


DEMOCRACY DERAILED

Sudan's precarious information
environment, 2019-2022

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Executive Summary

In recent years, Sudan has seen significant political upheaval, from the 2019 ouster of autocratic ruler Omar al-Bashir and the October 2021 military coup that unseated the transitional government, to the outbreak of violent conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023. The result is a country - and its hopes for a democratic transition - now derailed, despite years of civil protests that themselves were disrupted by police maneuvering and the threat of full-blown civil war. This societal discord is manifested not just in real life but also in the country's online information environment. This report examines the state of digital affairs in Sudan in the lead-up to the current conflict, focusing on the period from the October 2021 coup through December 2022.

While online networks played a crucial role in exposing brutalities committed by al-Bashir's security apparatus and in organizing protests, almost 70 percent of the Sudanese population remained offline as of January 2022.

Despite less than a third of the country having access to the internet, both the al-Bashir regime and the subsequent ruling councils viewed online communication as a potentially dangerous tool in the hands of protesting citizens. Between December 2018 and December 2022, Sudanese citizens were subjected to 138 days of internet disruptions.

Overall, the legal infrastructure was typical of autocratic regimes in that it was designed to limit free speech and enable punitive actions against dissenters and opposition figures. Authorities used deliberately vague laws to enforce internet disruptions and confiscate protesters' cell phones. For example, the Criminal Act of 1991 criminalized the spreading of false information, while the 2020 amendment to the Cybercrimes Law, which was passed in secret, made the spread of disinformation punishable with up to four years in prison, flogging, or both. While many laws from al-Bashir's time remain in place, there have also been tangible improvements to Sudan's legal infrastructure since his removal. Independent citizens took to the courts to fight against internet shutdowns, and journalists defied the Press and Publications Act to create a media union.

Sudan's National Intelligence and Security Service formed a Cyber Jihad Unit to monitor online dissent and spread disinformation. During the 2018–19 protests that led to al-Bashir's ouster, internal disinformation from the regime painted protesters as violent. After al-Bashir's removal, internal campaigns worked to promote the military apparatus and target the transitional government.

Yet activists who spoke to the authors indicated they were primarily concerned with being identified by intelligence agents for sharing legitimate evidence of violence committed against protesters. Despite the danger, activists used Facebook Live to stream evidence of the regime's brutality and ensured the evidence could not be easily dismissed as old or fake by including the time, date, and location of incriminating incidents in social media posts.

An important form of online resistance took place on women-only Facebook groups. Previously used to identify cheating men, the groups turned into investigative platforms where women posted images of suspected plain-clothed members of the intelligence services accused of abusing protesters. The groups were so successful at unearthing personal information about undercover intelligence officers that many officers took to wearing masks to hide their identities.

Foreign entities orchestrating disinformation campaigns primarily focused on promoting their relationship with Sudan or pushing Sudanese politics in a way to their own benefit. Yevgeny Prigozhin, who oversees Russian private military company the Wagner Group, told al-Bashir to spread disinformation depicting protesters as violent, while later Russian campaigns focused on promoting Russia's own interests around a naval base in Port Sudan. Public relations firms from Gulf states that were supportive of the coup that toppled al-Bashir spent thousands of dollars promoting the military, seeing a greater opportunity of a beneficial relationship with the latter.

Meanwhile, rumors spread offline posed a threat to grassroots organizations that struggled to combat false information shared via word of mouth.

Sudan's unique information environment features a combination of a media ecosystem attempting to build a trustworthy reputation after years of censorship, a legal system designed to limit it further, and, despite these things, a populace striving toward greater governmental representation and democracy in spite of the autocratic rivalries that have violently hijacked it. In light of the ongoing conflict, with Sudanese civil society caught in the middle, the near horizon remains bleak, but in the long term, only greater transparency and accountability around the free flow of information in conjunction with a cessation in violence will provide the stepping stones necessary to build a resilient democracy in Sudan.

Introduction

For the nearly thirty years he held power, former Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir used violence, censorship, surveillance, and electoral fraud to maintain his autocratic rule. Civil and political rights were quashed by the ruling National Congress Party (NCP), ensuring al-Bashir's regime maintained tight control over the Sudanese population.

By implementing laws to control what could and could not be published by the media or posted online, the NCP was able to shape national dialogue without having to rely heavily on disinformation and propaganda. Intelligence services actively surveilled and arrested anyone critical of the regime, forcing citizens to use discreet means, such as closed messaging apps, to communicate.

Public attempts to oppose the NCP were met with immediate, extreme violence. Despite this, hyperlocal civic organizations created a framework for the nonviolent revolutionary protests that broke out at the end of 2018. After almost three decades in power, a coup orchestrated by the Sudanese military toppled al-Bashir in April 2019.

In the four years since al-Bashir was removed from power, Sudanese citizens have not been able to vote for a democratic government. A second military coup in October 2021 saw the country move further away from civilian rule. As discord between the SAF and RSF spiraled toward open conflict, everyday citizens were buffeted by disinformation spread by a range of internal actors, as well as foreign actors keen on shaping Sudan's political future. While the country experienced some prominent gains, including the outlawing of female genital mutilation, it has seen a continued crackdown on human rights as protesters were consistently met with deadly violence.

By analyzing the country's laws and technological capacities, this report looks at Sudan's information environment through the lens of the 2018–19 revolution, the subsequent transition, the 2021 coup, and the downward political spiral through the end of 2022, immediately preceding the violence that kicked off in April 2023.

While many of the examples and case studies included in this report were gathered using open-source tools and techniques, the research also included interviews with on-the-ground activists, civil society workers, former politicians, and journalists. It is, however, important to note two significant limitations. The first was logistical: almost 70 percent of the country remains offline, meaning large swaths of information never make it into the online realm and which interviews as a source can never fully elucidate either. The second limitation concerns the safety of individuals, both those interviewed as a part of this research and those whose social media posts are included as supporting evidence herein—posting or publishing content that the state does not approve of can put citizens in extreme danger.

To navigate these limitations, the researchers of this report spoke to activists on the ground; for their safety, some content in this report is deliberately obscured or left unattributed. Some of these activists provided crucial evidence to aid investigations that would not have been posted publicly, while others provided updates on offline information being openly shared at the community or neighborhood level. This offline information, while not accessible to researchers based outside of Sudan, is still readily available to those it directly impacts.

Revolution, Transition, and Coup

After taking power in a coup d'état in 1989, al-Bashir spent the next twenty-nine years turning Sudan into a patrimonial kleptocratic state. As a part of this, al-Bashir's regime banned unions and professional associations, replacing them with regime-sanctioned organizations run by al-Bashir's Islamist cadres.¹ This forced civic groups underground.

Despite being outlawed, Sudanese citizens banded together to create unions and civic organizations years before al-Bashir was ousted. Girifna, a youth-led political movement, originally started in 2008 and worked to put an end to al-Bashir's regime, according to Ahmed Ebaya, the group's spokesperson.²

Separately, in 2012, a group of university lecturers met with the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors and the Teachers Committee to form the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), a then-illegal union originally focused on improving working conditions and salaries generally and raising the national minimum wage. SPA would later come to be instrumental in al-Bashir's ouster.³

Throughout al-Bashir's rule, demonstrations and opposition political activity were often met with severe violence. In 2013, the NCP responded to the largest protests against al-Bashir's

rule in decades by killing several hundred protesters⁴ and shutting down access to the internet.⁵ According to Kholood Khair, director of Confluence Advisory, a think tank based in Khartoum, the violent suppression of protests in the Sudanese capital was a watershed moment for the country, as citizens saw the regime had no qualms about killing civilians.⁶

Looking back at the clampdown, Khair reflected that "the way that the NCP controlled things was at the neighborhood level through 'popular committees.' They were the bedrock of the regime, so people thought the way to resist was to set up resistance committees working at the neighborhood level, creating a framework from the bottom up."⁷

While the protests failed to remove al-Bashir from government, the subsequent proliferation of hyperlocal civic and community action started to create the building blocks for the nonviolent protest movement that ultimately led to al-Bashir's removal.⁸

In 2018, Sudan's political and economic instability came to a head: the Sudanese pound tanked, inflation rose to nearly 70 percent, and the price of a loaf of bread tripled.⁹ On December 19, 2018, protests broke out in the city of Atbara amidst public anger over Sudan's economic struggles. Almost immediately police killed several protesters as mass action quickly spread

1 Willow Berridge et al., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy: The Promise and Betrayal of a People's Revolution* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2022), 20.

2 Interview with Ahmed Ebaya, online, November 20, 2022.

3 Reem Abbas, "How an illegal Sudanese union became the biggest threat to Omar Al Bashir's 29-year reign," *National*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/africa/how-an-illegal-sudanese-union-became-the-biggest-threat-to-omar-al-bashir-s-29-year-reign-1.819159>; Marija Marovic and Zahra Hayder, *Sowing the Seeds of Nonviolent Action in Sudan*, *United States Institute of Peace*, Special Report No. 509, May 2022, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/sr509-sowing-the-seeds-of-nonviolent-action-in-sudan.pdf>.

4 "Sudan: Dozens Killed During Protests," Human Rights Watch, September 27, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/09/27/sudan-dozens-killed-during-protests>.

5 Peter Micek, "Update: Mass internet shutdown in Sudan follows days of protest," *Access Now*, October 15, 2013, <https://www.accessnow.org/mass-internet-shutdown-in-sudan-follows-days-of-protest/>.

6 Interview with Kholood Khair, online, October 31, 2022.

7 Ibid.

8 Marovic and Hayder, *Sowing the Seeds*.

9 Mohammed Amin, "Discontent in Sudan as economic crisis bites and Bashir imposes austerity," *Middle East Eye*, September 14, 2018, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/discontent-sudan-economic-crisis-bites-and-bashir-imposes-austerity>; Aya Elmileik, "What prompted the protests in Sudan?" *Al Jazeera*, December 26, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/26/what-prompted-the-protests-in-sudan/>.

across the country, with protesters calling for an end to al-Bashir's rule.¹⁰ Then-SPA spokesperson Sarah Abdeljaleel said, "[The SPA] could not just ask for lifting the minimum wage, we listened to the protesters and asked for regime change."¹¹

Days after mass protests broke out, al-Bashir's government once again shut down internet access.¹² In February 2019, al-Bashir declared a yearlong national state of emergency, disbanded the central government, and replaced all state governors with military officials.¹³



Screen cap of a tweet from Sudanese journalist Wasil Ali in which Ali posted images of the protests in Atbara on December 19, 2018.⁹

Following months of daily protests, mass incarceration, and deadly attacks on protesters, the Sudanese military removed al-Bashir from power on April 11, 2019. The coup leaders dissolved the NCP government, suspended the constitution, and implemented a Transitional Military Council (TMC) to oversee a transition of power.¹⁴ After internal maneuvering and politicking, Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the SAF emerged as the leader of the TMC, while Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and commonly known as Hemedti, was named vice president. By April 2023, the two officers and their respective forces would be in violent open conflict.

Despite al-Bashir's overthrow, protests continued as the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a coalition of civilian and political groups including the SPA, called for an immediate transfer to civilian rule. Protesters remained camped outside the military's headquarters in Khartoum demanding a civilian-led government and democratic elections, refusing to accept an administration run by military and security figures or by al-Bashir's supporters.¹⁵

On May 7, 2019, Hemedti signed a deal with Canadian lobbying firm Dickens & Madson Inc. to improve the image of the Sudanese military, both locally and internationally.¹⁶ According to the contract, the goal was to "assure that you attain recognition as the legitimate transitional leadership of the Republic of the Sudan and create a supervisory role for your council."¹⁷ The lobbying firm was also hired to secure funding for Sudan's military equipment, influence US policy in favor of the TMC, and secure ties with Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Libya.¹⁸

Dickens & Madson, however, struggled to improve the image of the TMC and the RSF in particular. On June 3, 2019, the RSF killed over one hundred protesters in Khartoum, raped

10 "Several killed in Sudan as protests over rising prices continue," Al Jazeera, December 21, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/21/several-killed-in-sudan-as-protests-over-rising-prices-continue/>.

11 Abbas, "How an illegal Sudanese union."

12 Berhan Taye, "Amid countrywide protest, Sudan shuts down social media on mobile networks," Access Now, December 21, 2018, <https://www.accessnow.org/amid-countrywide-protest-sudan-shuts-down-social-media-on-mobile-networks/>.

13 "Sudan's Bashir declares year-long state of emergency, dismisses government," *Middle East Eye*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudans-bashir-declares-year-long-state-emergency-dismisses-government>; Mohammed Amin, "Major shake up in Sudan's government on first day of emergency rule," *Middle East Eye*, February 23, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/major-shake-sudans-government-first-day-emergency-rule>.

14 Sarah El Sirgany, Nima Elbagir, and Yasir Abdullah, "Sudan's President Bashir forced out in military coup," CNN, April 11, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/11/africa/sudan-unrest-intl/index.html>.

15 "Sudan's army topples President Omar al-Bashir after months of protests," *Middle East Eye*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudans-army-topples-president-omar-al-bashir-after-months-protests>.

16 Geoffrey York, "Canadian lobbying firm hired for US\$6-million to polish image of Sudan's military regime," *Globe and Mail*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-canadian-lobbying-firm-hired-for-us6-million-to-polish-image-of-sudan/>.

17 Ibid.

18 Tom Wilson, "Sudan militia chief hires Canadian lobbying group for \$6m," *Financial Times*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/816fb488-99a7-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36>.

both men and women, and dumped bodies in the Nile River.¹⁹ Following the massacre in Khartoum, the TMC stated that negotiations with the FFC would be suspended, and a general election would take place within nine months.²⁰ In response, the SPA called for complete civil disobedience until a civilian government was in place.²¹

Two months of talks between the TMC and FFC, during which protesters were still being killed, resulted in the dissolution of the TMC and the formation of the Sovereignty Council on August 20, 2019. Al-Burhan remained leader of the country, with five military representatives, including Hemedti, and six civilian representatives. The council consisted of only two women.²² Abdalla Hamdok, a respected economist and former United Nations official, was sworn in as prime minister on August 21, 2019.²³

Although the power-sharing agreement was a success on paper, in practice the military still appeared, to Sudanese citizens, to be in control. On June 30, 2020, mass protests across the country saw civilians calling for the old regime to be dismantled. One protester told Middle East Eye, “The army is ruling the country, not civilians.... [W]e haven’t achieved the goals of the revolution, and this is why we are protesting again.”²⁴

On September 21, 2021, Hamdok announced that an attempted coup, allegedly orchestrated by “remnants from the previous regime” who were “intent on aborting the civilian democratic transition,” had been thwarted.²⁵

A month later thousands of protesters linked to the NCP and Islamist parties swarmed the streets of Khartoum, staging a days-long sit-in outside the presidential palace, calling for the army to take control of the country via a military coup.²⁶ The calls were countered by demonstrators who supported the transitional government.²⁷ The competing protests were organized by factions within the FFC, with the primary faction supporting Hamdok’s government and a breakaway faction demanding the interim cabinet be dissolved.²⁸

Days later, on October 25, 2021, the army did just that: In a televised address, al-Burhan announced the dissolution of Sudan’s cabinet and the implementation of a state of emergency. Despite claiming the move was not a coup but an attempt to “rectify the path” toward a democratic transition, al-Burhan became the de facto head of Sudan.²⁹

Al-Burhan stated that Hamdok had not been arrested, but rather that he had been placed under house arrest at the

19 Hemedti and the RSF have maintained that the people responsible for the Khartoum massacre were imposters wearing RSF uniforms, not official RSF members. While no one has been convicted for the crimes committed on June 3, 2019, video evidence from during and after the sit-in dispersal shows armed men wearing RSF uniforms forcing captured protesters to call for military rule on camera, and protesters and activists have accused the RSF of being behind the killings. See Kaamil Ahmed, “‘They felt victorious’: How Sudan’s militiamen filmed their deadly assault on protesters,” *Middle East Eye*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/rsf-khartoum-how-sudan-feared-militia-janjaweed-filmed-deadly-assault-protesters>; (DISTURBING IMAGERY) BBC News Africa, “Sudan’s Livestream Massacre - BBC Africa Eye documentary,” July 12, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR56qxM4kHA>; Khalid Abdelaziz and Michael Georgy, “Sudan sit-in bloodshed cripples uprising,” Reuters, June 10, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-politics-crackdown/sudan-sit-in-bloodshed-cripples-uprising-idUSKCN1TB1VK>.

20 “Sudan military scraps transition deal and calls elections after deadly crackdown,” *Middle East Eye*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-military-scraps-transition-deal-and-calls-elections-after-deadly-crackdown>.

21 “Sudan protest group SPA calls for nationwide ‘civil disobedience,’” *Middle East Eye*, June 8, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-protest-group-spa-calls-nationwide-civil-disobedience>.

22 Mohamed Hassan, “Who are the members of Sudan’s new sovereign council?” *Middle East Eye*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/who-sudans-new-sovereign-council>.

23 “Abdalla Hamdok: Who is Sudan’s new prime minister?” Al Jazeera, August 21, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/8/21/abdalla-hamdok-who-is-sudans-new-prime-minister>.

24 Mohammed Amin, “Protests erupt in Sudan as calls mount to ‘correct’ the revolution,” *Middle East Eye*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/protests-sudan-correct-revolution-path-hamdok>.

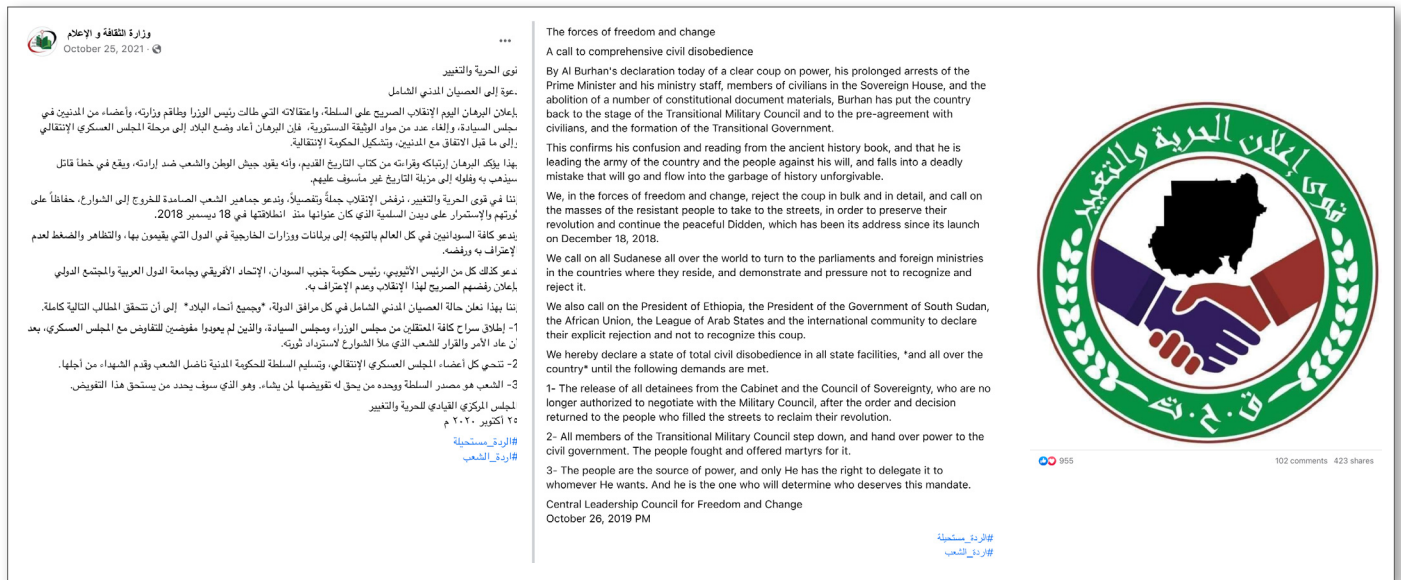
25 “Sudan failed coup: Government blames pro-Bashir elements,” BBC, September 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58629978>.

26 “Sudan: Protesters demand military coup as crisis deepens,” BBC, October 17, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-58943013>.

27 “Crowds take to Sudan’s streets after calls for rival protests,” Al Jazeera, October 21, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/21/supporters-of-civilian-rule-in-sudan-kick-off-rally-in-khartoum>.

28 Ibid.

29 “Sudan coup 2021: Five strange moments from Burhan’s speech,” *Middle East Eye*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-coup-burhan-speech-strange-moments>.



Screencap of a Facebook post in which Abdalla Hamdok's government called for protest action following the October 25, 2021, coup.^b

army leader's own house.³⁰ The Ministry of Culture and Media issued a statement calling for citizens to conduct acts of civil disobedience and to take to the streets.

In a statement, the SPA said, "We urge the masses to go out on the streets and occupy them, close all roads with barricades, stage a general labor strike, and not to cooperate with the putschists and use civil disobedience to confront them."³¹

On November 21, 2021, nearly a month after the coup took place, Hamdok was reinstated as prime minister after signing an agreement with al-Burhan.³² But in the streets, Hamdok was

seen as a traitor to the revolution. Mass protests continued, and, on January 2, 2022, Hamdok resigned as prime minister, claiming his attempts to bridge the gap between political forces had failed.³³

Protests against the coup and subsequent military rule continued throughout 2022, while relations between al-Burhan and Hemedti deteriorated. Although the international community frequently used street protests as a metric of resistance, defiance against the coup manifested in myriad ways, including the creation of resistance committee charters³⁴ and collective strike action.³⁵

30 Peter Beaumont and a Guardian reporter, "Sudan's PM detained at home of coup leader 'for his own safety,'" *Guardian*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/26/sudan-prime-minister-abdalla-hamdok-detained-for-own-safety-says-military-leader>.

31 "Sudan security forces arrest PM Abdalla Hamdok, ministers," Al Jazeera, October 25, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/25/sudans-abdalla-hamdok-under-arrest-report>.

32 Khalid Abdelaziz, "Sudan military reinstates prime minister, but protests continue," Reuters, November 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudan-military-reinstate-ousted-pm-hamdok-after-deal-reached-umma-party-head-2021-11-21/>.

33 "Sudan's Hamdok resigns as prime minister amid political deadlock," Al Jazeera, January 3, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/2/sudan-pm-abdalla-hamdok-resigns-after-deadly-protest>.

34 Mat Nashed, "Sudan protesters sceptical military will step aside," Al Jazeera, July 6, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/6/sudan-protesters-skeptical-military-will-step-aside>.

35 Nada Wanni, "Sudan's hidden resistance: 'The day that can no longer wait,'" Al Jazeera, October 25, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/10/25/sudans-hidden-resistance-coup-day-no-longer-wait>.

Role of Women

Over the course of its rule, the NCP's repressive government subjected Sudanese women to decades of oppression and discrimination. The Criminal Act of 1991 gave the Public Order Police, also known as morality police, the right to arrest anyone for "indecent or immoral dress."³⁶ Although the law could be applied to all genders, Amnesty International said that, in practice, "it is disproportionately women who are discriminated against."³⁷ Sudan is also one of only six countries to not have signed the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.³⁸

The 2008 National Elections Act introduced legislative quotas for women, ensuring at least 25 percent of seats in the Majlis Watani, Sudan's National Assembly, would be reserved for women candidates.³⁹ In 2015, the last election before Sudan's revolution, women held 133 of the 426 seats in the National Assembly.⁴⁰

Despite this minor increase in political representation, in many ways, women formed the backbone of the revolution. Several media outlets reported that a majority of protesters during the 2018 uprising were women; according to a report by the Chr. Michelsen Institute, a nonprofit research foundation, the share of women protesters during the 2018 revolution was above 60 percent.⁴¹

Women used the protests to advocate for their rights and started organizing "all women marches,"⁴² calling for gender equality and addressing gaps in Sudanese laws that resulted in Sudan being classified as one of the worst countries for women's rights.⁴³



A protester holds a sign saying, in Arabic, "No compromise on women's rights, retribution only."^c

With the wide participation of women in the 2018 protests came a promise by the transitional government to increase women's representation in public offices. The first transitional government that was formed in August 2019 allocated 40 percent of Sudan's new parliamentary seats to women, and a 2020 UN-funded exercise identified 1,070 female community activists—two-thirds of whom were aged forty or under—as potential political leaders.⁴⁴

Although observers applauded Hamdok's government for repealing many of the discriminatory public order laws that

36 Article 152(1) of the Criminal Act of 1991, <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/10737>.

37 "Sudan: Court overturns conviction of teenager sentenced for 'indecent' dress," Amnesty International UK, January 12, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/sudan-court-overturns-conviction-teenager-sentenced-indecent-dress>.

38 "Ratification Status for Sudan," United Nations Treaty Bodies Database, United Nations Human Rights Treaty Bodies, accessed January 2, 2023, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Treaty.aspx?CountryID=165&Lang=EN.

39 "Gender Quotas Database: Sudan," International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-view/260/35>.

40 Ibid.

41 Ilaf Nasreldin, "Sudanese Women March for Protection Against Gender Based Violence," Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2021, <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7766-sudanese-women-march-for-protection-against-gender-based-violence>

42 "The women's procession in Khartoum...a historic crowd despite the attacks and harassment," Alrakoba, April 9, 2021, <https://www.alrakoba.net/31549308/ع/الموكب-النسوي-في-الخرطوم-حشد-تاريخي-رع>.

43 "Sudan one of the worst countries for women's rights: survey," Radio Dabanga, November 13, 2013, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-one-of-worst-countries-for-women-s-rights-survey>.

44 "Finding Sudan's future women political leaders: 1,070 and rising," United Nations, June 16, 2020, <https://sudan.un.org/en/49556-finding-sudans-future-women-political-leaders-1070-and-rising>.



An image of a woman wearing traditional dress, later identified as architectural engineering student Alaa Salah, went viral and came to represent women's role in Sudan's revolution.^d

disproportionately targeted women and for banning female genital mutilation, months after al-Bashir was ousted women activists felt they were being sidelined.⁴⁵ Women occupied two seats on the eleven-member Sovereignty Council, four of the sixteen ministerial positions, and only two women were elected civilian state rulers out of eighteen states.⁴⁶

Speaking at the United Nations in October 2019, Alaa Salah expressed frustration that “women have been sidelined in the formal political process in the months following the revolution.”⁴⁷ Salah, an architectural engineering student, came to symbolize the pivotal role of women in revolutionary protests after a photograph of her standing on top of a car leading a crowd of protesters in a chant while wearing a traditional white toub went viral.⁴⁸

WOMEN-LED SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS

While in the minority politically, women made up for their lack of influence in public offices by controlling the public narrative through online activism and creating influential women-led groups on social media platforms focused on advocating for inclusion and equality.

During the revolution, Sudanese women transformed women-only Facebook groups into revolutionary tools. Social media groups in which women could talk and express themselves without fear of reprisal from morality police were already popular in Sudan before 2018, but as protests swept the country, groups in which women shared work opportunities or

45 Jason Burke and Zeinab Mohammed Salih, “Sudan ‘on path to democracy’ as ex-ruling party is dissolved,” *Guardian*, November 29, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/29/sudan-dissolves-ex-ruling-party-and-repeals-morality-law>; Declan Walsh, “In a Victory for Women in Sudan, Female Genital Mutilation Is Outlawed,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/30/world/africa/sudan-outlaws-female-genital-mutilation.html>; Nita Bhalla, “‘The revolution isn’t over’ say Sudan’s frontline female protesters,” Reuters, September 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-women-rights/the-revolution-isnt-over-say-sudans-frontline-female-protesters-idUSKBN1W4369>.

46 Sara Elareifi, “Sudanese Women Participated in the 2019 Revolution, but Sidelined During the Democratic Transition,” *Democracy in Exile, DAWN*, November 15, 2020, <https://dawnmena.org/sudanese-women-participated-in-the-2019-revolution-but-sidelined-during-the-democratic-transition/>.

47 Katie Reilly, “The Iconic Photo of Her Helped Fuel Sudan’s Revolution. Now, She and Other Women Are Being Sidelined,” *Time*, October 30, 2019, <https://time.com/5712952/alaa-salah-sudan-women-protest/>.

48 Ibid.

had conversations about affordable menstrual products became protest spaces.

One prominent group, created to help women find out information about their crushes or future husbands, turned into a platform to expose members of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). Members of the group, called Minbar-Shat, Sudanese slang for a woman who is infatuated with a man, would post pictures of suspected plain-clothed members of the security forces who harassed or abused protesters, asking for information about the men.⁴⁹ In most instances, the group would uncover the

man's personal information, including his name, address, and even contact information.⁵⁰ The group became so influential that members of the security forces started to cover their faces for fear of having their private information exposed (i.e., being "doxed").⁵¹

Like any system that relies on gathering information from the public, the group was accused of spreading misinformation and engaging in defamation campaigns. Some members of the group were charged with defamation against a TV presenter; the case was settled, however, and the group continues to operate.⁵²

49 Iliana Hagenah, "How the Women-Only Facebook Group Minbar-Shat Helped Overthrow the Sudanese Government," *Elle*, October 4, 2019, <https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a29355590/minbar-shat-facebook-sudan-revolution/>.

50 Tamerra Griffin, "These Women Joined Facebook to Follow Their Crushes. Now They're Using Their Skills to Expose Abusive Police," *Buzzfeed News*, February 16, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tamerragriffin/sudan-protests-women-facebook-groups>.

51 Ibid.

52 "The court (closes) the case file of the TV presenter against the Minbar-Shat Group," *Sudana Foog Online*, February 21, 2020, <https://sudanafoogonline.net/المحكمة-تغلق-ملف-قضية-المذيع-التلفزيوني>.

Technological Capacity

Freedom House, a nonprofit that conducts research on democracy and human rights, has consistently classified Sudan as not free since beginning such work in 2009. In 2019, when the country underwent severe internet disruptions, Freedom House gave Sudan a rating of twenty-five on a one-to-one-hundred scale, with one hundred being “most free,” in its annual Freedom on the Net report.⁵³

Although a significant portion of Sudan’s revolution was organized online, via social media platforms or messaging applications such as WhatsApp, a majority of the population still does not have access to the internet. In January 2022, approximately 69 percent of the population was offline.⁵⁴

For a majority of Sudanese internet users, mobile phones remain the most popular means of accessing the internet. In 2022, 78.36 percent of internet traffic in Sudan originated from a mobile phone,⁵⁵ and less than 1 percent of the population had a fixed-line broadband subscription.⁵⁶

However, measuring the number of mobile phone users in the country is difficult, particularly because many citizens have multiple devices. As security forces frequently destroyed protesters’ mobile phones, citizens took to carrying a “protest phone,” often an old mobile phone devoid of personally

identifiable information that could be used to document violence committed against protesters.⁵⁷

Compared to the rest of the African continent, data costs are relatively low in Sudan: In 2022, the cheapest mobile plan was approximately 14.89 Sudanese pounds (SDG) or \$0.03 for 1 gigabyte of data for thirty days.⁵⁸ On average, 1 gigabyte of data costs approximately 340.30 SDG or \$0.75 for a thirty-day plan.⁵⁹ In comparison, 1 gigabyte of data in neighboring Chad costs, on average, \$5.10 for thirty days.⁶⁰

Despite the cost of data being lower than much of the rest of Africa, internet access remains prohibitively expensive for most Sudanese.⁶¹ In 2021, almost 20 percent of the population was unemployed⁶² while the annual inflation rate rose to 382 percent.⁶³ The rapidly fluctuating inflation rate makes cost of living in the country difficult to calculate.

Technological Statistics as of November 2022^e

Internet penetration	+/- 30 percent
Number of internet users	14.03 million
SIM cards in country	35.76 million
Average cost of 1GB data for 30 days	\$0.75

53 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2019 – Sudan*, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/sudan/freedom-net/2019>.

54 Simon Kemp, “Digital 2022: Sudan,” Datareportal, February 16, 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-sudan>.

55 Ibid.

56 “Fixed Broadband Subscriptions, 2000-2018,” International Telecommunication Union, <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

57 “Police violence at Sudan demonstrations,” Radio Dabanga, February 21, 2020, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/police-violence-at-sudan-demonstrations>.

58 Lars Kamer, “Price for 1GB mobile data in Sudan 2022,” Statista, August 1, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1272678/price-for-mobile-data-in-sudan/>; “Worldwide mobile data pricing 2022 – Sudan,” Cable, accessed January 2022, <https://www.cable.co.uk/mobiles/worldwide-data-pricing/#resources>.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2022 – Sudan*, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/sudan/freedom-net/2019>.

62 “Unemployment, total (% of total labor force) (modelled ILO estimate) – Sudan,” World Bank, accessed December 2, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=SD>.

63 “Inflation, consumer prices (annual %) – Sudan,” World Bank, accessed December 2, 2022, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/FP.CPI.TOTL.ZG?end=2021&locations=SD&start=2010>.

Internet Shutdowns

Sudan has a long history of internet shutdowns despite fewer than a third of its citizens having access to the internet.⁶⁴ Like many countries in the region, Sudan experiences varying degrees of internet disruptions.⁶⁵ Due to the length and severity of these disruptions, however, internet monitor Surfshark ranked Sudan the worst country for internet shutdowns in Africa in 2022.⁶⁶ When protests broke out in December 2018, al-Bashir's government revoked access to social media platforms and messaging applications, forcing citizens to use virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent the social media blockages. After the June 2019 massacre in Khartoum, however, the transitional government cut the country off from the internet entirely. Citizens could not contact loved ones to find out if they were safe, send evidence of military brutality to journalists, or ascertain if it was safe to leave their houses.

Data did trickle out of Sudan, however. According to Rest of World, engineers inside telecommunication companies who were responsible for shutting down internet access “switched some people back on.”⁶⁷ Members of the FFC received new SIM cards with internet access. And, just five days after the blackout, fixed-line broadband returned, even though less than 1 percent of the population had access to a fixed-line broadband subscription.⁶⁸ To piggyback off these networks, Sudanese people gathered outside banks and hotels with internet access and used apps to decrypt passwords and access the networks.⁶⁹

Between December 2018 and December 2022, at least eight politically related internet disruptions affected the entire country, lasting a total of approximately 138 days.⁷⁰

Dates and Length of Internet Disruptions^f

12/21/2018–02/26/2019 ^g	68
04/07/2019–04/11/2019 ^h	5
06/03/2019–07/09/2019 ⁱ	36
10/25/2021–11/18/2021 ^j	25
12/25/2021–12/25/2021 ^k	1
12/30/2021–12/30/2021 ^l	1
01/02/2022–01/02/2022 ^m	1
06/30/2022–07/01/2022 ⁿ	2
10/25/2022–10/25/2022 ^o	1

LEGISLATION AND LITIGATION AROUND INTERNET ACCESS

Sudanese legislation concerning the right to access communication networks is lacking, and laws that are in place are often manipulated by those in power to suit their agenda. For example, the 2018 Telecommunications and Post (Organization) Act provides the regulatory authority the legal right to disrupt telecommunication bodies if the law is violated.⁷¹ Article 6(j) of the act states that one of the mandates of the Telecommunications and Post Regulatory Authority (TRPA) is “protecting the national security and the higher interests of Sudan in the field of Telecommunication, Post, and ICT.”⁷² However, the concept of “national security” is vague and not fully defined, allowing

64 Micek, “Update: Mass internet shutdown”; Kemp, “Digital 2022.”

65 The term “internet shutdown” is often used as a catchall term for any intentional disruption, often by governments, to Internet access. However, Internet disruptions range from partial to complete and can target neighborhoods or an entire nation. Partial shutdowns might include denying access to specific websites, social media platforms, or messaging applications, whereas total shutdowns include a complete cut of telecommunication and Internet access. For more information on Internet shutdowns, see “Internet shutdowns and elections handbook,” Access Now, last updated April 2021, <https://www.accessnow.org/internet-shutdowns-and-elections-handbook/>.

66 “Internet shutdown tracker,” Surfshark, accessed December 2022,

https://surfshark.com/research/internet-censorship?utm_source=netblocks&utm_medium=blog&utm_campaign=disruption&utm_content=homepage.

67 Jina Moore, “Anatomy of an internet shutdown,” *Rest of World*, May 12, 2020, <https://restofworld.org/2020/sudan-revolution-internet-shutdown/>.

68 International Telecommunication Union, “Fixed Broadband Subscriptions, 2000-2018,” <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

69 Moore, “Anatomy of.”

70 For the purpose of this report, shutdowns that occur during students' exams, which typically last only a few hours, have not been included. For information on exam-related Internet shutdowns in the Middle East and North Africa, see Kassam Mnejja and Zach Rosson, “Empty promises: More internet shutdowns during exams in MENA,” Access Now, August 24, 2022, <https://www.accessnow.org/empty-promises-shutdowns-exams>.

71 The Telecommunications and Post (Organization) Act, 2018, <https://tpa.gov.sd/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/THE-TELECOMMUNICATION-AND-POST-ORGANIZATION-Act2018.pdf>.

72 “Litigating Internet Disruptions in Africa: Lessons from Sudan,” CIPESA, March 3, 2022, <https://cipesa.org/2022/03/litigating-internet-disruptions-in-africa-lessons-from-sudan/>.



The Telecommunications and Post Regulatory Authority issued a statement arguing that the internet would remain shut down in compliance with the original shutdown ordered by the military government following the October 25, 2021, coup.⁹

those in power to use the act as a tool to disrupt internet services under any pretense.⁷³

compensated for the loss of internet access.⁷⁸

Yet citizens turned to the law to battle internet shutdowns during the transitional period and following the 2021 coup.

Following the October 2021 coup, lawyers and consumer protection associations again went to court to demand internet access. On November 9, the Khartoum District Court ordered Sudan’s three main telecommunication providers—Zain, MTN, and Sudani—to restore internet access to the complainants.⁷⁹ On November 11, the court ordered the three providers to restore internet service to all users.⁸⁰

A week after authorities shut down the internet in June 2019, lawyer Abdelazim Hassan filed a lawsuit against his service provider, Zain.⁷⁴ Hassan argued that Zain had violated his contract, which agreed to provide him with access to the internet if he paid his bills on time.⁷⁵ Two weeks later, Zain restored internet service to Hassan’s SIM card, and his SIM card alone; because Hassan filed the case in a personal capacity, the restoration of internet access did not apply to others.⁷⁶ Hassan returned to court to file a class action suit against the telecommunications providers; on July 9, thirty-six days after the start of the blackout, a court ordered the restoration of mobile internet access.⁷⁷ Two days later, the Sudan Telecommunications Professionals Association (TPA) called for consumers to be

In response, the TRPA issued a statement saying the internet would remain shut down, citing “national security” and a state of emergency as justification for not complying with the court’s ruling. A judge dismissed the TRPA’s argument, instead issuing a warrant for the arrest of the chief executive officers of the telecommunication companies responsible for denying citizens access to the internet.⁸¹ Internet access slowly returned on November 18, 2021, although access to certain platforms such as Twitter remained restricted until November 24.⁸²

73 Khattab Hamad, “Internet shutdowns in Sudan: The story behind the numbers and statistics,” Global Voices, June 8, 2020, <https://globalvoices.org/2020/06/08/internet-shutdowns-in-sudan-the-story-behind-the-numbers-and-statistics/>.

74 “Litigating Internet Disruptions in Africa.”

75 Moore, “Anatomy of.”

76 “Litigating Internet Disruptions in Africa.”

77 “Mobile internet access slowly restored in Sudan,” Al Jazeera, July 9, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/7/9/mobile-internet-access-slowly-restored-in-sudan>.

78 “Sudan internet shut-down: Call for compensation,” Radio Dabanga, July 11, 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-internet-shut-down-call-for-compensation>.

79 Khattab Hamad, “In Sudan, the court stands on the side of unrestricted access to the internet,” Global Voices, December 16, 2021, <https://advx.globalvoices.org/2021/12/16/in-sudan-the-court-stands-on-the-side-of-unrestricted-access-to-the-internet/>.

80 “Sudan’s Telecommunications Authority will not restore internet service,” Radio Dabanga, November 12, 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-s-telecommunications-authority-will-not-restore-internet-service>.

81 Ammar El Khalfi, “A Sudanese court rejects telecom companies’ justifications for not returning the internet,” Anadolu Agency, November 14, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/2420674/الاتصالات-لعدم-إعادة-الإنترنت>.

82 Hamad, “In Sudan, the court stands.”

Laws

Common criticisms of Sudanese laws around false information and press freedom primarily focus on the lack of clear definitions within notionally enforceable language.⁸³ This lack of concrete definitions protects the interests of those in power, allowing laws that should protect citizens to be used against them as they can be applied arbitrarily against dissenters and ignored for supporters.⁸⁴

CRIMINAL ACT OF 1991

Article 66 of the Criminal Act of 1991 criminalized the spread of false information with intent to cause “threat to the public peace” or impact the “prestige of the State.” Those found guilty under this statute are subject to a fine, up to six months in prison, or both.⁸⁵

PRESS AND PUBLICATIONS ACT OF 2009

The Press and Publications Act of 2009 established the National Council for Press and Publications (NCP), supervised and funded by the Office of the President.⁸⁶ The act stipulated that all publications had to be licensed by the NCP after paying a fee and that all journalists must register with the NCP to practice their profession.

During the 2018–19 revolutionary protests, authorities routinely censored and suspended media publications; they also arrested journalists.⁸⁷ According to freelance reporter Dalia Eltahir, Sudanese journalists are still frequently threatened and targeted. “Throughout my career I received multiple death threats,” Eltahir said in an interview. “Some messages even start with phrases like, ‘We know where you live.’”⁸⁸ In August 2021, journalist Ali El Dali was beaten, allegedly by men wearing military uniforms.⁸⁹

Despite incidents such as Dali’s, Eltahir maintained that media freedom did improve under the Hamdok government.⁹⁰ Raghda Orsud, cofounder of Beam Reports, an online media outlet that does fact-checking and investigates disinformation, agreed. “Beam Reports would not have been allowed to exist under the al-Bashir regime,” she said.⁹¹

Although press freedom was again under threat following the October 2021 coup, defiance against the Press and Publications Act has also taken place.⁹² In August 2022, 659 journalists voted to form the first independent union in decades despite al-Bashir-aligned media professionals claiming the union could not replace the institutions set up under al-Bashir.⁹³

83 “Share Mania: Mapping Misinformation and Disinformation in Sudan,” *Beam Reports*, January 15, 2023, <https://www.beamreports.com/2023/01/15/share-mania-mapping-misinformation-and-disinformation-in-sudan/>.

84 Mohamed Suliman, “The case for reforming the Sudanese Access to Information Act,” *Global Voices*, August 28, 2019, <https://globalvoices.org/2019/08/28/the-case-for-reforming-the-sudanese-access-to-information-act/>.

85 Article 66 of the Criminal Act of 1991, <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/10737>.

86 Articles 6(1) and 7(1) of the Press and Publications Act of 2009, <https://moj.gov.sd/sudanlaws/#/reader/chapter/305>.

87 “The Council of Press and Publications suspends the issuance of al-Intibaha and al-Sayha newspapers,” *Sudan News Agency*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.suna-news.net/read?id=723089>; “At least 79 journalists arrested in two months of protests in Sudan,” *Reporters Without Borders*, February 14, 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/least-79-journalists-arrested-two-months-protests-sudan>.

88 Interview with Dalia Eltahir, online, November 17, 2022.

89 “Sudanese journalist beaten senseless in Khartoum attack,” *Radio Dabanga*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudanese-journalist-beaten-senseless-in-khartoum-attack>.

90 Eltahir, interview.

91 Interview with Raghda Orsud, online, November 17, 2022.

92 “Press freedom under siege after military coup in Sudan,” *Reporters Without Borders*, November 5, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/press-freedom-under-siege-after-military-coup-sudan>.

93 Nafisa Eltahir and Khalid Abdelaziz, “Sudanese journalists form independent union to defend freedoms,” *Reuters*, August 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-journalists-form-independent-union-defend-freedoms-2022-08-28/>.

RIGHT TO INFORMATION ACT OF 2015

In theory, the Right to Information Act of 2015 is written such that citizens are notionally provided with legal recourse in order to access government-held information.⁹⁴ However, the law ensures that certain exceptions, left intentionally vague, make it easy for the government to deny citizens' requests to access information.⁹⁵

NATIONAL SECURITY LAW, AMENDMENT OF 2020

The 2020 Amendment of the National Security Law gave the Sudanese intelligence service the right to search and seize citizens' data without a court order. Specifically, Article 25 of the law states, "The security service has the right to request information, data, documents, or things from anyone to check it or take it."⁹⁶ Authorities employed the law to search and confiscate protesters' cell phones, leading to the use of what became known as a "protest phone," as mentioned above.⁹⁷

CYBERCRIMES LAW OF 2020

In July 2020, al-Burhan, the Sovereignty Council chair, signed amendments to a cybercrimes law originally enacted by the al-Bashir regime in 2018, a month before the protests that would ultimately lead to his ouster broke out.⁹⁸ However, the original 2018 law was never officially made public and only became available after someone anonymously uploaded it to Google Drive.⁹⁹ As with other laws, activists have criticized

the vagueness of the terms it uses, such as "information," which is defined recursively as "data of all kinds that has been processed by any means of information."

Article 7 of the Cybercrimes Law makes internet shutdowns a criminal offense only if they are perpetrated by an individual; the law makes no reference to internet shutdowns implemented by the government.¹⁰⁰ Article 24 of the Cybercrimes Law expanded the definition of what comprises false information as originally defined in the Criminal Act and increased the punishment for spreading false information:

"Whoever prepares or uses the telecommunications network or any of the means of information, communications, or applications to publish news, rumors, or reports – knowing that it is false – with the intent to cause fear or panic to the public, or to threaten public peace or tranquility, or to diminish the prestige of the state, shall be punished with imprisonment. For a period not exceeding four years, or by flogging, or both."¹⁰¹

On July 18, 2020, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) announced on Facebook that it had appointed a commissioner in May to prosecute anyone who defamed or insulted the army online. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that eight journalists later received threatening calls from anonymous individuals claiming to work for the military. The callers told the journalists to delete their online content critical of the army otherwise they would be sued or even hurt.¹⁰²

94 Right to Information Act of 2015, <https://moj.gov.sd/sudanlaws/#/reader/chapter/362>.

95 *Sudan's Bad Laws, Internet Censorship and Repressed Civil Liberties*, CIPESA, November 2021, https://cipesa.org/wp-content/files/briefs/Sudans_Bad_Laws_Internet_Censorship_and_Repressed_Civil_Liberties_2021.pdf.

96 "Sudan: 'Men With No Mercy' Now Armed With EU-Linked Spyware," SMEX, December 21, 2022, <https://smex.org/sudan-men-with-no-mercy-now-armed-with-eu-linked-spyware>.

97 "Freedom on the Net 2021 – Sudan," Freedom House, accessed October 2022, https://freedomhouse.org/country/sudan/freedom-net/2021#footnoteref12_dd6uix7.

98 *Sudan: Cybercrime Law can restrict vital information during the pandemic*, Article19, November 10, 2021, <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Cybercrime-Law-Sudan-Covid-project-final-ARTICLE-19.pdf>.

99 *Ibid.*

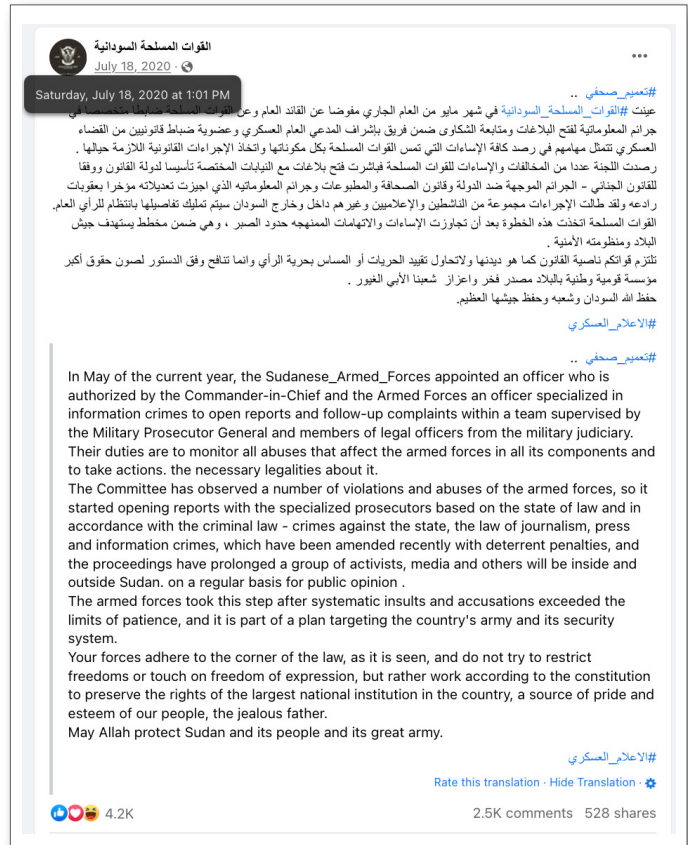
100 Khattab Hamad, "Sudan's revised cybercrime law falls short on its promise," Global Voices, March 4, 2021, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2021/03/04/sudans-revised-cybercrime-law-falls-short-on-its-promise/>.

101 *Sudan's Bad Laws*.

102 Mat Nashed, "Sudan tightens cybercrime law as army pursues 'fake news,'" CPJ, November 23, 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/11/sudan-tightens-cybercrime-law-as-army-pursues-fake-news/>.

In February 2021, authorities arrested Salah Manna, a member of a legal team tasked with dismantling the remnants of al-Bashir's administration, for claiming that al-Burhan and Hemedti used their influence to release al-Bashir's wife from prison.¹⁰³ Days later, al-Burhan used the cybercrimes law to sue Orwa Alsadig, Manna's colleague, for allegedly claiming he wanted to work to oust al-Bashir.¹⁰⁴

According to Ahmad Suliman, a political communications aide who worked in the Hamdok government, the case was not taken to court. "There were no cases brought to court and/or tried under these amendments, whether it be cases of hate speech which countering it was the justice ministry's rationale to introduce the amendments, nor as part of a formal authoritarian crackdown by the military on free speech," Suliman said in an interview. "The same goes to the commission formed by the military which went silent days after it was formed until today."¹⁰⁵



A July 18, 2020, post by the Sudanese Armed Forces confirmed the appointment of a commissioner to prosecute anyone who was seen to defame the military.⁹

103 "Police Arrest ERC Rapporteur, Salah Mann," *Darfur24*, February 7, 2021, <https://www.darfur24.com/en/2021/02/07/police-arrest-erc-rapporteur-salah-manna/>.
 104 *Sudan's Bad Laws*.
 105 Interview with Ahmad Suliman, online, November 17, 2022.

Online Information Flow

Throughout al-Bashir's tenure as leader of Sudan, the government censored the media. The country consistently ranked near the bottom of Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index during the time al-Bashir was in power.

Following the brutal suppression of protests in 2013, the government shut down access to the internet in an attempt to prevent protesters from organizing online and sharing evidence of government violence.¹⁰⁶ Protesters relied heavily on online information and information shared via messaging applications, as newspapers reporting on the protests and the economic situation were censored and confiscated.¹⁰⁷

According to Beam Reports' Orsud, the al-Bashir regime attempted to discredit evidence of the violent crackdown on protesters by stating that any footage posted online was old or was not taken in Sudan. To combat this, citizens started to call out pertinent information while recording, including the date and location of an event, embedding those details within the footage itself and making it harder for the government to obfuscate.¹⁰⁸

To avoid being monitored online, encrypted messaging applications became particularly useful revolutionary tools: they provided citizens with the ability to communicate and share information without fear of online harassment. Speaking to the Guardian in 2015, activist and journalist Rishan Oshi said she uses WhatsApp "because the security services announced that they are watching Facebook and other means of communication, so WhatsApp is safer in that respect."¹⁰⁹

As revolutionary protests gained momentum in 2018, al-Bashir again cut off access to social media platforms and messaging applications such as WhatsApp¹¹⁰ despite claiming that the "problem" in Sudan was not as it was made out to be on social media.¹¹¹

Internet users circumvent censorship and social media gags by using VPNs. According to Freedom House, "users without VPNs on their phones paid specialists at technology shops throughout Sudan to install them."¹¹² In conversations with those who regularly attended protests, activists told the authors that VPNs are used both to access platforms that might be restricted and to add a layer of anonymity for protesters who fear their online activity is being monitored by security forces.¹¹³

While WhatsApp remained an integral part of Sudan's revolutionary process, many activists also used Facebook Live streams to document protests. In 2018, visual evidence of the revolution's momentum broadcast over Facebook Live helped combat government claims that the protests had withered.¹¹⁴ In 2020, police shot and killed a Sudanese student who was using Facebook Live to stream coverage of a protest.¹¹⁵

After the June 3, 2019, massacre, the TMC ordered the internet shut down, while the military confiscated and destroyed any electronic devices protesters used to document the atrocities.¹¹⁶ Despite this attempt to prevent information about the deadly event from making headlines, Facebook Live footage provided clear evidence of security forces using deadly force against protesters.¹¹⁷

106 Samuel Gibbs and agencies, "Sudan internet cut off as protests erupt against government in Khartoum," *Guardian*, September 25, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2013/sep/25/sudan-internet-cut-khartoum-protests>; Micek, "Update: Mass internet shutdown."

107 Dalia Haj-Omar, "Sudan blacks out internet to hide brutal suppression of protests," Index on Censorship, September 27, 2013, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/09/amidst-internet-blackout-whats-government-sudan-hiding/>.

108 Orsud, interview.

109 Khalid Albaih, "How WhatsApp is fuelling a 'sharing revolution' in Sudan," *Guardian*, October 15, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/15/sudan-whatsapp-sharing-revolution>.

110 Yousef Saba and Nafisa Elthahir, "Sudan restricts social media access to counter protest movement," Reuters, January 2, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-protests-internet-idUSKCN1OW0Z7>.

111 "Sudan police confront rallies as Bashir blames social media," *Middle East Eye*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-police-confront-rallies-bashir-blames-media>.

112 *Freedom on the Net 2021*.

113 Authors' conversations with protesters who asked to remain anonymous for their own safety.

114 Jon Emont, "'Facebook Protesters' Helped Sudan Drive Out Bashir," *Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/social-media-movements-helped-drive-out-african-leaders-11555085194>.

115 "A Sudanese youth was shot dead while presenting a protest live video on Facebook," *Al Nilin*, June 21, 2020, <https://www.alnilin.com/13132577.htm>.

116 Berhan Taye, "#IAmTheSudanRevolution: There's a direct link between internet shutdowns and human rights violations in Sudan," Access Now, June 11, 2019, <https://www.accessnow.org/iamthesudanrevolution-theres-a-direct-link-between-internet-shutdowns-and-human-rights-violations-in-sudan>.

117 "Sudan's Livestream Massacre."

Following the near total internet shutdown, activists attempted to share and verify footage from Khartoum. A Telegram channel named “Military Council Violations” was created on June 3, 2019, by members of the diaspora and protesters in Sudan who managed to circumvent the internet shutdown by using foreign SIM cards with international roaming.¹¹⁸ The group worked to verify images and footage taken during the massacre, which were often shared to popular social media platforms of diaspora communities.¹¹⁹

However, protesters were not the only ones to document the 2019 massacre. After the internet was restored, triumphant footage surfaced online. According to Middle East Eye, the footage recorded by protesters was taken during the attack, while much of the footage of security forces was taken either before or after they had attacked.¹²⁰ Some of the footage included evidence of security forces raping and attacking protesters, as well as forcing protesters to call for military rule.¹²¹

Citizens sharing content in real time also used the lessons learned in 2013 to combat government claims that content posted online was old or fake. The recorder of video footage could often be heard stating the date the video was made, as well as the area it was made in. On Twitter, activists uploading content would include timestamps, street addresses, and brief descriptions of the content.

This content was often circulated by Sudanese journalists or other high-profile accounts who provided a timeline of events as they happened from multiple perspectives.



Screenshot of an example post documenting an incident that occurred at 3:53 p.m. in Khartoum on August 11, 2022. The Twitter handle is hidden to maintain anonymity of poster.

118 Kaamil Ahmed, “Sudan’s diaspora fights to fill information black hole created by internet blackout,” *Middle East Eye*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/not-trend-us-sudans-diaspora-fill-information-black-hole-created-internet-blackout>; “Military Council Violations” *المجلس العسكري*, Telegram, accessed December 2022, <https://t.me/militarycouncilviolations>.

119 Ahmed, “Sudan’s diaspora fights.”

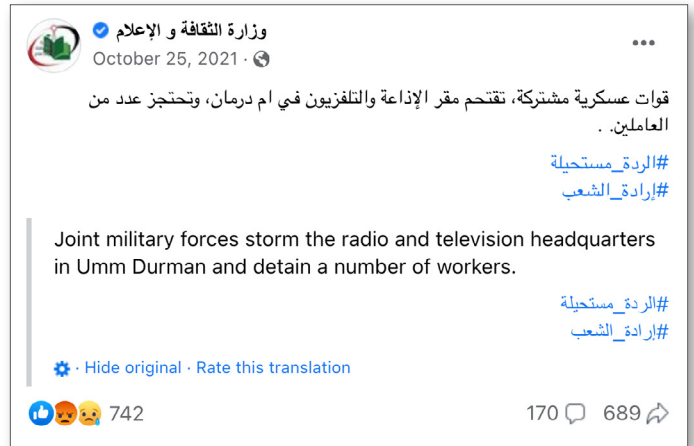
120 Ahmed, “They felt victorious.”

121 Ibid.

Nada Ali, a Sudanese activist, told the authors that she includes links to primary sources, including resistance committees and protesters, in her social media posts about Sudan. Ali posts in English to give victims of government brutality a voice and provide the international community with information on the daily struggles of Sudanese protesters at the front line.¹²²

Sudanese ruling parties are aware of the impact information shared on social media platforms can have on Sudan's international image. This is evident from the fact that the internet was disrupted during periods of protest to prevent information from reaching both local Sudanese citizens and an international audience, both during the revolution and the transitional period. Immediately prior to the coup on October 25, 2021, military forces stormed Sudanese Radio and Television headquarters and arrested employees, before proceeding to arrest Hamdok and restrict internet access.¹²³

Activists who asked to remain anonymous told the authors that posting content online has the potential to be dangerous, as it can be used by security forces to prove that a specific individual was at a protest. Despite the potential for harm, they maintained that posting about what happens at protests is important to both show the international community what is taking place and to maintain an archive of incidents.



Screenshot of an early morning October 25, 2021, post—the day of the second coup—to the Facebook page for the Ministry of Culture and Media, in which it reported that military forces had stormed Sudanese Radio and Television headquarters in Omdurman (erroneously auto-translated as “Umm Durman”).[†]

122 Correspondence with Nada Ali, online, August 12, 2022.

123 “Press freedom under siege.”

Internal Disinformation Operations in Sudan

A recent report by Beam Reports identified five primary internal actors responsible for spreading disinformation in Sudan: the RSF, NISS, SAF, Islamist parties, and parties who oppose military rule.¹²⁴

During al-Bashir's rule, the government established under the purview of the NISS the so-called Cyber Jihad Unit, which was tasked with "crush[ing] online dissent."¹²⁵ The Cyber Jihad Unit primarily monitored the online activity of Sudanese citizens and spread mis- and disinformation. However, according to Beam Reports' Orsud and Confluence Advisory's Khair, the al-Bashir regime did not need to focus heavily on spreading disinformation before the revolution.

"There was no media doing day-to-day reporting that needed to be combated with disinformation," Orsud told the authors of this report. Because the regime did not allow critical, investigative journalism to exist, it was able to shape media narratives without relying heavily on deliberately spreading false information.

While the regime may have focused more on censoring media and controlling online and offline narratives, during the revolutionary protests of 2018 and 2019, al-Bashir's government worked hard to spread disinformation about protesters.

Activists told the Wall Street Journal that one of the primary ways the al-Bashir government tried to fight back against protesters who used social media to coordinate was by spreading false dates and times for protests and sending fake announcements.¹²⁶ According to Girifna spokesperson Ebaya, the regime would spread false information about protest locations, and, when protesters arrived, they would be arrested. To mitigate

this, Girifna, the FFC, and other organizations relied on information provided by the SPA Facebook page exclusively. As a result, the movement became more centralized, and traps set by security forces were less successful.¹²⁷

However, more malicious government-led disinformation campaigns orchestrated by the NISS and the Cyber Jihad Unit also spread on social media.¹²⁸ In one popular example, the NISS tried to pin the growing unrest in late 2018 on supposed Darfuri rebels. State TV channels and government-run Facebook pages showed footage of Darfuri men claiming that they had attempted to incite violence at protests.¹²⁹ But the plan backfired, as friends of the men identified them as ordinary students with no ties to rebel groups, who had been tortured into making false confessions. Facebook comments disputing the confessions as well as the hashtag #WeAreAllDarfur went viral after the plan was exposed.¹³⁰

DISINFORMATION DURING THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

Following al-Bashir's removal and the implementation of the TMC, the military apparatus regularly blamed "rogue units" for killing protesters. On May 13, 2019, after the TMC and FFC announced they had reached a partial agreement, RSF soldiers shot at protesters camped outside the military headquarters.¹³¹ Hemedti denied responsibility and blamed the attack on people "disguised" as RSF soldiers.¹³² Similarly, following the June 3, 2019, massacre in Khartoum, Hemedti insisted "rogue elements" and "imposters" wearing RSF uniforms were to blame for the large-scale killing of nonviolent protesters.¹³³ Hemedti consistently perpetuated the narrative that the RSF was not responsible for the murder of protesters

124 "Share Mania: Mapping Misinformation."

125 "Sudan to unleash cyber jihadists," BBC News, March 23, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-12829808>; "Cyber Jihadist Unit monitors Sudan's online communication," Radio Dabanga, December 10, 2014, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/cyber-jihadist-unit-monitors-sudan-s-online-communication>.

126 Emont, "Facebook Protesters' Helped."

127 Ebaya, interview.

128 Mohamed Suliman, "As Sudan transitions to democracy, urgent reforms must tackle disinformation," Global Voices, October 4, 2019, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2019/10/04/as-sudan-transitions-to-democracy-urgent-reforms-must-tackle-disinformation/>.

129 "32 Darfuri students accused of being 'SLM-AW sabotage cell,'" Radio Dabanga, December 27, 2018, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/32-darfuri-students-accused-of-being-slm-aw-sabotage-cell>.

130 Flora Carmichael and Owen Pinnell, "How fake news from Sudan's regime backfired," BBC News, April 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-47899076>.

131 Nadine Awadalla, "Violence overshadows Sudan's transition push," Reuters, May 14, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-politics-idUSKCN1SK0T8>; "Sudan: Violence breaks out at Khartoum protest sit-in amid rising tensions," *Middle East Eye*, May 13, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-dozens-protesters-injured-after-gunshots-ring-out-khartoum-sit>.

132 Sarra Majdoub, "Sudan: Who is Hemedti? The man behind the massacres," *New Arab*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/sudan-who-hemedti-man-behind-massacres>.

133 Hamza Hendawi, "Special report: Inside the June 3 massacre now etched into Sudan's collective memory," *National*, June 6, 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/special-report-inside-the-june-3-massacre-now-etched-into-sudan-s-collective-memory-11028906>.

despite multiple eyewitnesses and video evidence showing RSF soldiers shooting at unarmed civilians.¹³⁴ According to Khair, disinformation about who was responsible for the massacre continues to this day.¹³⁵

During the transitional period, Islamists and members of the al-Bashir regime focused on targeting protesters and FFC members, claiming civilian members of the transitional council were not fit to govern the country.¹³⁶ According to former Hamdok communications aide Suliman, FFC members were regularly called “atheists” and “drunkards,” and sit-ins were referred to as “brothels.”¹³⁷

One persistent narrative used against Hamdok and his government was commonly known as “the farm group.” Rumors spread that friends and advisers of Hamdok would meet regularly at a farm to drink and smoke, while also making decisions about how to rule the country. The accusation was so widespread that a journalist asked Hamdok about the farm at a press conference, to which the prime minister denied any knowledge of the farm group.¹³⁸ Amjed Farid, a former adviser to Hamdok who was also alleged to be a member of the farm group, said that entire narrative was perpetrated by the RSF.¹³⁹

Multiple sources told the authors of this report that one of the primary failings of the transitional government was communications. An information vacuum existed in the wake of the al-Bashir regime—citizens were aware that a robust media environment did not yet exist in Sudan, yet there was an absence of trusted political sources. According to freelance journalist Eltahir, the media was not given access to information from Hamdok’s government in a timely manner, giving rumors and

misinformation time to spread before media could report the real information. She said the problem was discussed with Faisal Mohamed Saleh, the former minister of culture and information in Hamdok’s government, but the government took no action to address this issue.¹⁴⁰

It took the Hamdok government time to realize that institutions needed to be set up to combat disinformation campaigns, according to Suliman. Because political disinformation was more rampant following the 2018 revolution than it was during the al-Bashir regime, the Hamdok government had to outsource the work of researching and identifying the spreaders of disinformation to outside organizations.

In June 2021, Meta removed a network of over 1.8 million followers after Valent Projects, an independent research firm hired by Sudan’s information ministry to investigate activity that had been linked to al-Bashir loyalists, gave it a tip.¹⁴¹ In a statement to Reuters, the transitional government said al-Bashir loyalists were “working systematically to tarnish the image of the government.”¹⁴² According to Meta’s June 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior report, the network posted content about opposition political and religious parties, including the Communist Party and the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁴³ In particular, the network was critical of the then-ruling transitional government.

Although Meta identified the network as an internal campaign targeting a domestic audience, the listed locations for operators of some of the pages with hundreds of thousands of followers included not just Sudan but also Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt.¹⁴⁴

134 “Sudan’s Livestream Massacre.”

135 Khair, interview.

136 Ibid.

137 Suliman, interview.

138 “Two women among the new governors, and Hamdok denies (the farm group), clarifies the tasks of the advisors, and announces the names,” Radio Dabanga, July 22, 2022, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/ar/all-news/article/الاسماء-ويعلن-المستشارين-ويوضح-مهام-المستشارين-ويعلن-الاسماء>.

139 “Amjad Farid: The farm group was promoted by the Rapid Support,” *Sudan Today*, February 3, 2022, <https://alsudantoday.com/sudan-news/sudan-now-news/38924>.

140 Eltahir, interview.

141 Nafisa Eltahir, Malaika Tapper, and Khalid Abdelaziz, “Facebook shuts fake accounts in Sudan, as fight for public opinion rages online,” Reuters, October 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-facebook-insight-idCAKBN2H91BY>.

142 Ibid.

143 *June 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report*, Facebook, June 2021, <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/June-2021-CIB-Report-Final.pdf>.

144 Information provided by CrowdTangle archive of the network.

DISINFORMATION PRE- AND POST-COUP

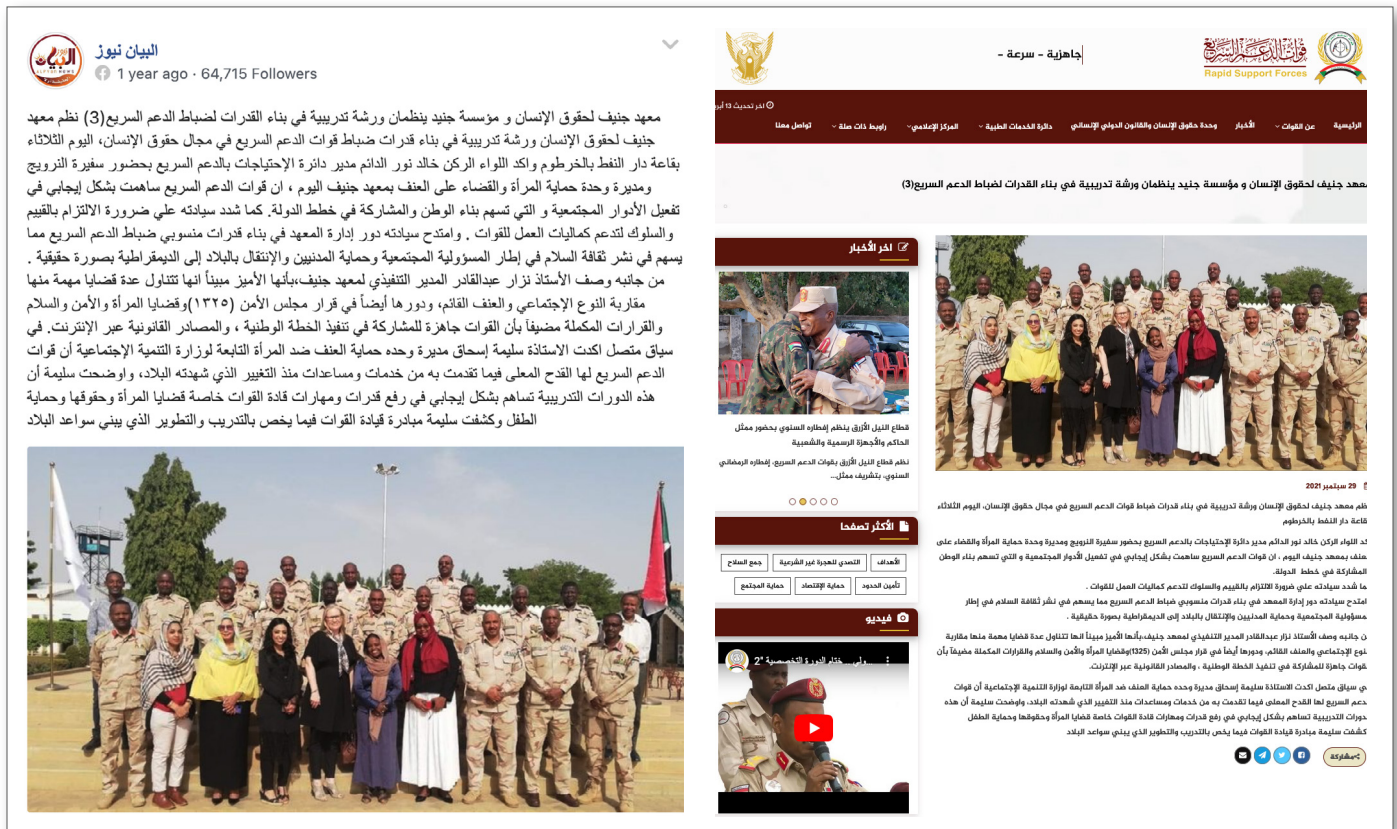
One of the largest internal disinformation campaigns targeting Sudanese citizens was removed in September 2021, just one month before the October 25 coup.¹⁴⁵ Meta removed 943 Facebook and Instagram assets (i.e., accounts, pages, groups, or events) promoting the RSF for violating the platforms' policies against government interference.

The network itself had significant reach; according to Meta, about 1.1 million accounts followed one or more of the inauthentic pages and around one hundred fifty-three thousand people joined one or more of the suspended groups.¹⁴⁶

Many of the pages impersonated media or purported to be independent media outlets, while some of the accounts posed

as journalists and freelancers. The supposed media pages mixed content taken from legitimate news websites with pro-RSF content and narratives supportive of the military, making the propaganda look like news.

Disinformation about Hamdok's government was rife in the weeks and days leading up to the 2021 coup. Sudanese investigative outlet Beam Reports saw a spike in misleading and fabricated posts in the period immediately before the coup, with the organization conducting an increased number of fact-checks.¹⁴⁷ In early October 2021, false reports spread from WhatsApp to Facebook pages with hundreds of thousands of members claiming that Volker Perthes, special representative for Sudan and head of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), had told Hamdok to dissolve the government and create a new one.¹⁴⁸



A screenshot of a post from the campaign promoting the RSF shows a page, with just less than sixty-five thousand followers (left), sharing content copied directly from the RSF website (right). The page labelled itself as news and had administrators based in Sudan and Saudi Arabia.⁵

145 Tessa Knight, "Sudanese Facebook network promoting paramilitary group removed month before coup," Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), October 28, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/sudanese-facebook-network-promoting-paramilitary-group-removed-month-before-coup-48f30b46ffe0>.

146 September 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report, Facebook, September, 2021, <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Sept-2021-CIB-Report.pdf>.

147 "Share Mania: Mapping Misinformation."

148 "How true is the popular news about the proposal of the head of UNITAMS to dissolve the government and form a new government?" *Beam Reports*, November 10, 2022, <https://www.beamreports.com/2021/10/11/ما-وصحة-الأخبار-الرائجة-حول-اقتراح-رئيس-UNITAMS-لحل-الحكومة-وتأسيس-حكومة-جديدة>.

External Disinformation Operations

Many of the foreign disinformation campaigns that targeted Sudanese citizens through the end of 2022 focused on improving either the government's or the military's image, or influencing Sudanese politics to suit the foreign entity's agenda. Countries responsible for information campaigns targeting Sudan that have since been uncovered primarily include Russia and Gulf states, which have vested interests in Sudan. Russia, in particular, operates mining companies in the gold-rich nation and signed a deal with al-Bashir to create a naval base in Port Sudan.¹⁴⁹ In 2019, Gulf states helped the military oust al-Bashir.¹⁵⁰

FOLLOWING RUSSIA'S PLAYBOOK

According to leaked documents reviewed by CNN, Russian specialists created "a program of political and economic reforms" designed to keep al-Bashir in power by discrediting and suppressing protesters.¹⁵¹ The proposal included that the al-Bashir government spread claims that protesters were violent, that they were attacking hospitals and mosques, and that the protests were orchestrated by the West. According to the documents, the specialists also proposed that protesters be represented as enemies of Islam by planting LGBT rainbow flags at rallies.

Russia's proposal also included "extensive media coverage of the interrogation of detainees, where they admit they arrived to organize civil war in Sudan."¹⁵² This tactic was actively used by al-Bashir's government when the NISS arrested students from Darfur and spread disinformation claiming they had instigated violent protests.¹⁵³

PR FIRMS FROM GULF STATES

In the months after al-Bashir was removed from power, Sudanese social media users noticed a surge in content promoting and supporting the military. According to the *New York Times*, an Egyptian company called New Waves paid recruits \$180 a month to write pro-military posts using inauthentic Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts.¹⁵⁴

Meta confirmed that two companies—New Waves in Egypt and Newwaves in the United Arab Emirates—spent approximately \$167,000 on Facebook ads, paying in US dollars and Emirati dirhams.¹⁵⁵ Although Meta could not confirm the two campaigns were connected or that they were linked to the Egyptian and Emirati governments, the *New York Times* noted significant hints indicating possible government connections.

According to Meta, the two campaigns had a massive following: more than 13.7 million accounts followed one or more of the 102 Facebook pages that were removed for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior. One page, named Sudan Alyoum (Sudan Today), linked to a website of the same name that actively publishes content to this day. During its investigation, the *New York Times* found that Sudan Alyoum published sixty articles supporting Hemedti between May and August 2019. The articles linked in the *New York Times* piece appear to have been deleted from the website.

149 Declan Walsh, "'From Russia With Love': A Putin Ally Mines Gold and Plays Favorites in Sudan," *New York Times*, June 5, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/05/world/africa/wagner-russia-sudan-gold-putin.html>; Amy Mackinnon, Robbie Gramer, and Jack Detsch, "Russia's Dreams of a Red Sea Naval Base Are Scuttled—for Now," *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/15/russia-sudan-putin-east-africa-port-red-sea-naval-base-scuttled/>.

150 Samy Magdy, "As Sudan uprising grew, Arab states worked to shape its fate," Associated Press, May 8, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-qatar-international-news-omar-al-bashir-saudi-arabia-e30e894617cf4dfb9a811af2df22de93>.

151 Tim Lister, Sebastian Shukla, and Nima Elbagir, "Fake news and public executions: Documents show a Russian company's plan for quelling protests in Sudan," CNN, April 25, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/25/africa/russia-sudan-minvest-plan-to-quell-protests-intl/index.html>.

152 Ibid.

153 Carmichael and Pinnell, "How fake news."

154 Declan Walsh, and Nada Rashwan, "'We're at War': A Covert Social Media Campaign Boosts Military Rulers," *New York Times*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/world/middleeast/sudan-social-media.html>.

155 Nathaniel Gleicher, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior in UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia," Meta, August 1, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/08/cib-uae-egypt-saudi-arabia/>; Kanishk Karan, Ayushman Kaul, and Mohamed Kassab, "Facebook Disabled Assets Linked to Egypt and UAE-Based Firms," Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), August 14, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-disabled-assets-linked-to-egypt-and-uae-based-firms-a232d9effc32>; Jean le Roux and Max Rizzuto, "Facebook shuts down Egyptian disinformation network, bans two marketing companies," Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), March 2, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-shuts-down-egyptian-disinformation-network-bans-two-marketing-companies-60260d52ae0d>.

RUSSIAN SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

Since 2019, there have been multiple campaigns from Russia targeting Sudanese social media users with the goal of improving Russia's image in Sudan. Many of the campaigns use similar techniques, namely creating inauthentic assets to impersonate news media and spreading politically motivated content.

In October 2019, Meta removed a network that contained pages posing as news entities.¹⁵⁶ According to the Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO), the pages primarily acted as mouthpieces for whatever government was in power at the time, claiming neutrality while simultaneously sharing pro-Russian content.¹⁵⁷ Approximately four hundred fifty-seven thousand accounts followed at least one of the eighteen

removed pages. According to Meta, some of the accounts were operated by Sudanese nationals.¹⁵⁸

A year later, Meta removed a network from Russia with links to the Internet Research Agency (IRA), targeting Sudan, Syria, and Libya. According to the company, they "identified several decentralized clusters of connected activity that relied on local nationals from Libya, Egypt, Sudan and Syria."¹⁵⁹ An assessment of the assets by SIO and private research company Graphika found that the Sudanese assets impersonated news organizations and posted positive content about the RSF, Russian mining interests, and the building of a Russian naval base in Port Sudan.¹⁶⁰ Narratives around the naval base were also prominent in a May 2021 campaign that also had links to the IRA.¹⁶¹ The network was removed for violating Meta's policies against foreign interference.¹⁶²

156 Nathaniel Gleicher, "Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from Russia," Meta, October 30, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/removing-more-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-russia/>.

157 Shelby Grossman, Daniel Bush, and Renée DiResta, *Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa*, Stanford Internet Observatory, October 29, 2019, https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/29oct2019_sio_-_russia_linked_influence_operations_in_africa.final_.pdf.

158 Gleicher, "Removing More Coordinated."

159 Nathaniel Gleicher and David Agranovich, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from France and Russia," Meta, December 15, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/>.

160 Shelby Grossman et al., *Stoking Conflict by Keystroke: An Operation Run by IRA-Linked Individuals Targeting Libya, Sudan, and Syria*, Stanford Internet Observatory and Graphika, December 15, 2020, <https://github.com/stanfordio/publications/blob/main/IRALibyaSudanSyriaReport.pdf>.

161 Tessa Knight, "Inauthentic Facebook assets promoted Russian interests in Sudan," Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), June 3, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/inauthentic-facebook-assets-promoted-russian-interests-in-sudan-2623c58b1f7f>.

162 Nathaniel Gleicher, "How We Respond to Inauthentic Behavior on Our Platforms: Policy Update," Meta, October 21, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/inauthentic-behavior-policy-update/>.

Offline Disinformation Operations

The COVID-19 infodemic, described by the World Health Organization as “too much information, including false or misleading information,” showed that online mis- and disinformation about COVID-19 had direct offline harms, such as vaccine hesitancy.¹⁶³ However, measuring the offline impact of online disinformation, particularly politically motivated disinformation, is complicated, as it is often difficult to ascertain if online disinformation was the sole cause of offline actions.

In the case of Sudan, social media was used to spread information about revolutionary protests. However, when internet shutdowns prevented Sudanese from using social media platforms and messaging applications, people still rallied and went to the streets. Information continued to spread offline, including critical information such as meeting points and times.

According to Suliman, the political communications aide who worked in the Hamdok government, this offline network of information sharing was also used to spread disinformation. In particular, in areas such as Darfur where internet penetration rates are low and word-of-mouth is valued, disinformation sparked tribal hostilities on multiple occasions.¹⁶⁴

Separately, Ebaya said Girifna also suffered from offline disinformation. “People spread rumors about us, and we couldn’t discredit them because there wasn’t a single source of the rumors,” Ebaya said in an interview with the authors.¹⁶⁵ In some instances, the group concluded that either security forces or the NISS orchestrated these rumors but could not confirm their suspicions.

The lack of trust in politicians and political parties following the 2021 coup is also apparent in street protests. One of the most popular chants, translated into English, says: “Oh my country, where the best is its youth, not its military or political parties. The revolution is associations and committees; the revolution just started.”¹⁶⁶



A woman distributed pieces of paper with information about a march scheduled to take place on November 13, 2021. Information included date, time, meeting point, and hashtags to use for those with internet access.¹

163 “Infodemic,” World Health Organization, accessed November 27, 2022, https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1; Samia Tasnim, Md Mahub Hossain, and Hoimonty Mazumder, “Impact of Rumors and Misinformation on COVID-19 in Social Media,” *Journal of Preventive Medicine & Public Health* 53 (April 2, 2020): 171–4, doi:10.3961/jpmph.20.094, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7280809/pdf/jpmph-53-3-171.pdf>.

164 Suliman, interview.

165 Ebaya, interview.

166 Sudan Monitoring Network, “Oh my country, where the best is its youth, not its military or political parties,” Facebook video, October 21, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1082404229251696>.

Conclusion

As many of those who contributed their knowledge to this report noted, Sudan's information environment is unique: A lack of robust media and trusted sources of information allow disinformation to spread, to a large extent, unchecked; intentionally vague laws around false information allow those in charge to abuse their power; and the country's faltered steps toward democracy made it the perfect target for internal and external forces to try and influence Sudan's political landscape.

While there have been improvements—notably, the creation of an organization such as Beam Reports and the formation of a journalism union—Sudan has a precarious road ahead. The Hamdok government was unable to consistently provide trustworthy sources of information in a timely manner, frustrating journalists in their attempt to build an independent Sudanese media ecosystem.¹⁶⁷ Although the government acknowledged

the threat influence operations posed to Sudan's burgeoning movement toward democracy, the 2021 military coup d'état halted any progress Hamdok's government made in combating disinformation. The outbreak of violence in April 2023 between al-Burhan's SAF and Hemedti's RSF has proven no different, with early evidence of online influence emerging at the start of the conflict.¹⁶⁸

Moving forward, assuming a cessation in current hostilities can indeed be reached, any formal government or power-sharing body in charge of Sudan's future, must address the information vacuum within the country that allows for disinformation to spread both online and offline. The purposeful vagueness of information laws, including those around disinformation and the right to access information, should be addressed to ensure journalists and fact-checking bodies can do their jobs and that security forces are held accountable when they abuse these laws.

¹⁶⁷ Eltahir, interview.

¹⁶⁸ Tessa Knight, "Potentially hijacked Twitter accounts promote Sudanese paramilitary force," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), April 18, 2023, <https://dfriab.org/2023/04/17/potentially-hijacked-twitter-accounts-promote-sudanese-paramilitary-force>; Tessa Knight, "Suspicious Twitter accounts artificially amplify Sudanese paramilitary leader amid armed conflict," Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), April 19, 2023, <https://dfriab.org/2023/04/19/suspicious-twitter-accounts-artificially-amplify-sudanese-paramilitary-leader-amid-armed-conflict>.

Glossary

PEOPLE

Omar al-Bashir: Leader of Sudan, under various titles, from 1989 to 2019.

Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan: Commander-in-chief of the Sudanese Armed Forces and de facto head of state of Sudan following the 2019 coup d'état.

Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo: Commonly known as Hemedti or Hemeti, Dagalo is the head of the Rapid Support Forces.

Abdalla Hamdok: Prime minister of Sudan from 2019 to 2021.

GOVERNMENT, POLITICS, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC): A coalition of civilian and political groups that negotiated a power-sharing plan with the Transitional Military Council for a transition to democracy via the Sovereignty Council.

National Congress Party (NCP): The dominant political party in Sudan led by Omar al-Bashir during his reign as leader of the country. Outlawed in 2019.

National Council for Press and Publications (NCPP): A government entity that regulates the media. Also known as National Council for Press and Journalistic Publications.

National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS): An intelligence-gathering and advisory agency with powers of arrest, detention, and immunity from prosecution and disciplinary action.

Rapid Support Forces (RSF): A paramilitary group operated by the National Intelligence and Security Service and led by Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. The RSF have been accused of committing crimes against humanity in Darfur.

Sovereignty Council: An eleven-member collective head of state consisting of military and civilian representatives, originally scheduled to lead Sudan during a thirty-nine-month transitional period. Dissolved on October 25, 2021, following a coup d'état. Often translated as the "Sovereign Council."

Sudan News Agency (SUNA): The official news agency of Sudan.

Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF): The military forces of Sudan, headed by Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA): An umbrella association comprised of multiple trade unions that was instrumental in calling for revolutionary action in 2018 and 2019.

Transitional Military Council (TMC): A military council that took control of Sudan after removing Omar al-Bashir from power.

TRPA: Telecommunications and Post Regulatory Authority.

OTHER TERMS

VPN: Virtual private network, a service that provides a secure, private connection to the internet.

ENDNOTES

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