



Dismantling the Sudanese Dictatorship: How Urbanization in Khartoum Paved the Way for Democratic Reform

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Dismantling the Sudanese Dictatorship:
How Urbanization in Khartoum Paved the Way for Democratic Reform

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Abstract

Over the last twenty years, Khartoum has seen an explosion of rural mass exodus to the urban centers which has brought about social change and created a melting pot of identities once separated by tribe, language, and distance. The relationship between urbanization and the political context in Khartoum is an area that remains largely untouched within the broader scholarship on Sudan. This research provides a nuanced analysis of urbanization in Khartoum as a new and largely unexplored trend. It asks whether urbanization has been an accelerating or decelerating force for the regime's staying power. Ultimately, it finds a hybrid conclusion: that while urbanization strengthened the regime for almost thirty years—primarily due to the size and reach of the government's security apparatus, extreme poverty, and the deliberate dissolution of political parties—this has been countered by the changing ethnographic makeup of the city. The youth-led popular protest of April 2019 was marked by unprecedented ethnic, class, and gender diversity that differentiated it from the elite-led, middle-class revolutions of the past. This thesis suggests that while urbanization in Khartoum benefited the National Congress Party (NCP) regime at certain intervals, it also had unforeseen consequences that ultimately accelerated regime change in Sudan.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Loloa Ibrahim is a native of Sudan with a deep interest in social movements and collective action—particularly in the African context. In her professional life, she works in philanthropy where she directs a global network of donors and foundations funding systemic change initiatives and grassroots movements around the world. At various intervals, she returned to her native Sudan to work with refugees, displaced persons, and other vulnerable populations in the areas of social protection, gender equity, and direct services. She holds a B.A. in Political Science from the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University.

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Glossary of Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organization
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
NCP	National Congress Party
NFP	National Front of Professionals
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Service
SCP	Sudan Communist Party
SPA	Sudanese Professionals Association
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission on Refugees

Chapter I

Introduction

In the stormy history of democracy, the urban center has long served as the nucleus of public assembly, a sanctuary for the persecuted, and an incubator of political and cultural change. Freedom, it would seem, is born of urban struggles, and democracy out of diversity, discord, and deliberation. What better harbinger than the city to navigate such tensions and paradoxes? If ever one country has gone against all patterns and predictions, it is Sudan—a nation that has existed under the dark moon of military dictatorship for thirty years, writhing under an iron fist but repeatedly failing to reach its anticipated breaking point. Even while the “Arab Spring” was in full bloom, with pro-democracy uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt inspiring similar actions throughout the region, Khartoum stalled in relative passivity. That is, until the April 2019 revolution which brought down President Omar al-Bashir’s regime.

In Sudan’s capital city of Khartoum, rapid, unorchestrated, and sometimes unauthorized urban growth has been a prominent feature of the past fifty years, but was greatly accelerated in the late 1990s. This thesis explores the recent paradigm of urbanization in Sudan (1995 to the present) with a specific focus on Khartoum given its significance as the seedbed of political change in Sudan.

Central to the study of urbanization in this context is the question of whether it has served to transform the political climate in the city to confront the oppressive thirty-year reign of the National Congress Party (NCP), which captured the state through

military coup in 1989.¹ In other words, this research asks: has urbanization served to strengthen or weaken the NCP regime in Sudan? It offers a hybrid conclusion: that while urbanization contributed to the regime's staying power primarily due to the size and reach of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), the eradication of the middle class, and the deliberate dissolution of political parties, this has been countered by the changing demographics of the city which ultimately accelerated the people's call for democracy. This is evidenced by the youth-led events of April 2019 which were marked by two distinct factors: (1) an unprecedented diversity of ethnicity, tribe, class, age, and gender that scarcely resembled the elitist and relatively homogenous revolutions of the past, and (2) protests that began in the periphery first before moving to the center—a complete shift from the center-periphery dynamic of the past. This thesis suggests, therefore, that while urbanization benefited the NCP regime at certain intervals, ultimately it accelerated regime change in Khartoum.

To substantiate my argument, I divided my research into four sections. In the first section, I review Khartoum's significant and rich history of popular uprisings dating back to the 1964 October Revolution. I analyze Khartoum's unique brand of Islamist military dictatorship. Second, I define and assess urbanization in the Sudanese context, providing a nuanced analysis of its impact in Khartoum, how this urban growth occurred, and how it has impacted the social, economic, and political character of the city. Third, I provide an analysis of the NCP regime in the wake of the city's urban growth and shed light on the thirty-year endurance of the NCP regime in Khartoum. Finally, against this historical backdrop, an analysis of the current political climate establishes Khartoum's significance

¹ M. A. Mohamed Salih, *Economic Development and Political Action in the Arab World* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

as the cradle of political change in Sudan while also seeking to explain why, in this case, it was the rural centers, not the city, that gave rise to the April 2019 revolution that unseated al-Bashir. I draw conclusions based on the above showing how urbanization in the context of the Sudanese dictatorship accelerated the fall of the NCP regime.

Urban Growth in Khartoum: 1995 to Present

Authors Mohammed Arouri, Adel Ben Youssef, et al., define *urbanization* as “the demographic process whereby an increasing share of the national population lives within urban settlements.”² Since the mid-1990s, Khartoum has seen an explosion of rural mass exodus to the urban centers which has created a melting pot of primordial identities once separated by tribe, language, and distance. A comparison of Sudan’s nine largest urban centers (see Table 1) demonstrates the striking difference between the population of Khartoum versus the eight largest urban centers in the country.

Greater Khartoum is comprised of three cities situated at the convergence of the Blue Nile and White Nile rivers: Bahri, Omdurman, and Khartoum City. Covering an area of approximately 22,000 square kilometers (equivalent to 3% of the total area of Sudan), Khartoum houses more than one-tenth of Sudan’s population and more than half of the total urban population.³ As a city, it has grown both spatially and demographically. This rapid expansion, driven by desertification, migration, and dwindling economic

² Mohammed Arouri, Adel Ben Youssef, et al., “Effects of Urbanization on Economic Growth and Human Capital Formation in Africa,” September 2, 2014. Available from: https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1288/2014/09/PGDA_WP_119.pdf. Accessed December 2, 2018.

³ Zara Sarzin, and Barjor Mehta, “Sudan: Issues in Urban Development” (World Bank, November 2011): 31.

Table 1. Population of Sudan's Nine Largest Urban Centers

Province	1993 Population
Khartoum	2,831,000
Port Sudan	308,616
El Obeid	228,139
Nyala	220,386
Wad Medani	212,501
Al-Gadarif	185,317
Kosti	172,832
Al-Fashir	141,600
Al-Gineina	127,187

Source: Ahmad and El-Batthani, 199.

opportunity in the rural areas, led to widening economic inequality and the growth of unplanned settlements and slum areas. In his seminal work on urbanization, Sudanese researcher Yasin A. Eltayib notes:

The population of Khartoum in 2008 was 5,274,321 of which 4,272,728 (81%) is considered as urban and rest of 19% (1,001,593) rural. The horizontal expansion of the Greater Khartoum area has been quite remarkable with an increase of 48 times as large as it was in 1955.⁴

Studies by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) place Khartoum's migrants into three categories: war-displaced, drought-displaced, and voluntary migrants.⁵ Displaced individuals living in Khartoum have typically lost property and community, but have traded the perils of war and physical danger for the

⁴ Yasin Abdalla Eltayib, *Political Economy and Urban Poverty in the Developing Countries: Lessons Learned from the Sudanese Experience*. August 2012.

⁵ Evelina Lyytinen, "A Tale of Three Cities, Internal Displacement, Urbanization, and Humanitarian Action in Abidjan, Khartoum, and Mogadishu," *New Issues in Refugee Research* (UNHCR, 2009): 7.

relative safety of Khartoum's slums and internally displaced person (IDP) camps. A Tufts University survey by Karen Jacobsen suggests that in 2007 the number of IDPs in urban areas of Khartoum ranged from 1 to 1.2 million people, with an additional 300,000 to 400,000 living in camps and resettlement areas.⁶ These figures suggest that internal migrants account for almost one-quarter of the population of Greater Khartoum. The average length of displacement in Khartoum is typically twelve years, thus making it a protracted situation which, compounded by sheer numbers, created a problem that far exceeded the scope of humanitarian intervention.

The problem demanded a comprehensive, long-term development policy and pro-poor strategy. This never occurred, however. In fact, the NCP grossly mismanaged the economic integration of IDPs, instead focusing on demolishing slums to bolster the more affluent and already developed areas of Khartoum. Poor urban planning, coupled with structural racism and a policy of exclusion, created conditions where 27% of urban dwellers live under the poverty line of less than \$1 per month.⁷ Not surprisingly, gross mismanagement in the rural areas also led to 58% of rural dwellers living under the poverty line.⁸

The monopoly of power held by an elite minority, coupled with the state's preference toward Arab tribes, led to complete neglect of development agendas in all but the most affluent portions of the city. The government used its apparatus to establish ethnic and geographical polarizations in a classic "divide and rule" strategy reminiscent

⁶ Karen Jacobsen, "Internal Displacement to Urban Areas: The Tufts-IDMC Profiling Study, Khartoum, Sudan: Case 1" (Norwegian Refugee Council/Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (NRC/IDMC), 2008).

⁷ Sarzin and Mehta, "Sudan," 20.

⁸ Sarzin and Mehta, "Sudan," 20.

of colonial times. Engineered social marginalization and deliberate political exclusion fostered an urban crisis of great magnitude within the city as urban poor and IDPs vied for space alongside a new class of regime-loyal millionaires. This urban practice of dividing Khartoum into classes is one of many sustained colonial practices that has shaped Sudan's identity politics for decades.

Khartoum's urban growth is largely characterized by the rural-urban movement of people fleeing poverty, environmental degradation, and war. Upon their arrival in Khartoum, IDPs, migrants, and large populations of *Fellatta* (ethnically marginalized tribes of West African descent) were relegated to the outer rings of the city in makeshift slums and squatter settlements. For the IDP, urbanization means parting with their property, land, and animal wealth to find security as a destitute city-dweller. For city residents, the influx of IDPs is an unwelcome competitor for the limited opportunities of employment. Whatever share of the limited marginal market is taken by the IDP further pauperizes those already involved in that particular trade.

Rural mass exodus to the urban centers is attributed mainly to geographically and socially uneven development, armed conflict, and "the concomitant depression of rural ecosystems and communities."⁹ While cities grew, the rest of the country was mired in poverty. Rural farmlands that lacked proper irrigation systems made harvests more vulnerable. The distribution of ethnic groups throughout the country meant the state engaged in discriminatory practices with regard to the distribution of resources and

⁹ Galal Eldin Eltayeb, "The Case of Khartoum, Sudan," University of Khartoum, 2003. Available from: <http://sigus.scripts.mit.edu/x/archived/challengecourse/pdfs/pdfscities/khartoum.pdf>. Accessed 19 August 2019.

services, and a centralized government meant power and wealth were concentrated in Khartoum and only marginally shared across regions.

To curb urban sprawl and control informal urbanization, the government established four key emergency IDP camps: Wad Al Bashir, Jebal Awlia, Mayo Farms, and Dar El-Salam.¹⁰ Violent demolition campaigns were carried out by the Ministry of Physical Planning and Public Utilities to force IDPs to move into the camps. thus reducing the many informal settlements that were both a nuisance and an international embarrassment to the regime. Despite the state's efforts, however, the continued influx of migrants and their preference to remain outside of formal camps foiled the government's best efforts to contain its newest city dwellers. Khartoum became a deeply divided city.

¹⁰ Roberto Rocco, and Jan van Ballegoijen, eds., *Routledge Handbook on Informal Urbanization* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 163.

Chapter II

Sudan's History of Popular Uprising: 1964 and 1985

No study of popular uprising and democratization in today's Sudan would be complete without an understanding of two revolutions that occurred in the heart of Khartoum. Sudan's post-independence history is marked by the October Revolution of 1964 and the Intifada of April 1985—both remarkable because they unseated what W. J. Berridge refers to as “entrenched military regimes by largely pacific civil action at a time when authoritarian governments in Africa and the Middle East could usually be replaced only by military means.”¹¹ In both uprisings, the urban center was the locus of civic values, social movements, and political change. Every movement that brought about political transformation had its origins in Khartoum.¹²

October Revolution of 1964: Lessons and Parallels

The October 1964 Revolution, a source of reverence and nostalgia to this day, began as a student protest that quickly escalated into a wave of demonstrations and strikes. The events were prompted by opposition to the policies of then president Ibrahim Abboud, which in turn aggravated political unrest and civil war in the south. When confronted with the protests, Abboud reacted by immediately dissolving Parliament,

¹¹ W. J. Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan: The “Khartoum Springs” of 1964 and 1985*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 1.

¹² Munzoul Assal, “Urbanization and the Future of Sudan,” *African Arguments* (January 29, 2008). Available from: <https://africanarguments.org/2008/01/29/urbanization-and-the-future/>. Accessed September 2018.

banning political parties, prohibiting gatherings, and suspending the press.¹³ In 1963 a Central Council was quickly formed to fill the void left by the dissolved Parliament. However, as author Timothy Niblock notes, “the controlled and contrived nature of this representation —where parties were banned and candidates could only seek election on their individual merits—gave the council limited political significance.”¹⁴ Soon, opposition against the regime’s repressive policies began to mount. The most effective and well-organized anti-government campaigns were building up among student movements at the University of Khartoum, where calls for democracy resonated and took hold. However, those calls took on a new life following the October 21 death of Ahmed Al Qurashi, a university student killed by police during a student-led forum on South Sudan.¹⁵ His death galvanized widespread demonstrations which led to even more clashes with police and additional lives lost. This inspired University of Khartoum professors, unionists, and what was then known as the National Front of Professionals (NFP)—loosely equivalent to today’s Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA)—to call for a general strike that paralyzed life in the city.¹⁶

The NFP, an increasingly powerful group, eventually formed the United National Front, a joint body tasked with undertaking negotiations with the military regime to actualize the people’s call for democracy. By October 29, the United National Front and the Abboud regime had reached an agreement to forge a way out of the crisis. It included

¹³ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 15-20.

¹⁴ Tom Niblock, *Class and Power in Sudan: The Dynamics of Sudanese Politics, 1898-1985* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 222.

¹⁵ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 20-23.

¹⁶ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 23.

the liquidation of the military regime, the formation of a caretaker government whose main responsibility would be to prepare the way for the election of the Constituent Assembly; the revival of the freedom of the press and of expression; the cancellation of all laws which restricted freedom; and the safeguarding of the independence of the judiciary and the university.¹⁷

In November 1964, Abboud stepped down.

The success of the 1964 revolution, although short-lived, bears parallels to the April 2019 revolution, still ongoing at the time of this writing. That revolution is largely credited with the fact that civilian resistance was predominantly peaceful, encouraging an alliance with military officers who, at momentous intervals, refused to open fire on civilians. This mutual understanding opened up new, discrete pathways for dialogue with opposition leaders, which demonstrated boldness, unity, and leadership. Unlike the NCP, however, the Abboud regime allowed considerable space for civic institutions to organize and campaign against the regime. This stands in contrast to the suppressive and violent reaction of the NCP security forces in the face of civic activism, which pacified the Sudanese opposition for almost three decades and contributed to the regime's longevity and staying power.

The October Revolution accomplished the seemingly impossible feat of forcing the hand of a military regime through the will of a marginalized intelligentsia. While unprecedented for any African country at the time, the uprising of October 1964 is often characterized as a short-term triumph but a long-term failure.¹⁸ It failed to realize a transition to a stable democracy and instead perpetuated a short-lived sense of hope and

¹⁷ Amir Salim Mohamed, "Civic Engagement and Authoritarian State in Sudan: The Unfulfilled Arab Spring." Master's thesis, University of London, n.d. Available from: https://www.academia.edu/24375058/Civic_Engagement_and_Authoritarian_State_in_Sudan_The_Unfulfilled_Arab_Spring. Accessed 20 August 2019.

¹⁸ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 14.

euphoria that was soon overtaken by another military regime led by Jaffar Nimeiry in 1969. Nonetheless, political theorist and author Ahmed El Affendi characterizes the event as an assurance “that mass protests, even when spontaneous and largely uncoordinated, were going to lead to a decisive restoration of democracy, rather than chaos or civil conflict.”¹⁹ The whole experience and the achievements associated with it became a source of inspiration and immense pride for the Sudanese.

Among the most interesting paradoxes of the October Revolution was its introduction of secular and universalist slogans by actors who would later become “the vanguards of political Islam in Sudan.”²⁰ The same revolution that promised liberalization and reform was simultaneously birthing the country’s first crop of Islamists. A key player in the incitement against Abboud was none other than the late Hassan al-Turabi, the orchestrator of the 1989 Salvation Revolution one generation later. He is now remembered by history as the figurehead of Sudan’s Muslim Brotherhood movement. At the time, he was a university lecturer who offered seminal critiques of the Abboud regime and played a critical role in the October Revolution through compelling political speeches delivered before droves of student demonstrators. Interestingly, amidst calls for liberty, “al-Turabi was, as usual, tailoring his message to suit his audience. To an exam hall full of students he talked about political liberty, whereas to a more socially conservative electorate he spoke about public morals.”²¹ Acts of rioting and violence carried out by the Muslim Brotherhood and their sympathizers took on a moralistic undertone, singling out

¹⁹ Abdelwahab El-Affendi, “Revolutionary Anatomy: The Lessons of the Sudanese Revolutions of October 1964 and April 1985,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2012): 293.

²⁰ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 15.

²¹ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 30.

bars and liquor sellers, and prompting the notion that this was not a purely secular event.²² Al-Turabi was the chief antagonist against the left, and he turned to religion to pursue his political imperatives. As a result, he transformed a political event into a religious one to garner support for his specific political objectives. The Islamists were born out of, defined by, and continue to exist as a counter-revolutionary reaction to the fear of progressive influence in Sudanese politics.²³

Prominent Sudanese thinker Abdullahi Gallab regards the 1964 revolution as the single most profound event in the history of independent Sudan.²⁴ It was the moment when conservative forces in Sudan rallied against the left—a rallying that eventually culminated in the reactionary Islamist regime that took hold in 1989. Hatred of the left after the October Revolution provided a catalyst for a culture war against secular, progressive, and communist movements in Sudan, and this remains a major cause for the political paralysis Sudan suffers even today.

The April 1985 Intifada

By the time the 1985 Intifada came about, the political tone in Khartoum was even more fraught. Jaafar Nimeiri had taken power in 1969 by *coup d'état*, ousting sitting president Ismail al-Azhari and ending the country's first hard-won and short-lived democracy. By then, Nimeiri had instituted *sharia* law and banned all political parties, including the Sudan Communist Party (SCP). This created significant divisions in the

²² Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 28.

²³ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 13-38.

²⁴ Abdullahi A. Gallab, *Hasan al-Turabi, the Last of the Islamists: The Man and His Times 1932–2016* (New York: Lexington Books, 2018), 151.

anti-regime movement as it was now comprised of secular nationalists, pro-democracy agents, leftists, and Islamists.²⁵ Throughout Nimeiri's era, civilian resistance continued among the very groups who led the 1964 uprising but to a less effective extent due to Nimeiri's powerful and far more coercive security apparatus compared to that of his predecessor General Abboud. More significantly, the regime had taken extensive measures to co-opt or dismantle the trade unions and student activist organizations of the past. Here one can observe the parallels between the authoritarian tactics of the Nimeiri regime and the NCP—quelling dissent through the politics of fear and co-opting political parties and competing ideologies.

While Nimeiri attempted a brief reconciliation with traditional opposition forces in 1977, this failed to generate real political change as power remained concentrated in his hands. However, it succeeded in enabling him to pacify anti-regime activism by garnering the support of the Islamists who by then controlled the majority of student movements. Despite this, a number of factors were working to the detriment of Nimeiri: drought and looming famine, renewed civil war in the south, rising food costs, and political opposition from credible threats like Al Sadik Al Mahdi, leader of the Umma Party, and Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, leader of the Republican Brotherhood.

Taha's reinterpretation of the Meccan verses of the Quran developed a teaching of Islam that challenged existing applications of *sharia* law. His teachings shook the foundation of the prevailing Islamic thought, and as a result he was convicted of apostasy and hanged in 1985. Reaction to Taha's death was so severe it galvanized people to bring down the Nimeiri regime. Taha's execution gave rise to the same professional and trade

²⁵ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 53-58.

union organizations that were among the critical factors that toppled the regime four months later. As Alex de Waal notes:

The gatherings to mourn Ustaz Mahmoud became the occasion for trade union and professional leaders to begin discussing how to organize regime change, and they immediately established the Trade Union Alliance. From this emerged the National Alliance for National Salvation (NANS), which coordinated the uprising.²⁶

The civilian revolt of April 1985 began with a series of uprisings led by professionals, trade union members, students, and political parties—first protesting austerity measures and later triggering a ripple of protests throughout the capital. As with the 1964 revolution, a general strike, coupled with widespread campaigns of civil disobedience, paralyzed Khartoum. The events were significant and persistent enough to topple the regime, culminating in an April 6 public announcement by Sudan Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief General Abdel Rahman Swar Al Dahab of the dissolution of the government and security services branch. A transitional military council and civilian council were erected ahead of the transition to a democratically elected government in 1986.²⁷

There was little agreement over what should replace the ousted regime. Nonetheless, the uprising was animated by a convergence of political parties that was unprecedented and posed a significant challenge to the military regime. The Umma Party, for example, was the force behind the events that triggered the earliest demonstrations. The 1985 uprising offered another example of the strength of civic activism in Sudan, despite the fact that Nimeiri's regime was harsher and more politically coercive than that

²⁶ Alex de Waal, "Sudan's Elusive Democratization: Civil Mobilization, Provincial Rebellion and Chameleon Dictatorships," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31, no. 2 (2013): 216.

²⁷ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 40.

of General Abboud. Also notable was the military's alignment with the people, and its refusal to respond with violence to non-violent civilian actions.²⁸

Both uprisings have been characterized by historians as elite affairs emerging primarily from developed, urban locales that were “relatively affluent, well-educated, and socially homogeneous.”²⁹ Both uprisings exhibited patterns of effective civic engagement led by politically savvy and organizationally coherent actors. Both were led by actors in Khartoum. This is a crucial function of an urban center—to act as a hub of political thought with a robust menu of competing political ideologies and perspectives.

Observing the wider trends in post-colonial Africa, political thinkers attribute the success of the two revolutions to the nature of the African state at the time—a state that was not yet well policed and still grappling with the legacy of colonial rule that forged a divide between the center and periphery.³⁰ In the earlier insurrections, the distinction between urban intelligentsia and the less engaged, marginalized rural population made Khartoum and its residents uniquely powerful by contrast. Today's Khartoum has morphed into something quite different, with the economic, tribal, and political lines between center and periphery morphing and blurring into something larger, paradoxically weaker, but decidedly less ideological.

An analysis of the patterns of civic engagement in both the 1964 and 1985 uprisings demonstrates the pivotal role played by student movements, trade unions, and professional organizations centered in the city. These groups capitalized on the quasi-liberal political environment, the narrow social base of support of the then regimes, and

²⁸ de Waal, “Sudan's Elusive Democratization,” 223.

²⁹ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 60.

³⁰ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 7-8.

more significantly, the space allowed to society and its civic components under the comparatively less coercive and less penetrative authoritarian states present in 1964 and 1985.

When confronting the NCP regime a generation later, similar activities can be observed from civic activism institutions, particularly the SPA, which was the main driving force behind the April 2019 revolution thanks to its highly politicized and well-organized establishment. Now we begin to observe a new and more inclusive form of protest that spans across racial, class, and ethnic divisions. We also begin to observe a new and unprecedented dynamic between the center and the periphery.

Chapter III

Sudan's Islamists: Emergence, *Coup d'état*, and the 1989 Salvation Revolution

Abdullahi Gallab argues that the rise of Islamism is neither a result of the 1964 Revolution nor is it uniquely Sudanese. He contends that the entire late-colonial and post-colonial experience in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere in the former colonial world, has been held hostage to the ongoing struggle between Islamism and the domestic, regional, and global power relations that have provided and continue to provide “material and ideational support for reactionary forces.”³¹ The state represents the inherent and inherited systems and structures of power and coercion developed as part of the colonial experience.³² Sudan's Islamists not only failed to construct a state that addressed issues of economic inequality along tribal and ethnic lines, but they have been responsible for intensifying those practices by favoring the North, particularly Khartoum, vis-à-vis economic investment and infrastructure development. Sudan's Islamists are particularly Sudanese when placed within the broader transhistorical, regional, and global context. The Islamist movement of the Salvation Revolution of 1989 was a unique experiment in military Islamism and the longest running example of its kind.

On the night of June 30, 1989, a military coup orchestrated by Brigadier General Omar al-Bashir occupied strategic locations in Khartoum and forcefully removed the democratically elected government of Al Sadik Al-Mahdi from power. The newly

³¹ Abdullahi Gallab, *Their Second Republic: Islamism in the Sudan, from Disintegration to Oblivion* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 81.

³² Gallab, *Their Second Republic*, 178.

installed government dubbed itself the *Inqaz* or Salvation Revolution. Most Sudanese, including some of Sudan's strongest allies like Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, completely misread the nature of the new order. Mubarak hastily endorsed the military junta, thinking it was a traditional coup that would ultimately align with his own country's interests.³³ Few anticipated the brutal crackdown on all civilian politics or the mass arrests of Sudan's entire political class that followed. Behind the coup was a meticulously organized plan to launch an Islamic revolution under the facade of military rule. Hassan al-Turabi, the same instigator behind the 1964 revolution, soon rose to become the religious commander of the *Inqaz* movement.

Islam in Sudan, like elsewhere, was not a simplistic reactionary throwback to the golden area of seventh-century Arabia, but a resolutely modern phenomenon that equated Sudan's problems with communism and the sectarian, secular parties dominating the political space. It soon became clear that Omar al-Bashir was merely a figurehead of the movement, and the real power and influence came from al-Turabi, the revolution's grand strategist. Al-Turabi imposed four broad objectives: a new Islamic political system including *sharia* (legislation) and *shura* (consultation); a new foreign policy free from the reins of Cairo and Washington; a new, liberalized Sudanese economy; and a revival of Islamic traditions.³⁴ During the 1990s, al-Turabi's lofty objectives began to show cracks, and Khartoum faced international isolation, American sanctions, and a loss of development aid. The revolution that was once considered exportable, replicable, and bearing the potential to change the whole world, had begun to disband.

³³ Harry Verhoeven, *Water, Civilisation and Power in Sudan: The Political Economy of Military-Islamist State Building* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 83-115.

³⁴ Verhoeven, *Water, Civilization and Power in Sudan*, 97.

Al-Turabi's fellow leaders in the *Inqaz*, particularly his deputy Ali Osman Taha and President al-Bashir, soon began to see him as arrogant and dangerous, having organized the regime in such a way that it was fully dependent on him and less on the consultation and experience of his lieutenants. It was Taha who drove the rift in the Islamist movement and the subsequent overthrow of al-Turabi, and he became a principal actor in shaping the movement from that point on. Following the embarrassment of al-Turabi's failed attempt to assassinate President Mubarak in 1995, and subsequently his own survival of a physical attack during a visit to Canada, many began to see him as more of a problem than an asset. In 1999, al-Bashir undertook a palace coup that led to al-Turabi's arrest, thereby foiling al-Turabi's attempts to neutralize al-Bashir's power and assume authority over the regime. The Islamist political project had gone awry.

Al-Turabi, the architect of Sudanese Islamism—at first a charismatic and dominant personality with significant clout—had been ousted by his own followers who then turned the Islamist state into a project of personal accumulation. Political elites used state power to convert public industries into personal wealth through the misapplication of privatization and structural adjustment programs. The split had profound political consequences. Islam in Sudan, which had been dictated by the breadth and depth of al-Turabi's influence, disintegrated and morphed into a military state with only an inference of Islamist aspirations. The true character of the *Inqaz* was revealed. Berridge notes:

Having “eaten its father,” the Islamic Movement lost its ideological coherence. Whilst the post-1999 regime remained Islamist in character, the division created a conflict over how exactly the “Islamic State” was to be established and many began to acknowledge the failings of the original “civilizational project” of the 1990s. This ideological splintering resulted in the re-emergence of a semi-free print media. As a result of the Islamic Movement's ideological confusion, the security agencies have been unsure

as to how to censor the wide range of political and religious views that have emerged following this media liberalization.³⁵

The regime morphed from one that suspended democracy, touted jihadist aspirations to justify civil war with the south, and went to great lengths to socially engineer Islamic values, into one that abandoned the Islamist ideology in favor of an “Economic Salvation Program.”

With al-Bashir and Taha at the helm, and armed with new petrodollars, the regime ushered in an era of aggressive economic liberalization, investing heavily in a hydro-agricultural revival, large-scale infrastructure development, and the delivery of public services—particularly in the larger, more affluent, and already developed cities. This would later be known as the “Hamdi Triangle,” named after regime ideologue and Minister of Finance Abdelrahim Hamdi. The project was hailed by many as being deeply discriminatory and racially motivated due to its focus on urban locales that were generally considered more Arabized, more educated, and less African. The shift from ideological radicalism to an economic growth mission was regarded as an expensive, bold gamble designed to benefit a substantial minority. Al-Turabi might have initially commanded the loyalty of most civilian regime insiders, but the combination of the army’s coercive power and the alluring prospect of being rewarded with petrodollars meant that all but the most ideologically committed joined the bandwagon behind al-Bashir and Taha.³⁶

³⁵ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 200.

³⁶ Verhoeven, *Water, Civilization and Power in Sudan*, 93.

The Hegemony of the North

Shortly after the April 2019 revolution, I interviewed prominent opposition leader, former ambassador, renowned poet, and author Mohammed Elmekki Ibrahim. Ibrahim highlighted the issue of Northern hegemony which, until recently, had silently shaped the character of Sudanese politics while being regarded as simply indisputable fact. Few challenged the national practice of promoting the Arab and Islamic cultures of the North while ignoring and marginalizing Sudan's African communities.³⁷

Like Ibrahim, Gallab refers to this phenomenon as “the creation of the center”—a strategy of *ta'rib* or Arabization that Gallab attributes first to colonial reordering and control, and later to the deliberate divisions created by the state along ethnic and cultural lines (a predominantly Arab north and the African margins). Gallab further credits this to the white-collar salariat in Khartoum, the economic arteries of the Northern cities, and a railway system designed to enrich the city while starving the margins.³⁸ Ultimately, these decisions created the theme of the margin peasant worker which endures to this day. Ibrahim similarly credits the power base of the Northern Sudanese Arabs with numerous oppressive, and even violent, occurrences including the rise of the *Janjawid* of which the current General Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo “Hemedti” is a direct product. Today, Hemedti, a former Janjaweed commander, may very well determine the future of Sudan and is a powerful figure of the transitional government formed after April 2019. He and other figures like him, are a product of the state's commitment to quashing non-Arab identities by emboldening, supporting, and even arming the tactics that aid in their

³⁷ Mohammed Elmekki Ibrahim. former Sudanese Ambassador, personal interview by thesis author, May 14, 2019.

³⁸ Abdullahi Gallab, *A Civil Society Deferred: The Tertiary Grip of Violence in the Sudan* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 139-163.

suppression. The concentration of power in Khartoum compared to the rest of the country, and the imbalance of power-sharing (see Table 2) leaves little hope for those “whose fortunes destined them to have been born outside the ethnic groups of the Northern Region.”³⁹ For many years, this imbalance of power emboldened the NCP regime. According to Eltayib and Samat:

Khartoum enjoys 73 per cent of the industries, 75 per cent of the industrial labor force, 67 per cent of the electrical power supply from the national grid, 85% of commercial enterprises, 80 per cent of banking services, 85 per cent of industrial bank loans, 71 per cent of real estate bank loans, 65 per cent of the currency exchange market, 70 per cent of tax payers, 81 per cent of the taxes collected, 70 per cent of the hospitals and health center, 65 per cent of medical doctors, and 80 per cent of the nurses of the total national share.⁴⁰

Ambassador Ibrahim believes that Sudan’s relentless obsession with Arabization ultimately backfired thanks to urbanization. While Khartoum has always been predominantly Arab, it once boasted religious tolerance and diversity. Young people were educated in both English and Arabic in co-ed institutions. Religion, despite some attempts at *sharia*, was still a private matter. After the NCP took power, the government instituted a systematic and deliberate policy of Arabization and Islamization in an effort to homogenize the Sudanese population under a common language and faith. As the city swelled with newcomers from the peripheries, bringing with them tribal and ethnic identities, a thirty-year process of language homogenization began to blur the distinction between Arab and non-Arab, particularly among youth who rejected the labels of the past. A new rallying cry of “We are all Sudanese” was popularized by young people who

³⁹ Salah Hassan and Carina E. Ray, eds., *Darfur and the Crisis of Governance in Sudan: A Critical Reader* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 90.

⁴⁰ Yasin Abdalla Eltayeb Elhadary, and Narimah Samat, “Political Economy and Urban Poverty in the Developing Countries: Lessons Learned from the Sudanese Experience,” *Journal of Geography and Geology* 3, no. 1 (2011): 68.

Table 2. Division of Key Offices, by Region, in Sudan

	Northern Region	Southern Region	Darfur Region
As percentage of Sudan's population	5%	16%	20%
Presidents, 1956-present	All of Northern Origin	0%	0%
National Ministers 1989-2000	52%	13%	11%
Members of Revolutionary Command Council 1989-present	53%	20%	13%
Presidential Advisors 1994-2001	50%	0%	10%
State Governors excluding Southern States	40%	All from the South	15%
Attorney Generals 1989-2000	50%	0%	0%
Heads of Constitutional Court	74%	13%	13%
Heads of National Internal Security	50%	0%	0%
Heads of External National Security	100%	0%	0%
Sudan Intelligence System	100%	0%	0%
Heads of National Police Force	44%	0%	0%
Sudanese Ambassadors (2000)	66%	6%	2%
Sudan Consuls	47%	2%	0%
Presidents of Universities (56)	55%	0%	17%
Managers of Bank of Sudan 1988-2000	100%	0%	0%
Managers of Other Banks and Financial Houses	67%	0%	1%
Managers of Gezira Scheme	100%	0%	0%
Major Public Companies (52)	73%	0%	0%

Source: Hassan and Ray, 19.

had lived through the atrocities of Darfur and the secession of South Sudan, and had grown weary of tribalism and ethnic divisions. This made the April 2019 protests look and sound significantly different than any civil unrest in Sudan's past, with unprecedented class, ethnic, and gender diversity. Ibrahim noted:

Nothing could prepare the regime for the phenomenon created by Arabization itself. Local neighborhood committees, activist groups and other grassroots actors communicated in the language and aspirations of the popular masses—harmonizing the delivery, style, and cadence of a revolutionary dream shared by all.⁴¹

Whereas the past revolutions were characterized by elite Arab citizens in Khartoum organizing in closed forums and later garnering the support of the margins, this revolution came from the margins, excluded no one, included everyone, and spoke a common language.

⁴¹ Ibrahim, interview, May 14, 2019.

Chapter IV

Urbanization and the Sudanese Dictatorship

Urbanization is a multi-layered process tied to sustainability, economic growth, geographic layout, urban governance, social transformation, and the cultural cross-pollination that stems from rural exodus.⁴² Because of the nature and complexity of its study, some scholars have noted “urbanization quality” as the optimal frame to assess urban growth, rather than the one-dimensional study of “urbanization level,” which does not adequately capture “urban functionality or the extent to which [the city] can meet the current and future needs of citizens.”⁴³ Based on this understanding of urbanization quality, the deep problems in Khartoum’s urbanization process are apparent, namely, the failure of the state to emphasize economic fairness, efficiency, and sustainability. Examining the problem of poverty in Khartoum, Sudanese scholars Adil M. Ahmad and Ata E. El-Batthani note two factors that cause urban poverty—“the more or less uncontrolled growth of the city,” and “the lack of effective policies aimed specifically at alleviating poverty.”⁴⁴ Khartoum’s urban growth is significantly characterized by both.

Evidence suggests that poverty levels in Sudan have risen in direct proportion to urbanization. Using census data on poverty levels, Sudanese researcher Galal Eldin

⁴² Gordon McGranahan, and David Satterthwaite, “Urbanization Concepts and Trends,” IIED Working Paper, 2014. Available from: <https://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/10709IIED.pdf>. Accessed August 18, 2019.

⁴³ Yiping Xiao, Yan Song, and Xiaodong Wu, “The Evolution of Quality Concept and the Quality of Urban Development,” *Sustainability* 10, no. 8 (20 August 2018): 2. Available from: <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/10/8/2953>. Accessed 19 August 2019.

⁴⁴ Ahmad and El-Batthani, “Poverty in Khartoum,” 198.

Eltayeb suggests in his work on urbanization in Khartoum that the poverty rate (defined as an income of \$1 per month, per person) in the slums is at 85%.⁴⁵ Severe poverty, an obliterated middle class, and the rise of a new stratum of elites loyal to the ruling party created an extreme wealth gap. Rapid urban growth led to eradication of the middle class and manifestation of extreme socioeconomic inequality marked by a *nouveau riche*, millionaire class living side by side with squatter settlements, IDP camps, and slums.

The hyper-concentration of wealth and power created conditions in the metropolis that strengthened the NCP's economic and political base and proceeded to attract and absorb more individuals into its ideology—either by fear or by enticement. Moreover, the regime's strategic use of political repression and state violence contributed substantially to preserving its power, creating a security apparatus so obsessed and ruthlessly efficient that even an incendiary thought carried with it the risk of arrest and detention. This powerful policing body was NISS, which significantly benefited from the larger number of citizens residing under its watchful eye in the urban centers. Human rights defender Amin M. Medani explains that uniformed NISS agents are not only “expressly considered part of the regular forces, but [are] also armed to the teeth [with] thousands of members and collaborators.”⁴⁶

Human Rights Watch researcher Jemera Rone was among the first to expose Khartoum's infamous “ghost houses”—detention centers where political agitators were held, often for months, and subjected to “systematic beatings, torture, and humiliating

⁴⁵ Eltayeb, “The Case of Khartoum,” 12.

⁴⁶ Amin M. Medani, “A Legacy of Institutionalized Repression: Criminal Law and Justice in Sudan,” Chapter 3 in Lutz Oette, *Criminal Law Reform and Transitional Justice: Human Rights Perspectives for Sudan* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 77.

treatment.”⁴⁷ Rone noted ghost houses created conditions in which torture and disappearances occurred unchecked and perpetuated a climate of fear, compliance, and silence in the city.⁴⁸ Prior to the advent of the NCP, such secret detention centers were unheard of in Khartoum. This marked the early impact of the regime’s security apparatus, which has since flourished into a network bearing the extensive powers of arrest, detention, and immunity.

Because of the extensive and unchecked actions of NISS, discussed in more detail in the following section, the NCP rooted and secured its stronghold in Khartoum where it was headquartered. It policed, monitored, and instilled fear in the city, ensuring that the political activism that once flourished in Khartoum was promptly quelled. In this instance, urbanization had indeed worked in the regime’s favor, broadened and deepened the reach of NISS and protected its interest in the urban center, where it mattered most. That said, while NISS exemplifies the ways in which the regime did in fact benefit from urbanization, other social changes were simultaneously at play that the regime could neither anticipate nor combat.

The Impact of NISS

While urbanization increased the country’s appetite for democracy, some forces were equally working to suppress it. One of those was NISS. When a mass urban migration spiked in 2005, the NCP was in a heightened state of alert, swiftly imprisoning activists, censoring journalists, and flooding the airwaves with propaganda about the

⁴⁷ Jemera Rone, *Behind the Red Line: Political Repression in Sudan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996), 175.

⁴⁸ Rone, *Behind the Red Line*, 33.

crisis in Darfur and the war in the south. Proliferating numbers of NGOs and civil society organizations took root in an effort to mitigate the crisis of IDPs fleeing war; it would take two years of conflict before residents in Khartoum were fully aware of what was occurring in Darfur. This was made possible by NISS' ownership and control over the international press, most major television stations, several newspapers, and all major FM radio stations. The use of propaganda and calculated misinformation became a deliberate and widespread practice post-2005. Newly arrived domestic migrants were quickly indoctrinated via rallies and propagandist events that promised reward for their allegiance and obedience. In fact, al-Bashir was known for mounting this kind of charm offensive, appearing before crowds in military uniform to promise glory in the name of Islam and Sudanese national identity. Additionally, broad measures toward Arabization encouraged the abandonment of regional dialects and the adoption of Arabic as the main *lingua franca*. Furthermore, in an effort to homogenize the thinking and behavior of the growing population the regime took deliberate measures to utilize mosques as change catalysts. A 2010 report by Amnesty International confirmed that NISS agents had targeted large numbers of Sudanese citizens, including "members of the opposition, students, human rights defenders, civil society activists and staff of national and international NGOs and UN agencies, as well as ordinary civilians."⁴⁹

The continuing growth of NISS has had cultural implications as well, creating a climate where dissenters are easily identified and punished while informants are rewarded. A broad and well-orchestrated network of informants has emerged and spread across schools, universities, markets, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Author Ahmed

⁴⁹ Amnesty International, *Agents of Fear: The National Security Service in Sudan* (London: Amnesty International, 2010): 11.

Elzobier believes that the regime created what he calls “the “securitization of politics” which transforms any political concern into a security matter.”⁵⁰ As such, the regime continues to legitimize the monitoring, surveillance, and subsequent detainment of opposition leaders, activists, and dissenters.

As urbanization progressed in Khartoum, other outlets through which urban density could foster regime change were heavily monitored and blocked. Understanding that urban mobs are harder to dislodge, the regime began meeting protesters and demonstrators with new, aggressive tactics that even included abductions and sexual assault—previously unheard of in Khartoum.

As urban concentration brought an influx of new Internet and social media users, so too did the regime amplify its tactics to censor, block, and crush Internet dissidents. Researcher Seva Gunitsky describes social media as a “mixed blessing” for authoritarian regimes, saying it is “increasingly being used to boost regime stability and strength, transforming it from an obstacle to government rule into another potential tool of regime resilience.”⁵¹ Research on the role of the Internet in dictatorships suggests that social media may unwittingly support authoritarian regimes by acting as an early warning system for public discontent, making it easier to persecute people who oppose the regime. Some evidence of this quandary can be observed in Sudan.

Evgeny Morozov argues that the Internet is a tool that can both promote democracy and unravel it. While it provides a platform for revolutionary discourse, authoritarian governments can and do use it to track, arrest, shut down, infiltrate, and

⁵⁰ Ahmed Elzobier, *Political Islam: The Logic of Governance in Sudan* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2014), 102.

⁵¹ Seva Gunitsky, “Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability,” *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 1 (2015): 42–54.

block opposition. Morozov's work exposes the dark side of new media, and the misguided belief that the Internet is inherently emancipatory—a concept he calls “cyber-utopianism.”⁵² He adds: “One major problem with the networked society is that it has also suddenly over empowered those who oppose the very process of democratization.”⁵³

Morozov's work holds true in the case of Sudan. In 2011, the NCP formed the Cyber Jihadist Unit to conduct “online defense operations.” Hundreds of agents were recruited to monitor content and hack social media accounts. The unit was bolstered in 2012 when the Sudanese blogosphere experienced unprecedented expansion, growing from 70 to 300 blogs over a period of 18 months. Not coincidentally, the arrests of numerous bloggers and Internet activists took place during that same year.

Urbanization as an Accelerator of Democracy

While it may be the case that the challenges of urbanization motivate political opponents and urban elite dwellers to amplify grassroots support for regime change, it can also be said that urbanization, particularly in the African context, creates a collision of interests between new classes of uneducated urban poor who are largely unaware of the values, processes, and structures of democracy—an imbalance that can hinder the prospects of regime change. In the case of Khartoum, evidence appears to point to the former proposition – that urbanization provided the functional frameworks for the desirability of democracy as an instrument of political development. This, of course, took place gradually and with significant growing pains as the country had to first contend

⁵² Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (London: Penguin, 2011), xiii.

⁵³ Morozov, *The Net Delusion*, 256.

with the ruthlessness of the NCP dictatorship and with the decades-long social paralysis borne out of extreme poverty.

The ways in which urbanization relates to regime change and democracy is analyzed in a 2016 study by Edward Glaeser and Bryce Steinberg who suggest that (1) urbanization offers the right conditions for social movements to coordinate and mobilize popular uprisings; (2) urbanization increases the demand for democracy; and (3) it enhances civic capital or “the ability of citizens to improve the quality of their government.”⁵⁴ Scrutinizing all three claims, the study finds positive correlation and ample statistical evidence (although not always conclusive) to support the theory that urbanization promotes democratic change—but even stronger support for the theory of urbanization as an accelerator of regime change. Glaeser and Steinberg note, “The theoretical arguments that urbanization destabilizes autocracies [have] reasonable support in history and more modern statistical work.”⁵⁵

For thirty years, Khartoum appeared to have gone against the grain of the Glaeser and Steinberg research, that is until the revolution of April 2019. That event lent credence to the theory that urbanization in fact accelerated regime change in Khartoum. What was unique about the uprising is that it originated outside of Khartoum, in the Nile-state city of Atbara, 200 miles north of Khartoum, sparking a movement that resonated throughout the country. While it was led by the SPA—a middle-class, educated, and politically savvy group—the revolution also was comprised of an unprecedented diversity of actors. Atbara, affectionately termed “the city of iron and fire,” lies at the heart of Sudan’s

⁵⁴ Edward L. Glaeser and Bryce Millett Steinberg, “Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?” (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2016): 2, 3. Available from: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22860>. Accessed 19 August 2019 .

⁵⁵ Glaeser and Steinberg, “Transforming Cities,” 16.

railway system and is itself home to a rich history of labor activism and dissent against oppressive rulers. According to Sudanese academic Magdi el Gizouli, Atbara has a strong emancipatory legacy. In an interview about the Sudanese uprising, El Gizouli noted the significance of Atbara:

It was in Atbara that the Sudanese working class discovered the “trade union” and it was a momentous discovery indeed. The solidarity within the trade union was a revolutionary social relationship that has challenged and often successfully supplanted the bonds of ethnicity, race and even gender. Sudan’s successive dictators, Abboud (1958-1964), Nimayri (1969-1985) and al-Bashir (1989-2019), all considered Atbara as a threat: a place where the racist ideology of Sudan’s ruling establishment was denounced and often defeated.⁵⁶

While the revolution indeed began in the peripheries, it is important to note that Atbara is itself an urban city, sitting at the confluence of the railway system. Even in the peripheries, therefore, the protests were heavily centered in the cities, lending credence to the notion that the urban center provides an optimal environment for popular protest and, ultimately, regime change.

In an interview with McGill University professor and Sudanese political theorist Khalid Medani, this newly reimagined periphery/center relationship is regarded as representative of the changing class and economic dynamics of Khartoum. According to Medani, this was not like the middle-class-led uprising of the past because today’s Sudanese middle class has considerably changed. While they tend to be educated, middle-class citizens are themselves living close to poverty or are unemployed. They are culturally but not materially middle class. In fact, Medani notes that the SPA “first caught the public eye thanks to their extensive research on the wages of Sudanese professionals

⁵⁶ Clement Deshayes, and Magdi El Gizouli, “Class Dynamics, Disseminations of the Sudanese Uprising: An Interview with Magdi El Gizouli,” Noria Research, January 1, 2019. Available from: <https://www.noria-research.com/class-dynamics-dissemination-of-the-sudanese-uprising/>. Accessed 19 August 2019.

(doctors, lawyers, engineers) finding them all living below the poverty line or earning less than \$50 a month.”⁵⁷ Disenchanted by the lack of opportunity, an ever-dwindling middle class is left with few options: continue living with limited possibilities, seek membership with civil society or political spaces that are pushing for change, or leave the country altogether. In other words, this was not a revolt waged in the interests of the middle class because Khartoum’s middle-class earners, as once known, no longer exist.

The importance of middle-income groups for the prospects of democracy is well documented and widely discussed by modernization thinkers such as Barrington Moore⁵⁸ and Seymour Lipset and Reinhard Bendix⁵⁹ who wrote on the social and economic requisites of democracy; likewise, in the context of Sudan, Abdelwahab El-Affendi⁶⁰ and Alex de Waal,⁶¹ who have written on the historic role of Sudan’s middle class in the resistance legacies of the past. Recall that the two major urban insurrections in Sudan’s history both were elite affairs. The 1964 revolution was middle-class led, non-violent,

⁵⁷ Khalid Medani, Assistant Professor of Political Science and Islamic Studies, McGill University. Personal interview by thesis author, May 8, 2019.

⁵⁸ Barrington Moore, *Moral Aspects of Economic Growth and Other Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); also Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

⁵⁹ Seymour Martin Lipset, and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).

⁶⁰ El-Affendi, “Revolutionary Anatomy,” 292–306.

⁶¹ Alex de Waal, *Advocacy in Conflict: Critical Perspectives on Transnational Activism* (London: Zed Books, 2015); de Waal, *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa* (London: Hurst, 2004); and de Waal, “Sudan’s Elusive Democratization: Civil Mobilization, Provincial Rebellion and Chameleon Dictatorships,” *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31, no. 2 (2013): 223.

and very liberal. Similarly, the 1985 popular uprising was a coalition of elites and migrants fleeing drought in the countryside.⁶²

This segues to the present-day uprising in Sudan, begun in April 2019, which is simultaneously exacerbated by extreme poverty in the center and an almost complete decimation of economic and political life in the periphery. Khartoum's urban growth is driven by the government's failure to stimulate economic activities in the rural as well as the urban centers, thereby creating a struggle for limited resources. The class politics that shaped the uprising and its consequent demands are indicative of the changing and interconnected relationship between citizens in today's Khartoum now free from the divisions of tribe and class. As its most critical legacy, the Salvation Revolution unintentionally altered the old power dynamics by creating a middle class that was itself poor or drawn from the peripheries. This time the youth-led refrain of "We are all Sudanese" led the way. This time it was the periphery leading the center. It was the remarkable alliance of poor and middle class on the frontlines leading the charge, their fates inextricably linked.

The Changing Political Landscape in Khartoum

Before the advent of the NCP, Sudan's primary political parties included the Umma Party, the Sudanese Communist Party, the Baa'th Party, the Popular National Congress Party, the National Democratic Alliance, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). While the state of political parties was already challenged by preceding

⁶² Tom Lodge, "Social Movements and Political Change in Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 31, no. 2 (2013): 213–234.

dictatorships, the *Inqaz* took extreme measures to pacify or co-opt the existing parties into its ideology as part of a policy of “national reconciliation.”⁶³

Following the Islamist coup, the political map was significantly changed. The countryside owed allegiance to the traditional parties: the Umma party of Almahdi and the DUP of Almirghani. Dignitaries from the traditional parties joined the Islamist political formations mainly for money and a meager share of power. These money-induced changes were accompanied by a public denouncement against the traditional parties, depicting them as ancient and out of touch. Worse still, the DUP joined the government and held positions that made them seem to the people as part and parcel of the Islamist regime. Splinters of the Umma party and the DUP also joined the Islamists, dealing a significant blow to the vibrancy of party ideology and harkening an era of ideological consolidation.

Newly enacted laws by the NCP redefined political parties as “permanent organizations” based on agreements between individuals. Additionally, political parties were regarded as having a social hand in “organizing citizens and representing them” but not in the power and practice of legislative and executive authority.⁶⁴ This stands as an example of the regime’s “constant attempts to limit any form of political emergence” and deeply trivializes the “liberal/democratic definition of political parties within any modern political system.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 205.

⁶⁴ Issam Aw Mohamed, *The Political Parties and the Military Rule Experience in Sudan* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), 61.

⁶⁵ Mohamed, *The Political Parties and the Military Rule Experience*, 62.

Al-Bashir's party prided itself in weakening the opposition to diffuse threats to its order. This meant dismantling labor and trade unions, establishing paramilitary militias linked to the state, and annihilating anti-government activists. As Berridge notes, the co-opting of political opposition took on a deliberate character in 2011 when "al-Bashir appointed Jaffar al-Sadiq al Mirghani and Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, the sons of the DUP and NUP chiefs, respectively, as Presidential Assistants. In many ways this represented a policy of fictionalizing the opposition"⁶⁶ while also co-opting two of the country's most important political parties.

As a hub of religious thought, Khartoum is where theological universities, Islamic scholars, *imams* (religious leaders), and *muftis* (Islamic jurists) abound. With the influx of citizens arriving from the countryside, many of whom have scarcely been exposed to the sophisticated discourse on Islamic political thought, the NCP installed pro-regime imams in mosques to repeat the refrain of "Hear and obey the Amīr" (i.e., the ruler)—an old Islamic adage discouraging rebellion. Anecdotal evidence suggests this became a familiar and accepted maxim in Khartoum.

As hard as the regime sought to make political parties irrelevant and homogenize religious belief, urbanization ushered in a new era of political activity that did not seek government sanction or permission. This new wave of political activism formed on the sidelines, at university campuses, on the Internet, and in informal gatherings. It is theorized by former Foreign Minister turned opposition leader Farouq Abu Eissa that the co-opting of political parties created a void that people, particularly youth, sought to fill:

Finding little ideology to align with, young people formed movements like *Girifna* (We are Fed Up), *Altaghyeer Al'an* (Change Now), the Sudanese

⁶⁶ Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan*, 32.

Professionals Association, numerous feminist groups, and other informal convergences that self-effaced on the sidelines after the Arab Spring.⁶⁷

According to Abu Eissa, the level of politicization among urban Sudanese youth is at an all-time high, resulting in vibrant, organized, political spaces bearing a new narrative that reflects the emerging contemporary class dynamics caused by urbanization.

The SPA stands out as an example of a clandestine organization with few visible leaders and potentially hundreds of members. It is assumed to have been formed in 2016 and is fast becoming a political party in its own right. Unlike the tactics of its compatriots in 1964 and 1985, the SPA made a deliberate effort to broadcast a message of inclusion, asking Sudanese in the peripheries to join the protests, and inviting marginalized communities like Darfur and others to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with them in the same fight. Abu Eissa credits this phenomenon to urbanization, which created a new narrative of mutuality and a sense national responsibility toward one another. Urbanization, he suggests, was the only force that could counter the NCP's attacks on political freedom and compel citizens to approach political activism through a new lens that encompassed all Sudanese.

⁶⁷ Farouq Abu Eissa, former Foreign Minister, current opposition leader. Personal interview with thesis author, May 17, 2019.

Chapter V

The April 2019 Revolution

The April 2019 intifada was first catalyzed by a series of protests that began in December 2018. Even before 2018, however, the stirrings of a new, emboldened generation of Sudanese were apparent, with many still reeling from the secession of South Sudan, which also meant the loss of 75% of Khartoum's oil revenue.⁶⁸ This led the Bashir regime to implement its first wave of austerity measures in 2012, which immediately sparked popular protests, albeit smaller and centered in the city. Additional protests followed in 2013. What was clear was that the loss of South Sudan, and the ensuing poverty that caused, united Sudanese activists of all stripes against the NCP as a common enemy.

The Periphery as Catalyst of the Intifada

Although initially sparked by the removal of bread subsidies coupled with a three-fold increase in the price of bread, the 2018 protests soon escalated into broader objections about the regime itself. Early news reports referred to the protests as “bread riots,” erroneously equating them to a spontaneous, even irrational, movement sparked by a one-time economic crisis. The voices that resonated from the demonstrations, however, reflected deeper political grievances and demands that soon came to the forefront: a crisis

⁶⁸ Mohammed Hussein Sharfi, “The Dynamics of the Loss of Oil Revenues in the Economy of North Sudan,” *Review of African Political Economy* 41, no. 140 (2016): 316-322. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262576821_The_dynamics_of_the_loss_of_oil_revenues_in_the_economy_of_North_Sudan. Accessed 19 August 2019.

of corruption, 60% inflation, the systemic suppression of human rights, lack of opportunities for young people, privatization policies that transferred assets to the regime's supporters, a severe liquidity crisis, and the systematic theft of gold and petrodollars during Sudan's brief oil boom. Soon, the protests expanded across cities and towns in the north and, later, in Khartoum.

Following the lead of Atbara and other cities on the periphery, the populace of Khartoum also took to the streets. Organized and led by the SPA, the Sudanese marched to parliament demanding wage increases and the legalization of trade unions, among other issues. When they were met with violence, the protests escalated into demands for the removal of the NCP, with chants of *tas'gut bas* (fall, that's all) and broader calls for democracy. The demonstrators now openly bemoaned the endemic levels of corruption in the regime and its allies, the usurpation of human rights by NISS security forces, and the brutal wars waged against Darfur, the Blue Nile state, the Nuba Mountains, and the painful and irreparable secession of South Sudan.

Following the intensification of economic crisis, calls for democratization began to gain ground. By late 2018, social movements played a significant role in demanding more from the state. Their demands were based on social rights that had long been neglected, an agenda that included the equitable distribution of resources, and a reimagining of Sudan's fragmented cultural identity. The language of rights was used to articulate a collective expression of needs that placed more weight and urgency on the needs of the urban poor. This in itself was unprecedented and paved the way for a pro-poor revolution that could only have occurred in the more restless, overpopulated, urbanized Khartoum of present day.

The significance of these events in the periphery vis-a-vis urbanization is inherent in the state's failure to address the conditions that drive both rural and urban poverty. This means that while the central government was focused on developing the urban centers, it inadvertently created hotbeds of civil unrest in the peripheries through policies of urban primacy, systemic abuse, and gross neglect. Dissatisfied by their government's lack of interest in the peripheral regions, the rural areas became the locales of insurgencies and popular protests. In response, the NCP reacted with harsh and sometimes genocidal tactics to preserve its dominance, focusing its efforts more on state security and less on alleviating poverty. Social services all but collapsed in the rural areas, access to primary education dropped to its lowest point, and migration to Khartoum became a major trend. By neglecting the periphery, the Sudanese state created its own security nightmare.

The *Inqaz* regime thrived on policies of self-preservation, appointing top-down leaders aligned with the regime and giving them unchecked power with little attention to accountability or competence. Hemedti, the Janjaweed commander of the Darfur genocide, now a general, commands an entire army thanks to the NCP's reckless provision of arms and funding to a known war criminal. Urbanization became an inevitable consequence the state's gross neglect of the margins but, it also created a thirst for revolution in the peripheries—the same regions the state sought to exclude and pacify.

Beyond Ethnic Divisions: Urbanization, Diversity, and Social Change

The protests were remarkable in terms of their geographic spread, but also in terms of the formidable coalition of youth groups, civil society agents, and opposition political parties. Equally significant was the sustained, new, and innovative process the

demonstrations followed, learning and borrowing from movements of the past. The SPA scheduled strategic, well-coordinated actions that encompassed the middle class, working class, and the poor while spreading through all neighborhoods and locales regardless of economic status. The protest slogans were purposely framed by the SPA to incorporate the grievances of a broad swath of Sudanese, not just the ethnic and political elites in the north. These were, arguably, the most significant aspects of the demonstrations— inclusivity and the ability to galvanize support across ethnic lines. Additionally, by organizing across the formal/informal social spectrum, activists were able to sustain the protests through greater numbers and higher turnouts. The grand notion of converging professional and trade unions with street activists and workers in the informal economy had not been even remotely envisioned in the past. This development played a key role in undermining the al-Bashir regime in ways that could not have been predicted when the uprising first began. The new, socioeconomic, ethnic, and demographic makeup of the urban center made these new alliances possible. For the first time, poor and middle class were one, and the state was the common enemy of both Arab and black.

Unlike similar uprisings in the past, the April 2019 intifada was the result of a confluence of young activists and members of the SPA displaying an unprecedented solidarity with other regions of the country. In doing so, they challenged the political discourse of the state which, throughout its reign, had made significant efforts to sustain divisions along the lines of tribe and class. The new activists, however, engineered cross-class alliances, standing in solidarity at strikes, sit-ins, walk-outs, at college campuses, schools, private and public sector entities, as well as with the unemployed. Also apparent is the remarkable empowerment of youth activism and their utilization of social media to

assist in the coordination of demonstrations across regional and class divides. This coordination among activists from middle- and working-class backgrounds, the support for the peripheries, and the coordination across the gender divide, exemplifies the political and cultural shift that has taken place in Khartoum for the past two decades.

The significance of the last twenty years coincides with the secession of South Sudan—a great loss for the North not only in terms of lost oil revenue but in terms of the country’s now lost heritage. This encouraged a number of youth-led campaigns to march under a new banner of solidarity in an effort to forge a national identity that ensured that racial and tribal-based differences would never again divide the country.

This thesis found that urbanization has been an accelerating force in the fall of the regime precisely because of these new forms of organized protest and the diversity and inclusivity of its agents. Urban density in Khartoum means that more people are connected, have access to the Internet and mobile phones, are tech savvy, plugged in, and informed. While this does not necessarily equate to an understanding of the democratic process, it does allow for a confluence of voices, a platform for airing grievances, and a sense of solidarity, sameness, and oneness that is unprecedented in Sudan’s revolutionary history.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

The urbanization of Khartoum can be characterized by poverty and squalor, as the state failed to meet the needs of its urban citizens or address the inequalities that drove people out of the peripheral rural areas and into the city centers. This thesis established that while there were conditions that hindered or delayed regime change, there were also powerful undercurrents, some unintentional, that worked to promote it. Although the Sudanese people remained generally pacified for almost thirty years by the fear of the NCP and its tactics, Glaeser and Steinberg note that the city offered unique advantages: collaboration among activists, safety in numbers, and reduced risks to protesters. Rural mobs, after all, “are easy for the army to disperse or destroy” but “urban mobs are hard to dislodge.”⁶⁹ At some point, the groundswell of protest became too much even for the NCP regime to control.

One positive aspect of urbanization in Khartoum has been the rising consciousness of rights, i.e., rights of the poor, the non-Arab, and the marginalized. This phenomenon can be credited, in part, to the proliferation of civil society organizations (CSOs) and national non-governmental organization (NGOs) in the urban areas—but it is also thanks to increased access to new media. The Khartoum of thirty years ago, for example—remote from other parts of the country, largely cut off from the world, and fed only by state-sponsored television and radio propaganda—was easier for dictators to

⁶⁹ Glaeser and Steinberg, “Transforming Cities,” 9.

manipulate and control.⁷⁰ According to the online publication *African Arguments*, by 2005 there were 1,194 registered CSOs in the city, 194 of them foreign.⁷¹ Membership in these organizations is dominated by disenchanting and unemployed graduates, including those who have lost jobs and rank owing to political reasons.

The NCP regime followed the dictator's playbook, quashing all opposition and dissent, controlling the media narrative, meddling in religious affairs, and perpetuating extreme fear. For thirty years that was enough to maintain its stronghold over the city. NCP leaders and loyalists usurped billions of petrodollars; oversaw the arrest, abduction, and death of thousands of Sudanese; commanded a genocide in Darfur; and sat through the tragic secession of South Sudan. The forces of urbanization, however, were slowly countering the NCP's power—grooming a new political class and paving the way for the unstinting hopefulness of a younger generation that chanted *tas'qut bas* (fall, that's all) and paved the way for democracy.

⁷⁰ Mahmood Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2010).

⁷¹ Assal, "Urbanization and the Future of Sudan."

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