

MEDIA REFORM AMID POLITICAL UPHEAVAL WORKING PAPER



Sudan's Brief, Fragile Reform Window (2019–2021)

October 2022

SUDAN



CENTER FOR
INTERNATIONAL
MEDIA
ASSISTANCE



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR
DEMOCRACY

SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD



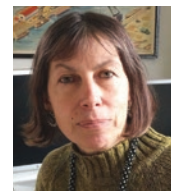
Sudan's Brief, Fragile Reform Window (2019–2021)

Contents

Background.....	3
Sudan's Media Sector in Context	5
Current Media Reform Processes and Actors	8
Role of International Assistance	14
Aid to the Media Sector	15
Media Assistance: Is There a Strategic Direction?	18
Case Study: UNESCO Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan.....	21
Conclusion	24
Endnotes	27

About the Authors

Dr. Mary Myers is a British media development consultant and independent researcher. Mary has 25 years of experience evaluating media development and communication projects, mostly in Africa, for clients including the UK's FCDO, UNICEF, and BBC Media Action. She is an external research associate at the University of East Anglia. She has authored several previous reports for CIMA, including *Defending Independent Media—A Comprehensive Analysis of Aid Flows* (2018) and *Local Radio Stations in Africa: Sustainability or Pragmatic Viability?* (2020). Over the last two decades, she has made many short research trips to Sudan and follows developments in the country closely.



Lina Yassin is a Sudanese environmental journalist and a development consultant with experience working on climate change communications and journalism projects across the MENA region. Lina is currently finishing a Master's degree at the University of Oxford.



Cover Photo: © Esam Idris / CC BY-SA 4.0



CENTER FOR
INTERNATIONAL
MEDIA
ASSISTANCE



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR
DEMOCRACY

SUPPORTING FREEDOM AROUND THE WORLD

Background



Beginning in December 2018, millions of people marched, chanted, and staged strikes and sit-ins in the streets of Khartoum and across Sudan. This was the popular revolution that led to the toppling of the 30-year dictatorship of President Omar Al-Bashir in April 2019. It marked the beginning of some profound reforms across Sudan, as well as a turning point for the media.

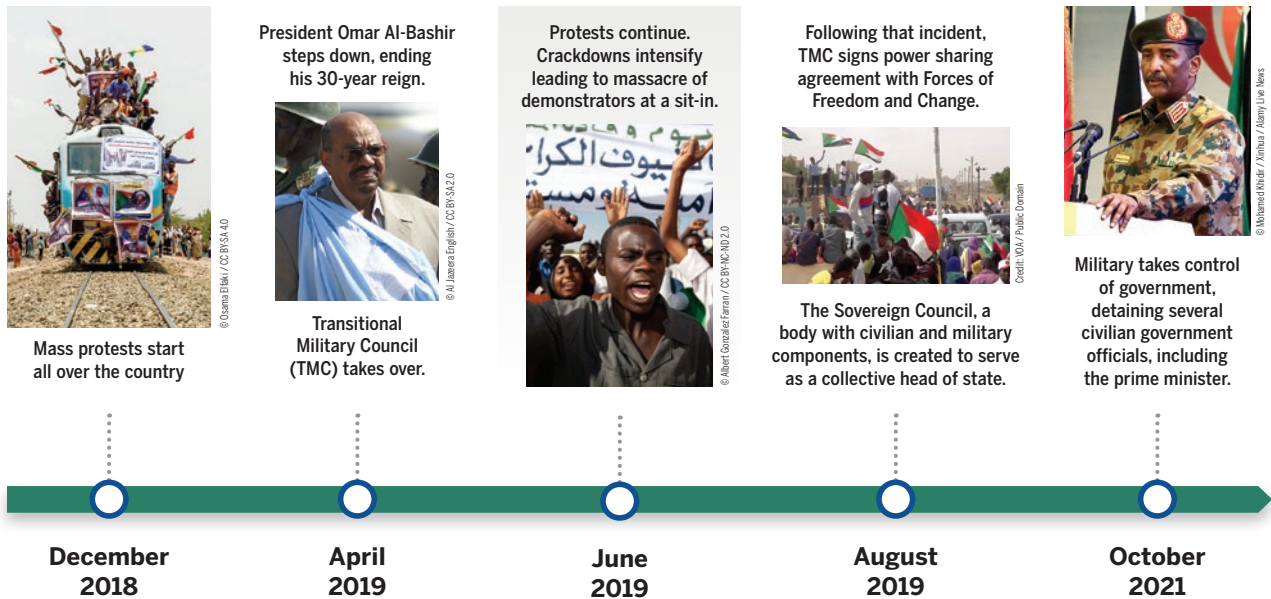
Under Al-Bashir, the media were kept under classic authoritarian control, with systematic government censorship and persecution of independent voices from 1989 onwards.¹ The online environment was constrained by tight social media monitoring, which culminated in a total internet shutdown at the height of the popular protests in June 2019.² Before and during the revolution, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) deemed Sudan “one of the world’s most hostile terrains for journalists.”³ For three decades, the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) spearheaded the regime’s censorship of the media, arresting journalists, shutting down newspapers, confiscating entire issues as they came off the press, and imposing red lines that could not be crossed.⁴

Today (mid-2021), Sudan’s RSF score is up by 16 points (from 175 out of 180 in 2019 to 159 out of 180 in 2021), which shows some progress, although it must be noted that this is still a “very bad” rating on the RSF global scale.

The relative improvement in the media situation is mainly a result of the popular uprising that has produced a political opening and a sense of democratic optimism. The uprising spark came in December 2018 when secondary school students in the town of Atbara in northeast Sudan began to protest the government’s decision to raise the price of bread.⁵ The nonviolent protests were then led and organized by the Sudanese

INDICATOR	RANK/SCORE
2021 Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Rank	159/180
2020 V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index Rank	161/179
2021 Freedom House Global Freedom Score	17/100 (Not Free)
2020 UN Human Development Index Rank	170/189

Transition Timeline



Professionals Association (SPA)⁶ until Al-Bashir was overthrown by fellow military officers in April 2019.⁷ As one analyst put it:

The scenes of millions of Sudanese out on the streets during waves of protests over an eight-month period in 2018–2019 demonstrate a triumph not just of the human spirit, but of some of the most brilliant strategic thinking by any social movement in history.⁸

Seventeen primarily middle-class professional unions, including those of doctors and other medical professionals, came to the fore to lead and organize the popular resistance, under the aegis of the SPA. The Sudanese Journalists Network was part of this informal coalition, which also comprised women's groups, lecturers, opposition politicians, and lawyers. However, the popular uprising was predominantly a movement of young people, whose communications were aided enormously by social media, despite efforts by Al-Bashir's regime to impose an internet blackout.⁹ Many nonprofessionals — from students to farmers, housewives to artists — took part, and their activities were organized very informally through local resistance committees.¹⁰

A crucial turning point in the uprising came on June 3, 2019, when an estimated 128 demonstrators were killed during a sit-in massacre (the total number of deaths from the revolution remains uncounted).¹¹ Shortly after this sit-in, the Transitional Military Council (TMC)¹² signed a political accord to form a power-sharing body with the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a wide coalition representing the civilian protesters of the uprising, including the SPA. The FFC was the main political force asking to establish a civilian-led government and calling for the end of Al-Bashir's presidency; it also signed the power-sharing agreement with the military.

At the time of writing (July 2021), the country was being led by a transitional Sovereignty Council,¹³ which has civilian and military components and is expected to rule until 2023, when elections are to be held.¹⁴ The transitional government has started working on reform in several sectors with the main focus on peace, the economy,¹⁵ and international relations.¹⁶ But, as we shall discuss further, this coalition is unstable and there is still a long way to go on democratic change in general and on media reform in particular. As RSF notes: "[The] system of predation has left its mark, and the media must now be rebuilt over the ruins."¹⁷

Sudan's Media Sector in Context

The media environment of Sudan must be understood not only in terms of past authoritarian rule but also the present context of a failing and fragile state. Sudan (with an approximate population of 38 million) is still a country at war — Darfur is the most significant conflict, rumbling on after 17 years, despite a recent peace deal in October 2020.¹⁸

The war of secession in South Sudan, though it came to an end a decade ago, in 2011, had profound consequences, not least being the loss of significant oil revenue for the North and a huge influx of refugees.¹⁹ Other conflicts are ongoing in South Kordofan,²⁰ El Geneina,²¹ and the Blue Nile regions,²² and along the Sudan-Ethiopia border. The 2021 United Nations (UN) Humanitarian Needs Overview estimates that 13.4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in 2021, almost a third of the country's population.²³ The World Bank classes Sudan as a Least Developed Country and poverty is exacerbated by ongoing climate change impacts,²⁴ such as the 2020 floods that impacted one million people²⁵ and conflict-related humanitarian crises.²⁶

Meanwhile, inflation is rampant, food and oil have been subject to recent price hikes, educational levels are low, and corruption is high.²⁷

Before the revolution, because of government control and ownership of much of the press by the National Congress Party (NCP), the erstwhile ruling party, the independent media sector had been decimated over the years, with many journalists getting killed, fleeing the country, or simply giving up, demoralized.

The field was losing so many of its good people ... there was a huge emigration of journalists. [...] The way they [the NISS] used to crack down on press freedoms ... so a newspaper would become impoverished, and



© REUTERS / Mohamed Nureidin Abdallah / Alamy Stock Photo

it would shut down ... or journalists [would] find themselves in court every single day and this happened to so many people that at some point you just start self-censoring because you are just exhausted.²⁸

Furthermore, there was (and still is) a lack of training institutions for journalists and media professionals.

Since the revolution, change has not come quickly to the media sector. While the new government has granted licenses to a handful of new outlets, media outlets affiliated with the previous regime have been closing, keeping the absolute number of outlets still relatively small by African standards. In Sudan there are currently only about 45 newspapers, 19 television (TV) channels, and roughly 65 radio stations, a handful of which are community owned.²⁹ Compare this with Mali — with an approximate population of 20 million — which has many more: around 227 newspapers, 373 radio stations, and 19 TV stations (2020 figures).³⁰ There are at least 50 Sudanese news websites, many of which are online versions of print media. Diaspora media (such as Radio Dabanga, which has live radio and TV) are also active online.³¹

Most of the coverage and media resources in Sudan are limited and concentrated in the capital, Khartoum. One of the consequences of the current economic challenges is that the media remain focused on Khartoum because media houses cannot afford local correspondents or to send reporters out to the provinces. As one journalist told us:

97 percent of the staff of the journalistic and media institutions are based in Khartoum ... The remaining 3 percent rely on reporters, whom they do not pay, by the way, and who do not work professionally; they could be working for the government [office staff/employees] or anywhere else and report to the papers in the evening. This [has] created a problem with the balance of the news. If you read the papers, you notice that the reports are just from Khartoum — there might be [just] one piece of news or two from outside Khartoum.³²

Hundreds of journalists are employed by the state media apparatus, consisting of the Sudan News Agency (400 employees) and the Sudanese Radio and Television Corporation (SRTC; 1,628 employees). These journalists are not editorially independent because they were appointed and have been paid by the state for many years, and have largely continued

to give the “official” view, without question, even since the uprising.³³ The media landscape is marked by major economic challenges (high inflation, shrinking advertising revenues, corruption, COVID-19 lockdowns), and significant gender inequality.³⁴ Frequent power outages adversely affect access to electronic and online media, and large portions of the country do not even have radio coverage, let alone TV, satellite, internet, or print media.

Many observers judge the standard of journalism to be poor, for all the historical reasons and current constraints just described, as well as the lack of self-regulating civil society organizations in the media sector:

Journalists in Sudan haven't been doing journalism for the past 30 years; I have never read an investigative piece in a Sudanese newspaper, for example. Most of the content in newspapers is very basic and the quality of it is embarrassing and so journalists need heavy capacity building starting from university curriculums.³⁵

Among audiences, there is a general lack of trust in the government and consequently a lack of trust in the state media (Sudanese Radio and TV Corporation).³⁶ According to a survey by Internews, audiences often



© REUTERS / Mohamed Nureidin Abdallah / Alamy Stock Photo

turn to international channels and websites to verify news about events, even about those in Sudan, and especially about the COVID pandemic.³⁷

All sectors of the media are suffering from the current economic crisis, with newspapers taking the worst hit. The massive inflation rate, which was about 230 percent in October 2020,³⁸ has debased the currency and as a result, the cost of printing has risen, making newspapers almost a luxury item (one newspaper in Khartoum now costs roughly the same as six loaves of bread.)³⁹ There are no government subsidies for independent media due to the indebtedness of the country, and even the government broadcaster is run down in terms of equipment, and its staff are very poorly paid. The already beleaguered media sector has also suffered in the wake of COVID-19 lockdowns due to the sharp decrease in advertisements, which usually account for most of the commercial media's revenue.⁴⁰ According to several interviewees, many journalists are tempted by bribes and other corrupt incentives in order to survive, which detracts from objective reporting.

The rise of social media has brought its own opportunities — such as the revolution itself being almost live-streamed to the world by activists and reporters in the first months of 2019⁴¹ (internet users comprise 30.9 percent of the population⁴² and there are good mobile phone connections for 73 percent of Sudan, with 52 percent of those being smartphone connections, so this enables a clear majority of people aged 35 and under to use social media on a daily basis).⁴³ But there are social media-related challenges, for instance, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, often driven by Islamist vested interests. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), a Cyber Jihadist Unit was created by the intelligence services under Al-Bashir's regime in 2011 after the Arab Spring to monitor journalists' activities online. RSF calls it “a troll army” and it apparently continues to operate and is spreading false information on social media with the aim of undermining the transitional government and protecting the interests of former regime figures, many of whom still own and control most of the commercial media.⁴⁴ Government control over news content continues, as evidenced by the recent blocking (in July 2021) of 30 online news sites, including that of *El Sudani* newspaper, one of the biggest and oldest in the country.⁴⁵



Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok

The new government is clearly split down military and civilian lines, with the former exerting control and expressing mistrust of the media, while the latter, headed by civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, stating on multiple occasions that media freedom is among the government's top priorities. As we will discuss further below, this military/civilian divide means that much of the government's stated aims appear increasingly rhetorical.

For instance, in 2019, just a month after being instated, Hamdok travelled to the 74th session of the UN General Assembly — many observed this as an attempt to reconnect with the international community.⁴⁶ During the assembly, he signed the pledge of the Global Campaign for Media Freedom (GCMF),⁴⁷ a coalition of countries working together to advocate for media freedom and the safety of journalists.⁴⁸ Upon being appointed as the minister of culture and information, Faisal Mohammed Salih — who is now ex-minister — started working on media reform with UNESCO, which is the lead implementing partner of the GCMF.⁴⁹ By the end of 2020 and after a series of workshops and roundtables with journalists and media experts,⁵⁰ UNESCO published a Media Reform Roadmap⁵¹ outlining the steps needed to reform the sector in Sudan. However, as we will see, these are ambitious goals (see our case study below) and there is doubt as to whether the commitments made by the transitional government will be genuinely backed up with action.

Current Media Reform Processes and Actors

While “reform” may be too grand a word for the changes achieved since 2019, the media in Sudan certainly have more freedom today than they had before the uprising.

Journalists are now able to operate free from direct censorship, and most of the journalists we interviewed voiced joy and relief that the dark days of the Al-Bashir regime are over:

For 30 years the regime tried to suppress and terrorize the journalists and media professionals — tried to scare them, tried to buy them, but at the end it did not succeed.⁵²

There have been significant milestones achieved, such as the following:

- The transitional government’s interim constitution, adopted in August 2019, enshrines freedom of expression as well as the right to access the internet.⁵³
- Raids on media houses by the National Intelligence and Security Service have stopped⁵⁴ and the systematic censorship of newspapers has ceased.⁵⁵ The NISS was dissolved in July 2019 and its powers of arrest and detention removed by the transitional government.⁵⁶
- Systemic state harassment of online activists by security forces has subsided compared with the many incidents of violence, intimidation, and harassment by the authorities against people posting on social media during the 2019 protests and mass demonstrations.⁵⁷
- Reduction in the “red lines” for journalistic coverage (such as reporting on government and international relations), though coverage of the military remains largely prohibited.
- Arbitrary arrests and detention of journalists are now rare. By way of comparison, at the height of the uprising (roughly December 2018 to June 2019), RSF registered more than 100 press freedom violations, mainly arrests of journalists and various forms of

newspaper censorship. Whereas for the first four months of 2021, there were a handful of incidents reported, in which mainly social media activists were threatened, arbitrarily detained for short periods, and/or mistreated, often by branches of the army such as Military Intelligence and the Rapid Support Forces⁵⁸ and usually in the provinces, outside Khartoum.⁵⁹ Reporters Without Borders currently records no journalists, citizen journalists, or media assistants in prison in Sudan.⁶⁰

- Respected independent journalists now hold key government roles, notably Faisal Mohamed Saleh (formerly of online news site *Al Taghyeer* and who had previously been imprisoned for his journalism), who became minister of culture and information in September 2019 and is now adviser to the prime minister; Rashid Saeed, formerly a journalist with Radio Dabanga who is now the undersecretary in the Ministry of Culture and Information (“the Ministry”); and Lukman Ahmed, formerly with the BBC and now the director of the state broadcaster, the SRTC.
- Government press conferences are held on a more regular basis (although notably held more often by civil servants than military spokespeople).⁶¹
- In the aftermath of Al-Bashir’s ouster, videos and pictures of women previously deemed “immoral” have become more common online and have become a subject of debate.⁶²

These changes were achieved after months of wrangling, when the Forces of Freedom and Change negotiated the basis of the interim constitution with the military, and appointed key civil society figures to make up the civilian wing of the transitional government. Some changes have been achieved through continued activism since the toppling of Al-Bashir in April 2019; for instance, around 300 journalists demonstrated outside the information ministry in December 2019 to demand changes in leadership positions at the public broadcaster, the SRTC, and the removal of the intelligence agents who had infiltrated into many news organizations.⁶³

However, the pace of change is halting and is in danger of going backwards. The gains of the popular revolution are still very fragile. With regard to any hope of a transition to democracy, there is still the fundamental problem of the military branch of the government continuing in parallel with the civilian, and of being largely unaccountable. Furthermore, people loyal to the former regime still retain positions

of power,⁶⁴ and there is widespread talk of a “deep state,” characterized by fundamentalist Islam, which still controls many of the country’s institutions, such as the army, professional associations, and key ministries.⁶⁵ So, it is largely the military, Islamists, and old regime supporters — and their foreign backers in Egypt and the Gulf — who have a vested interest in opposing media reform.

List of Current Main Actors in Media in Sudan

- The civilian wing of the transitional government itself — notably the under-secretary at the Ministry of Culture and Information, Rashid Saeed, and an internal Commission for Media and Information Reform that then Minister Faisal Mohamed Saleh set up in 2020 to advise on new media laws, independent regulation, and other reforms.⁶⁶
- The Sudanese Radio and TV Corporation, which is still regarded as part of the government but is due to be restructured and established as a public corporation, with the new appointment of Lukman Ahmed (an ex-BBC senior journalist) and an oversight board independent of government.
- The Sudanese Journalists Network — a key part of the Sudanese Professionals Association,⁶⁷ which played an integral role in the protests that led to the downfall of the Al-Bashir regime — is “an alternative to the state-sponsored and controlled journalists union, the Sudanese Journalists Union.”⁶⁸ The network continues to campaign actively and works closely with the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders.⁶⁹
- UNESCO, which ran a series of consultative workshops on media reform throughout 2020 and has produced a Media Reform Roadmap⁷⁰ with funding from the British Embassy and the Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists (see case study below).
- The Faculty of Law at the University of Khartoum has been working with UNESCO on the legal aspects of the above-mentioned roadmap.
- A handful of local civil society organizations, including the Sudanese Development Initiative (SUDIA), Al Alag Centre for Press Services, and the Democratic Thought Project, have various democracy and human rights programs. Their activities include the following: media monitoring (e.g., SUDIA); research on gender-based violence and harassment inside the media profession (e.g., Al Alag); training of journalists on topics such as human rights reporting and gender and social issue coverage (e.g., Al Alag); and campaigning on freedom of the press and women’s rights (e.g., Democratic Thought Project). Most of the above organizations receive support from international partners — for example, since 2007, Al Alag has worked with the European Union; French, Swiss, and Dutch Embassies; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung; UN Women; and a Canadian organization called Alternatives. The Democratic Thought Project currently has funding from the Open Society Foundations.
- New, progressive media outlets that have started up recently and/or have grown or gained more international support since the fall of the old regime are also a force for change. Examples include (but are not limited to) the Aladwaa Centre, *Ayin* online platform, a new newspaper (*Al-Sudania*) linked to the Democratic Thought Project, the *Democracy* newspaper, and Sudan Facts, an online platform for investigative journalism. These often focus on civil society and showcase investigative or citizen-journalist methods and/or diverse or community/grassroots stories and minority voices. Some coach and promote the professional development of young Sudanese journalists.
- Donors’ group on media reform/freedom (see the “Aid to the Media Sector” section for more details).
- The international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) currently most active in the media sector are the British Council, Thomson Foundation, CFI, Free Press Unlimited, and Internews. Other INGOs working on media include the GISA Group; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Sudan office; and the National Democratic Institute.

The government has yet to set up a legislative council or key transitional commissions and has not seriously embarked on security sector reform.⁷¹ As Human Rights Watch observes, “The government introduced some reforms but has not yet implemented most of the institutional and law reforms called for in the August 2019 constitutional charter.”⁷²

One of our interviewees (a senior Sudanese newspaper journalist) voiced his uncertainty about the future as follows:

I do not know what will happen in the [coming] months, but I hope that they [Hamdouk’s government] will ... lift the laws restricting freedoms fast. Not to go out through the door only to come back through the window with other laws that still restrict freedoms. [...] This is not acceptable!⁷³

Civil society in Sudan was one of the most suppressed sectors during the past regime. Civil society organizations (CSOs) suffered from constant arrests and shutdowns. The previous regime’s authorities systematically targeted civil society groups and accused them of having links to opposition groups. Furthermore, the previous regime banned almost all civil society groups from holding events on human rights, women’s rights, and other topics of public concern.⁷⁴ The National Security Act of 2010⁷⁵ was one of the tools that the NISS used to justify the arrest of civil society activists as it allowed detention without charging any individual for up to three months.⁷⁶ Now, after three decades of crackdowns and having to work under the radar with limited resources, Sudanese civil society is finding it hard to lead on the reform process, not just in the media and other sectors.

The institutions have been through a very rough and a hard time in Sudan. All the institutions in the country have been weakened and now to try and get them to just function is a nightmare.⁷⁷

That said, there are a handful of civil society groups pushing for human rights, including as they relate to media reform. All the representatives of NGOs and activist groups we spoke to saw the current priority as working with the civilian arm of the transitional



Credit: Ospi7 / CC BY-SA 3.0

A civil demonstration against the October 2021 coup in Sudan

government to help consolidate the reforms already made. However, they were generally unhappy with the minimal collaboration with the transitional government they had received so far:

...increasingly what I’m realizing is that the government is not really that sincere about the reform or even if they are sincere, there’s something stopping them from actually moving forward with it and translating it to real action on the ground.⁷⁸

Another activist told us about a committee for reforming the media, which included CSOs, that the government formed soon after the “revolution”:

...but until now there is no clear strategy or any progress. [...] The former minister [Faisal Mohamed Saleh] was the one who formed the committee and now with the changes in the government we don’t know if this is going to help things progress or if this is going to be an obstacle.⁷⁹

A recurring theme in our interviews was the slow pace of change of the transitional government in enacting reform, which is frustrating CSOs and foreign donors alike.

One director of a local NGO said,

[One of] the major obstacles against media reform in Sudan is the slowness. First of all, the media policy committee⁸⁰ should have been formed much earlier than this, it was formed very late ... The Ministry of Information delayed things because of the situation in the country; there are many pending issues and so that delays other things, and things now take too long and it doesn't make sense.⁸¹

Another interviewee from an INGO observed that “The donors are standing by and waiting for the Ministry [of Information] to move.”⁸²

There is little evidence of wide public support for media reform. A recent study of Sudanese public opinion⁸³ found that most people's overwhelming concerns were to satisfy basic needs such as food, jobs, public services (water, electricity, healthcare), security, and education. The study found some indication that the newfound individual freedom of expression was welcome:

Freedom of speech, the first thing you can feel now is being able to express your opinion[:] before you couldn't speak unless with your smaller circle. Now you speak out about any important public issue.⁸⁴ (Male, over 35, Port Sudan)

Also, that some individual journalists appear to be trusted:

I follow people's accounts, journalists, people working for newspapers ... I follow multiple [people] to compare and check if they are fake accounts aimed to distort the truth.⁸⁵ (Male, under 34, Khartoum)

However, this does not necessarily translate into support for a reformed or independent media as a sector. In other words, ordinary Sudanese people may be enjoying the novelty of expressing their individual opinions on Facebook and following some outspoken social media influencers, but these are mainly people in the younger generation who are not particularly interested in lobbying for laws to reform the media or



© REUTERS / Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah / Alamy Stock Photo

calling for an independent media regulator because they have other priorities (e.g., education, health) and perhaps because they view the traditional media and journalism as outdated, too politicized, and irrelevant compared with social media. Moreover, most of the population, even if they wanted to support the sector in principle, could not in practice afford to buy newspapers regularly or pay for media content online.

Furthermore, it is quite clear that there is very little trust in the transitional government — and the reformers within it — to deliver real change:

If you asked me a year ago, I would say that I am very optimistic about the future of media in Sudan but we have been faced with multiple disappointments by this government in other sectors ... The military component does not want democracy and they are the ones calling the shots in the government now. The civilian component is very weak and quite disappointing.⁸⁶

As regards media law, the reform process has yet to make significant progress. Although the draft Constitutional Declaration recently repealed most laws that suppressed press freedom, the transitional government is still drafting new laws.⁸⁷ And, though the media sit under the jurisdiction of the civilian arm of the transitional government, the military controls the internet, meaning that the government can still block the internet at will: For example, during protests and tribal conflicts in Kassala, Eastern Sudan, in June 2020, the military cut the internet for three days to stem the protests.⁸⁸ The army still regards itself



Protestors gathering in front of The Republican Palace in Khartoum, December 2019.

as above criticism and has blocked coverage of its activities on several occasions since the revolution; for example, a military court in Khartoum banned media coverage of the trials of those involved in a foiled coup attempt in July 2019.⁸⁹

As some local journalists and activists noted in our interviews, there are still limits on freedom of expression and freedom of the press in Sudan.

There is [supposed to be] no one putting red lines for us ... [but they still exist for] things that will harm national security, or being advocates for the previous regime ...⁹⁰

It's still important to be very cautious in the media and activism field ... You can see that journalists are careful with the words they use ... because they know that the militia violence⁹¹ is very different from the state or the government. When it comes to militia it's about kidnapping and assassination, not about arresting and investigating.⁹²

Old regime supporters still control large sections of the media. For instance, most of the 18 daily newspapers that cover politics continue to be affiliated or have close ties with supporters of the former regime⁹³ and much of the available internet comes via companies owned by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia⁹⁴ — countries known to support the Sudanese military. Some interviewees pointed out that the new minister of information and culture recently appointed an Egyptian adviser on media matters, which they felt was a bad sign given Egypt's oppressive media stance.

The National Press and Publications Council (NPC), regarded by reformers as a repressive institution established by the defunct regime, is still in charge of granting licenses for newspapers, can still impose huge fines on publishing houses, and can hinder the establishment of new newspapers.⁹⁵ It is unclear whether the transitional government supports it or not.

Thirty years of dictatorship has meant that self-censorship continues to be the norm in newsrooms,⁹⁶ and most news outlets still prioritize the activities of the government in news reports.⁹⁷ This is partly due to old habits dying hard, partly because the government controls much of the advertising, and partly because journalists are easily “bought” by politicians due to the economic challenges journalists face.

Female journalists occupy few media management positions and tend to be targets of more harassment and violence than male journalists.⁹⁸ Women activists are still often subjected to threats and smear campaigns on social media.⁹⁹ Conservative attitudes are still prevalent and social media influencers and minority groups such as the LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, plus) community are frequent targets of online harassment.¹⁰⁰

Efforts by the civilian branch of the new government to instigate a clean sweep of old regime elements in the media have resulted in some backlash, particularly regarding the Disempowerment Committee, also known as the Empowerment Removal Committee.¹⁰¹ This committee is a product of the new government, and is in many ways progressive, but some see it acting as an obstacle to free expression. It is viewed with considerable concern by some inside the media, in

human rights, and in diplomatic circles.¹⁰² For instance, in June and December 2020, the committee decided to dismiss over 80 journalists from the national broadcaster and to close down two newspapers (*Al Ray El Aam* and *Al Sudani*) and two private TV channels (Ashorooq and Teiba) for alleged financial links to Al-Bashir's regime¹⁰³ (since then, some of them have been reinstated, following local and international outcry, including by the International Federation of Journalists).¹⁰⁴ There have been other journalists adversely affected by this committee's efforts to purge members and supporters of the former ruling party, such as Hussein Khojaly, publisher of *Alwan* newspaper and the owner of Omdurman satellite TV, who was detained for a month in early 2021.¹⁰⁵

In addition, the Law on Combating Cybercrimes of 2018 was recently amended to increase the penalties for online defamation, sharing false information, and "insulting" the army,¹⁰⁶ which is potentially a means of silencing — or at least chilling — independent online journalists, bloggers, and citizen reporters, among others. Furthermore, in July 2020, the Sudanese army appointed a special commissioner to bring lawsuits against individuals who "insult" the military online, both inside and outside the country.¹⁰⁷

Reforms to government spending on advertisements are still not sufficient to solve the profound problem of inadequate financial support to independent media. Throughout Al-Bashir's rule, government outlays on advertisements (e.g., jobs, service announcements) were controlled by the NISS through a system referred to as "Akhmar," which favored pro-government media outlets for financial support through official advertising. But now, despite the NISS and Akhmar officially being dissolved, government advertisements generally continue to be issued to outlets that have ties to the previous regime.¹⁰⁸

Problems with advertising revenue are just one of the symptoms of the desperate economic state that the Sudanese media finds itself in. In fact, several of our interviewees prioritized economic problems over and above media freedom issues:

The economic situation is majorly impacting the media. Some newspapers are now forced to close because they no longer can afford

to operate. In my opinion, the economic impacts are far more dangerous than the restrictive laws or the suppression.¹⁰⁹

The current need for alternative sources of income makes some journalists more vulnerable to external influences and biases.¹¹⁰

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought further challenges for media reform; for instance, Freedom House reports that the Cyber Jihadist unit (mentioned above) has engaged in disinformation campaigns surrounding COVID-19, reportedly sharing stories claiming that the virus has not reached Sudan and that the transitional government was using the pandemic lockdown to stifle dissent. The unit reportedly sought to mobilize people to protest the lockdown.¹¹¹

Also, on the subject of COVID-19 reporting, in 2020 there was a case of two female journalists threatened and harassed by security forces for three days in North Darfur for "exaggerating" the health situation in the state — this instance was publicized by media rights groups both locally (e.g., by the Sudanese Journalists Network) and internationally (by the Committee to Protect Journalists).¹¹²



People wait to receive COVID-19 vaccines at a vaccination site in Khartoum, March 2021.

© Mohamed Khidir / Xinhua / Alamy Stock Photo

Role of International Assistance

Before describing the international community's assistance to the media sector, let us situate this in the wider context of international aid to Sudan. Sudan's multiple crises and the long civil war with the South have made the country a big recipient of humanitarian aid — particularly food aid — for the last 20 years.¹¹³

Now, the recent political opening of the revolution and Sudan's strategic geopolitical situation have meant even greater interest from the international community — millions in foreign aid have been given to support the transitional government. For example, in June 2020, at the Sudan Partnership Conference, the Friends of Sudan group¹¹⁴ pledged \$1.8 billion to assist the country “on the road to peace and democracy.”¹¹⁵ However, Sudan's economic situation is so dire that Prime Minister Hamdok has estimated that the country needs up to \$10 billion in aid to rebuild its economy.¹¹⁶

During the popular revolution, the African Union and European countries made it clear they were on the movement's side, and that Sudan's pariah status in the international community would not shift without a regime change. The removal of Sudan from the United States' State Sponsors of Terrorism list (announced by President Donald Trump in October 2020) is widely seen as representing a key opportunity for Sudan's transitional government to reconnect with the international community, particularly the United States. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have also moved to help Sudan (in July 2021) with a package of debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative, of which Sudan is now a part.¹¹⁷

The Gulf states are probably more important than the West when it comes to aid to Sudan. During the uprising, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE backed



© Olamahadi / CC BY-SA 4.0

the Transitional Military Council with billions of dollars of support,¹¹⁸ and now the transitional government is looking to the Gulf for the largest amounts of aid. Saudi Arabia is Sudan's biggest financial donor and, along with the UAE, is supplying substantial quantities of “fuel, bread and foreign exchange.”¹¹⁹ It is clear that these countries and other “big players” in the Arab world, such as Egypt, not only are large aid donors but also have diplomatic influence and financial leverage over the various political parties now represented in the transitional government, and particularly over the military. When it comes to the media, it is extremely unlikely that such countries' influence will extend to support media reform in Sudan — after all, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are the third and fourth “worst jailers of journalists” in the world, according to the CPJ.¹²⁰ In fact, as discussed further below, it is likely that these countries will influence Sudan's transitional government toward more media control, rather than media freedom or liberal reform.

Aid to the Media Sector

Unlike the Gulf states, Western donors — i.e., the United States, Canada, United Kingdom (UK), and European and Nordic countries — *do* appear to be interested in supporting the independent media sector and media reform efforts, mainly in the context of wider democratization and governance aid programs. In fact, as one of our interviewees said, there has been a “gold rush” of foreign aid agencies coming into Sudan wishing to work on democratization and governance since the popular uprising.

Before the uprising, there were a few INGOs supporting independent media, mainly through training, but working “below the radar,” as there were laws limiting foreign funding. These included Internews, GISA Group, Free Press Unlimited/Radio Dabanga, and the Thomson Foundation. As of July 2021, support for a more plural and independent media sector makes up a more significant share of international aid to Sudan. Western donors are expected to give US\$5–10 million for media support in 2021, according to estimates provided by some interviewees. The UK is regarded

as a principal donor and international coordinator of media assistance in Sudan. According to an NGO source, UK support for media in Sudan in fiscal year 2020–21 was £400,000. The United States has been supporting the state broadcaster, the SRTC, with technical assistance and equipment since the revolution to help transform it into a public service broadcaster. The main bilateral donors (roughly ranked by size of actual or potential budget for media support) are the United States, through USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives; the European Union (EU); UK; France; Germany; Netherlands; and Switzerland.¹²¹ The most significant foreign implementing agencies are the British Council, Internews, UNESCO, the Thomson Foundation, CFI, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, and Free Press Unlimited — again roughly in order of the size of their budgets.¹²²

There is a donors’ group on media assistance/freedom that is currently coordinated by the UK Embassy and consists of USAID’s Office of Transitional Initiatives; the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO); Delegation of the European Union to Sudan; German Embassy (occasional attendance); French Embassy; and the United Nations Development Programme. This group seems to have met about three or four times so far but its functioning has been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This donors’ group claims to be “working closely” with the Ministry of Culture and Information but its members admit to being in a “holding pattern,”¹²³ waiting to engage with the new minister, Hamza Baloul, who replaced Faisal Mohamed Saleh in a government reshuffle in February 2020.

The INGOs that have been most active in the media sector to date are the British Council, Thomson Foundation, CFI, UNESCO, and Internews, all of which have run or are running various workshops and trainings for journalists (topics have included fact-checking, elections, disinformation, COVID awareness, preventing violent extremism, economics and business management (Thomson), preventing gender-based violence, training-of-



© Wirestock Creators / Shutterstock.com

trainers in journalism (UNESCO), as well as strategic communications and media literacy training for government officials (Thomson, financed by the UK Embassy). Radio Dabanga is funded by the Dutch Foreign Ministry via Free Press Unlimited and provides independent news and information — aimed initially at those in Darfur but now increasingly targeting a Sudan-wide audience. Other INGOs working on media (sometimes tangentially as part of governance or other human rights programs) include the GISA Group, working with grassroots documentary-makers and citizen journalists; Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Sudan office, which trains political parties on media and communications for election campaigns; and the National Democratic Institute, which works with the prime minister's office and the cabinet on key external and internal communications.

Separate from the UNESCO workshops and Media Reform Roadmap already mentioned (see also the case study below), CFI ran a media strategy workshop in Khartoum with French government funding in 2020. Thomson Media also convened one and, with the media INGO consortium it has convened, produced a concept note for a “national media development facility,” which it has presented to donors for funding

and to the Ministry as a “holistic” media development package (we call this the “INGO consortium plan”).¹²⁴ The vision behind this INGO consortium plan is to create a “one stop facility” (local center) for media (there is no local partner involved). Thomson Media, which is convening the group, is hoping for “coordination of all donors around a single objective” and to “avoid the mess there was in Tunisia, Myanmar, Serbia, Somalia” — implying there was money wasted and duplication of effort on media assistance in those countries.¹²⁵ It is unclear whether the INGO consortium plan will be approved by donors and, if so, whether it will secure the local ownership that would be key to its success.

Different donors have also commissioned various recent studies of the media landscape, notably one by Internews (2020); one by Altai for USAID;¹²⁶ a study on misinformation and disinformation for the President's Office, also financed by USAID; and an audience insights report (forthcoming) commissioned by the UK's FCDO.

Western donors are also exerting pressure diplomatically on the Sudanese government through their embassies,¹²⁷ and although the details of how



© Mohamed Khidir / Xinhua / Alamy Stock Photo

Sudanese protesters demanding political reforms and democratic transformation gather in Khartoum, June 2020.

and whether this is working is very hard to discern, Sudan is thought, at least by some, such as this interviewee, to be susceptible to soft-power influence:

The transitional government cares very much about what the international community think[s] of them and so if the international community keeps subtly or softly demanding media reform, the government will have to give in at some point and start a serious process of reform.¹²⁸

For the UK Embassy, it appears that Sudan's signing up to be a member of the Global Campaign/Coalition for Media Freedom (led by the UK and Canada) has made media reform a "policy priority for the FCDO,"¹²⁹ which would perhaps otherwise not be the case. The GCMF is, according to one British Embassy representative, the impetus for the UK currently taking the lead on media and convening the informal Sudan media donors' group. The GCMF (via the UK) has also provided some funding for the UNESCO Roadmap process. Other Western donors we spoke to believed they would be interested in supporting independent media as part of good governance, whether the GCMF existed or not. One donor government representative put it this way:

There are such massive transformational processes that require big conversations in this society, like what's the relationship between state and religion, and then what constitution you want to see, and how are you going to vote at the end of the transition ... So we certainly need to have media that is engaged and is capable to help the population get information and analysis.¹³⁰

Western embassies say there is good will between themselves and the transitional government and that "the strategic intent is there for human rights and pro-democratic reform within the civilian government," as one aid attaché put it. Another embassy official said "we've come a very long way ... there's a huge appetite for reform."

However, the Western diplomatic/donor community is also finding that the Sudanese government is very difficult to work with because of its internal divisions

(the military/civilian split being the biggest), political reshuffles, and myriad other priorities, particularly the peace process, humanitarian issues, and economic needs and reforms. Words used by international agencies to describe government personnel include "lack of competence," "exhaustion," "overwhelmed with work," "fuzzy situation," and "no clear lead on [the] government side." The COVID-19 pandemic has not helped (and, indeed, has affected our own efforts to reach government officials for interview). The situation at the time of writing, from the international assistance community perspective, can be summed up in the words of one donor government official who said:

Our goal is having government engagement ... We've been holding off with our media strategy until the new minister arrives. We're in a holding pattern.¹³¹

When it comes to civil society, there is little evidence of organized grassroots efforts to push for media reform. INGOs and donors would like to work with local groups but appear to be unable to find sufficiently solid and broadly representative media associations, journalist unions, or membership organizations with which to partner. One donor representative said,

A paradigm shift is needed for civil society. They're very oppositional. Generally, civil society is a pillar but we haven't had much money for them so far. They're very complicated to work with — worse than with government! — and the revolutionary youth don't know how to get international money.¹³²

UNESCO and other international players have linked with the Sudanese Journalists Network and the Sudanese Women Journalists Entity¹³³ and there are a handful of other CSOs related to media and human rights (enumerated above). But local organizations working on media are scarce.

The reason for this, as already mentioned, is that after three decades of crackdowns and having to work under the radar with limited resources, Sudanese civil society is finding it hard to finance itself and to lead on the reform process in all sectors, not just in the media.

Media Assistance: Is There a Strategic Direction?

It is unclear whether the international community has clear long-term strategies for supporting the media in Sudan, beyond commissioning studies and discussing a variety of options and “roadmaps” with the transitional government and waiting for it to make a move. The Western donors’ strategy, such as it is, appears to be to hold funding while navigating the constant government changes and unstable political scene in the country.

Much of the media support given so far has been opportunistic and managed by outside agencies. Before the revolution, this was largely because the few INGOs supporting the media, like Internews, Free Press Unlimited, and the Thomson Foundation, had to operate without drawing the attention of the former regime. Now, things are opening up, and media INGOs are setting up offices in Khartoum, or are in the process of doing so. For example, Radio Dabanga used to have to broadcast from the Netherlands on shortwave radio and online but it is likely to start broadcasting from Sudanese soil soon.

Since the revolution, media assistance efforts have been ad hoc, short term, and somewhat uncoordinated — and still not properly “owned” by any Sudanese entities, whether governmental or not. Delays can partially be excused by the COVID-19 pandemic but identifying the “what,” “how,” and “when” of media support remains the great challenge. The following list of priorities, identified by the transitional government and by most media stakeholders, shows that “everything is a priority” (in the words of one donor representative); and while training needs are clearly urgent, so too are the needs to address the media’s economic difficulties and legal constraints.



© REUTERS / Unit Bektas / Alamy Stock Photo

Priorities

The **transitional government** appears to have prioritized the following media laws for further reform:

1. A press law that will regulate media outlets and journalists, as well as ensure their freedoms (to replace the 2009 Press and Publications Act, which may be repealed)
2. A radio and television transmission law to independently regulate broadcasts
3. A law to ensure access to information from public institutions
4. General Radio and Television Corporation legislation to establish the corporation as a public entity and guarantee its editorial independence (this is a reform of the state broadcaster, SRTC, to become a self-financing public corporation)¹³⁴

According to a study commissioned by USAID, the transitional government planned to have all four laws approved by the end of 2020.¹³⁵ However, this process has already been delayed by over a year.

All media reform stakeholders have identified the following other (nonlegal) priorities for the Sudanese media sector:¹³⁶

1. Improving capacity building by up-skilling existing journalists and training new ones
2. Ensuring media sustainability and providing support for investment and business models¹³⁷
3. Improving media literacy (including government communications)
4. Upgrading technical infrastructure and digital capabilities
5. Focusing on ethics and establishing codes of conduct
6. Developing and supporting more independent, diverse, regional, and community content
7. Setting up an independent regulatory authority for broadcasting and establishing other regulatory/adjudicating authorities and commissions to oversee state advertising, ensure access to information, and promote diversity and gender equality, among others.

8. Setting up a system of self-regulation among journalists, media managers, and other types of media workers

9. Creating processes to measure press circulation and broadcast and online audiences

The need for training tends to top the recommendations listed by media support INGOs. Our interviewees mentioned the need for capacity building for everyone from journalists, government communicators, and the police to journalism students, social media activists, and media technicians. For example, Altai Consulting — which has been advising USAID — judges the four most urgent training needs for journalists and journalism students to be “a. The ethics of journalism b. The basics of journalism including the different writing formats c. Mobile journalism d. Sourcing and fact-checking.”¹³⁸ But there have been different hierarchies of training needs put forward; for example, Thomson Media says capacity building in digital skills is a priority. While training is important, it does reflect the overarching supply-driven approach many donors take, as opposed to the extensive structural change needed (discussed more below).



© REUTERS / Mohamed Nureldin Abdullah / Alamy Stock Photo

In the meantime, economic problems experienced by journalists and media houses are urgent and profound, and training will not necessarily address this issue. Financial support was high on the list of needs expressed by most of the media workers (managers and journalists) we interviewed.

At the same time, UNESCO, which seems to be in “pole position with the donors” (according to one INGO representative) has priorities that are regulatory and legal in nature. Its Media Reform Roadmap lays out some ambitious goals as well as a timeframe, starting with “repealing of laws used to suppress media freedom and to criminalize journalists.” But this timeframe has already been delayed by over a year. In the interim, the media INGO group has submitted its separate “consortium plan” to international donors and the Ministry, addressing content creation, state media reform, support for regional and grassroots media outlets, and legal issues.

The situation for the Western donors is one of waiting to see which of these plans (if any) will be favored by the minister and the Ministry’s Media Commission. At the time of writing, it is unclear which strategy or strategies hold most sway with the transitional government, how negative the evident tensions between civilian and military forces within the government will be for media freedom, and to what extent, if at all, the international community is influencing media reform and support.

Much of what is needed is structural in nature and goes beyond any roadmap so far put forward — such as the need to build stronger supportive institutions; to change the incentive system that creates self-censorship; to build greater broad-based political will to enact the reform priorities; and so on. But these are long-term aims, and beyond the powers of the international community without a stable government fully committed to reform — and that is not (yet) in place. The donors are therefore relying on supply-driven approaches for the time being, such as training, although they know that profound structural change is needed.

Meanwhile, the media INGOs are waiting for donors to release money for media support, an amount expected to be substantially more than what has

been given thus far. As mentioned above, about \$5–10 million is expected to be on offer by the donors for media support in 2021, and the INGOs we spoke to expect there to be a series of “calls for proposals” launched this year.

Many of our interviewees noted that a true bottom-up approach, with the involvement of local Sudanese grassroots media and media-support organizations, has been missing. In the words of one representative of an international media NGO (a Sudanese national):

For now we haven’t seen many local organizations being invited to the table, which is something that we really would like to see in the future. It’s not so bad to have finance but talking about local media needs without Sudanese media groups being active in these conversations and everybody learning from them in order to empower them, that’s a key factor. We don’t want to see some kind of colonialist approach.¹³⁹

However, it remains to be seen whether the INGOs will truly be able to involve local Sudanese grassroots organizations — or whether, as is often the case in these situations, it is the INGOs themselves that will ensure their own sustainability by securing donor funding, while the local media enjoy a short-term boost but subsequently lapse into long-term hardship once more.

Another negative that has long dogged the international aid system is the fact that INGOs must compete for donor funds rather than work cooperatively for them. We may well see this situation repeating itself in Sudan soon. Because of this need to compete for funds, some INGOs we talked to were gloomily predicting that “competition” and “territoriality” would develop among INGOs before too long.

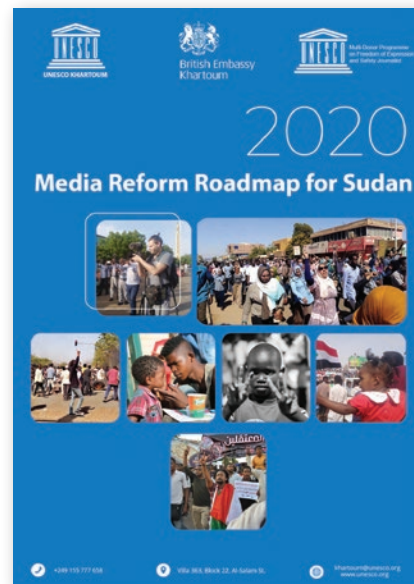
Case Study: UNESCO Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan

This case study analyzes what appears to be the most prominent initiative taken by the international community for media reform in Sudan to date.

Between 2019 and 2020, UNESCO¹⁴⁰ held a series of workshops and roundtables with journalists and media experts on media reform, with the financial backing of the United Kingdom (UK) and in close cooperation with the Ministry of Information and Culture. By the end of 2020, UNESCO published a *2020 Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan*,¹⁴¹ which outlines the steps needed to reform the sector in Sudan with ambitious goals. The intention is that this roadmap will lead to the creation of a national action plan on media freedom, a requirement of all countries signed up to the Global Campaign for Media Freedom, to which Prime Minister Hamdok committed Sudan in September 2019.

The UK funded this UNESCO initiative with approximately £150,000 and UNESCO has provided some of its own funding derived from the global Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists (to which Austria, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK have so far contributed).¹⁴²

The roadmap was devised using a “multi-stakeholder” approach, in which UNESCO convened 13 workshops and 66 “expert meetings,” “launching an open and transparent discussion on the situation of the Sudanese media and the way forward” to lay “the groundwork for a comprehensive reform of media legislation in line with international standards”¹⁴³ and in line with UNESCO’s indicators for media development.¹⁴⁴ These workshops included five thematic workshops in Khartoum and three workshops in Kassala, Atbara, and El Fasher.



These consultations culminated in a workshop on February 5, 2020, at a hotel in Khartoum. The headline recommendations from the workshop, included in the resulting roadmap, are the following:

- Replace the 2009 Press and Publications Law with one that guarantees freedom of the press and the protection of journalists.
- In the field of radio broadcasting controls, draft a new law for the independent regulation of radio, including provisions to encourage and regulate a variety of public, private, and community broadcasts.
- Regarding defamation laws and legal restrictions imposed on journalists, make legislative amendments to replace laws that do not comply with international human rights standards and that have been used to suppress freedoms, including relevant articles from the Criminal Code of 1991, the National Security Act of 2010, the Information Crimes Act of 2007, and the Press and Publications Law of 2009.¹⁴⁵

Indicative timeline for government action

Action \ Timeline	2020 M7 – M12	2021 M1 – M12	2022 M1 – M12	2023 M1 – M12
1. Legislative and regulatory reform				
1.1 Establishment of a transitional “Commission for Media and Information Reform”				
1.2 Drafting and adoption of a new law for the independent regulation of broadcasting				
1.3 Frequency allocation for broadcasting to be assigned to the broadcasting regulator				
1.4 Policy, legal and regulatory measures to promote community media				
1.5 Legislative and regulatory measures to ensure transparency of media ownership				
1.6 Drafting and adopting of a new law on Sudanese radio and TV				
1.7 Repeal of laws used to suppress media freedom and to criminalize journalists				
1.8 Repeal of the Press and Publications Act 2009 and replacement with a new press law				
1.9 Drafting of a new law to provide guarantees on access to information				

Screenshot showing part of the “indicative timeline for government action” in the UNESCO reform roadmap (version from September 1, 2020)

The roadmap includes 28 items for “government action” with associated timelines, covering the following:

1. Legislative and regulatory reform (example: “Action 1.3: Frequency allocation for broadcasting to be assigned to the broadcast regulator” — to be achieved during 2021)
2. Education, training, and employment (example: “Action 3.1: Media literacy and practical media skills embedded in youth work and schools” — to be achieved during 2021–22)
3. Investment in technical infrastructure (example: “Action 4.2: Extend the coverage of existing local radio services” — to be achieved during 2021–22)
4. Institution building and restructuring (example: “Action 2.9: Independent agency to oversee state advertising according to non-political criteria” — to be achieved by 2023)

Despite the optimism surrounding UNESCO’s roadmap goals, it is still unclear how it will be implemented and who the responsible bodies are. The then minister

of culture and information and his deputy were, apparently, very involved with writing the roadmap and the Ministry is meant to “own” it,¹⁴⁶ but it appears that COVID, the recent government reshuffle, and changes in the ministerial cabinet have slowed down the reform process. The new minister, Hamza Baloul, has yet to announce his priorities for the media, so it is unclear where this roadmap will fit. There has also been turnover at UNESCO, with the retirement of the director of the UNESCO office in Khartoum, Dr. Pavel Kroupine, since the roadmap was launched.

The fact that action on the roadmap depends on just a few individual government ministers’ and officials’ preferences is concerning. There is also a worry that the process is too slow:

We should remember that we still have no parliament — all the information, evaluation, and monitoring that the government is supposed to do is currently being done by the media. It is very important to prioritize rapid support.¹⁴⁷

The donors' media group appears to be using the UNESCO roadmap as its guiding strategy but some INGO representatives we spoke to said that that it is already outdated and does not take into account the rapid expansion of digital devices and platforms across the country. "UNESCO's plan is dislocated from the media ecosystem," said one INGO representative.

UNESCO's initiative can also be criticized for not being rooted in Sudanese civil society, although the UNESCO representative we spoke to insisted there was substantial local involvement: "We had to do a lot of brokering and bringing people together," he said, and listed 25 groups involved in the UNESCO consultations, including the Sudanese Journalists Network, SUDIA, Sudanese Women Journalists Entity, and the Darfur Journalists Association, as well as four national reviewers who are respected senior figures in law and the media. However, the majority of the journalists we interviewed had not been involved and were not aware of the roadmap.

Another criticism is that the roadmap is too ambitious. For example, just one of the actions, the reform of the

state broadcaster, is thought to be "a monumental task," in the words of one INGO representative.

Some of the journalists we interviewed had taken part in the UNESCO workshops and were generally positive; for example, one senior journalist who had previously been convicted under the severe press laws of the past said:

I welcome the outcomes of the workshops that were hosted by UNESCO. We spoke about topics that were considered 'red lines' in the previous government such as changing the 2009 act and removing/editing laws from the 1991 Criminal Act.¹⁴⁸

However, another local journalist we interviewed was disappointed that the transitional government had not — in his view — taken the initiative on media reform itself, and had had to resort to international aid:

I believe that there was no need for this [UNESCO workshop/roadmap] to be an external/international initiative and that the government itself could have started this.¹⁴⁹



Protesters march during a rally against military rule following the last coup, in Khartoum, September 2022

© REUTERS / Mohamed Nureldin Abdullah / Alamy Stock Photo

Conclusion

We find that there is a will for reform from the civilian part of the government, the international community, independent media professionals, and a handful of Sudanese CSOs. However, pushing for a free media is a low priority for most of the population, who have more urgent survival and security needs. Furthermore, the military/Islamist wing of the transitional government seems to want to control, not free, the media.

In July 2021, Sudan appeared to be at a critical juncture where democracy and more liberal values were being weighed almost equally against powerful military forces and fundamentalism, both within the government and in Sudanese society at large. Which of these two blocs gains the upper hand politically during this military/civilian transitional government will almost certainly dictate what happens to the media. The window of opportunity for a democratic transition and the installation of a genuinely civilian government is a narrow one.

Our research brings us to the conclusion that journalists and the news media are not currently enough of a watchdog force to influence the direction of politics either way, and they have little time to do so since elections are slated for 2023. Meanwhile, social media are too chaotic and divisive to represent a genuine, constructive democratic force.

It also appears that Western countries do not have enough leverage over the transitional government — or indeed time — to push it to carry through profound media sector reforms, such as helping to make the state broadcaster independent. The dominant role of military and fundamentalist forces and lack of emancipatory values and broad cultural base that would support substantial transformation toward a more democratic, liberal media landscape are huge

factors. Such a context has a profound effect on the viability of donors' strategies and reform priorities.

While changing laws may seem to be a sensible priority, it must not be assumed (by the international community or any other stakeholders) that once the legal hurdles have been cleared, a strong group of Sudanese journalists will be ready and able to champion freedom of expression and to hold power to account. There are simply not enough skilled and properly paid Sudanese journalists or enough trusted, well-organized, and well-funded media outlets in existence to make this a realistic scenario. Good independent journalism has been weakened to the breaking point by 30 years of dictatorship and economic hardship, if indeed it ever existed in Sudan. Likewise, the rest of civil society is weak.

Therefore, the question of sequencing in democratic transitions becomes particularly relevant in the context of Sudan. Is support for media reform likely to be effective only once other reform processes are underway? It would seem, from our analysis, that the answer to this question is yes, there *does* have to be a baseline level of governance, security, judicial, and economic reform achieved before media reform can be expected to move forward. This was evidenced in so many of our interviews when the question of priorities was evoked: It is very difficult to talk about



a free media when people are hungry; it is almost impossible to change media laws when there is not yet a legislative assembly in place.

Further, there needs to be a stronger civil society and more grassroots demand for a better and more independent media: These are lacking at present, and it will take time to build them up. This, then, presents media assistance actors and donors with a dilemma about whom and what to support and how to spend their money in the meantime.

On the plus side, we find that there is energy, experience, expertise, and ideas among the individuals and organizations on the media scene, including the Ministry of Culture and Information, INGOs, donors, and Sudanese journalists and media managers. There are several good media houses and training programs, there is activism around rights and legal reforms, and there are anti-disinformation campaigns in progress.

So, on the question of what could be done quickly (i.e., within the next two years), there are possibly some short-term “wins” to be made by media assistance actors such as providing core funding for existing progressive media outlets and for CSOs and human rights bodies, both local and international. Further, although it may appear to be top down and supply driven, there may be virtue in Western donors pushing for the creation of one or more institutions to drive media reforms as a priority in the short term.

At the same time, donors must think in the long term and help existing CSOs develop into local media reform agents. Donors need to boost grassroots capacity for sustainable media reform interventions; promote the adoption of legal frameworks for civil society operations; support management and operational capacity building among independent media outlets and media trainers; develop the policy and advocacy capacities of existing CSOs; and work with local CSOs to foster closer cooperation through networks and ad hoc coalitions.

We make the following recommendations, aimed primarily at the donor community and the transitional government.

Recommendations/ Future Opportunities

Recommendations for the international community:

1. Recognize media reform/support as a priority and ideally promote the ideal of a free media in all international forums related to Sudan, especially inside the Friends of Sudan group and in all diplomatic relations with other influential donors, especially Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states.
2. Not necessarily wait for the government to move on media to fund urgent projects quickly (e.g., training, countering COVID disinformation through trusted social media outlets, providing core funding to independent outlets like Radio Dabanga).
3. The international **Media Donors' Group** (currently coordinated by the UK Embassy) should pool all its money earmarked for media support to create a **media basket fund** that would force the key donor representatives to meet regularly to make decisions about what to fund from the basket, share what is working and what is not, show the government that the donors are serious about independent media, and minimize competition and duplication by INGO implementing agencies. The Media Donors' Group should be headed by an ambassador or equivalent and this senior person should act as a one-stop interlocutor with the Ministry of Culture and Information.
4. The Media Donors' Group should draw up a media-support strategy that differentiates between short- and long-term aims, recognizing that the two have to run in parallel, i.e., push the legislative reform set out in the UNESCO roadmap more strongly with the government, and **combine** that with long-term support for local CSOs working on journalists' rights.
5. The Media Donors' Group should support both the UNESCO roadmap and the ideas of the INGO Consortium plan and use them as the roadmap for the donors' group.



Recommendations for the government of Sudan:

1. Redouble the efforts of the Commission for Media and Information Reform, which already exists within the Ministry of Information and Culture and, if necessary, boost numbers of competent and qualified personnel working in this commission.
2. Work closely with the Media Donors' Group on the UNESCO roadmap/INGO Consortium plan (see above). Liaising should be done at a high level — i.e., between the undersecretary at the Ministry and a senior interlocutor in the Media Donors' Group.
3. Back an independent regulatory authority for media and internet, as a priority, and put someone trusted and independent in charge (e.g., a respected academic or a retired professional without links to politics).
4. Pay urgent attention to repealing all laws limiting freedom of expression and work with the Media Donors' Group to enact the laws proposed by the UNESCO roadmap and under consideration by the Ministry's media commission.
5. Ensure that the Disempowerment Committee acts transparently and within the law when examining media outlets linked with the previous regime.
6. Educate the military and ensure that all branches understand that journalism is not a crime and that the military should protect and facilitate journalists' work.
7. Minimize bureaucratic hurdles for visa permits and registration processes for media INGOs wishing to run projects in Sudan (in consultation with the Media Donors' Group, which could help carry out pre-checks on the INGOs in question).
6. In supporting the INGO Consortium plan, the Media Donors' Group should *also* oblige the members of the INGO Consortium (Internews, Thomson, CFI, et al.) to do the following: a) work together and not present competing project ideas for the same funds; b) align and add its activities to the UNESCO roadmap; and c) work at all times with existing Sudanese media outlets and civil society and require INGOs to minimize their expatriate staff and favor the recruitment of local administrators if they establish offices in Khartoum.
7. Fund the core operating costs of Radio Dabanga to expand its reach to most of the country on FM and expand its online presence, on condition that it partner with local media (possibly SRTC) and put a sustainability plan in place and a strategy to become independent of donor funding within, say, 10 years.
8. The Media Donors' Group should create a **public interest media fund** for Sudan and use this to support small Sudanese-run media outlets, production houses, and local media-support NGOs that are already inclusive, independent, young, and innovative, favoring private start-ups, community media, and media based outside Khartoum. Consider providing core or direct salary support for these outlets and make it easy to access and apply for financial aid from the fund. (Learn from INGOs already working with these local organizations which should receive priority status, but channel the funds directly, not through the INGOs — take some risks!)

Endnotes

- ¹ Before 1989 there was a brief opening of the media following a previous coup and uprising in 1985, which meant there was a short-lived but relatively lively media at the time Al-Bashir came to power (e.g., Sudan had 55 daily or weekly newspapers and magazines at this time) but Al-Bashir's Revolutionary Command Council banned all of them and dismissed more than 1,000 journalists. See LaVerle Berry, Ed., *Sudan: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 2015), <https://www.loc.gov/item/2014043450/>; Prior to the brief democratic opening that Sudan enjoyed between 1985 and 1989, the country's media suffered from repression and censorship more or less continuously under a series of military- and/or Islamist-led governments since independence in 1956. See Aida Al Kaisy, *Media Information Ecosystem Analysis: Sudan* (Arcata, CA: Internews, 2020).
- ² Jina Moore, "Anatomy of an Internet Shutdown," *Rest of World*, May 12, 2020, <https://restofworld.org/2020/sudan-revolution-internet-shutdown/>.
- ³ "Sudan," Reporters Without Borders, n.d., <https://rsf.org/en/sudan>, accessed August 2021.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Reem Abbas, "Sudan's Protests: The Revolt of the Periphery," *Al Jazeera*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/1/28/sudans-protests-the-revolt-of-the-periphery>.
- ⁶ Sarra Majdoub, "Sudan Professional Association: The 'Ghost Battalion' at the Centre of the Revolution," *Europe Solidaire sans Frontières*, August 12, 2019, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article50184>.
- ⁷ Khalid Abdelaziz, "Sudan's Bashir Ousted by Military; Protesters Demand Civilian Government," *Reuters*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-politics-idUSKCN1RNOAY>.
- ⁸ Stephan Zunes, *Sudan's 2019 Revolution: The Power of Civil Resistance* (Washington, DC: International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2021), ICNC Special Report Series Volume 5, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Zunes-Sudans-2019-Revolution-1.pdf>, 1.
- ⁹ Many people used virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent the internet ban during the uprising. VPN addresses were provided by local resistance committees, which worked at the grassroots level, passing on messages received through social media to neighbors who did not have access to communication technologies. These committees assigned people to become citizen journalists and/or videographers of the protests. Social media also helped counter Al-Bashir regime propaganda and organize protests in the backstreets of Khartoum within minutes. Such protests often confounded the security forces who were overextended and exhausted from having to constantly move from place to place to suppress actions; Stephan Zunes gives an example of how Twitter was used by protesters: "following a protest or major incident with security forces, people would tweet to show solidarity, often including a descriptive hashtag. Similarly, calls for participation in a march, rally, or other action would use a specific hashtag. International news outlets would pick up on the initial posts that would later get circulated and shared further across networks of activists." See Zunes, *Sudan's 2019 Revolution*, 22.
- ¹⁰ "The committees were informal, locally autonomous, and covered neighbourhoods, villages, and other smaller networks of residents. These were particularly popular among young Sudanese, who did not feel included in the traditional opposition groups or adequately represented in the FFC [Forces of Freedom of Change]." See Zunes, *Sudan's 2019 Revolution*.
- ¹¹ Amar Jamal, "The Khartoum Massacre: When the Sudanese Revolution Lost Its Innocence," *The Wire*, April 10, 2021, <https://thewire.in/world/khartoum-massacre-sudan-revolution>.
- ¹² The Sovereign Council was designated head of state and supreme commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces, Rapid Support Forces, and other uniformed forces. It is composed of 14 members (5 from the Transitional Military Council, 5 from the Forces of Freedom and Change, a civilian selected jointly, and 3 representatives from the armed groups — signatories of the peace agreement). A Transitional Legislative Council of at most 300 members was to be formed within 90 days of establishing the Sovereign Council but it has yet to materialize. See "Sudan: A Transition under Pressure," Briefing, European Parliament, December 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659413/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)659413_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659413/EPRS_BRI(2020)659413_EN.pdf).
- ¹³ "Sudan Protesters, Military Form New Transitional Council," DW, August 20, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/sudan-protesters-military-form-new-transitional-council/a-50101593>.
- ¹⁴ The power-sharing agreement between the military and civilian forces was originally planned to last 39 months but on October 18, 2020, and upon signing the Juba Peace Agreement, the Sovereign Council and Ministerial Council approved a constitutional document that extends the transitional government period for 14 more months. See "Sudan Extends Transitional Government Period," *Middle East Monitor*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201104-sudan-extends-transitional-government-period/>.
- ¹⁵ Naba Mohieddeen, "Sudan Normalizes Relations with World Bank," *VOA*, March 27, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/sudan-normalizes-relations-world-bank>.
- ¹⁶ David Pilling, "Fragile Sudan seeks to stabilise foreign relations," *Financial Times*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/b7c40545-e611-467b-9671-c565ccb58da9>.
- ¹⁷ "Sudan," Reporters Without Borders, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/sudan>.
- ¹⁸ Barbara Woodward, "Progress towards Peace, Prosperity and Democracy in Sudan," *Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Government of the United Kingdom*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/progress-towards-peace-prosperity-and-democracy-in-sudan>.
- ¹⁹ "The World Bank in Sudan," *The World Bank*, last updated September 29, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/sudan/overview>.
- ²⁰ Armed confrontations among rival tribal parties in South Kordofan are ongoing. A clash on April 28, 2021, resulted in dozens killed and wounded. See "South Kordofan Violence Resurfaces as Dozens Are Killed or Wounded in Tribal Clashes," *Dabanga*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/south-kordofan-violence-resurfaces-as-dozens-are-killed-or-wounded-in-tribal-clashes>.

- 21 Ongoing tribal clashes in El Geneina have resulted in the recent deaths of 56 people and the displacement of thousands to Chad. See "Death Toll Rises from Fighting in Sudan's West Darfur: UN," Al Jazeera, April 6, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/6/death-toll-rises-from-fighting-in-sudans-west-darfur-un>.
- 22 Sudan and Ethiopia are now experiencing an ongoing border dispute over a fertile agricultural area known as al-Fashaga. The tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia also continue to rise due to the problematic Renaissance Dam negotiations. See Max Bearak, "A Border War Looms between Sudan and Ethiopia as Tigray Conflict Sends Ripples through Region," Washington Post, March 19, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/03/19/sudan-ethiopia-border-conflict/>; "Gerd: Sudan Talks Tough with Ethiopia over River Nile Dam," BBC News, April 22, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56799672>.
- 23 Susanne Jaspars and Youssif El Tayeb, "Food Aid and Power in Sudan — Time for Continuity or Change?" March 1, 2021, <https://csf-sudan.org/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7/>.
- 24 "Sudan — Climate Projections — Mean Projections," World Bank Group, n.d., <https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/sudan/climate-data-projections>, accessed August 2021.
- 25 "One Million People Affected by Nile River Floods. 'This Is What Climate Change Looks Like,'" Cordaid via ReliefWeb, November 24, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/one-million-people-affected-nile-river-floods-what-climate-change-looks>.
- 26 "Sudan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021 (December 2020)," United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs via ReliefWeb, February 22, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-needs-overview-2021-december-2020>.
- 27 "Consolidating Sudan's Transition: A Question of Legitimacy," Clingendael, Policy Brief, 2020, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Policy_Brief_Consolidating_Sudan_transition_February_2020.pdf.
- 28 Sudanese freelance journalist in an interview with the authors, September 13, 2020.
- 29 Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report* (Washington, DC: US Agency for International Development, 2020), unavailable online; "Sudan—Radio," Media Landscapes, n.d., <https://medialandscapes.org/country/sudan/media/radio>, accessed August 2021.
- 30 "Sudan—Print," Media Landscapes, n.d., <https://medialandscapes.org/country/sudan/media/print>, accessed August 2021; "Mali—Overview," Media Landscapes, n.d., <https://medialandscapes.org/country/mali>, accessed August 2021.
- 31 Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report* (USAID, September 2020); Some of the most popular and notable outlets include *Al-Dar* ("The Homeland"), popular tabloid daily; *Al-Democrati* ("The Democratic"), established after the revolution in 2019; *Al-Jareeda* ("The Newspaper"), opposition leaning; *Al-Tayyar* ("The Direction"), opposition leaning, available online; *Al-Ra'y al-Amm* ("The Public Opinion"), private, daily; *Al-Shuruq* ("Sunrise"), private, based in Dubai, via satellite; Blue Nile TV, jointly owned by private shareholders and the government, entertainment content via satellite; Bukra TV, established during the revolution as the mouth of the revolution; Capital FM, private, Khartoum English-language station; Hala FM, private, music-based Khartoum station; Omdurman TV, private, via satellite; Radio Dabanga, operated by Dutch nongovernmental organization, targets Darfur; Sudania 24, private, via satellite; Sudan Radio and TV, government run, also available via satellite; Sudan News Agency (Suna), state run, in Arabic, English, and French.
- 32 Sudanese freelance journalist in an interview with the authors, September 13, 2020.
- 33 Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report* (USAID, 2020).
- 34 Nuba Reports, "Sudanese Women in Media: The Majority with a Minor Voice," *The New Humanitarian*, June 13, 2017, <https://deeply.thenewhumanitarian.org/womensadvancement/articles/2017/06/13/sudanese-women-in-media-the-majority-with-a-minor-voice>.
- 35 Senior Sudanese analyst in an interview with the authors, March 30, 2021.
- 36 However, state media are still among the most popular channels, according to ORB International, despite not being entirely trusted for news. Sudan Radio is particularly popular in rural areas where 65 percent of the population live and where other media and the internet tend not to reach. See ORB International, *Cabinet Office Sudan, Winter 2020/21 Report* (London and Charlottesville, VA: ORB International, 2021), unavailable online.
- 37 For instance, "Survey data shows that 71.8% of those asked access COVID-19 information on online news platforms such as Aljazeera.net, BBC Arabic, Sky News Arabia and other channels from the Middle East/North Africa region." See Internews, *Misinformation: Sudan's Centralisation Problem and the Pandemic* (Rooted in Trust, USAID, and Internews, 2021), https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/SUDAN_COVID-19_IEA_March2020.pdf, 26.
- 38 Patrick Werr, "Sudan Inflation Soars, Raising Spectre of Hyperinflation," Reuters, November 29, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-economy-idUSKBN2890CH>.
- 39 According to our researcher in Khartoum (May 2021 estimate).
- 40 Mona Abdel Fattah, "Sudanese Newspapers Shaken in Confronting Corona," *Independent Arabia*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/109391>.
- 41 Alexander Durie, "The Sudan Uprising and the Critical Role of Social Media," *The New Arab*, September 17, 2019, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/sudans-uprising-and-critical-role-social-media>; "Sudan: Supporting the Media Reform Roadmap," UNESCO, n.d., https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/country_factheets_sudan_web.pdf, accessed August 2021.
- 42 "Sudan," Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, Government of the United Kingdom, Factsheet, updated April 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/931505/Economic_Factsheets_October2020_Sudan.pdf.
- 43 ORB International, *Cabinet Office Sudan, Winter 2020/21 Report*.
- 44 "Sudan: Press Freedom Still in Transition a Year after Omar al-Bashir's Removal," Reporters Without Borders, April 10, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/news/sudan-press-freedom-still-transition-year-after-omar-al-bashirs-removal>.

- ⁴⁵ "Outcry as Sudan Blocks *El Sudani* Newspaper and 30 Other Websites," Dabanga, July 6, 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/outcry-as-sudan-blocks-el-sudani-newspaper-and-30-other-websites>.
- ⁴⁶ "At UN, Sudanese Prime Minister Says 'Great Revolution Has Succeeded,' Country Will Rebuild, Restore Values," UN News, United Nations, September 27, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1048022>.
- ⁴⁷ "Sudan Signs International Undertaking for Media Freedom," Dabanga, September 26, 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-signs-international-undertaking-for-media-freedom>.
- ⁴⁸ UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office and Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, *Media Freedom Coalition: An Overview* (London: Government of the United Kingdom, 2020), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-coalition-an-overview>.
- ⁴⁹ "Media Reform in Sudan: The Beginning of a New Era for Freedom of Expression," UNESCO, June 2, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/news/media-reform-sudan-beginning-new-era-freedom-expression>.
- ⁵⁰ Abdullah Muhammad Babker, "Week of Intense Activity for UNESCO in Sudan," *Sudan News Agency*, February 7, 2020, <https://suna-sd.net/read?id=538913>.
- ⁵¹ UNESCO, *Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan* (Khartoum: United Nations, 2020), <https://sudan.un.org/index.php/en/103843-media-reform-roadmap-sudan>.
- ⁵² Sudanese journalist in an interview with the authors, July 20, 2020.
- ⁵³ Article 56 of this interim Constitutional Declaration states "Freedom of expression and the press (1) Every citizen shall have the unrestricted right to freedom of expression, to receive and publish information and publications, and to access the press, without prejudice to public order, safety and morals, as defined by law. (2) The right to access the internet, without prejudice to public order, safety, and morals, as defined by the law. (3) The state shall guarantee freedom of the press and other media, as regulated by law in a democratic, pluralistic society. (4) All media shall adhere to the ethics of the profession and shall not incite religious, ethnic, racial, or cultural hatred, or call for violence or war." See Draft Constitutional Charter for the 2019 Transitional Period, signed August 2019; "Sudan: Interim Constitutional Declaration Signed," US Library of Congress, Global Legal Monitor, n.d., <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/sudan-interim-constitutional-declaration-signed/>, accessed May 3, 2021.
- ⁵⁴ Aida Al Kaisy, "Media Information Ecosystem Analysis: Sudan," Internews, 2020, unavailable online.
- ⁵⁵ Confirmed by Reporters Without Borders reports and attested to by almost all the journalists we interviewed. See "Sudan Still Awaits Its Press Freedom Revolution," Reporters Without Borders, December 3, 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/news/sudan-still-awaits-its-press-freedom-revolution>.
- ⁵⁶ In July 2019, the Transitional Military Council issued a constitutional decree to change the name of the National Intelligence Security Service to the General Intelligence Agency. The decree also included amending some articles in the National Security Agency Law of 2010 to reform the institution. See Murtada Koko, "Changing the Name of the Sudanese Intelligence After its Restructuring," *Al Ain*, July 30, 2019, <https://al-ain.com/article/sudanese-intelligence-service>.
- ⁵⁷ "Sudan: Freedom on the Net 2020," Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/sudan/freedom-net/2020>.
- ⁵⁸ "Sudan: Unlawful Detentions by Rapid Support Forces," Human Rights Watch, March 1, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/01/sudan-unlawful-detentions-rapid-support-forces>.
- ⁵⁹ See, for instance, a report released May 4, 2021, by Radio Dabanga about the mistreatment and detention of social media activist Adel Dahab in North Kordofan, which also mentions the recent arrest and prison sentence for another human rights defender, Waad Bahjat, who was also active on social media (although her subsequent prison sentence was not, ostensibly, for her social media activity). See "Activist abused and detained by Military Intelligence," Dabanga, May 4, 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/activist-abused-and-detained-by-military-intelligence>.
- ⁶⁰ "Violations of Press Freedom Barometer," Reporters Without Borders, 2021, <https://rsf.org/en/barometer?year=2021&type=id=236#list-barometre>.
- ⁶¹ Al Kaisy, "Media Information Ecosystem Analysis: Sudan."
- ⁶² "Sudan: Freedom on the Net 2020," Freedom House.
- ⁶³ "Sudan : Press Freedom Still in Transition a Year after Omar al-Bashir's Removal," Reporters Without Borders.
- ⁶⁴ Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report*.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.; "The eyes of Sudan are on Khartoum to ensure that the interim government of Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok remains true to the ideals of the revolution. Government efforts to dismantle the 'deep state' by replacing affiliates of the former regime in positions of power are under scrutiny at home and abroad. Naysayers, especially Islamic fundamentalists hankering back to the former regime, are being called to account, and their media channels gagged." See "Sudan Timeline Oct-Dec 2019: Interim Government Put to the Test," Dabanga, January 20, 2020, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-interim-government-put-to-the-test>.
- ⁶⁶ "Media Revamp Committee to Be Formed in Sudan," Dabanga, December 13, 2020, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/media-revamp-committee-to-be-formed-in-sudan>; According to UNESCO, "This Commission would be of a temporary nature for a fixed term to be replaced, after enactment of legislation, by (a) an independent and permanent authority for the regulation of broadcasting; (b) a new public corporation to oversee Sudanese radio and TV; (c) a self-regulatory body for press regulation and (d) an independent oversight mechanism on access to information." See UNESCO, *Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan* (Paris: UNESCO, 2020), <https://sudan.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Media%20Reform%20Roadmap%20for%20Sudan.pdf>, 3.
- ⁶⁷ <https://twitter.com/AssociationSd>
- ⁶⁸ The Sudanese Journalists Union was one of the media entities most tightly controlled by the former regime. According to a number of our interviewees, instead of being a body to represent journalists, it was used as a way to further monitor journalism in the country, which eventually pushed journalists who were not followers of the National Congress Party to establish the Sudanese Journalists Network in 2008. Also, see Al Kaisy, "Media Information Ecosystem Analysis: Sudan," 14.
- ⁶⁹ Al Kaisy, "Media Information Ecosystem Analysis: Sudan."
- ⁷⁰ UNESCO, *Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan*.

- ⁷¹ "Sudan Events of 2020," in *2021 World Report* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/sudan>.
- ⁷² Ibid.
- ⁷³ Sudanese journalist in an interview with the authors, July 25, 2020.
- ⁷⁴ "Sudan: End Crackdown on Civil Society," Human Rights Watch, January 13, 2013, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/01/13/sudan-end-crackdown-civil-society>.
- ⁷⁵ Republic of Sudan, *Nairobi Security Act, 2010*, via MENA Rights Group, 2010, <https://menarights.org/sites/default/files/2016-11/Sudan%20National%20Security%20Act%202010%20%28EN%29.pdf>.
- ⁷⁶ "Sudan Blocks Civil Society from Participating in UN-led Review of its Human Rights Record," *Amnesty International*, March 31, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2021/05/AFR5443102016ARABIC.pdf>.
- ⁷⁷ Representative from a civil society organization in an interview with the authors, March 4, 2021.
- ⁷⁸ Representative from a civil society organization in an interview with the authors, March 4, 2021.
- ⁷⁹ Representative from a civil society organization in an interview with the authors, March 29, 2021.
- ⁸⁰ The interviewee is presumably referring to the transitional government's Commission for Media and Information Reform.
- ⁸¹ Representative from a civil society organization in an interview with the authors, March 29, 2021.
- ⁸² Representative from an international nongovernmental organization in an interview with the authors, April 7, 2021.
- ⁸³ ORB International, Cabinet Office Sudan, *Winter 2020/21 Report*.
- ⁸⁴ Quoted in ORB International, *Cabinet Office Sudan, Winter 2020/21 Report*, 18.
- ⁸⁵ Quoted in ORB International, *Cabinet Office Sudan, Winter 2020/21 Report*, 7.
- ⁸⁶ Senior Sudanese analyst in an interview with the authors, March 30, 2021.
- ⁸⁷ Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report*.
- ⁸⁸ Al Kaisy, "Media Information Ecosystem Analysis: Sudan."
- ⁸⁹ In the months after Al-Bashir was removed from power and imprisoned in April 2019, there were at least two attempted military coups and plots to take back power by elements of the former regime: "A military court in Khartoum has ruled to ban media coverage of the trials of defendants accused of involvement in the foiled coup attempt in July, as well as the Court Martial of former Janjaweed leader Musa Hilal. The court said the ruling was in 'order not to harm justice.'" See "Media Banned from Sudan Courts Martial," Dabanga, October 17, 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/media-banned-from-sudan-courts-martial>.
- ⁹⁰ Senior Sudanese journalist in an interview with the authors, March 1, 2021.
- ⁹¹ The interviewee is probably referring to the Rapid Support Forces, Sudanese paramilitary forces operated by the Sudanese government and implicated in brutal repression and violence in Darfur — also known as the Janjaweed. See "Sudan's Transitional Military Council Praises Rapid Support Forces," Dabanga, June 7, 2019, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-s-transitional-military-council-praises-rapid-support-forces>.
- ⁹² Civil society activist in an interview with the authors, February 15, 2021.
- ⁹³ "Sudan: Press Freedom Still in Transition a Year after Omar al-Bashir's Removal," Reporters Without Borders, April 10, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/news/sudan-press-freedom-still-transition-year-after-omar-al-bashirs-removal>.
- ⁹⁴ Al Kaisy, "Media Information Ecosystem Analysis: Sudan."
- ⁹⁵ "World Press Freedom Day in Sudan: Still a Lot of Work to Do," Dabanga, May 4, 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/world-press-freedom-day-in-sudan-still-a-lot-of-work-to-do>; The NPC was created by the 2009 Press and Publications Act, which, according to Internews, "guaranteed freedom of press but neglected to end censorship by including vague wording allowing restrictions on publication of issues that affect national security and public order." See Al Kaisy, "Media Information Ecosystem Analysis: Sudan."
- ⁹⁶ "Sudan," Reporters Without Borders, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/sudan>.
- ⁹⁷ Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report*.
- ⁹⁸ "Sudan," Reporters Without Borders, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/sudan>.
- ⁹⁹ "In Sudan, Women Are Still Facing the Deadly Threat of the Military," Open Democracy, October 5, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/sudan-women-are-still-facing-deadly-threat-military/>.
- ¹⁰⁰ "Sudan: Freedom on the Net 2020," Freedom House.
- ¹⁰¹ This committee (full name Empowerment Elimination, Anti-Corruption, and Funds Recovery Committee) was formed in November 2019 after the transitional government approved a law to dismantle the institutions set up by the ousted regime. Empowerment (tamkin in Arabic) is the term with which the ousted government of Omar Al-Bashir supported its affiliates in state affairs by granting them fargoing privileges, including government functions and the setting up of various companies. See "Sudan Anti-corruption Committee Calls for Criminal Proceedings," Dabanga, February 12, 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-anti-corruption-committee-orders-criminal-proceedings>; See also a selection and summary of media reports which frequently mention the Empowerment Removal Committee: "#SudanUprising Human Rights: Events in August 2021 Reflect Further Set-Backs for Women's Rights and Free Media," Sudan in the News, September 17, 2021, <https://www.sudaninthenews.com/political-briefings>.
- ¹⁰² About the Disempowerment Committee, one diplomat told us "we're monitoring it, it's very controversial." A media INGO representative said: "Regarding the dismantling committee, they have recently undergone wide criticism by those who see them as taking the law into their hands. What they did may be viewed by some as obstruction to media freedom." Others we interviewed took a more nuanced stance, such as a civil society representative who said: "Their decision to close down the two newspapers was correct. Those newspapers operated with money stolen from the Sudanese people and so it was fully legal to stop them and I don't think it was at all related to media freedom, this was an administrative issue."

- ¹⁰³ “Sudan Events of 2020,” Human Rights Watch; “Sudan Suspends Four News Outlets over Alleged Financial Link to Bashir Regime,” Committee to Protect Journalists, January 13, 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/01/sudan-suspends-four-news-outlets-links-bashir/>.
- ¹⁰⁴ “Sudan: 84 Broadcast Workers Fired over Alleged Loyalty to Former Regime,” International Federation of Journalists, December 15, 2020, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/recruitment/article/sudan-84-broadcast-journalists-fired-over-alleged-loyalty-to-former-regime.html>.
- ¹⁰⁵ “Arresting Journalists over Unfounded Charges Need to be Eliminated,” Skyline International, February 12, 2021, <https://skylineforhuman.org/en/news/details/384/sudan-policy-of-arresting-journalists-over-broad-charges-should-changed>.
- ¹⁰⁶ “Sudan: Freedom on the Net 2020,” Freedom House.
- ¹⁰⁷ “Sudan Events of 2020,” Human Rights Watch.
- ¹⁰⁸ Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report*.
- ¹⁰⁹ Senior Sudanese journalist in an interview with the authors, July 21, 2020.
- ¹¹⁰ Sudanese journalist in an interview with the authors, September 13, 2020.
- ¹¹¹ “Sudan: Freedom on the Net 2020,” Freedom House.
- ¹¹² “Sudanese Authorities in North Darfur State Harass 2 Journalists Reporting on COVID-19,” Committee to Protect Journalists, July 31, 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/07/sudanese-authorities-in-north-darfur-state-harass-2-journalists-reporting-on-covid-19/>.
- ¹¹³ Lydia Poole, *Sudan Aid Factsheet 1995–2009* (Somerset, UK: Development Initiatives, 2011), <http://devinit.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Sudan-Aid-Factsheet-2011.pdf>.
- ¹¹⁴ The Friends of Sudan is a group comprising Western and Gulf states alongside multinational organizations including the African Union, United Nations, and European Union. See Jonathan Tossell, *Consolidating Sudan’s Transition: A Question of Legitimacy*, CRU Policy Brief (The Hague: Clingendael, February 2020), https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/Policy_Brief_Consolidating_Sudan_transition_February_2020.pdf.
- ¹¹⁵ “\$1.8 billion Pledged to Assist Sudan’s People on the Road to Peace and Democracy,” UN News, United Nations, June 25, 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1067172>; These funds are being used to enhance macroeconomic stabilization and the World Bank’s Sudan Family Support Project. See “Sudan Family Support Project,” The World Bank, n.d., <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P173521>, accessed August 2021; The United Kingdom alone pledged £150 million at the Berlin Conference. This pledge included a £70 million bilateral budget for 2020–21 and £80 million to contribute to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The £70 million bilateral budget included £60 million in humanitarian aid and the rest includes aid for other development areas. See “Sudan: Overseas Aid — Questions for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office,” UK Parliament, September 23, 2020, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-09-23/94412>.
- ¹¹⁶ Tossell, *Consolidating Sudan’s Transition: A Question of Legitimacy*.
- ¹¹⁷ As a result of the decision, Sudan is to benefit from \$50 billion in foreign debt relief, effectively reducing the country’s current estimated \$56 billion foreign liability to \$6 billion over three years. See “EU, USA Welcome IMF, World Bank HIPC Decision on Sudan,” Dabanga, July 1, 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/eu-usa-welcome-imf-world-bank-hipc-decision-on-sudan>.
- ¹¹⁸ Zunes, *Sudan’s 2019 Revolution*.
- ¹¹⁹ Alex De Waal, *Sudan: Prospects for Democracy* (Somerville, MA: World Peace Foundation, Tufts University; London: Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics, 2019), <https://sites.tufts.edu/wpf/files/2019/05/Prospects-for-democracy-in-Sudan-110419.pdf>.
- ¹²⁰ “Attacks on the Press in 2020,” Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020, <https://cpj.org/attacks-on-press-2020-journalists-killed-jailed/>; Although we have no direct evidence for this, some of our interviewees hinted that some sections of the Sudanese media are willing to support and publicize the different factions, including fundamentalist Islam, in the transitional government (both civil and military) and may be benefiting financially from foreign aid coming from various countries in the Arab world. For example, one journalist we interviewed said “There is talk about good laws and so on, but on the other hand journalists could easily be bribed or take on agendas of agencies or groups whose aim is to destroy the transitional period.”
- ¹²¹ Our own rough estimates, based on interview data.
- ¹²² Our own estimates.
- ¹²³ Representative of a bilateral donor agency in an interview with the authors, March 10, 2021.
- ¹²⁴ At present, the members of the informal international media NGO grouping include Thomson Media, Internews, Fondation Hironde, Free Press Unlimited, CFI, and Deutsche Welle Akademie. David Quin, (Thomson Foundation) in an interview with the authors, April 7, 2021.
- ¹²⁵ INGO representative in an interview with the authors, April 7, 2021.
- ¹²⁶ Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report*.
- ¹²⁷ “Our ambassador continues to speak out against individual cases of violations” — UK Embassy employee in an interview with the authors, September 17, 2020.
- ¹²⁸ Sudanese political analyst in an interview with the authors, March 30, 2021.
- ¹²⁹ Embassy official in an interview with the authors, March 22, 2021.
- ¹³⁰ Donor government official in an interview with the authors, March 22, 2021.
- ¹³¹ Donor government official in an interview with the authors, March 10, 2021.
- ¹³² Donor government official in an interview with the authors, March 10, 2021.
- ¹³³ “Organization Defends Female Sudanese Journalists Against Discrimination,” Sky News Arabia, September 3, 2017, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/video/977874>; “Media Reform in Sudan,” UNESCO.
- ¹³⁴ Government official in an interview with the authors, March 1, 2021.
- ¹³⁵ Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report*.

¹³⁶ These priorities have all been identified in government-endorsed workshop reports (such as the UNESCO workshop in February 2020); in our interviews with Sudanese journalists, lawyers, and civil society representatives; interviews with donors, diplomats, and media INGOs; and in recent reports by think tanks, aid agencies, and media INGOs. They are presented in no particular order, but capacity-building was mentioned most often.

¹³⁷ For instance, there are calls for state help with lower taxes for media outlets: “there is a huge need for [state] support—not necessarily financial support, it could be in the form of decreasing taxes [and] customs on the production inputs related to the media and press ... we want to increase the journalists’ salaries and benefits, so that they can work properly.” Journalist in an interview with the authors, July 21, 2020.

¹³⁸ Altai Consulting, *Journalistic Needs Assessment in Sudan: Final Report*, 40.

¹³⁹ Interview with a Sudanese representative from an INGO, April 6, 2021.

¹⁴⁰ “Sudan: Supporting the Media Reform Roadmap,” UNESCO.

¹⁴¹ UNESCO Khartoum, British Embassy Khartoum, UNESCO Multi-donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists, *2020 Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan* (Khartoum: UNESCO Khartoum, British Embassy Khartoum, UNESCO Multi-donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists, 2020), <https://sudan.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Media%20Reform%20Roadmap%20for%20Sudan.pdf>.

¹⁴² “How to Actively Support Freedom of Expression and the Safety of Journalists,” UNESCO, n.d., https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/special_account_brochure_web_1.pdf, accessed August 2021; One of our interviewees said he believed that the United Nations Development Programme had also donated approximately US\$30,000, but we were unable to verify this.

¹⁴³ “Sudan: Supporting the Media Reform Roadmap,” UNESCO.

¹⁴⁴ “Media Development Indicators (MDIs),” UNESCO, n.d., <https://en.unesco.org/programme/ipdc/initiatives/mdis>, accessed August 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Babker, “Week of Intense Activity for UNESCO in Sudan.”

¹⁴⁶ An INGO representative in an interview with the authors, March 29, 2021.

¹⁴⁷ A Sudanese journalist in an interview with the authors, March 30, 2021.

¹⁴⁸ A senior Sudanese journalist in an interview with the authors, July 20, 2020.

¹⁴⁹ A senior Sudanese journalist in an interview with the authors, July 21, 2020.