

AT A CROSSROADS: PROTESTS IN SUDAN

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When protests broke out in Atbara in northeastern Sudan over rising prices of bread in mid-December, not many thought it would snowball into a nationwide agitation, shaking the foundations of the junta. President Omar al-Bashir, who captured power through a bloodless coup in 1989, first called the protesters “rats” and then declared a state of emergency. Dozens were killed. When none of these measures quelled public anger, Mr. Bashir sacked the Health Minister and the Prime Minister, and promised reforms. But the protests, led by the Sudanese Professionals Association, a new group, grew in strength. As protests reached the army headquarters, the military high command stepped in, deposing Mr. Bashir on April 11 and announcing a transitional government led by the military council. But even the fall of Mr. Bashir failed to calm the streets as protesters wanted “a revolution”. Over three decades, Mr. Bashir and his military clique had used several tactics, from aligning with Islamists and banning political parties to suppressing dissent and unleashing paramilitaries against defiant regions, to stay in power. But the recent economic crisis, especially after South Sudan split away with three-fourths of the oilfields, broke the regime’s back.

The army seems to have realised it is facing the greatest challenge to its power in three decades. It has already made several concessions. Soon after Mr. Bashir was deposed, Awad Ibn Ouf, the chosen head of the military council, also stepped down. The much-feared intelligence chief, Salah Gosh, was fired. The new military ruler, Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, has ordered lifting of the curfew and freeing of political prisoners. But the problem is that the army is not ready to give up control. Its plan to be in charge for at least two years has made the protesters wary. They are afraid that the army, given its track record, will try to retain its grip on power through some means or the other. This is the current stalemate – the protesters want a break with the past while the army doesn’t want to give up its privileges. This conflict was visible in neighbouring countries where dictators fell amid public protests. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak resigned as President in 2011, but the military never gave up its privileges. In two years it was back in power through a coup. In Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika stepped down as President this month, but the army has retained power; protests still continue in the country. The Sudanese protesters say they want an orderly transition under a civilian government. The army should respect their demand and resolve the impasse. Mr. Bashir has quit. It’s time to replace the oppressive regime he built, with a much more inclusive, responsive and democratic civilian government.

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