

Massacre and Uprising in Sudan

Friday 14 June 2019, by [AKRAM-BOSHAR Shireen](#), [BEAN Brian](#) (Date first published: 13 June 2019).

Sudan's ongoing but embattled revolution is perhaps the best organized and politically advanced in the region. That's why the US and Saudi Arabia are determined to crush it.

At dawn on Monday, June 3, paramilitary forces raided the sit-in opposite the Army General Command in Khartoum, Sudan, raining fire on protesters and bringing an end to six months of a largely peaceful uprising. Soldiers broke through the demonstrators' barricades, burnt their tents to the ground, and shot at and beat protesters. Witnesses spoke of soldiers shooting indiscriminately, throwing bodies of slain protesters into the Nile, and raping two of the medics at the sit-in.

Within forty-eight hours, the death toll rose to over a hundred, as tens of bodies were recovered from the Nile. Five hundred more were injured in what could only be described as a premeditated massacre.

The sit-in outside the military headquarters had become the focal point of the ongoing [Sudanese Revolution](#), with students and professionals having camped out to protest the ruling military regime since early April. Led by the Sudanese Professionals Association, an umbrella group of trade unions that had previously been banned by the regime, the uprising maintained a nonviolent and highly organized character, culminating in a two-day general strike at the end of May.

But two months after the initial protests that [ousted](#) dictator Omar al-Bashir, the revolutionaries were still voicing their same principal demand: an end to military rule in Sudan and a civilian-led transition government that could lead the way to fair and democratic elections. Weeks of negotiations with the military had stalemated, with the military refusing to relinquish control.

Last Monday's attack was led by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a state-controlled offshoot of the Janjaweed, a militia responsible for war crimes in Darfur. After storming and brutally massacring demonstrators in Khartoum's sit-in, the RSF then moved to the surrounding neighborhoods — which had also boasted anti-regime protests and ongoing congregations of demonstrators — continuing to disperse, beat, and shoot activists.

Mohammed Elnaiem, a resident of one of the surrounding neighborhoods as well as a Sudanese activist and PhD student, gave us a firsthand account of the crackdown. He described the scene he witnessed early that morning and the continued crackdown:

The RSF came first in a small band, around three or four trucks, and they started talking to the army. We thought that maybe the army — they were lower-ranked soldiers — would be on our side. But the RSF drove through the barricades that we had built, and the army didn't do anything. Shortly afterwards, the army vehicles that were in our neighborhood left. At that point most people understood what was going to come next, and started to clear out. We realized that the army and the RSF were in coordination with each other — and that the RSF were completely in control. They started shooting at us and we all started running away from the barricades, and running into houses to hide. I haven't been brave enough to go outside to rebuild the barricades like some other

people have been since then. It's terrifying. There's gunshots everywhere. In my neighborhood there is reports of a sniper in an abandoned building. I don't know where specifically so it's really risky. They want to terrorize us at home.

The RSF also raided three of Khartoum's hospitals, shooting at wounded protesters who had been brought in for treatment. At Sudan's Royal Care Hospital last Tuesday, the soldiers forced fifty wounded protesters to evacuate after shooting and arresting one of the doctors, who had been a part of the medical team at the sit-in. Other revolutionary sit-ins in various cities across the country, including in northern Port Sudan, and in eastern Gadarif and Sinja, were also raided and attacked by the RSF.

In a further show of force and lockdown, the military imposed an internet blackout, crippling most online and phone services across the country. The internet blackout is still ongoing. And Khartoum, as activists have explained, is essentially under military occupation.

The aim of last week's early-morning massacre and the ensuing crackdown is clear: to disperse the revolutionaries, end the central sit-in, and crush the people's demand to wrest power from the military.

The brutal crackdown comes six years after the [Rab'aa massacre](#) in Cairo carried out by then-general, now-president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, where over a thousand Muslim Brotherhood protesters were slaughtered, capping the coup carried out by the Egyptian military and marking a sharper turn of counterrevolution in the country. Today, the Khartoum sit-in massacre marks a counterrevolutionary turning point in Sudan, though in Sudan it is the regime associated with the Muslim Brotherhood that perpetrated the killings.

The forces of counterrevolution in Sudan are outgrowths of the country's own recent history of genocidal war. As many commentators said of the RSF's brutal crackdown, Darfur has come to Khartoum this week. Indeed, the Rapid Support Forces have a nearly two-decade history of racist repression in Darfur in western Sudan, as well as collusion with the European Union's drive to eliminate migration across its borders.

In 2003, Omar al-Bashir created the RSF's predecessor, the Janjaweed, [recruiting](#) them as the government's main tool in his war on Darfur. The two years after the founding of the Janjaweed witnessed the highest levels of violence in Darfur, with over one hundred thousand killed and up to two million ethnically cleansed. Al-Bashir's scorched-earth repression in Darfur led to the call for his arrest for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Nearly a decade later, in 2013, al-Bashir formally recognized the Rapid Support Forces and appointed Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (General Hemedti), who had risen through the ranks of the Janjaweed, as its leader. The militia had evolved from a primarily sectarian paramilitary to an official militia, formally subordinated to the military regime. This is as clear as ever today, as Hemedti, head of the RSF, is also deputy head of the so-called Transitional Military Council — wielding perhaps more power than anyone in the country.

In 2014, the RSF militia took up the task of policing migration, colluding with [Fortress Europe](#) as it began to [tighten the noose](#) on migrants and refugees heading towards Europe from Africa and the Middle East. The year before Europe turned its focus to Turkey to curb migration from Syria and Iraq, it looked to stop the movement of migrants through Sudan, and launched what became known as the [Khartoum Process](#).

The Khartoum Process aimed to stop African migrants from entering Europe. The Rapid Support

Forces themselves were deployed to prevent migrants from various countries from crossing Sudan's borders. Tasked with arresting and deporting hundreds of migrants, the RSF were paid a quarter of a million dollars to criminalize migrants in response to Europe's bidding. Thus, European anti-migrant racism fueled and helped professionalize the terror that was turned against the protesters this week.

The massacre of June 3 came just days after the leaders of the Transitional Military Council, General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al Burhan and his deputy, General Hemedti, attended a series of meetings convened by the Saudis in Mecca with the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Burhan and Hemedti have long-standing ties with Saudi Arabia through their participation in the Saudi-led war in Yemen that has plunged that country into a humanitarian crisis. The Saudi-UAE coalition has used Sudanese soldiers to outsource the war on Yemen, diminishing the number of Saudi lives lost and thus dampening internal dissent.

The tens of thousands of Sudanese soldiers sent to fight in Yemen have been [reported](#) to include numerous child soldiers from the Darfur region. Motivating the war on Yemen is Saudi Arabia's ongoing imperial rivalry (with absolute support from US) with Iran for regional dominance. It should also be noted that this anti-Iran alignment has driven the Gulf countries into [closer cooperation with Israel](#), one consequence of which is the upcoming Bahrain conference, where the Trump administration plans to unveil its so-called "deal of the century" sell-out of the Palestinian people.

Competition with Iran, partly at the behest of the US, drives the active backing for the Transitional Military Council (TMC) by the regional forces of counterrevolution, and their efforts quell the aspirations of the Sudanese people. On Sunday, June 2, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pledged to send three billion dollars in aid to Sudan. The Emirati crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed, [vowed](#) to "preserve Sudan's security and stability." Egyptian president — and counter-revolutionary extraordinaire — [Sisi](#) has used his position at the head of the African Union (AU) to support the TMC and block attempts by the AU to condemn it, although last Monday's massacre finally drove the AU to suspend Sudan. The timing of the bloodbath undoubtedly was reviewed and green-lit by these regional powers.

While the US made statements condemning the excesses of the recent violence, this should in no way be equated with support for the uprising, as the distancing is only cosmetic. Saudi actions are carried out in lockstep with the strategy of the country's US ally in its attempts to isolate Iran. Trump's [plans to bypass](#) Congress to keep weapons flowing into Yemen represent just one small example of this.

Russia has taken a more belligerent stance, [echoing](#) the RSF's earlier statements of justifying the massacre and stating that the violence of June 3 "need[ed] to be done for order to be imposed and fight against extremists" — the same language Russia used to express their support for the butchery of Bashar al-Assad in Syria's own revolution.

Needless to say, the revolution in Sudan is having to grapple with the fact that the massed forces of global capitalism, though sometimes in rivalry with one another, do not tolerate democratic movements like that which has flowered in Sudan's streets since January. The revolutionaries in Khartoum know this, [chanting](#) slogans like "We don't want your money" at the announcement of Saudi-Emirati aid in April. How the struggle confronts this challenge and connects with international solidarity as counterrevolution intensifies will be critical. The revolution has no friends in the halls of government but in the streets.

At first, the response from the TMC was to justify the killings; it has since shifted to downplaying them and minimizing the number killed. In a classic "good cop" maneuver, it has also stated that

now — after having dismantled one of the symbolic centers of the resistance and sown terror and death — it is open to negotiating again, even as it enforces an internet blackout to cover up its crimes.

Since the breakdown in negotiations, the TMC [has once again announced](#) that elections will be held in no more than nine months, breaking the previously agreed upon three-year transition period that the opposition had called for. The opposition demanded this timeframe before elections in order to provide adequate opportunity to organize political forces independent of the regime. Sections of the country (Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan) are still reeling from civil wars that have lasted for over a decade. Early elections would only ensure that pro-regime elements would be best positioned to reap the rewards of the ballot due to the undemocratic character of the political arena that is just beginning to be forced open by the protests.

The Sudanese Professional Association (the core of the Forces of the [Declaration of Freedom and Change](#)) has [declared](#) no more negotiations with the TMC and called for an open-ended political general strike and mass civil disobedience in order to bring down the military regime as the “only measure left” to save the revolution. As this article is being written, the [first reports](#) of the civil disobedience campaigns are coming in, and a “[social shutdown](#)” has cleared the streets in response to the call to stay home. Sections of [oil workers](#) have taken up the strike as well. The strike and civil disobedience would also mean an organized boycott of the elections should the military continue unilaterally to pursue them.

This will test some of the divisions within the revolution. Some of the more traditional [opposition parties](#) like the National Umma Party of Sadiq al-Madhi (the prime minister deposed by Omar al-Bashir in the 1989 coup), the Sudanese Congress Party, and some of the armed movements around Yassir Arman and Malik Agar are organized under the umbrella grouping [Sudan Call](#).

These parties — along with the Sudanese Communist Party, which is grouped with some small Ba’athist and Nasserite parties in the National Consensus Forces alliance — have for years played the role of institutionalized opposition against the Bashir government and his National Congress Party. Many of them, like al-Mahdi and the Popular Congress Party (PCP) of the late Hassan al Turabi, have played roles in previous governments (the PCP joined a National Unity government in 2017, which the revolutionary forces [have not forgotten](#)). Their political habits of negotiation with, and parliamentary opposition to, the old regime, will carry over and make them more likely to compromise with the military regime and counterrevolution.

However, it should be noted that the communists have thus far maintained a principled opposition to compromises on a civilian government. The politics of those elements who clearly see the dangers of these compromises have marked the successes of the revolution thus far. As the protesters recognized immediately after overthrowing al-Bashir, despite changes in government, the state apparatus remains largely intact, and this contest with state power remains the largest hurdle for the uprising.

Indeed, despite the “transition” in their name, the Transitional Military Council represents the same order as the ancien régime. The military has proven to be the consistent kingmaker of Sudanese politics and guided past coups in 1969 and 1989. The general strikes and mass struggle present themselves as the way forward to achieve an alternative.

The revolution sprang not from the opposition parties but from the masses of the Sudanese people and new formations like the SPA — which itself was created through struggle. Now is a crucial juncture to see how, after last Monday’s massacre, the struggle can be maintained in opposition to the military regime.

Mohammed described the current moment in Khartoum:

In spite of all this terror there are still people building barricades. They risk their lives, and they get terrorized, they go home for a few hours, and then they go back and rebuild the barricades.

The determination and political will expressed by this current round of general strikes and civil disobedience are essential. Also, though underreported, the promising development of neighborhood revolutionary councils offers hope, and their growth and regroupment will be essential.

Whatever lies ahead, after the massacre, Mohammed explains that:

The TMC has lost legitimacy and because of that we can have a more strongly defined revolutionary program and demand the sovereign council not as having five [representatives] from the military and five from the civilian government, [but] we should say “no, zero from the TMC.

Though the Sudanese revolution has thus far proven one of the most organized and politically advanced revolutions in the region, these challenges remain massive. Our attention and solidarity should be with the Sudanese people, who have entered the stage of history and are fighting, and dying, for freedom.

Shireen Akram-Boshar and Brian Bean

P.S.

• Jacobin, 06.13.2019:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/06/sudan-revolution-khartoum-protests-massacre>

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