

Pre-emptive military coup ousts Bashir to protect Sudan's elite

By Jean Shaoul
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Sudan's army has stepped in to oust President Omar al-Bashir, in an effort to put an end to the months of mass protests and strikes calling for the ouster of his regime.

Awad Ibn Auf, the minister of defence and deputy president, announced Thursday that the military had arrested al-Bashir, who seized power in a coup in 1989, suspended the constitution, shut border crossings and closed the country's airspace for the next 24 hours.

He declared a three-month state of emergency, putting the country under military rule, and said that the army would oversee a two-year transitional period leading up to elections. Political prisoners would be released, he claimed.

The military coup follows four months of social unrest triggered by a government decision that tripled the price of bread. The spontaneous protests quickly developed into nationwide anti-government demonstrations calling for al-Bashir to step down. The movement drew in ever broader sections of the population with nationwide strikes of workers, including at Port Sudan on the Red Sea, and several work stoppages and protests at major telecom providers and other corporations.

Al-Bashir responded with brutal measures aimed at crushing resistance to the government, including the use of live ammunition by snipers, tear gas and baton charges. At least 60 people have been killed, including children and medics, some of whom died in prison as a result of torture.

Security forces arrested hundreds of demonstrators, with at least 800 sentenced to lengthy terms of imprisonment. Women were sentenced to floggings. There have been numerous arrests of oppositionists, including leaders of the main opposition Umma Party and the Sudan Communist Party (SCP).

In February, al-Bashir announced a year-long state of emergency, making mass demonstrations illegal, and dismissed his cabinet and all the 18 provincial governments, replacing the governors with military and security officers.

This did little to curb the widespread unrest over unemployment, soaring inflation and controls on accessing foreign currency and cash that have made living conditions

intolerable. There is enormous popular hatred of al-Bashir's regime for its never-ending wars in different parts of the country, brutal repression, corruption and indifference to endemic poverty.

The regime has suppressed all opposition to its policies over the last 30 years and waged war against its own people in South Sudan and Darfur, with armed conflicts still ongoing in South Kordofan and Blue Nile provinces, in what has become known as Sudan's third civil war.

Al-Bashir announced his resignation from the ruling National Congress Party (NCP), appointing his close associate Ahmad Harun as deputy head of the NCP, who called for a "national dialogue." But this was understood as a manoeuvre to win over some elements of the bourgeois opposition and maintain NCP rule via stage-managed elections in 2020—where Harun or Bashir would run.

The powerful movement of the Sudanese working class is part of a growing movement of strikes and demonstrations by workers across North Africa—in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco—and around the world.

Sudan's rallies have been led by a coalition that includes the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) of doctors, lawyers and teachers, the National Consensus Forces (NCF), Sudan Call, the Unionist Gathering and the Umma Party.

The Stalinist SCP played the crucial role in subordinating the working class to the bourgeois opposition tendencies through its call for "the broadest possible alliance of political parties, armed groups, mass democratic organisations, professional unions, workers' and peasants' movements, as well as students' and women's unions."

Limiting the movement to al-Bashir's ouster would always serve to give the regime a facelift, as has now been proven. The SCP's popular front with the Islamic opposition Umma party is treacherous. Sadiq al-Mahdi, a former premier (1985-89) and a leader of the Umma, led calls for "the handing of power to a select military command that is qualified to negotiate with representatives of the people to build a new system to achieve peace and democracy."

Masses of workers and youth have come out onto the streets, not for a military coup or political reshuffle at the top, but rather a fundamental transformation of the entire social order. Since Saturday, the anniversary of the military coup that forced Jaafar Nimeiri to step down in 1985 after 16 years in power following massive protests, there have been mass demonstrations outside the military's headquarters in Sudan's capital, Khartoum. At least 800,000 people took part Saturday, with the number swelling to 2 million the next day, the biggest protest against the government in Sudan's tumultuous history.

There were reports of some soldiers intervening to protect demonstrators after security forces tried to disperse a mass sit-in outside the defence ministry, with al-Bashir's gunmen killing at least 20 people.

On Monday, *A l-Ahram Online* reported after Sunday's meeting of the National Defence and Security Council, headed by al-Bashir, "It has become clear that the army has picked its side." The council issued a statement published by the Sudanese official news agency that "the protesters represent a segment of society that must be heard." It had cooked up a deal for al-Bashir to step aside, with the military intervening "on the side of the people."

According to *Al-Ahram*, the army was split over al-Bashir's replacement, with one faction opposed to Defence Minister Auf because, like al-Bashir, he is wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes in Darfur when he was head of military intelligence. Al-Bashir's forces are accused of killing up to 400,000 people. Other military figures tipped for the post are retired Armed Forces Chief of General Staff Lieutenant-General Emad Al-Din Mustafa Adawi and Lieutenant-General Kamal Abdul-Marouf, the military's joint chief of staff.

The coup was clearly green-lighted by the United States and the UK, the former colonial power in Sudan, along with Sudan's neighbour, the Egyptian dictator General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who made his second visit to the White House earlier this week. El-Sisi's discussions with President Donald Trump were held against the backdrop of a similar attempt to neuter anti-regime protests in Algeria—with the military announcing the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika—as well as the raging civil war in Libya.

Referring to Libya and Sudan, el-Sisi said, "We cannot afford a leadership emerging in Libya or Sudan that tolerates, or even worse condones, militant Islamic activity. This is why ... we are keeping a close eye on any possible transition of power in Sudan."

On Wednesday, the US, Britain and Norway, who played a key role in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that ended a 30-year civil war and paved the way for the secession of South Sudan, issued a statement backing a

pre-emptive coup. The statement said, "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."

While the fall of al-Bashir was greeted with euphoria, the demonstrations have continued. Some protesters mocked the announcement, with one tweeting, "LOL, Awad Ibn Auf probably walked out [after] that speech and went straight to Bashir at his house arrest."

The Sudanese Professionals Association said, "It's a coup and we're not budging" and called for protests to continue until authority is passed on to "a civilian transitional government that represents the revolution's forces."

But attempts to present a civilian transitional government as capable of producing a flourishing democracy that would resolve the enormous social and economic problems confronting Sudanese workers are no less fraudulent than a military transitional council. Either way, the country remains dominated by a small, wealthy clique. The only way to establish a democratic regime in Sudan is through a struggle led by the working class to take power and expropriate the ill-gotten wealth of the entire ruling class, in the context of a broad international struggle of the working class against capitalism and for the building of socialism.

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