

Global Communications

EDITED BY CAROLA RICHTER AND CLAUDIA KOZMAN

# Arab Media Systems





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# 14. Sudan: Media under the Military–Democratic Pendulum

*Mahmoud M. Galander*

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This chapter describes the impact of the incessant political changes that have taken place in Sudan and highlights the impact of the country's shifts from democratic to military governments since independence on the performance of the media. In particular, the chapter describes the role of newspapers in the development of nationalism in the early 1920s, and in the development of partisan politics after independence. The chapter explores how, as radio and television remained public in their early years, they served as government propaganda and education tools, but later with the advent of satellite transmission and reception, how private entertainment radio and television services prevailed. The chapter discusses the impact of the numerous political systems that have shaped the media-politics relationship and, in particular, the effect of the various media laws that were promulgated in the country by the different political regimes.

## Background

Until the secession of South Sudan in 2011, Sudan was one of the largest African and Arab countries in terms of area. The country borders Chad and the Central African Republic to the west, Ethiopia and Eritrea to the east, Egypt and Libya to the north and, since 2011, the Republic of South Sudan to the south. Although Sudan's culture is predominantly Muslim Arab, its ethnic constitution is a mixture of African, Nilotic, and Arabic. The history of the land is closely tied to the Pharaohs, as

several indigenous “Meroitic” and “Kushite” kingdoms had links to them. Christianity dominated in northern Sudan for several centuries before Islam and Arabism “migrated” to the country, around the twelfth century, through two corridors: Egypt in the north and the Grand Maghreb in the west.

The traditional nature of Sudanese society has helped in maintaining its homogeneity. The Islamic impact on Sudanese journalism is noticeable in the writings of early (and even current) Sudanese journalists. Arabic poetry, Qur’anic verses, and Arabic proverbs are widely used to create the strongest impact on the audience. Examples of this effect are well-documented in Sudanese archives, sermons, and utterances of the Mahdi, the leader of the Mahdist revolution who was able to win the hearts and minds of the public (Abu Salim, 1979). Successful political and persuasive writings rely on a mixture of modern analytical approaches with appropriate quotations from Qur’anic verses, the Hadith, and famous utterances of Islamic figures (Galander, 2003). Although Arabic is the lingua franca, there are several vernacular languages that are confined to some parts of the country. For example, the Beja in the eastern Red Sea area speak their own “Tibdawi” language, whereas some tribes in the north speak the “Mahas” and “Dungulawi” vernaculars.

According to the latest census, the current population of the country is 43 million, with a median age of 19.7 (World Population Review, 2020). Ethnicity lines are clearly drawn and well-established; the famous North-South conflict, which lasted for decades until the secession of the South, reflects these lines of division. Major areas of social conflict include famous parts of the country, such as Darfur in the west, the Ingessana in the southeast, the Beja in the east, and the Nuba in the west. Most of the conflicts are related to underdevelopment, as many of the regions lack the basic healthcare, employment, and education, but they have escalated into political conflicts, thus leading to armed struggle. Although the majority of the population is Muslim, major cities in the country have several churches that reflect the multireligious nature of the society.

## Historical Developments

By the early-sixteenth century, Sudan was overwhelmingly under the influence of Islam, as two Muslim Sultanates, the Sinnar (or Funj) and the Fur Sultanates, ruled most of the land. Under these sultanates, social modes of communication prevailed. Religious leaders and traditional educators transmitted knowledge and information orally among members of society, and social and political news was communicated through traditional media, such as town criers, who traveled from village to village to announce major social and political news (Galander, 2001).

In 1821, the Ottoman Empire brought Sudan under its control for the next 60 years before it was driven out in 1885 by Mohammed Ahmed Al-Mahdi, who besieged Khartoum and ended the Ottoman rule of the country by defeating the famous British officer, General Charles Gordon. The Mahdi established the first independent Islamic state, the *mahdiyya* State. During the *mahdiyya* period, the mosque served as the basic center for dissemination of political and social news. Written communication was used on a limited scale for political propagation during the early days of the Mahdist movement, but when the movement developed into a revolution, and later into a state, both written and oral forms of communication were used. However, written communication was confined to formal messages exchanged among state officials.

After the occupation of the Sudan in 1898, the British colonial power sought to modernize the country by educating an elite that would help in the administration of the country, but would also remain loyal to it (Galander, 2003). As such, the sons of loyal tribal leaders were sent to schools and brought up to populate the administration. This educated elite was, however, ultimately behind the rise of a local press that became the vanguard of the call for independence.

Print journalism dates back to 1903, when a non-Sudanese publisher began publishing the newspaper *Al-Sudan* with the permission, but also under the watchful eye, of the British administration (Salih, 1971). A few years later, several newspapers began to sprout up, and by the 1920s as a nationalist movement swept the country, several Sudanese published newspapers and used the press as a political platform for calls for independence. In response to these developments the colonial

power introduced several restrictions to curb nationalistic enthusiasm by licensing the press, practicing censorship, and denying government employees the ability to write in the daily press (Babiker, 1985).

Born under a colonial administration, Sudan's broadcasting service was to serve as the main means of disseminating propaganda for the Allied Forces fighting in North and East Africa during the Second World War (Awad, 1994). The half-hour daily radio service, which started in 1940, primarily broadcast news of the war to the Sudanese public, who followed the conflict closely because of the involvement of several battalions from the Sudan Defense Force (SDF).

With independence in 1956, Sudan embarked on a multiparty form of democracy that copied the British bicameral parliamentary system. However, this first democratic experience did not last long; two years later, the democratically elected prime minister, citing sectarian bigotry and senseless political wrangling, collaborated with the army and handed over rule to a military junta. The following six years of military rule were brought to an end by a popular revolution in October 1964. A multiparty system was thereafter restored, but it too ended only four years later, when another military coup in 1969 dragged the country into 16 years of socialist and, later, Islamist rule. In its first two years, General Ja'afer Nimeiry's government adopted socialism and nationalized the banks, international companies, and private businesses. In its last two years, the socialist military government adopted Islamic Shar'ia law and dealt harshly with its violators. In 1985, another popular revolt brought the second military government to an end and ushered in the third democratic period, which lasted from 1985 to 1989. These four years of democracy were mired in political wrangling that was further exacerbated by a raging war in South Sudan. As a result, on 30 June 1989, Islamist elements in the Sudanese army conspired with the National Islamic Front (NIF) party and engineered a coup that brought the Islamists—under Omar Al-Bashir—to power for 30 years (1989–2019).

The 30 years of Islamist rule put the country under international scrutiny, as the government was accused of harboring international terrorists and rogue Islamist elements, such as Osama bin Laden, as well as committing crimes against humanity in the province of Darfur. Consequently, the country was severely sanctioned by the US government for almost all of the government's 30 years, while civil wars

crippled the economy. Under continued external political and economic pressure and as a result of an incessant internal civil resistance, the Islamist-military government of Omar Al-Bashir was finally brought down by a popular revolt within the so-called second wave of the Arab uprisings that lasted for four months until April 2019.

## Political System and Legal Framework

Few countries have experienced anything like Sudan's constant political oscillation between military and democratic forms of government. The country has also witnessed the replacement of three military dictatorships through civilian dissention, the latest of which were the December 2019 uprisings, which ended the longest authoritarian government in the history of the country. Such swings from democratic to military governments are important for understanding and explaining the dynamics of media operations in the country.

The media of the country have, no doubt, suffered from such an incessant oscillation between liberalism and authoritarianism. As the country stumbled from democratic to military rule, the media existed in an environment unconducive to the healthy growth of the profession.

During the first democratic government after independence in 1956, the private and partisan press mushroomed, and a truly free press system operated for a brief period until the coup of 1958 brought the first military rule, which clamped down on the free press. Although the military did not ban the private press, it printed its own newspaper as the official voice of the government. In 1964, a popular revolution restored liberal democracy, and reinstated the free press, but several newspapers were banned from publishing as a result of accusations of collaboration with the defunct military government (Galander, 2001). In 1969, another coup brought the second military government to power. As it subscribed to leftist ideologies, the government of General Ja'afer Nimeiry nationalized the press, and replaced 40 private newspapers with two government dailies and a weekly military paper. A press council was also established to guide media operations in the country, and the first indigenous press law replaced the colonial press act of the 1930s. The press law confined all mass media ownership to the ruling Sudan Socialist Union (SSU), and, consequently, the media were turned

into mouthpieces of the government party, and forbidden to publish substantive criticism.

In 1985, the second popular revolution forced General Nimeiry to resign and brought back a democratic government that restored press freedom and lifted restrictions on private ownership of the press. This sudden return of the private press led to an unprecedented rise in the number of private media outlets, and created a situation that bordered on journalistic chaos, with increased violations of the basic ethics of journalism. Such conditions, according to some sources, helped the next military coup of General Omar Al-Bashir to rationalize the takeover, by citing unverified stories of corruption and crime that had appeared in the press (Galander, 2001).

The third military government began with a scheme of publishing two government-owned papers, but later allowed the private press to publish after shackling them with a series of restrictive press laws, enacted in 1994, 1996, 1999, and 2004 (Galander, 2016). These laws provided several strategies for curbing free expression of opinion, including censorship, jailing of journalists, closure of papers, and confiscation of printed issues.

As for radio, the first military government of General Abboud (1958–1964) began to expand radio services to the southern region of the country, where a civil war was flaring up and the need for a government voice was strong. By the time of the second military government of General Nimeiry, and as microwave and satellite technologies became available, regional radio stations were established all over the country. During the 30-year period of General Al-Bashir's rule, with the advanced technologies of radio transmission, private radio stations were allowed, and as a result, several FM radio stations, such as *Radio Al-Rabiaa* and *Khartoum University Radio*, appeared, but most of these stations were non-political and confined their discussion and programming to sports and music.

Television was introduced in Sudan by the first military government. It was then expanded, and put to political use by the second military government, and was further expanded to broadcast regionally and internationally by the third. The government of General Abboud introduced television in 1962, but the service was a privilege only enjoyed by a small middle-class elite that lived around Greater Khartoum.

The government of General Nimeiry expanded television coverage to almost all regions of the country and utilized the service for political mobilization (Galander, 2003). The government of General Al-Bashir considered television a strategic resource for the propagation of its self-declared embodiment of the “civilized Islamic orientation” form of government.<sup>1</sup> Today, several television channels such as *Al-Shurooq*, *Blue Nile*, and *Sudaniya 24* are in operation.

With respect to the legal dimension, the first press law of the land was the 1930 Press Act passed by the British administration, which served at the time as an important restraining factor against the involvement of the local population in newspaper publishing by placing heavy financial burdens on any media venture. After independence, the first postcolonial government (1956–1958) did not abolish the press law of the colonialists, as there was little need to use the law against the press, especially as it was not adversarial or irresponsible (Sa'id, 1989). However, the first military government that succeeded the British in 1958 amended some articles of the colonial law and used it to deal with the press from a security perspective (Galander & Starosta, 1997, p. 216). Though no new press laws were initiated after the return of democracy in October 1964, the governments of the period had a record of violations of the basics of press freedom as they suspended newspapers, dragged some journalists to court, and planned to publish a government-owned newspaper (Galander & Starosta, 1997, p. 216). The second military government, led by General Nimeiry, introduced the 1973 Press and Publication Act, which established complete state control of the mass media, and introduced a press council that became, and has remained, the mainstay of Sudan’s media ever since. The council served as the watchful eyes, and the iron fist, of the government with respect to journals and journalists: all publications were to be approved and licensed, and all journalists were to be vetted by the council (Galander & Starosta, 1997, p. 225). With the downfall of General Nimeiry’s government and the return to democracy, a new press law was put into effect, which, “though couched in liberal terms suited to the prevailing democratic spirit, [...] retained some of the articles of the previous 1973 Press Act” (Galander & Starosta, 1997, p. 231).

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<sup>1</sup> The Arabic term used to describe the system was *Al-Tawajjuh Al-Hadari Al-Islami*.

The third military government of Omar Al-Bashir depended, at first, on “revolutionary” decrees to organize press activity. By 1993, the blowing winds of global change obliged the government to introduce amendments to the media; hence, it promulgated what became the first of many laws, the 1993 Press and Publication Act, which legalized the independent press under strict conditions. The law banned individual or family ownership of newspapers, and it outlined several punitive measures to be used against violators of the law. The law established a press council as the regulatory agency of the press and as a tool for curbing the enthusiasm of the economically unable and the politically undesirable investors. Three years later, the government abolished the 1993 Act and introduced a new 1996 Press Act that was no different from the previous one in its treatment of the press, except for a few “liberal” articles, such as one that allowed the press council members to elect the president of their council (Mahjoub, 2003).

With the political developments that signaled a probable return to liberal democracy, a new 1999 Press Law repealed the 1996 Press and Publication Act (Press Law, 1999). The law legalized the partisan press as it stipulated that any legally registered political organization could publish a newspaper. However, the increased pressure on the government in 2000, as a direct result of the liberal environment that prevailed, led them to introduce more punitive articles to the law; the most notorious of these sought the establishment of a “press court” by the chief justice “to deal with violations to this law” (Press Law, 1999). Other amendments included an assortment of punishments that the council and the press court could impose on journalists.

By 2004, a process of national reconciliation brought several political opposition groups back into the country, and a new political atmosphere conducive to democratic practices developed. Responding to the blowing winds of change, the government took the initiative of repealing the 1999 Press Law, and it introduced a new 2004 Press and Press Publications Law. The law gave more attention to the political role of the press council by including in its membership representatives of the political groups that signed the peace agreement. Despite the liberal atmosphere, the 2004 law did not only give the press council all the punitive measures of the previous laws but added a new one: the ability to cancel a journalist’s license (Galander, 2017).

In 2009, a new press law replaced the 2004 law, with only minor changes to the extent of punishment or prerogatives of the press council. The new law came into effect during a critical political period in the country, as legal wrangling mired any progress and resulted in increased penalties against the press. A notable feature of the 2009 law was the inclusion of three sources of punishment, which an article on the issue labeled “the tripartite sources of press punishment” (Galander, 2017, p. 375). The article named these three sources as the Press Council, the National Security Bureau, and the Press Court. Each of these institutions had, from 2009 to the end of the third military government, imposed numerous penalties that created a crippling environment for the Sudanese press.

Currently, since the 2019 uprisings, the country is now engaged in the process of overhauling the public media. The interim government has, for example, closed down the media outlets that were owned or operated by the security apparatus. The administration of the state-owned Radio and Television Corporation has also been changed. As for the private media, the government has opted for this sector to be regulated by a press council. It must be mentioned that radio stations and television channels were operated and/or licensed during the last military government of Al-Bashir by the ministries of information in the capital and in individual states.

## Economy and Ownership Patterns

As the country has swung between the two extremes of liberal and authoritarian rule, the ownership of media has been much affected by the existing political and economic system. Although the private press existed during the early years of independence (even under the first military government), the second military government of Nimeiry adopted socialist policies and, hence, nationalized or confiscated the press, including publishing houses and printing presses. Under the socialist government, the media were owned and operated by the single government party, which sought to mobilize the Sudanese masses towards the implementation of a socialist state.

The end of General Nimeiry’s government signaled the return of the private press, but as the economic conditions were not conducive to this

shift, newspapers did not perform well, and many were closed down. The situation had political consequences, as some outlets fell prey to foreign and local political exploitation (Galander, 2001). A leader from the NIF told this author that they were ready to give financial aid to newspapers that would support the party's cause, whereas an inquiry into feature articles in favor of Ethiopia and Libya in a private newspaper revealed that they were adverts in disguise (Galander, 2016).

The third military government of General Omar Al-Bashir demonstrated an extreme distrust of the media by denying private ownership at the beginning of its rule and, later, by controlling the media with restrictive laws. A clandestine scheme of media acquisition and control by the government was also adopted (Galander, 2017). The government's security apparatus established its own printing press and an advertising agency that distributed government adverts to favored newspapers, and developed a plan for the gradual takeover of financially troubled newspapers. In this way, the government crippled unfavorable newspapers and forced them either to stop publishing or to fall for the Security Bureau's scheme of forced acquisition under an arrangement that would leave the owners as ineffectual shadow owners (Galander, 2017). Before the demise of the last military government of Al-Bashir, historically famous newspapers such as *Al-Ayyam*, *Al-Sahafa*, and *Al-Khartoum* were unable to continue publishing, while only government-supported (or government-supporting) papers such as *Al-Sudani*, *Al-Watan*, *Al-Intibaha*, and *Al-Ahram* were abundantly available in kiosks. The number of newspapers published in Khartoum, during the last days of the government, was estimated at 41 political and sports papers.

For many years, radio and television control remained in the hands of the different governments, democratic or military, hence less emphasis was placed on the economic sustainability of radio and television operations. However, with the advent of FM facilities, several private radio stations sprang up in the country. Improved satellite equipment has also allowed television channels to expand out of the country, and as a result, few privately-owned television channels currently exist. Today, private ownership of television channels in Sudan is a reality and, with the advent of Internet services, several of Sudan's private and government television channels, and some radio stations, are available

online. However, similarly to what is presently the case in some Arab countries, the new trend of private ownership of radio and television has also been clouded by government attempts at intrusion. For example, it is well-known that the *Al-Shurooq TV* channel is owned by the Islamist Party through a close confidant of the Al-Bashir government, while another television and radio station (*Taiba TV*) was mentioned during the trial of General Al-Bashir as having received millions of dollars from him.

## Technology and Infrastructure

The role of Nimeiry's government in laying down the foundation of a strong communications-related infrastructure cannot be denied. His government is credited with the expansion of television broadcasting as it built the first satellite reception station in the country, and used both this and the microwave network to expand service to regions and areas far from Khartoum.

General Al-Bashir's government put even more emphasis on television as a medium for the propagation of political views, not only nationally, but also regionally and internationally. The government invested heavily in modern communication technology, such as satellite transmission, reception equipment, and modern television production facilities. The plans for extending the range of transmission materialized in the late 1990s as *Sudan TV*, according to several government sources (Center for Strategic Studies, 1999, p. 404), could be watched in several neighboring African and Middle Eastern countries. As satellite and Internet technologies expanded transmission globally, *Sudan TV*'s channels were then made available on several satellites. On the national level, the number of local or regional television channels increased dramatically due to the fact that 25 regional radio stations and television channels were established as the public property of the 25 states that comprised the individual regions of the country (Center for Strategic Studies, 1999).

Advances in Internet and mobile telephony in Sudan have become more rapid and robust. *MTN*, *Zain*, and *Kanar* are the current international service providers of the service in the country. The establishment of a government-based telecommunications authority

in 1995, accompanied by the installation of new satellite equipment and the building of 36 reception stations, increased the capacity of reception and transmission more than tenfold (Galander, 2003). These new technological developments, as well as the shift to fiber optics in 1995, constituted the basis for the country's rapid advancement in communications, which was manifested in the spread, as in the 1990s, of Internet cafés and increased public use of mobile telephony, including smartphones. The latest data on Internet services in the Sudan indicate that Internet users total around 31% of the population.

With the expansion of the use of mobile phones in the new millennium, the use of social media in Sudan has risen to a remarkable level. Analyzing the situation, *The Guardian* wrote that as the press has been adversely affected by the clampdown on freedom of speech, the young generation has been left with only social media to exchange news and views (Albahir, 2015). According to 2017 data, mobile phone use had surged to include 72% of the population. Although *Facebook* is most popular among the population, *WhatsApp* use has recently risen to an extent that *The Guardian* prophesied it as "fueling a sharing revolution" (Albahir, 2015). The newspaper remarked that "the app has become a major source of news to Sudanese people, thanks to the ease of sharing that it offers and the wide reach of the group chat option, which has also helped connect the large diaspora to the latest wedding pictures and local gossip" (Albahir, 2015).

The recent December 2018–April 2019 uprisings confirmed *The Guardian*'s prophecy as they emphasized the role that *WhatsApp* (and, to a degree, *Facebook*) played in the dissemination of the opposition's public mobilization tactics. An article on the situation during the last years of Al-Bashir described the resort to social media in search of political information as so overwhelmingly unprecedented that the government's security bureau had to establish an "electronic Jihad brigade" to counter the barrage of anti-government sentiments that filled social media sites (Galander, 2017).

No better confirmation of the impact of social media on public opinion can be found than in the developments in the aftermath of the fall of General Al-Bashir's government. The opposition cleverly utilized social media and successfully mobilized the masses in the streets of cities to demand the handover of power to a civil government. Reluctant

to hand over power to civilians, the ruling Military Council became frustrated by the political strength endowed to the opposition by social media and, eventually, took an unprecedented drastic decision of enforcing a country-wide Internet blackout. To emphasize the impact of social media on political developments in the country, a member of the Transitional Military Council (TMA) considered the Internet “a threat to national security.” This move to deprive the public of access to social media was meant to disable the public revolt by denying the opposition communication with the masses and preventing the organization of the planned civil disobedience.

## Challenges

The major challenges faced by the media are the result of the unstable nature of Sudanese politics. Throughout its history, the press has suffered from continued pressure, not only from the military governments, but also from rival elements in the different democratic governments.

During the last three decades, Sudan’s mass media have been under all sorts of pressures, political, legal, and economic, while global technological advances keep challenging the industry and putting these media at an extreme disadvantage. Local economic conditions are unfavourable for both the printed press and broadcasting, despite the newly-gained liberal atmosphere that is promising for a free press system in the future. As such, a new approach to the country’s “classic” mass media may be needed.

As this chapter is being written in 2019, an interim government is in power, and in three years’ time (in 2022) a full democratic government is anticipated. Although the prospects of a full-fledged free press are on the rise, the most daunting issues are the current realities surrounding the future of the printed press, not only in Sudan, but worldwide, and the rising costs of newspaper production. At least for the time being, the economic realities in the country make it very difficult for the private press to prosper, unless the government lends a helping hand. As seen in some European countries, press subsidies may have to be put into effect. For instance, as in Sweden, there may be a need for platform-neutral media subsidy schemes that could provide a more stable press

capable of rising to the responsibilities expected of it as a watchdog of a new democracy.

Despite these realities, the Sudanese media, particularly the printed press, have played an important role in national politics. Since Sudanese independence from the British, rulers have been aware that the press is a major tool of political education and can be used for enlightening the masses. This perhaps explains the continued harassment that the several military juntas which ruled the country exerted against the Sudanese press.

## Outlook

As the country enters into a new era in which the power of the people has brought down military governments three times, the role and place of media in the new era should receive close attention from concerned scholars and authorities. As the country, whose economy was left in disarray by the previous government, is entering into a new era of liberal democracy, the large number of daily newspapers would need to be brought down through a scheme of mergers and/or acquisitions that would strengthen the financial conditions for many of these papers. The same may also apply to private broadcasting ventures, some of which have been closed down because of lack of funds. Such steps need to supersede the shift to a multiparty democracy that has been planned to occur within the next three years.

Internet-based media are in a better position than other media, as many of them rely on the advantages offered by the nature of the technology. The obvious popularity in the use of the net in the country must be followed by developing profit-making schemes to benefit the media that use the Internet for broadcasting their programs. The current overwhelming and obvious impact of social media demonstrates the future of modern communication technology as fundamental to the development of communication policies everywhere. As Sudan is approaching a new phase of democratic rule, policymakers must take the changing nature of communication into account when designing policies.

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