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# Sudan's Arab Spring?

## Philipp Jahn reports from Khartoum about the protests against the Islamist regime of Omar Al-Bashir

*Read this interview in German.*

**Tens of thousands of people have been protesting in Sudan since December – provoked by the government's plan to raise bread and petrol prices. Meanwhile the protests have escalated into an uprising against Omar Al-Bashir's regime. What are the demonstrators demanding?**

The uprising began on 19 December in the city of Atbara, 350 km north of the capital Khartoum, triggered by the tripling of the price of bread. Within a few days, protests spread throughout the country, and reached Khartoum on 25 December. At first, the population was expressing frustration with the economic situation. Petrol, cooking oil, bread and cash are either not available or only after hours of standing in line.

Officially, the annual inflation rate is over 70 per cent, and although the 2018 harvest was the best in a decade, some agricultural products cost twice what they did a year ago. Now, however, an alliance has been forged between the needy population and the progressive middle class, which pushes for democratic reforms. Professional associations and unrecognised unions are jointly calling for demonstrations. Their main demand is the end of Al Bashir's Islamist regime.

**How has the regime been reacting to the protests?**

The regime is trying to destroy the alliance by expressing understanding for the demonstrators and their difficult economic situation. The bread price has been lowered and various national reserves tapped. At the same time, however, protests are broken up with tear gas and live ammunition. Each demonstration results in dead and injured people.

The Rapid Support Forces – militias from Darfur who are also fighting for Saudi Arabia in Yemen – have been transferred to

Khartoum and, with the secret service, create a threatening backdrop. The regime is hoping that this approach will prevent the suffering population from holding more demonstrations. Meanwhile, it is also offering to hold talks with the progressive middle class. In the past, the regime managed to destroy the reputation of the opposition parties by organising national dialogues and negotiations.

**Is Sudan experiencing its own 'Arab Spring'?**

That's a difficult question. No Sudanese religious regime has ever been overthrown without the support of an external power, and right now, there is none. The Arab Gulf States don't like Al Bashir, but they have no interest in his downfall. The Emir of Qatar phoned Al Bashir on 22 December to support him politically. Other regional actors have long had economic ties with the Sudanese regime. Russia in particular is hoping to establish a bridgehead in Africa through Sudan.

Western governments, on the other hand, are afraid of instability and need Sudan as a partner for their migration policies. For lack of external partners, the progressive forces are hoping to at least get Al Bashir to step down and for a government of technocrats involving some members of the current regime to be formed. However, the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for Al Bashir makes his departure very risky.

*The interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.*

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Philipp Jahn manages the country office of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Khartoum, Sudan. Previously, he worked for GIZ in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan and Germany. He worked for three years as a consultant for anti-corruption and integrity for the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). He studied law in Berlin, Madrid and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.