
Sudanese students, workers bring down Numeiri dictatorship, 1985

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) student participants](#) [1]
- [an example of regime change](#) [2]
- [included participation by more than one social class](#) [3]

Timing

March 26,
1985

to:

April 6,
1985

Location and Goals

Country:

Sudan

Location City/State/Province:

concentrated in Khartoum

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

The overarching goal was to bring down the Numeiri-led government and instate a civilian-led, multi-party system.

The political opposition also called for: The end of sharia law in the country; the indictment of the Numeiri regime's leaders and confiscation of their illegally acquired wealth; the liberation of the economy; non-alignment in foreign policy; a constitution guaranteeing individual and collective liberties, separation of powers, judicial independence, multiparty system of governance, the autonomy of the south; and the election of a constitutional assembly before April 1986 (when military junta rule would end).

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 039. Parades
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 013. Deputations
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention>National Charter
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike
- 148. Mutiny

Segment Length:

Approximately 2 days

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Professionals
- political opposition parties
- students
- workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

the Communist Party of Sudan (SCP) called the strike.

Trade Unions Assembly for National Salvation, an umbrella organization for several combined unions.

Partners:

Trade unions partnered with the strikers included: General Trade Union of Petroleum Workers in Sudan, General Trade Union of workers in the Defense Ministry, General Trade Union of Stores and Suppliers, General Trade Union of Chemical Store workers, General Trade Union of Mechanized Transport Workers

Political partners included the Muslim Brotherhood party, the National Islamic Front (NIF), the National Umma Party, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

The Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) also supported the strike and the ousting of Numeiri.

External allies:

Military leaders that joined the opposition at the end of the campaign

Involvement of social elites:

Defense Minister Siwar al-Dahab and first vice president General Omar al-Tayib led the military junta opposition. Both leaders supported the opposition first by agreeing not to suppress the demonstrators with military power, and then by initiating a military coup to take Numeiri out of power.

Additionally, Sudanese intelligentsia expressed support of the strike and an end to Numeiri's rule, and initiated their own strikes as part of the campaign. These included doctors, lawyers, judges, and engineers.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Communist Party

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Lawyers
- Nurses
- Trade Union Assembly for National Salvation
- doctors
- engineers
- judges

- other opposition parties
- professors and academics

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Sudan Popular Liberation Movement

Groups in 5th Segment:

- General al-Dahab
- military
- security forces

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

Approximately 2 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

President Numeiri and his regime

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

A counter-demonstration in support of the regime was held on April 2, but failed to garner more than a thousand participants

Campaigner violence:

The campaign ended when military allies to the opposition launched a coup, but it is not clear whether this coup involved violence or not.

Repressive Violence:

Some clashes with security forces occurred during the striking. A total of 10 people were killed, most of those by police gunfire on crowds.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

8 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

It is hard not to separate the 1985 campaign from its overall context. To do this is to take into consideration the fact that Sudanese politics have been fraught with instability and corruption to this day. The coalition government voted into power in 1986 was overthrown in a coup several years later. The war in the south continues, along with the economic stagnation and poverty of a large number of the Sudanese population. And Sharia law was never lifted. However, looking at the campaign in itself shows that the campaigners made significant gains; most notably, Numeiri's government was overthrown, and what's more, it was carried out nonviolently, in concert with the military and with very little bloodshed. A major aim of the opposition

coalition, holding free general elections within one year, was achieved. It is the nature of these successes that garner success points here, and not the overall failing of the new government.

The infrastructure that emerged during the strike, primarily in the form of a coalition of trade unionists, professionals and political opposition, survived throughout the campaign.

Though the campaign began relatively spontaneously, with student demonstrations, it very rapidly grew to encompass many groups. The demonstration of April 3 was the largest in Sudan's history, and mass public meetings held by the strike and opposition's leaders drew between 5,000 and 20,000 people daily.

The Sudan has a history of popular uprisings to depose oppressive or disagreeable governments, prior to the 1985 insurrection. In 1964 the October Revolution consisted of a widespread general strike led by the National Front for Professionals. The organization joined forces with political leaders to create the United National Front (UNF) and, along with dissident military leaders, this coalition succeeded in dissolving the Abbud regime and transitioning to civilian rule. Later, in August of 1983, schools throughout the capital of Khartoum closed as students protested poor social conditions in the city.

In the years leading up to the 1985 strike campaign, several strikes took place in Khartoum, including a professionals strike in 1983 of judges and lawyers, who opposed President Numeiri's instatement of Islamic sharia law, and a 1984 doctors' strike calling for better pay and improved conditions in the health services.

Sudanese President Muhammad Numeiri came to power in a military coup on May 25, 1969, replacing the government of President Ismail al-Azhari with Numeiri's Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). After his transition to power, President Numeiri saw several unsuccessful attempts at overthrowing his regime, first from the Mahdists in 1970 and later from the Communist Party of Sudan (SCP) in 1971. Under his rule, Sudan signed the Addis Ababa accord in February 1972, aimed at ending the devastating civil war in the south of Sudan. However, the accord ultimately had very little success in ending the conflict. Later, in 1983, Numeiri implemented Sharia law throughout the country, applying it to all citizens regardless of whether or not they were Muslim. This move met with extensive criticism and public outcry from those opposed to Islamic law. Another feature of Numeiri's government was the formation of an internal security force of some 45,000, separate from the country's military and under the direct control of the president. These security personnel had access to weapons caches throughout the country and their own radio, television, and communications network. They also reportedly acted as spies for the regime. Under the constant threat of infiltration, any opposition to Numeiri was stifled.

Sudan during Numeiri's rule experienced severe economic deterioration and debt, rising food prices and food shortages, and a general decline in living conditions throughout the country. Directly before the strike broke out, the government increased the price of even the most basic commodities by 33 to 100 percent. The increase came under the auspices of austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the United States as a way to improve the economy, despite the widespread poverty and starvation among the Sudanese population. It was these major issues, coupled with the popularly held perception of Numeiri's government as oppressive—the leader had declared several strikes and union organizations and their demands illegal—that had a direct impact on the rise of the 1985 general strike.

The campaign began with spontaneous student demonstrations. On March 26, the eve of a presidential trip to Washington, DC, students from the Islamic University of Omdurman marched through the city. They shouted, "The people are hungry! Down with America! Down with the IMF!" On the day of the president's departure,

trade and technology students marched through Omdurman, ravaging the offices of banks and commercial buildings, including some owned by the president's brother. Yet Numeiri continued with his visit to America, leaving the government's administration under the control of Defense Minister Siwar al-Dahab. From there, the campaign organized and expanded.

On March 29, workers and unemployed citizens from the capital and surrounding areas flooded into Khartoum and marched through the streets. They shouted slogans propagated by the Communist Party and destroyed emblems of wealth. The Communist Party released a public statement on March 30, calling for an unlimited general strike in Khartoum until the defeat of the government. The next day, Sudanese professionals—lawyers, professors and academics, judges, doctors, nurses, and engineers—joined with the Trade Union Assembly for National Salvation (a conglomeration of railway, textile and bank employees' trade unions) to add their support to the strike. The strikers operated in conjunction with the political parties opposed to Numeiri's government. The Sudan Popular Liberation Movement (SPLM), a Sudanese rebel group led by John Garang de Mabior, was also brought onboard with the concession that the policy of sharia rule of law would be abolished by the new government that would replace Numeiri (an end to Islamic law was the SPLM's greatest demand).

The political parties and professional/worker groups hoped to hold a mass demonstration on April 3 that would bring the Sudanese army over to the side of the opposition. In the interim leading up to this show of protest, opposition leaders circulated statements by anonymous "free officers" that denounced Numeiri and his regime. While "higher-up" secret negotiations occurred between political opposition leaders and military officers, civilians carried on the strike activities and held large demonstrations. In a particularly salient example of the changing power relations within the country, a counter-demonstration in support of the regime was held on April 2, but failed to garner more than a thousand participants (most of whom were dignitaries and regime officials). The next day, April 3, was the largest demonstration in Sudanese history, bigger than those of both the October revolution and the 1956 celebration of independence. Between one and two million people marched through Khartoum to express their discontent with Numeiri's regime and call for an end to the repressive government. In the face of such a massive movement of people, the security forces and military retreated peacefully.

The next day, General al-Dahab met with the opposition leadership. He accepted their demands that he not declare a state of emergency or use armed force to put down the popular uprising. No action was taken to halt the demonstrations. In the meantime, leaders within the groups of the political parties, trade unionists and professional associations met to draft up a unified leadership and program with common goals. They adopted this "national charter" on the night of April 5, bringing it into operation on April 6 as President Numeiri returned to Sudan.

The military generals, now working alongside the political opposition, instigated a coup and installed a military junta with the total cooperation of General al-Dahab. Thousands of Sudanese who had been occupying the streets of Khartoum since the early morning expressed joy and celebration. A crowd of demonstrators even broke into the Kober prison and freed 400 political prisoners. All in all, ten people were reported killed during the course of the strike and subsequent coup.

On April 6, 1985, the coalition of political opposition groups, professionals, and trade unionists established the Transitional Military Council (TMC), headed by General al-Dahab and a civilian cabinet of non-party professionals. They would rule jointly for a one-year transitional period, at the end of which free elections would be held to determine the new government. At the forefront of their political agenda were negotiations with and accommodation of the SPLA and John Garang. The opposing political groups had a relatively similar agenda, calling for: the end to sharia law; indictment of the former regime's leaders and confiscation of their illegally acquired wealth; liberation of the economy; non-alignment in foreign policy; a constitution to

guarantee collective and individual liberties, separation of powers, judicial independence, a multiparty system, the autonomy of the south, and a general election for a constitutional assembly to take place before April of the following year, when the transitional rule would be terminated.

The TMC also promptly demobilized the internal security force set up by President Numeiri, confiscating their weapons and removing close to 400 officers from their posts. Upon his return to the country, finding his Defense Minister and first vice president to have sided with the opposition, Numeiri fled to Cairo where he remained in exile.

The Sudanese campaign to end Numeiri's rule has an interesting trajectory in that a spontaneous civilian-led strike offered an opportunity that was then appropriated by the political opposition to meet their ends. The students and workers, after all, were protesting the terrible living conditions that they suffered under, and the immense food shortage and prices increase. Once the striking activity was unified under the umbrella of the political, professional, and trade union organizations, with a centralized demarcation of goals, the coup took place and Numeiri's government was dismantled.

Unfortunately, the road from political transition to stability in Sudan was not a smooth one. General elections were held the following year, and Sadiq al-Mahdi, head of the National Umma Party, was voted in as prime minister. He led a coalition government comprised of the Umma party, the National Islamic Front, the Democratic Unionist Party, and four smaller southern parties. However, the coalition government was fraught with factionalism and corruption, and despite the Sudanese people's initial exuberance over its transition to power, it lost much popular support due to its inconsistencies in policy, scandalous behavior displayed by their political leaders, and the nepotism of their Prime Minister. Despite its pronouncements to the SPLM, the 1983 sharia law implemented by Numeiri wasn't revoked, drawing harsh criticism from Garang. In 1989, al-Mahdi was ousted from power in a coup led by Omar al-Bashir.

Research Notes

Influences:

In the years leading up to the 1985 strike campaign, several strikes took place in Khartoum, including a professionals strike in 1983 of judges and lawyers, who opposed President Numeiri's instatement of Islamic sharia law, and a 1984 doctors' strike calling for better pay and improved conditions in the health services. (1)

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Additional Notes:

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