



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# Arab, Russian, and Pakistani Protesters Learn the Lessons of 2011

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,210, June 27, 2019

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Demonstrators in Sudan, Algeria, and nations beyond the Middle East such as Pakistan and Russia are applying lessons learned from the 2011 popular Arab revolts as the Sudanese military uses an apparent Saudi-United Arab Emirates template to crack down.

The recent crackdown in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, in which some 100 people were reportedly killed and hundreds wounded, bears all [the hallmarks of the Saudi-UAE assisted repression of a 2011 revolt in Bahrain](#).

The deaths have also sparked comparisons to a [crackdown on protesters on a Cairo square in 2013](#) by Saudi-UAE-backed general-turned president Abdel Fattah Sisi that left up to 1,000 people dead.

The crackdown in Sudan, despite an apology from Lieut. Gen. Abdel Fattah Burhan, the head of Sudan's Transitional Military Council (TMC), involved – as it did in Bahrain – not only the shooting of protesters but also [attacks on hospitals treating the wounded and the beating and assault of medical staff](#).

General Burhan and the TMC took power in April after months of [protests forced Omar al-Bashir to resign](#) the presidency after 26 years in office.

Protesters and analysts noted that the crackdown came on the heels of [visits to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt](#) by General Burhan. It also followed [Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's pledging of \\$3 billion](#) to help Sudan weather the crisis.

UAE Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed promised General Burhan to [help "preserve Sudan's security and stability."](#)

The US State Department signaled its belief that the Gulf states may have inspired the violence by describing it as a “brutal crackdown” and stressing to Saudi deputy defense minister Khalid bin Salman “the [importance of a transition from the Transitional Military Council to a civilian-led government](#) in accordance with the will of the Sudanese people.”

The degree to which Sudanese protesters are willing to implement lessons learned from the 2011 revolts will be determined by their willingness and ability to sustain their protests in the face of violence.

The opposition rejected an offer by General Burhan to reopen negotiations and hold elections within nine months.

“We believe that the matter is now in the hands of the Sudanese people. [This regime will fall, no matter what](#),” said Khalid Omar Yousef, a leader of the Declaration of Freedom and Change Forces (DFCF), an alliance of opposition groups.

The protesters, like their counterparts in Algeria who in April [forced the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika](#), have vowed to sustain their protests until their demand has been met that the old regime has been dismantled and replaced by civilian rule.

Protests in 2011 that toppled the leaders of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen declared victory and surrendered the street once they had forced their leaders to step down.

The surrender assisted successful efforts to roll back the revolts’ success in three of the four countries, with Tunisia, where civilian rule and democracy prevailed, constituting the only exception.

The years between the rollback of the achievements of the revolts and the eruption of mass anti-government demonstrations in Algeria and Sudan were pocked by small-scale, issue-oriented protests across the Middle East and North Africa.

A military quashing of the Sudanese protests, [if Bahrain is the model](#), could introduce not only a period of sustained small-scale protests but also of low-level violence.

The threat of sustained instability in Sudan is enhanced by the fact that the crackdown was carried out by the feared Rapid Support Forces (RSF), [paramilitaries who were accused of systematic human rights abuses](#) during the war in Darfur.

The force is led by General Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, who also serves as deputy head of the TMC and, like General Burhan, has close ties to the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

The Middle Eastern and North African model of smaller-scale, issue-oriented protests has been replicated in Pakistan and Russia, with the government in Moscow adopting a more conciliatory tone than the Pakistani military.

The military appears determined to [put an end to sustained peaceful protests](#) by the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) or Pashtun Protection Movement, an ethnic rights group that is demanding that security forces be held accountable for extrajudicial killings and other injustices.

Trying to stop a rights demonstration in the troubled region of Waziristan, [security forces killed](#) at least eight people and detained Ali Wazir, one of the movement's leaders and a member of parliament.

PTM leaders, like protesters in Sudan, Algeria, and Russia, are increasingly less intimidated by security force violence or dire warnings that they risk exposing their country to the fate of Libya, Syria, or Yemen, which have been wracked by civil war and foreign military intervention since the 2011 protests.

"PTM members are nonviolent but [prepared to die to speak the truth](#) — and our security forces have no answer," said Afrasiab Khattak, a retired politician and commentator.

Protesters across Russia express similar degrees of fearlessness. "Rallies and protests are now occurring with increasing frequency, primarily [because Russians no longer care if the authorities refuse to sanction a given gathering](#), making it and participation in it illegal. Indeed, protesters are becoming radicalized. They now refuse to buckle under pressure, and they are willing to take to the streets over issues as non-political as the environment and as local as the construction of a cathedral," said Russian journalist Andrey Pertsev.

For now, Russia is the exception compared to Sudan, Pakistan, and Algeria. Authorities, apparently unwilling to use violence so far, have sought to accommodate protesters and in some cases have met their demands.

Unlike the 2011 Arab protests, which often started in second- and third-tier cities before going nationwide, the Russian protests are unlikely to spread to the Russian capital, where security is far tighter, according to a well-placed source in Moscow.

If there is one fundamental lesson to be learned, it is that the most recent wave of protests signals that an [era of dissent and defiance](#) that started in 2011 is far from over.

Each wave takes in the lessons of the mistakes of its predecessor. Violence, repression, and ever starker authoritarianism delays the process but does little to end it.

Accommodation helps defuse immediate tensions but is likely to fuel dissent.

Speaking in the wake of the crackdown, Muhammad Yousef al-Mustafa, a spokesman for the Sudanese Professionals Association, which has spearheaded the protests, asserted that "[we have no choice but to continue our protests](#) and civil disobedience until the fall of the military council."

*Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.*