Viewpoint: What if the President of Sudan is Arrested?

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The President of Sudan Omar Hassan El-Bashir faces an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on March 4, 2009. The author resided in Sudan from September 2007 until recently and during this period he interviewed both the President and the Leader of the Opposition. This viewpoint considers if Sudan under a leader subsequent to President of Sudan Omar Hassan El-Bashir will be substantially different should the current President be ousted from rule. Putting together this complex answer is like a jigsaw puzzle and requires a deep understanding of Sudanese history, religion and its position in the region as well as considering the role of individuals.

Firstly, the President is a dictator in the same style of other dictators in Africa and in the Middle East. Namely the President is a person who seeks power without a limited term of office, a person who seeks to hold absolute authority within a sovereign state and a person who seeks to change the world around him to reflect his power. Leaving a personal legacy is all important for such dictators. Legacy leaving activities of dictators, for example in Europe, shows an intense desire to leave a legacy of rule through grandiose architectural construction or through images (monuments and statues). In the case of North Africa and the Middle East, where Islam is the dominant religion frowning on images and where materialism is less prevalent than in Europe, there is less of a tendency for such a material legacy. In the case of Sudan, Islamization of the state and its population has been pursued by subsequent rulers as legacy leaving, some more ardent that others.

This fits well with the Islamic religion as it is a missionary religion. It also fits well in a perception that Sudan and indeed its leader will grow in status amongst other Islamic states (such as Saudi Arabia), that the President will have a legacy on earth being respected by not only its own population as a popular leader but by Muslims around the world and that he will be well received after death as being a righteous person. So the introduction of Sharia Law in 1983 by the previous President Gaafar Nimeiry and then the 1989 revolution by the current President that created an Islamist Republic in the Sudan (the first in the Sunni Muslim world) were both in this grain. So the path of Islamization as a policy and as a legacy was already set for Bashir.

This was furthered ingrained by his co-revolutionary (and relative) and the ideologue of the national Islamic Front party Dr. Hassan el-Turabi, who is now the leader of the opposition. Dr. Hassan el-Turabi as the leader of the opposition is seen locally as following the same Islamic path as the President and is likely to continue the same activities that have given cause for the ICC arrest warrant against the President. These activities in the decade after the 1989 revolution, were severe repression, including purges and executions in the upper ranks of the army, the banning of associations, political parties, and independent newspapers and the imprisonment of
leading political figures and journalists. Torture became widespread, especially in the south where non-Muslim women were raped, and their children taken from them. There was also an ongoing civil war between the predominately Muslim north and the predominately Christian south, and on-off conflicts with neighboring state of Chad, Libya, Congo, and Uganda and even an alleged attempt to assassinate the President of Egypt.

By 2003 the Islamization of Sudan entered a new phase that involved the three states consisting the province of Darfur. The President has been accused of directly or indirectly through the use of militia of using violence against the population of Darfur. This has led the Darfur population to leave their homes, become refugees by crossing into neighboring countries, or become Internally Displaced People (IDP). The President and the Leader of the Opposition both see this as part of their duties as a Muslim while the President sees this as part of his lasting legacy. The President's understanding, from the reading of the Koran, is that Islam offers non-Muslims a choice: convert to being a Muslim which in its literal translation is offering yourself to a single god—known as Allah, paying a sum not to convert and therefore being permitted to believe in and to follow what you want or thirdly to face the consequences that are not described in any particular manner. The President also quotes writings of Mohammed that state that Islam will rise as the dominant world religion but not from the historical center (today Saudi Arabia) but rather from the periphery.

Combined such understandings of Islamic writings, that could be interpreted otherwise, have led the President to believe that Sudan under his rule is the base for the rise of a new and great world Islam where the people of Darfur must consent. The President believes that his actions in general and specifically in Darfur will offer Sudan a legacy of fulfilling the agenic dignity of global missionary Islam. Because such activities in Darfur are done so in the name of Islam other leaders in the region and the Islamic world at large have chosen not to challenge him. The Leader of the Opposition, Turabi has also chosen not to challenge the President about Darfur, mainly because he was the ideologue responsible and also because he is a relative.

Such closeness in authorities of those in power and those in opposition is no different from other states in North Africa and the Middle East and offers the question if anything will change should the President leave office due to the ICC arrest warrant. In a sense it is actually no different from the Royal families of Europe where succession is guaranteed through a family blood line. Following the Islamic tradition of four wives and an extended family of three generations given that the President has been in power for twenty years, his direct supporters and indeed the country's bureaucratic system is controlled by close family ties approximating 4,000 people. The President has also expanded this system by granting favors to other families within his own tribe and those of tribes who follow him.

So the old families and the favored families control such key sectors such as the military, the economy and even such matters as medicine. By this it is meant that if a person is from one of these families then it is a hereditary right to be accepted to study medicine. The quality of such education in economics and medicine, for example, is on par with Europe, often noted when students pursue graduate study abroad and excel in results. Many return to Sudan and even though politically it has been classified a failed state there are many aspects where this is not the case. For example Sudan successfully changed the currency of its 100 percent cash-based economy within a six month period in 2006; credit cards being outlawed both by Sharia law that does not permit a credit system and by the actions of international credit card companies (such as Visa and Mastercard) who adhere to the international embargo against Sudan.

Even if the entire family system of the President were to be eradicated upon his arrest by the ICC there are still other factors to consider. One of which is geo-political considerations associated with history and religion. The President, the Sudanese people at large and almost all Sudanese political parties see Sudan as the historical and natural link or bridge between Africa, the Middle East and Islam and have aimed to enhance this view. This case is based historically on the
original Pharaohs coming from the land of Kush (today Sudan) who later moved along to the Nile to Mitzrahim (today Egypt). To be sure the President boasts that the Pyramids in Sudan predate those in Egypt by approximately 10,000 years. Geographically and historically, trade between Africa and the Middle East—including the slave trade—had routes through Sudan. Khartoum as the capital of the Sudan, which is a federal state consisting of 26 states, is also the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile rivers. Sudan is also an ethnic and tribal extension of East to West Africa including Nigeria which is also a predominant Islamic state. It is highly likely that any subsequent leader of Sudan, given the possible available individuals, will continue this geo-political stance.

To further such geo-political attitudes and as part of the President's dictatorial legacy agenda he has chosen to make Khartoum a city of tranquility and a base for the aforementioned Islamic agenda. Notably Khartoum is a city with very low levels of crime, as all criminal elements are suppressed by the installation of fear, a rigid watch your neighbor policy, and a homogenate ethnic and family neighborhood policy. This is furthered through an extensive control of population movement through road blocks at entry points into Khartoum (and other cities) as well as a national ID card system enacted through street stop and searches. This is indicative of Sudan being a police state. Removal of this system with the removal of the President may result in a collapse of the federal system of the 26 states as well as collapse of law and order. Care would be needed to ensure that a situation doesn't arise similar to that which happened after the demise of Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Inherent to such considerations of potential radicalization and anarchy is how the President has offered the city of Khartoum as a base for extending the goals of Islamization, where the policies and activities in Darfur are part and parcel of this. To be sure Al Qaeda is Arabic for The Base. Radicals such as Bin Laden have recognized this base in concept and in practice and have chosen to reside in it. Indeed Bin Laden also married one of Dr. Turabi's nieces as one of four wives permitted under Islamic law. Local opposition parties and their leaders, other regional state leaders and Islamic movements world-wide support the President's activities, enacted in the name of Islam, but this is also part and parcel of his desire to leave a dictatorial legacy.

So the bottom line of this viewpoint categorically states that arresting the President of Sudan is a desired goal given his atrocities, but in doing so the world should not expect any substantial or immediate changes in Sudan, and may well see a radicalization and even anarchy.

About the Author

Dr. Glen Segell is Director of the London Security Policy Study. He has over 200 publications, and was educated at the University of the Witwatersrand, Hebrew University, King’s College London, Trinity College, and Canterbury University.