptable:

It is clear that the regime of Omar al-Bashir and its security apparatus intend to continue using violence and excessive force against those who are exercising their right to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression.

[...]

The National Congress Party (NCP) regime rules with complete tyranny, using violence and the security apparatus to guard itself against the people.

International organisations like [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) have condemned the violent response from the Sudanese authorities. The [African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies](#) (ACJPS) has documented arrests and human rights abuses by the Sudanese authorities since the protests began in December. In mid-March it [estimated](#) hundreds of people have been detained without charge or access to a court of law. The Centre has also chronicled [press censorship](#) and new measures to restrict the media by the National Intelligence Security Services (NISS).

UK and international response: a ‘pivotal moment’ for Sudan

The Troika (UK, US and Norway) issued a new [statement](#) on 9 April responding to 6 April sit-in at Army HQ. The Troika described a ‘pivotal moment for the future of Sudan’ and called the Sudanese authorities to deliver a plan for political transition. Extracts:

The time has come for the Sudanese authorities to respond to these popular demands in a serious and credible way. The Sudanese people are demanding a transition to a political system that is inclusive and has greater legitimacy. The Sudanese authorities must now respond and deliver a credible plan for political transition. Failing to do so risks causing greater instability. The Sudanese leadership has a grave responsibility to avoid such an outcome.

We call on the Sudanese authorities to release all political detainees, stop the use of violence against peaceful protesters, remove all restrictions to freedoms, lift the state of emergency and allow for a credible political dialogue in a conducive environment with all

key Sudanese actors that has as its basis the goal of a political and economic transition to a new type of Sudan. One where human rights, the rule of law, democracy and equal citizenship are all respected and which can bring an end to the conflicts and corruption that have plagued the country.

If the Sudanese authorities take these steps, the Troika (the United States, The United Kingdom and Norway) will support such a political process and in time could work to help resolve some of the long term economic challenges that Sudan faces.

This is a pivotal moment for the future of Sudan. The decisions the Sudanese authorities take now, in an inclusive dialogue, will have a dramatic impact on the lives of 40 million Sudanese people and the stability of the region. We urge the Sudanese authorities, as well as the opposition, to embrace their responsibilities.

11 April: Army announces it is taking power

Early on 11 April the Army said it was to make an important statement. Rumours spread of a coup, and later in the day Army general Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf [appeared](#) on television: "I announce as minister of defence the toppling of the regime and detaining its chief in a secure place". Ibn Auf announced the formation of a military-led transitional government to oversee a two-year transition period, a three-month state of emergency, the release of political prisoners and the cancellation of the 2005 constitution. Sudan's air space would be closed for 24 hours and border crossings shut until further notice. He added a later statement will expand on the transitional council.

Whether the formation of a military-led transitional government will appease the protestors is not clear at the time of writing. Before the Army's announcement, but after rumours spread of Bashir's removal, the Sudanese Professionals Association emphasised the need for a [civilian-led transitional government](#):

We assert that the people of Sudan will not accept anything less than a civil transitional authority composed of a patriotic group of experts who were not involved with the tyrannical regime.

The leadership of our people's armed forces ought to handover power to the people, according to what was expressed in the declaration of freedom and change.

The Forces of the Declaration of Freedom of Change has [previously](#) called for a civilian-composed National Transitional Government to govern for four years.

Who is Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf?

[BBC Monitoring](#) provide the following description of General Auf:

Lt-Gen Auf, 65, is a career soldier who previously served as chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. During his tenure as defence minister, the Sudanese army has reportedly improved its artillery and rocket system. He previously served as the head of military intelligence.

His military, diplomatic and political experience put in him in a strong position to succeed Mr Bashir or to influence the succession.

He is among individuals sanctioned by the US over the Darfur ethnic conflict. The US has accused him of acting as liaison between the state and the government-backed Janjaweed militias. A UN fact-finding mission in 2005 put Lt-Gen Ibn Auf on the list of those responsible for the deteriorating situation in Darfur. As a result, the US has blocked his assets since May 2007.

Background

Sudan declared independence in 1956, having previously been under joint Anglo-Egyptian governance for the first half of the twentieth century. President Omar al-Bashir has ruled Sudan since taking power in a coup in 1989. The International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for the President for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

A two-decade long civil war was brought to a formal end in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA paved the way for a referendum in southern Sudan on independence in January 2011. South Sudan subsequently declared independence on 9 July 2011 and became the most recent country to join the [United Nations](#). South Sudan has since become embroiled in civil war.

There are a myriad of armed groups with different motives, support bases and allegiances within Sudan. Unilaterally declared ceasefires by the Government of Sudan and most armed groups has significantly reduced the level of fighting in the main conflict areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile (collectively referred to as the Two Areas) and Darfur. An African Union-United Nations mission in Darfur ([UNAMID](#)) peacekeeping mission has been present in Darfur since 2007.

The UK Government has long ties with Sudan and has played a leading role in attempts to bring peace to the nation (UK soldiers are deployed with the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan). The UK, along with the US and Norway, forms the 'Troika', which [dates](#) to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement negotiations (the UK was a [guarantor](#) of the CPA). The UK continues to issue statements on Sudan with its Troika partners: the US and Norway.

The EU has prioritised migration and Sudan is part of the 'Khartoum Process' aimed at preventing migration to the EU at source in the Horn of Africa. At the request of the Government of Sudan, the UK launched the UK-Sudan strategic dialogue in 2016 covering a range of bilateral issues.

In October 2017 the United States lifted economic sanctions in recognition of Sudan's efforts to maintain ceasefires, improve humanitarian access and cooperate on counter-terrorism efforts. A UN [arms embargo](#) on Darfur remains in place, as does an EU arms embargo on Sudan.

Bashir had pledged not to stand for President again after winning the 2015 Presidential election with 94% of the vote - few opposition parties participated. However, in August 2018 the ruling National Congressional Party reportedly [selected](#) Bashir to be its candidate for the 2020 Presidential election. Parliament began the process for amending the constitution to enable Bashir to stand again in late 2018 but Bashir called for Parliament to postpone this process when he declared the state of emergency.

The removal of Bashir from power marks the end of one of Sub-Saharan Africa's longest serving leaders. The Council on Foreign Relations has examined the trend of Africa's '[leaders for life](#)'.

Box 1: President Bashir and the International Criminal Court

The International Criminal Court has jurisdiction to prosecute serious violations of International Humanitarian Law in some circumstances when domestic courts are unable or unwilling to do so. These include war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and crimes of aggression committed after 2002.

In July 2008 the ICC Prosecutor applied for an international arrest warrant for President al-Bashir, the first such move ever against a serving head of state, for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes related to the conflict in Darfur. The first arrest warrant was issued in March 2009 and the second in July 2010.⁵ The case is currently at the pre-trial stage and will not progress until Bashir is arrested and transferred to the seat of the Court in The Hague. Full details of the charges are available on the [ICC website](#).

The ICC has no independent powers of arrest and is reliant on State Parties to the Rome Statute to fulfil its arrest warrants. South Africa was criticised in July 2016 by the ICC for failing to arrest President al-Bashir when he visited Johannesburg in 2015.⁶ The Ugandan Government similarly ignored the arrest warrant when President al-Bashir visited in November 2017.⁷ The ICC Prosecutor has urged the UN Security Council to sanction those countries who have failed to uphold the arrest warrant.⁸ The ICC does not try individuals unless they are present in the courtroom.

⁵ Further details about the court can be found in Commons Library briefing paper [The International Criminal Court: current cases and contemporary debates](#), 20 April 2009, SN05042

⁶ "South Africa should have arrested Sudan's President, ICC rules", New York Times, 6 July 2017

⁷ "Sudan's President, wanted by the ICC, visits Uganda", AP via news24, 13 November 2017

⁸ "Statement to the UN Security Council on the situation in Darfur, pursuant to UNSCR 1593 (2005)", ICC, 12 December 2017

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