

The Transitional Phase and the Future of the Islamist Movement in Sudan

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This piece is a translation of the arabic version published on [Al Sharq Forum website](#)

Following the removal of former Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir from power, debates have erupted over the future of the Islamist movement in Sudan. Thus, it seems important to address the organizational path of movements within the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as other actors during the transitional period such as the Alliance of the Declaration of Freedom and Change and the Transitional Military Council. It could be said that the future of the Islamic movement depends on the course of the transitional period, especially in terms of the formulation of civilian-military relations. Current discussions largely revolve around transitional arrangements and policies regarding the former regime. It is also noticeable that the main challenges going forward appear to lie in policies of integration and the exclusion of Islamist groups from political participation.

The Structural Development of the Islamist Movement in Sudan

From the 1950s until the end of the 1960s, the Islamist movement in Sudan witnessed many organizational and intellectual developments, during which the “Islamic Charter Front” was formed as a front group for the Muslim Brotherhood. However, despite the modernization of the movement, it was unable to keep abreast of the political changes within the nascent state at the time¹. Thus, in the mid-1970s, the Islamic Charter Front went through an organizational modernization in which the National Islamic Front was established and transformed into a decentralized organization which contributed to the emergence of specific activities for advocacy, women, and the economy as complementary functions for the development of the movement. The movement also declared its acceptance of pluralism, saying that its access to power and its enablement would not be implemented through the removal of parties and other movements. It also adopted the formula of “integrative empowerment”, including accepting the principle of competitive elections².

During Gaafar Nimeiry's administration from 1976 until the mid-eighties, the Front operated in the absence of political parties, both traditional and modern. This absence facilitated the group with an opportunity to fill the void and spread on the streets and in the institutions, and to expand its social base through the formation of a broad popular movement, in addition to the emergence of many Islamic symbols, and it was to become one of the main forces in the April 1985 uprising. In general, organizational decentralization has helped the social spread of the movement and its infiltration into the state and the military³. As a result, when Nimeiry fell, the Front was ready for the changes that arose, and was the quickest party to deal with the third stage of democracy, from 1986 till 1989. The emergence of the National Islamic Front was deemed to represent the final stage of the Islamist movement, as it was no longer simply a political or ideological front for the Brotherhood. Instead, it performed all its tasks on its own⁴.

After the so-called "National Salvation Revolution", in the beginning of the 1990s, Turabi began another process of modernization of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Sudan, moving its focus from the state of the group to the state of society to adapt to outside changes. However, this did not achieve the desired results due to the continuing fractiousness of the Islamist movement, a result of clear contradictions in its policies. The movement also faced internal and external constraints, was itself unable to build a stable model of political

change in Sudan, was involved in political and military clashes, and failed to deal with the crisis of national integration within the state⁵.

All these factors led to the emergence of many divisions within the Islamist movement which began to take two main directions:

- 1- The traditional school represented by Sadiq Abdul Majid, rejected the modernization programs, believing that the heritage of the Muslim Brotherhood was sufficient and appropriate. Its supporters are conservative with regard to the modernization process because they believe it weakens the relationship with the international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood.
- 2- The second approach, by those close to the Salafi schools which reject new jurisprudence, sought to meet contemporary challenges.

Moreover, other groups emerged as a result of various political pressures. The nature of the formation of the Charter Front was appropriate for the stage of political openness in the 1960s, but subsequent political restrictions led to the division and fragmentation of the front⁶.

Parties in the Islamist Movement

It can be said that the changes in the Islamic National Front in the early eighties represented a rupture with the Muslim Brotherhood. After the 1985 uprising, it broke away from the international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood. Following the



1989 coup, the repercussions of various events, especially the conflict between Hassan al-Turabi and Omar al-Bashir, led to the formation of two main groups that formed the background of political Islam in Sudan: the Islamic Movement / National Congress and the Popular Congress Party, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood, which had by then become the weakest link in the Islamic movement⁷.

1- The Sudan Islamic Movement / National Congress Party:

The Sudanese National Congress Party was founded in 1998 after the dissolution of the National Islamic Front. In 1999, a dispute broke out between al-Bashir and al-Turabi, due to the Turabi enacting legislation limiting presidential powers. This resulted in a split, and thus the establishment of the “Sudanese Islamic Movement” which was formed of Islamists who sided with the government of Omar al-Bashir. They continued their association with the National Congress Party. Ali Osman Taha, Sudan’s vice president, took over the General Secretariat for two sessions, and was succeeded by Zubayr al-Hassan. The Secretariat, in turn, is part of the social incubator of the National Congress⁸.

Since the formation of the National Congress, it has effectively taken control of the most prominent organizations and unions in the country, including the Workers’ Union, the Farmers Union, and the Bar Association. The party has a conservative ideology, and in the first elections in 2000, it obtained 355 out of 360 legislative seats⁹. But in 2013,

the congress witnessed a split when the government did not accept the proposals of Ghazi Salah al-Din over the need to make political reform, not to nominate al-Bashir again and to create a climate of political competitiveness. Following these proposals, Ghazi Salah al-Din and his supporters were expelled from the NCP and the Islamic Movement. Henceforth, this group would form the “Reform Now” movement¹⁰.

2. Popular Congress Party:

The other Islamists turned to Dr. al-Turabi as a continuation of the historical legacy of the Islamist movement, but this movement was oppressed by the government of Omar al-Bashir. This movement relied heavily on the leadership of al-Turabi, who enjoyed strong international and regional relations¹¹.

Hassan al-Turabi quickly established the Popular Congress Party in 2001, and the party remained on the opposition benches until 2017. But after the death of Turabi, the party agreed to participate in a government of national reconciliation, where it participated in several ministerial positions and took the role of assistant to the President of the Republic, as well as positions in the national parliament and local legislative councils. However, it is currently working on convergence with the state of political change. Furthermore, there are divergent currents between the party’s youth wing and leading elite, with the former favoring political integration outside the party framework.



The Organizational Framework of the Alliance of Freedom and Change

The first statement of the Alliance for Freedom and Change was issued in January 2019. It was sponsored by five main forces: the Sudanese Professionals Association, the National Consensus Forces, the Sudan call Alliance, the Sudanese DUP, and the Sudanese Congress Party. The statement included clear articles demanding the overthrow of al-Bashir, the achievement of a comprehensive and just peace, and the formation of a transitional government for 4 years, which formed the minimum demands of the members of the alliance. After the dismissal of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, the Alliance of Change refused to endorse the Sudanese army or the formation of a military council to lead the country for two years, instead insisting on transferring power to a transitional council headed by a civilian. Regardless of the modern nature of the Alliance of Freedom and Change, the groups under its sponsorship have many internal contradictions, most notably organizational fragility and the increasing likelihood of its disintegration as the transitional phase continues.

1. The Sudanese Professionals Association: The assembly is a formula for coordination between different trade unions and does not seek the transformation of a political party. Its assembly is considered an extension of the University Professors Association, which was formed in 2012. It later evolved

into eight trade union entities in 2016. The group seeks to present economic and political ideas to opposition parties.

2. The National Consensus Forces: This coalition, formed in late 2009, consists of 17 parties, including four main parties: the Ummah Party (a splinter faction from the National Ummah Party), the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, the Popular Congress, and the Communist Party. Given their differing ideologies, the consensus forces can be categorized as a weak coalition that may be thrown into disarray by political change.

3. The Sudan call Alliance: The Sudan call alliance is an alliance established in December 2014 in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia). This alliance includes the Ummah Party and the Sudanese Communist Party, as well as other political parties and armed movements such as the Sudan Liberation Movement, the Justice and Equality Movement, the Baath Party, and the Nasserite Party.

4. The Unionist Association: The Unionist Association was formed in January 2018 as a gathering of unionist parties divided between traditional and modernist groups.

5. The Sudanese Congress Party¹²: As a Sudanese national party, this party adopted the "project of the Sudanese revolution" as a basis for its political work towards changing society.¹³ Since its inception, the party has been considered an opposition party, refusing to participate in the national



dialogues conducted by the Bashir regime. This led to the arrest of former President Ibrahim Sheikh Abdul Rahman more than once. The “Sudanese Congress” emerged as one of the main parties in the current political mobilization, declaring its support for demonstrations against the Sudanese government. The party’s political rhetoric was marked by a bent towards revolutionary change, and its importance lies in that it presents itself as a spokesperson of the independents and the youth movement, demanding the rebuilding of the political system without the Islamists. During the current uprising, the Congress Party was the most visible in media coverage of the popular movement.

Military Council: The Transitional Military Council considers that its role has been complementary to political mobilization and has attempted to provide a vision that accommodates the diversity in Sudanese politics. The Council has therefore declared that its policy is not to exclude any political parties. In that regard, the Council has embarked on a series of dialogues with the various political forces and their visions of the transitional period.

If the visions of the administration of the transitional period are converging around integrated roles between the Transitional Military Council and the civilian authority, their points of contention revolve around the nature and overlapping of these roles and the length of the transitional

period. While political forces have proposed extending the period for four years, the army is clinging to the idea of a transitional period of two years or less, during which or after a consensus or elected government is to be formed.

Moreover, the restructuring of the army, the police, and the security apparatus is particularly important in the transitional period, since, according to the head of the Military Council, many security institutions were formed a long time ago based on personal preferences alone. The Transitional Military Council has therefore stated that it aims to change the security system so as to guarantee the freedom of citizens. Current indicators also show that the trend towards restructuring will move towards excluding the legacy of the Islamic Movement/National Congress from state institutions by referring top officers to a settlement which may open up the opportunity for new young leaders, but more importantly will weaken the influence of the Islamic Movement/National Congress in security policy¹⁴.

The Future of Political Islam

For over 30 years, the Islamist movement in Sudan has been able to take over important roles within the state, in the economic, military, and social sectors. After the coup carried out by the Salvation Front, the first constitution of Sudan was issued in 1998. During these years, it did not accept the existence of partisan pluralism. After the signing of the peace agreements, the 2005 Constitution, which



included some democratic principles, was issued. However, it did not guarantee the cessation of the violation of individual and public freedoms, nor did it limit the dominance of the salvation movement over the institutions of government in Sudan, with members of the National Congress obtaining many privileges that they used to suppress critics¹⁵.

The Islamist movement was thus unable to establish a framework for the development of a national identity. During the time of its rule, there was a sharp division between the Arab identity in the north and African identity in the south. Following this split, a political polarization between Islamists and other political forces took place. The role of the educated elite also declined, and the country experienced a scarcity of leadership. In sum, it can be said that the Islamist movement is experiencing a state of self-erosion¹⁶. Currently, the Islamist movement is facing the challenges of a post-al-Bashir and al-Turabi order. While al-Bashir represented the power of the state, Turabi was the intellectual and organizational pillar. Thus, the absence of the capabilities of these men represents a significant decrease in the potential of the Islamist movement, weakening its competitiveness in the future¹⁷.

The exclusion of the National Congress and its removal from political, military, and economic positions of power is not the sole factor in the likely decline of the Islamists. Other factors have caused a decline in the effectiveness of the Islamic Movement/ National Congress recently. The first relates

to leadership characteristics, where the experience of Zubayr Hassan is one of the factors affecting the decline of the effectiveness of the Islamist movement and the decline in membership numbers. Hassan does not have the leadership qualities of Hassan al-Turabi or Ali Osman. The second factor is related to the conflicts between Islamists, or the different wings of the Muslim Brotherhood, the most important of which is the conflict between al-Bashir and Turabi, which in some stages was characterized by a zero-sum game. There is also a third factor in the international and regional circumstances mitigating against political Islam, especially after the short-lived arrival of the Muslim Brotherhood in power in Egypt, which drew attention to the imposition of restrictions and control of the other branches of the Islamists, severely limiting the competitiveness of the parties descended from the Muslim Brotherhood in general¹⁸.

On the other hand, it can be noted that Sudanese political parties are witnessing a state of weakness and disintegration, whether traditional or modern, and lack of vitality and political capacity, similar to its northern neighbor. As for the Military Council, the realization of the democratic transition will lie in its ability to restructure the military and security forces.



Endnotes

- 1- Ḥāmidī, Muḥammad al-Hāshimī. *The Making of an Islamic Political Leader: Conversations with Hasan Al-Turabi*. (Boulder, Colo. :Westview Press, 1998), pp. 22-26.
 - 2- *Ibid.*, pp. 30-32.
 - 3- *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.
 - 4- *Ibid.*, pp. 39-44.
 - 5- W J Berridg. *Hasan al-Turabi: Islamist Politics and Democracy in Sudan* (New York :Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 275.
 - 6- *Conversations with Hasan Al-Turabi*, op. Cit., pp. 36.
 - 7- Hassan Mekki. "The Arab Spring and the Future of Islamists in Sudan". Center for Strategic Fikr Center for Studies. 17 November 2014. <https://fikercenter.com/en/studies/the-arab-spring-and-the-future-of-islamists-in-sudan>
 - 8- "The National Congress Party". Aljazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/movementsandparties/المؤتمر-الوطني-السوداني/حزب-16/2/2014>
 - 9- *Ibid.*
 - 10- Hassan Makki, op. Cit., pp. 4-5.
 - 11- *Ibid.*, pp. 3.
- See also, Harry Verhoeven, *Water, Civilisation and Power in Sudan: The Political Economy of Military-Islamist State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 100.
- 12- The party was founded in early 1986 as the National Congress Party (NCP), but a government formed a party with a similar name, the National Congress. The original battle of the party did not succeed in getting anything. It changed its name in 2005 to the Sudanese Congress Party after it merged with the Independent Movement Party.
 - 13- "Introducing the Party". The Sudanese Congress Party Website. <http://www.sudancon.org/ourparty.htm>
 - 14- Interview with the President of the Military Council Abdul Fattah Al-Burhan, Sudan TV, 21 April 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CsEaQ78kaCo>
 - 15- *Islamic Conference and Democratic Governance: Experiences and Trends* (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha, 2012) pp.12-13.
 - 16- Harry Verhoeven, op., cit., pp. 98. See also, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, op. Cit., pp. 11.
 - 17- Hassan Makki, op. Cit., pp. 6.
 - 18- *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.



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