

The Demand for Change in Sudan

Since January 2018, Sudan has been hit with a tough economic hardship. There have been price increase in commodities; especially bread, gasoline and transportation while Sudanese people have been suffering food shortages. Banks have run out of cash following currency devaluation. From an economic angle the country is on the verge of a total collapse.

The current situation is only getting worse. A protest erupted in Atbara city on December 19, 2018 triggered outcries in other cities such as Port Sudan, Madani, and capital Khartoum. The country has been witnessing street protests for the last three weeks and getting increasing international media attention. Moreover, the economic crisis seems to be evolving into a political crisis since protesters, just like those in the Arab Spring, are now calling for an economic relief and a regime change. The country's President Omar al-Bashir has been urged to step down by protesters who tried to reach the presidential palace. Security forces used tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunitions, resulting in the death of 37 protesters according to Amnesty International. Omar al-Bashir pointed his finger at Israel and foreign powers as the actors behind the protests. 40 university students from Darfur have even been accused as agents of Mossad.

Streets and even mosques are now turned into political arenas. It is clear that what is happening is more than a mere economic hardship. The current crisis in Sudan should be better examined on three points of views: economic, political and social.

First of all, it should be mentioned that anti-government protests in Sudan is not a new phenomenon. Since colonial time Sudanese people have a tradition of protest, people of Sudan revolted in various cases against their government in 1924, 1964 and 1985. Similarly, between 2011-2013 the *Intifada* street-protests erupted in many cities, leaving more than 200 deaths and 2.000 arrests.

Sudan's economy is definitely in decline after the country's division of South and North in 2011. Oil revenue as Sudan's engine of its long-term economic boom has vanished after the secession due to the North's 75% loss of its oil production. During the last seven years Sudan's economy has developed in slow motion despite the swift population increase. According to Africa Development Bank (AfDB) Sudan's GDP growth averaged 3.3% from 2011 to 2016 compared to 7.1% from 2000 to 2010.

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The government of Sudan felt the urgent need of cash to compensate the lost of its oil revenue. To attract Gulf money Bashir regime allied with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and United Arab Emirates and joined the coalition in Yemen's War. While Arab investment increased in Sudan, Sudanese soldiers fought at the front line in the Yemen War. This strategy brought some relief to Sudan's financial crisis and even the US eased its sanctions in 2017. International Monetary Fund (IMF) visited Sudan and prepared a program to save Sudan from a huge economic crisis. IMF suggested the government of Sudan to impose austerity measures, as in cutting subsidies of wheat and gas. Since the beginning of 2018 people in Sudan have opposed this program.

On the political layer, opposition groups have been demanding for a regime change. For them the real crisis is political rather than economic. The opposition combining of political parties, youth groups and associations of professionals demanded a transition from an "Islamic regime" to a secular democracy. For that reason protesters often chant slogans such as "revolution", "liberty, peace, justice", "Bashir must go" and "the people want a regime change".

Al-Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP) rule has dominated Sudan's political life for the last three decades. Bloodless coup in 1989 led by Omar al-Bashir in collaboration with the National Islamic Front (NIF) paved the way for the birth of an Islamic regime in the country. However, political pressure of the US-lead Western bloc started hanging over the new regime in the 90's. The US imposed restrictions over the Sudanese government on top of a 20-year embargo between 1997-2017. Al-Bashir government tried to ease Western pressure by establishing alliance with non-Western actors including China, Iran,

Malaysia, Russia, Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Omar al-Bashir's 30-year rule was marked with corruption, nepotism and autocratic rule. According to Transparency International, Sudan's Corruption Perception Index in 2017 ranked 175th out of 180 countries. Al-Bashir decided to play a one-man rule game from the beginning. First he excluded Sudan's Islamic movement leader Hasan al-Turabi whose aim was to limit the power of president by constitution in 1999. This led to the major crack in the Islamic movement leaving al-Bashir as the sole player in the country's politics. Ruling class enjoyed oil boom after 1999 while low-income groups continued to struggle under poverty.

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On the social level, the country has deep-rooted crisis inside and on its periphery. During the post-colonial period Sudan witnessed two civil wars leaving a total of 2.5 million deaths. When NCP rule started, the country's South was already drowned in a civil war. However, civilian conflicts in the periphery spread to Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile state. Unfortunately, the country's resources were spent for military purposes instead of education and health sectors. As a result of the regional conflicts, the International Criminal Court (ICC) charged President Omar al-Bashir with five accounts of crimes against humanity in 2009 and moreover, the country was separated in 2011.

Although obsessed Western narrative of al-Bashir has a bit exaggeration, ICC's arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir definitely influenced Sudan's politics; al-Bashir insists upon staying power to safeguard his uncertain future. Omar al-Bashir is seeking to continue his rule despite growing opposition against him. He was recently declared as NCP's candidate for the next presidential election scheduled in 2020. This might be the last drop for the Sudanese people who already live in economic hardship.

Different problems within the Sudan government such as the economy, corruption and the lack of peace and security in the country would end up in the demand of a political change. Let's hope that the dire situation would not turn even worse, especially for the civilians. But whatever the outcome is, 2019 will be a year that puts Sudan in the hotspot in the African region.