



REPORT SUMMARY

Sowing the Seeds of Nonviolent Action in Sudan

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This USIP Special Report explores the foundations of Sudan's 2018–2019 revolution, commonly known as the “December Revolution,” that led to the ouster of then-President Omar al-Bashir after nearly three decades in power. The report's findings are based on interviews and focus group discussions with 42 key informants as well as on the authors' experiences as civil society activists and trainers in Sudan.

BACKGROUND ON THE DECEMBER REVOLUTION

Mass demonstrations began in December 2018 in Blue Nile State, where residents protested dwindling subsidies and rising commodity prices. Within weeks, a national uprising had emerged to demand Bashir's resignation. This nonviolent campaign was led by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) and the umbrella coalition Forces of Freedom and Change. The protests continued for months despite repression, culminating in a mass sit-in at the military headquarters in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum.

On April 11, the Sudanese army renounced and arrested Bashir. Activists continued to protest, and in June security forces killed more than 100 protesters at the sit-in site. After the massacre, the opposition successfully negotiated an agreement for a democratic transition, which included a power-sharing deal between civilians and the military. Unfortunately, a military coup in October 2021 stalled efforts at democratic progress. The future of Sudan's democratic experiment remains uncertain, yet mass resistance continues in pursuit of democratic civilian rule.

CIVIC SPACE IN SUDAN, 2013-2018

Repression limited the possibilities for concerted opposition to Bashir in the years before the December Revolution. But there was still a large amount of development across different civic spaces that prepared civil society for the nonviolent campaign to come. These spaces can be broadly divided as follows:

- ▶ **Local *Mubadarat* (Initiatives) and Demand Groups.** These were involved groups of volunteers who stepped in to provide social services where the government was failing to do so. Demand groups did political advocacy to promote beneficial policies for communities. A key feature of these civic spaces was that they were not organized around partisan politics or direct opposition to Bashir, but instead pursued issue-based mobilization at the local level.
- ▶ **Civil society Workshops and Activism Training.** These activities were widespread, targeting both activists and the broader public. Many groups who conducted trainings and held workshops were supported by international organizations. Trainings and workshops covered civic engagement, nonviolent action and a range of other topics. They raised awareness about civil rights and good governance, inspired grassroots mobilization, forged community networks and fostered a common vision for democratic reforms. They also facilitated regional connections, with Sudanese activists learning from activists who participated in uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria.
- ▶ **Professional Associations.** Many labor organizations had operated underground, as their activities were restricted under the Bashir regime. These informal organizations ultimately came together to form the SPA, which became increasingly more political and ultimately went on to be a critical element of the December Revolution.

CIVIC SPACES AND THE DECEMBER REVOLUTION

The prerevolutionary period was characterized by determined civil society development in a variety of civic spaces, which greatly contributed to the December Revolution. The movement to oust Bashir displayed three key features that previous research has shown to be crucial for the success of nonviolent action campaigns. These features are:

- ▶ **Mass Participation.** Organizers linked regime corruption to everyday hardships faced by ordinary people to increase awareness and motivate participation. Local organizing in the prerevolutionary period also helped to establish a decentralized, grassroots structure for mobilization. Activists engaged in creative ways using art and other means to increase and diversify participation. Women's groups, religious leaders and engagements with local officials and security forces were also instrumental in broadening movement participation.
- ▶ **Unity and Leadership.** The SPA played a key leadership role in the revolution and was successful in many of its coordination efforts because of the popular legitimacy it enjoyed. The SPA was independent of a political party and the doctors and teachers it represented worked directly in their communities. The SPA developed weekly "resistance" schedules, planned events and communicated with local activists. It also coordinated with neighborhood resistance committees, who were deeply embedded at the grassroots levels.
- ▶ **Nonviolent Discipline.** Movement leadership was strongly committed to nonviolence. Their statements routinely emphasized nonviolent resistance as being key to removing Bashir. Many events they organized, including the sit-in at the military headquarters, featured checkpoints and local enforcement to prevent demonstrators from aggressively confronting the police. The insistence on nonviolence helped prevent violent escalation, which could have been used to justify harsh crackdowns by security forces. Instead, regime repression of unarmed protesters fueled backlash, motivating observers to join the movement.