The rise of Omar Al-Bashir and the Dynamics That Led to His Ouster

Since the wave of independence hit Africa in the 60s, the continent has had its share of problems with leadership, but few problems bemoan its people as the recurring problem of dictatorship which has been a key hindrance to the social, economic and political potential of the continent. Though most dictators like Mobutu Sese Seko and Idi Amin were ousted through coups, and others like Omar Bongo of Gabon died in office, a crop of dictators stood the test of time and managed to hold on to power even as times changed. Omar Al-Bashir is an epitome of such dictators, solidifying his legacy as one of Africa’s most prominent strong men with a record 30 years in power.

His contentious rule was characterized by death, war, sanctions and hardships for the Sudanese people, however, on April 11, 2019 Bashir was forced out of office and arrested after protracted public demonstrations that mirrored the Arab spring. This resulted in Bashir being ousted in a military coup d'ëta and being placed under arrest. Now Sudan free from basher is a country on the move, with a socio-political environment that is experiencing change at a fast pace as they now struggle and protest for stability and democracy.

The events described above were as a result of varied dynamics that on one hand, enabled him to rise, and hold on to power for so long, and on the other hand led to his eventual down fall. So how did these dynamics play out?
The Rise of Bashir

Omar Al-Bashir (centre) with other Revolutionary Council officers in 1989. Photo credits: [AFP]

Omar Al-Bashir’s reign began when he successfully led the the National Salvation Revolution in a coup in 1989 that toppled the government of the then prime minister Sadiq al-Mahdi. He was declared head of state, Defense Minister, and Commander in Chief of the armed forces. This meant the he was still directly in charge of the military while taking on his new role as president. He also replaced Al-Mahdi’s government with the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation (RCC). Since then, Omar Al-Bashir held on to power in a tumultuous alliance with the National Islamic Front (NIF) until 2018 when protests that would lead to his eventual ouster began.

Causes of the Protests

Protesters flood the streets of Khartoum in protests against government policies [AP/TASS]

The protests were triggered by a sharp increase in the prices of basic commodities coupled with high inflation, and lingering factors such as sanctions due to links with international terrorist organizations and corruption. However, three factors were the main causes of the demonstrations that ousted Al-Bashir.

Extreme Authoritarianism

In August 2018, President Al-Bashir announced that he would seek another term in office contrary to his earlier declaration of retiring by 2020. His declaration was also unconstitutional because he was not eligible for re-election in the upcoming 2020 elections. His decision to vie for another term was received with condemnation by the general public, civil society organizations and activists across the country.
Even members of his political party were not amused by the declaration. A campaign against his nomination was launched and sustained in social media platforms.

The Devalued the Local Currency

Prior to the demonstrations, Sudan's economy was increasingly shrinking. The situation worsened in 2011 following the secession of South Sudan that provided a significant source of revenue from oil. The cost of living increased making the life unbearable. As if that was not enough, the country’s currency was devalued in October 2018, this resulted in staggering fluctuation of exchange rates that marked the begging of ripple effects throughout Sudan’s economy. There was an acute shortage of cash in circulation, which lead to market inefficiencies. In addition, purchasing power reduced resulting in sharp reduction in the supply of basic commodities. This was evident by the long queues as people scrambled for basic items such as fuel, bread became the norm.

Removal of Wheat and Electricity Subsidies

Historically, Al-Bashir used the subsidization of basic commodities as a political tool to maintain support. The removal of government subsidy on the product and electricity was the straw that broke the camel's back as it added to the already deteriorated economic conditions felt at all levels of society by causing an increase in the cost of basic commodities such as bread, electricity and fuel. Bashirs actions triggered peaceful demonstrations that began in 19 December 2018 with calls for pressing economic reforms evolving into to calls for president Al-Bashir to step down.

Evolution of the Protests

The protests quickly spread to other cities before reaching the capital city - Khartoum. Authorities responded with violent measures such as the use of tear gas, rubber bullets to disperse demonstrators. This resulted in deaths and injuries that fueled the public outcries and international condemnation against Al-Bashir. In order to curtail communication and derail civic engagement, the government resulted in cutting access to social media and instant messaging services across the country. This was followed by curfews across the country that further slowed down the economy. At this point, many people could not access basic services such as healthcare. On 7th January, 2019, the protests took a new turn when hundreds of anti-government protesters were arrested and 19 were killed further intensifying the protests. On January 17, 2019, the government increased the violence to unprecedented levels when responding protests organized by the Sudanese Professionals Associations. The police fired live ammunition on groups of doctors demonstrating against the government in what
appeared to be a move by the government security forces to deter the public from demonstrating, this however intensified the demonstrations.
State of Emergency

On February 22, 2019, Al-Bashir declared a state of national emergency in a quest to reign in on the protests. He took certain measures that included the banning of unauthorized protests and criminalizing unlicensed trade in fuel and wheat with the risk of a 10-year prison sentences for those who would be found guilty. He also banned the "unauthorized circulation of information, photos or documents that belong to the president's family," and introduced capital controls on the trade of gold and foreign currency. Politically, He abolished central and regional governments, replaced regional governors with military generals, and went on to appoint his longtime ally, Mohamed Tahir Ayala, as Prime Minister. In addition, he appointed his former intelligence chief and current Defence Minister, Awad Mohamed Ahmed Ibn Auf, as the vice president. These changes were followed by an official announcement that Al-Bashir would resign from the head of the National Congress Party, and would not seek re-election in 2020.

Al-Bashir Deposed

Anti-government protesters in Khartoum cheering the military as they drive by. 11 April, 2019 [BBC]

Between 6 to 7 April, protests of immense proportions broke out, however, this time, the soldiers standing by in defense of the protesters against government forces, after sustained protests for more than three months, Omar Al-Bashir was deposed on April 11, 2019 and placed under house arrest. He was later transferred to solitary confinement at Kobar prison, a maximum-security prison in Khartoum where during his reign, his regime incarcerated political prisoners.

What Next for Sudan?

The new battle is for a democratic civilian rule, for this reason, street protests have continued with calls for an immediate and unconditional power transfer from the Transitional Military Council (TMC), a council under the Sudan military that currently holds power and directs country affairs, to a civilian-led transitional government. It is also about social political and economic reforms with hopes that Sudan will emerge from this dilemma as a stable, democratic and prosperous country. To achieve these talks were initiated between the civilian opposition and the TMC with the aim of forming a joint transition government to help hasten and smoothen the transition process; however this was halted when 118 people were killed, and others were injured and raped by security forces allied the TMC in what is now called the June 3rd Khartoum massacre. This was followed by the arrest of demonstrators.

In response, Opposition groups responded by carrying increasing pressure and calls for change by going on a 3 day general strike that occurred between the 9th to 11th of June, followed by an indefinite civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance until a civilian government is reinstated, however, the strike came to a halt when the TMC agreed to free political prisoners. The military leaders and opposition alliance reached a power sharing deal through talks which took place in Khartoum beginning of July 2019 and
were mediated by the Ethiopian Prime minister and members of pan Africa AU. The agreement will see
the military in charge for the first 21 months, then a civilian-run administration for the following 18
months. On July 17th the two sides signed the power sharing deal. The TMC officers arrested on 25th July
2019 its former officers who had been involved in an attempted coup which occurred in the beginning of
July 2019. The leaders of the Islamic movement and national congress party were among those arrested.
With negotiations back on track hopes of a transition from the TMC to a civilian government have been
renewed, but only time will tell whether the current struggle will lead to a stable, democratic and
prosperous Sudan.