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The Fall of Omar Hassan al-Bashir, the 'Spider' at the Heart of Sudan's Web

By Declan Walsh

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President Omar Hassan al-Bashir loved to tell the story about his broken tooth.

As a schoolboy working on a construction site, he told supporters in January, he fell and broke the tooth while carrying a heavy load. Instead of seeking treatment he rinsed his mouth with saltwater and kept working.

Later, after he joined the army, he refused a silver tooth implant because he wanted to remember his hardships. "This one," he said, pointing to a gap in his mouth, as supporters erupted into laughter.

The story was a way for Mr. al-Bashir, who was ousted Thursday after 30 years of iron-fisted rule over Sudan, to play up his humble origins — to show that he remained a man of the people who, like him, hailed from dusty farming villages on the Nile.

The folksy image was a jarring contrast with Mr. al-Bashir's image in the West, where he was often seen as a heartless warmonger, as a coddler of terrorists like Osama bin Laden and as the accused architect of a genocidal purge in Darfur that killed hundreds of thousands of people. Since 2009, the International Criminal Court has sought to arrest him on war crimes charges that include murder, rape and extermination.

But global notoriety was never much of a problem for Mr. al-Bashir, 75, at home in Sudan, a vast African country with a long history of war and suffering. He outwitted rivals who underestimated him, steered a decade-long oil boom that swelled Sudan's middle classes, and forged a network of security forces and armed militias to fight his wars that some likened to a spider's web with Mr. al-Bashir at its center.

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That carefully constructed edifice of power crumbled this week as thousands of protesters massed outside his Khartoum residence, chanting slogans and braving gunfire as rival gangs of soldiers exchanged fire. The oil money was running low, the economy was in tatters and young Sudanese, in particular, had had enough. The spider had to go.

"Just fall, that is all!" they chanted.

On Thursday morning, the military ousted him, ending his 30-year rule in the face of the sweeping demonstrations. It said it had taken Mr. al-Bashir into custody, dissolved the government and suspended the Constitution.

Representatives of the principal protest group, the Sudanese Professionals Association, which had been expecting a statement from the military and were preparing to negotiate a transition to civilian rule, greeted the announcement with disappointment.



Sudanese demonstrators at a rally this month in Khartoum. The protests started in December over the price of bread. Reuters

"What has been just stated is for us a coup, and it is not acceptable," said Sara Abdelgalil, a spokeswoman for the group. "Our request for a civilian transitional government has been ignored."

Born into a farming family in a dusty village 100 miles north of Khartoum, the capital, Mr. al-Bashir served as a paratroop commander in the army. In 1989, he headed an Islamist junta that ousted Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi in a bloodless coup, Sudan's fourth military takeover since independence in 1956.

For the first decade of his rule, though, Mr. al-Bashir, was seen as a frontman for a more powerful force — the cleric Hassan al-Turabi, a smooth-talking, Sorbonne-educated ideologue with sweeping ideas about embedding Shariah law deep in Sudan's diverse society and institutions.

International jihadists flocked to Sudan in that period, among them Osama bin Laden, who bought a house in an upmarket Khartoum district and invested in agriculture and construction. In 1993, the United States blacklisted the Bashir government as an international sponsor of terrorism, and it imposed sanctions four years later.

Mr. al-Bashir, center, with military officers in Khartoum in July 1989. He led an Islamist junta that ousted the civilian government of Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi in June that year. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In 1999, after a falling-out, Mr. al-Bashir outmaneuvered Mr. al-Turabi and cast him into prison. He turned back to the army to underwrite his authority, forging relationships that spanned the military, the security forces and the country's tribal leadership.

Mr. al-Bashir assiduously attended the funerals and weddings of military officers, often sending presents of sugar, tea or dried goods to their families. He held an open house once a week where commissioned officers could drop in and meet with him, said Alex de Waal, a professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and an expert on Sudan.

"He's like the spider at the center of the web — he could pick up on the smallest tremor, then deftly use his personalized political retail skills to manage the politics of the army," he said.

Mr. al-Bashir used a similar approach to manage provincial leaders and tribal chiefs, Mr. de Waal added. "Most of them became militarized and enmeshed in one of the popular defense forces. He has that extraordinary network, and it's all in his head."

The village of Abu Surouj in Western Darfur, after Sudanese government forces and allied militias attacked and burned it in 2008. Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

That style of personalist autocracy was put to use in battling the insurgency in southern Sudan, where rebels from different ethnic groups with Christian or animist beliefs were fighting for independence. During the 21-year war, the Sudanese air force dropped crude barrel bombs over remote villages in the south and sided with vicious local militias recruited by Mr. al-Bashir and his officers.

At the same time, Sudan discovered oil. After the first barrels were pumped in 1999, living standards gradually rose in one of Africa's most desperately poor countries. New roads appeared, remote villages gained water and electricity, and shiny buildings rose in Khartoum.

"Those were the fat years," said Magdi el-Gizouli, a fellow at the Rift Valley Institute.

In 2005, under international pressure, Mr. al-Bashir signed a peace deal with the southern rebels, overcoming opposition from his hard-liners who wanted to keep fighting. But by then another uprising had erupted in western Darfur that would define his legacy.

There, a pro-government militia known as the Janjaweed cut a bloody swath through remote villages, quelling an insurgency led by rebels. At least 300,000 people are estimated to have died.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt with Mr. al-Bashir on a visit to Cairo in January. Egypt was a longtime ally of Sudan, but Mr. al-Bashir supported a rival, Ethiopia, over a dam construction project last year.
Egyptian Presidency, via Reuters

Mr. Bashir is facing two arrest warrants from the International Criminal Court for charges in the Darfur conflict that include genocide. He was the first sitting head of state to be targeted with an arrest warrant by the Hague-based court.

"This was his biggest blunder," Mr. el-Gizouli said. "He outsourced the war to these militias, the Darfuri pastoralists. And he created a massively bloated security establishment with competing structures."

Mr. al-Bashir was charged with crimes that included murder, rape, torture and extermination, and his villainous reputation was amplified by campaigning celebrities like the actor George Clooney who denounced him as the embodiment of a sectarian, ruthless regime. But predictions he would become "a fugitive, a man on a wanted poster," were only partially borne out.

Defying the court, Mr. al-Bashir traveled to Kenya, Egypt, Nigeria and Saudi Arabia, although a visit to South Africa in 2015 was cut short when a court considered whether to arrest him. Some experts criticized the indictments as legally flawed and politically counterproductive.

Internally displaced people in South Darfur in 2005. At least 300,000 people are thought to have died in the region in fighting between pro-government militias and rebel forces. Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

Mr. al-Bashir portrayed himself as the victim of an international witch hunt led by an ungrateful West. He complained that the United States had reneged on its promises to lift sanctions in return for peace in the south. Buoyed by oil wealth, he swept to victory in the 2010 election, featuring posters that showed him standing proudly before new roads, dams and factories — even if 40 percent of Sudan's people remained below the poverty line.

In 2011, South Sudan voted to secede, becoming an independent country and taking with it three-quarters of Sudan's oil reserves. As revenues dried up, Sudan's economy weakened badly, and Mr. al-Bashir started to face serious opposition.

Armed riot police brutally suppressed street protests against soaring food prices in September 2013, killing as many as 170 people, according to Human Rights Watch. Torture and abuse in Sudan's jails became rampant, the group said.

Mr. al-Bashir reached wide into the region for funding and support, often flitting between rivals in search of the best deal. In 2013, he hosted the Iranian president at the time, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in Khartoum, as part of a putative courtship. Two years later, he

joined an Arab alliance fighting on one side of Yemen's war, led by Iran's archenemy Saudi Arabia.

A 2011 ceremony in Juba, South Sudan, commemorating the country's independence that year. Sudan lost much of its oil reserves when South Sudan broke away. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Last year he pivoted from his traditional ally, Egypt, to Ethiopia as part of a dispute over a giant hydroelectric dam that Ethiopia is building on the Nile. In recent months, as more protests erupted, he turned to Saudi Arabia's Persian Gulf rival, Qatar, for help.

The lifting of American sanctions in 2017 might have helped Mr. al-Bashir. But the State Department kept Sudan on its list of terrorism sponsors, stymieing any influx of foreign investment. By 2018 Sudan's economy was in free-fall, with an inflation rate of 72 percent, long lines at fuel stations and even a shortage of bank notes. The urban middle classes, dismayed to see their living standards collapsing, revolted.

A protest against the soaring price of bread in Atbara on Dec. 19 quickly spread to towns and cities across the country, in protests led by doctors and other professionals. Public anger grew as young doctors, some from wealthy families, were killed.

In January, Mr. al-Bashir contemptuously dismissed the protesters, telling the "rats to go back to their holes" and saying he would move aside only for another army officer, or at the ballot box.

Mr. al-Bashir, center, after addressing Parliament in Khartoum this month. Demonstrators reached the gates of his home at the headquarters of the Sudanese army in the city last weekend.

Ashraf Shazly/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

But on the whole his forces reacted with relative restraint, killing dozens rather than hundreds of protesters. The demonstrations, often wildcat affairs in different Khartoum neighborhoods, turned into a daily occurrence.

On April 6, in their largest protest yet, demonstrators made it to the gates of Mr. al-Bashir's home at the headquarters of the Sudanese army. The protest coincided with the anniversary of the 1985 uprising that toppled the regime of another unpopular Sudanese leader, the dictator Gaafar Nimeiry.

It was the start of the final push that led to his ouster on Thursday. His supposedly folksy touch had fully deserted him. The military and security leaders he fostered for years told him it was time to leave.

Like many military rulers, Mr. al-Bashir liked to claim that power had been foisted upon him, and that he wielded it reluctantly. "This country does not encourage anyone to enjoy power," he said after he seized control in 1989. "This country is exhausted. It has collapsed and fallen."

Critics say he left Sudan in much the same condition. Less clear, though, is whether his successors can change it quickly. The tattered economy needs a huge cash injection, and current conflicts in the Sudanese regions of Blue Nile or South Kordofan are unlikely to abate. Past uprisings, in the 1960s and 1980s, quickly saw a reversion to military control after a few years of erratic civilian rule.

"People want change, but Sudan's problems are structural, not a matter of personality," said Aly Verjee, an analyst at the United States Institute of Peace. "Even with Bashir gone, Sudan will not be healed overnight."

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