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Imperialism and Sudan, Part 1: What is the U.S. role in Sudan's crisis?

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Ruins of the Al Shifa Pharmaceutical Plant, bombed by U.S. in 1998.



Mass protest in Khartoum against the U.S. bombing of Al Shifa on Aug. 22, 1998.



Bill Clinton claimed Al Shifa produced chemical weapons. In fact, it produced half of Sudan's vital medications.

On Aug. 20, 1998, then-U.S. President Bill Clinton bombed the Al Shifa Pharmaceutical Plant in Sudan with 16 cruise missiles. I was part of a delegation, headed by former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, that traveled to Khartoum after that attack to expose the lies that were used to justify this horrendous and genocidal action against the Sudanese people.

Walking amongst the rubble of that cruise missile attack, with the knowledge that this plant was supplying some of the most vital medicines fighting malaria and other

deadly diseases to one of the poorest countries in the world, demands something from you.

While in Sudan, we also visited a displaced persons' camp. Walking through a field full of mud huts sheltering families of refugees enduring over 106-degree heat with not even a fan, nor refrigerators, nor pediatric or general hospitals nearby for toddlers — nothing but oppressive heat — is also an experience that demands something from you.

What these experiences demand is solidarity. And today the world must be in solidarity with the people of Sudan who, following the military ouster of elected former President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, face increased repression and continue to demand a just economy that does not deny them basic necessities like wheat and fuel.

According to data from the [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\)](#) and reported by Business Insider, 21 of the 28 poorest countries in the world reside on the continent of Africa. The criteria used included any Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of less than \$1,000 per year per capita. The list starts with Sudan, where the average person makes \$992 per year, and ends with South Sudan, where the average is \$246 per year.

It's no coincidence that, on the flip side, France, Britain and the U.S. fall in the category of the top 29 richest countries in the world — despite the fact that these countries also have many people living in poverty.

It begs the question: Where did these highly developed capitalist countries get their wealth from?

Western imperialism and Sudan

The grip of Western imperialism that robbed the Sudanese people of their right to

self-determination began long ago with colonial takeovers by France and Britain. And, in more recent history, that dictatorial role was passed on primarily to the U.S. and its Saudi Arabian client state, with Washington's approval.

Unfortunately, in the reporting of the corporate media around the crisis in Sudan today, and in the messages we're allowed to hear coming from inside Sudan, that reality is lost. But in order for real change to reverse the denial of self-determination for the people of Sudan, the essence of the crisis in Sudan must be exposed.

Last year, increased fuel and food prices were the last straw for many Sudanese, reflected by a coalition representing students, professionals, trade unions, community groups and various political organizations demanding a new government.

Last April this alliance, the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change (FDFC) coalition, whose leading force is the Sudanese Professionals Association, was successful in forcing President Omar al-Bashir out of office, though his removal took the form of a military coup. Afterward, a coalition of military and paramilitary forces took over as the Transitional Military Council (TMC), promising to facilitate a gradual move to civilian rule.

Negotiations between the military council and the coalition broke down. This was followed by the shooting of coalition protesters in early June while they were, by most accounts, peacefully assembled outside of the TMC's headquarters in the capital. Those who carried out the attack were security forces that are part of the military council.

Most of the reports from protesters, both in Sudan and those here in the U.S. that this reporter spoke to recently, put the number killed at between 100 and 300. That number includes killings by security forces in other parts of the country where a crackdown occurred simultaneously. The government claims 61 were killed but has

not denied the shooting of unarmed civilians.

On June 27, a joint proposal from the African Union and the government of Ethiopia was presented to the FDFC and TMC, reflecting past negotiations and allowing for a leadership panel of mostly civilians with military representation as a path toward civilian rule. A previous Ethiopian proposal was accepted by the coalition; however, the military had rejected it.

On the basis of this proposal, the military council and protest groups [reportedly reached an agreement](#) on July 5. The agreement calls for a three-year transition period before elections. The New York Times reported: “The protest leaders involved in the negotiations did have to make a significant concession: An army general will run Sudan for the first 21 months of the transition, followed by a civilian for the next 18 months. But many had been skeptical the military would share power at all. Now, the ruling council will have five civilians, five military leaders and an 11th member jointly agreed on.

“The agreement started to take shape at a secret meeting,” the Times added. “Diplomats from the United States, Britain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates convened Sudan’s military and protest leaders.”

How protesters view imperialism’s role

Although Omar al-Bashir was not president at the time of the June 3 crackdown — he has been [held in Khartoum’s Kobar jail](#) since he was deposed in April — he remains the political target of the protesters, who cite his leadership as the reason for the inflated prices for food and fuel and the country’s economic collapse, especially after 2011, when South Sudan, containing most of the country’s oil resources, became independent from the north.

On June 20 in Los Angeles, at a protest outside the Consulate General of the United

Arab Emirates, which I attended, protesters echoed that sentiment, blaming the TMC and former President al-Bashir. The demonstration was organized by the Sudanese Information Center located in Southern California.

“For the past 30 years we’ve been trying to get rid of this guy [al-Bashir] because there have been a lot of killings. He has killed 300,000 in Darfur alone with the Rapid Support Forces,” said one of the protesters leading the action, a Sudanese student visiting on vacation. The Rapid Support Forces are the group mainly cited for the recent killings by the military government in June. They are a paramilitary arm of the government and part of the TMC.

For security reasons, this person did not want to be identified, since he still lives in Sudan. He said he’s experienced beatings, been run out of his university with teargas and witnessed horrors like rape by the Rapid Support Forces.

When asked who is to blame for the economic crisis and if he was concerned about the involvement of the Troika of the U.S., Britain and Norway (and now Canada) in the current negotiations with Sudan, he said: “We blame mainly the UAE and Saudi Arabia because of weapons, cash and exchange of money for child soldiers by Saudi Arabia.”

Another leading protester spelled out the damage done by Saudi Arabia and others, but failed to include the U.S. in that mix. “We’re out here in front of the United Arab Emirates Consulate because the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, all have lots of interest in Sudan. They were allowed to invest in Sudan by the Sudanese government, to invest in our land, in our children. They have bought child soldiers to fight in wars in Yemen. ... We want other Arab countries to stop infiltrating our country.”

When I asked this person and others at the protest if they had any concerns regarding Western interference or the role of longstanding U.S. sanctions and IMF

policies in contributing to Sudan's economic problems, those I spoke with were either not aware of any interference or sanctions, or called for the Western governments to help. In fact, the lead banner of the protest had a Sudanese flag on one side and a U.S. flag on the other.



Mass protest in Khartoum against the U.S. bombing of Al Shifa on Aug. 22, 1998.

The lack of knowledge about or dismissal of the negative U.S. and IMF influence on Sudan was surprising, especially given the 1998 bombing by the Clinton administration, which sparked mass protests in Khartoum and other cities. However, all of the youth and others I spoke to at the demonstration seemed well educated and very knowledgeable about the role played by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This probably reflects how the news media are dominated by corporate interests that have a stake in Western investments, and which conveniently leave out any traces of the negative fallout from Western imperialist intervention, past and present.

U.S. supplies weapons to Saudi Arabia

Although this was just one demonstration, the narrative of Omar al-Bashir being solely responsible, along with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, is echoed by most of the

coalition forces' statements — even by the most progressive amongst them, like the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), an organization with a long history of political struggle in Sudan and a leading member of the FDFC coalition.

The SCP issued a statement welcoming the participation of the imperialist Troika, with no qualifications about past Western interference, and criticizing only the UAE, Saudi Arabia and China, which has competing interests with the U.S. in Sudan.

Even when leaving out the history of colonialism in Sudan, the role of U.S. sanctions and Washington's covert arming of various factions in southern Sudan, one would still expect to find blame with the U.S. for supplying weapons to Saudi Arabia.

One activist voice sharing a view not heard often was quoted in [The Globe Post](#): "The weapons that are being used to massacre innocent, non-violent, unarmed protestors in Sudan are American weapons that were sold to the Emirates and Saudi Arabia," stated Dimah Mahmoud, a Sudanese activist with a doctorate in Sudanese foreign policy.

Next: Imperialist roots of Sudan's economic woes

Imperialism and Sudan

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