

Human Rights at Risk: Popular Uprisings and Regime Change

Thursday, October 15, 2020

PROGRAM

Moderator: Shaun Irlam, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature, University at Buffalo
Q & A Facilitator: Ndubueze Mbah, Associate Professor of History, University at Buffalo

9:00 Welcoming Remarks

Shaun Irlam, Co-Chair, Alison Des Forges Memorial Committee
Ellen Dussourd, Co-Chair, Alison Des Forges Memorial Committee

9:15-11:00 Collective Action and Human Rights on Three Continents

Four Threats: What U.S. History Reveals about American Democracy Today
Suzanne Mettler, The John L. Senior Professor of American Institutions, Cornell University

Is American democracy in danger of backsliding today? Many assume that it is safe, given the nation's long-standing Constitution and progress over time in granting more inclusive and extensive rights. Yet American history reveals that democracy has often been fragile: the nation has lurched through numerous periods wracked by uncertainty about whether war or secession was imminent, dictatorship might arise, or rights might be imperiled. Four threats have caused disruption: political polarization; conflict over who belongs, particularly along lines of race; economic inequality; and executive aggrandizement. Now, for the first time ever, we face the dangerous confluence of all four threats. Mettler will discuss what earlier crises and the settlements that emerged from them indicate about our circumstances today.

African Protestors: Troublemakers or Heroes?

Lisa Mueller, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Macalester College

Africa has experienced a historic surge of protest in recent years. Some outsider observers fear that the unrest will destabilize African governments, amplify economic uncertainty, and derail counterterrorism efforts. Others see encouraging possibilities for Africans to advance democracy, development, and peace from below, by pressuring incumbents for reforms. Policy makers from Western governments and development agencies are often ambivalent about whether to discourage protesters or support them with diplomatic and material aid. This presentation will offer policy-relevant analysis of the potential for African protesters to be reckless troublemakers or agents of positive change. It will also assess the practical and ethical risks of foreign intervention in domestic contentious politics.

Anti-Government Protests in Hong Kong: Diverse Challenges to Human Rights

Ji Yeon Hong, Assistant Professor, Division of Social Science, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

This presentation will revisit Hong Kong's Anti-Government Protest from diverse political and economic perspectives. It will also compare how this protest was different from the previous movement, what made those differences, and how Hong Kong's public perceives the movement.

11:00-12:30 Lunch Break

12:30-2:30 Political Change and Human Rights in Sudan

From Revolution to Revolution: The Promises and Risks of Ending 30 Years of Military-Islamist Rule in Sudan

Harry Verhoeven, Associate Member, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford

In June 1989, a secretive movement of Islamists allied itself to a military cabal to violently take power in Africa's biggest country and launch a revolution meant to fundamentally overhaul the Sudanese state and the ways in which it engaged with the outside world. Sudan's revolutionary regime was built on four pillars--a new politics, economic liberalisation, an Islamic revival in society, and a U-turn in foreign relations--and mixed militant conservatism with social engineering: a vision of authoritarian modernisation. Over the three decades that the Al-Ingaz (Salvation) regime was in power, most outside attention focused on the many wars it fought in regions like Darfur, on the military-Islamist government's relationship with Al-Qaeda and on its stand-off with the United States and the West more broadly. But what such a focus has occluded has been the central importance of Sudan's political economy and the ways in which the Al-Ingaz regime restructured state-society-market relations to entrench itself in power and organize new forms of social mobility while blocking others. This presentation focuses on socio-economic rights and the violence of development in Sudan--an exercise at once both retrospective and prospective, as Sudan's post-April 2019 transitional institutions wrestle with the devastating economic legacies of three decades of Salvation rule.

Popular Change in (Revolutionary) Sudan and (Evolutionary) Ethiopia: An Early Comparative Analysis

Aly Verjee, Fellow, Rift Valley Institute

Historic political changes are occurring in the Horn of Africa's two largest countries: neighbors Ethiopia and Sudan. In both countries mass popular uprisings precipitated these changes, although the processes of reform were different: Ethiopia's 2018 shift occurred in the context of a leadership transition within the ruling political party while Sudan saw an overthrow of most of the structures of the previous regime. Yet both countries remain vulnerable to the reversal of reforms, while continuing to provide each other with both models to potentially emulate as well as cautionary tales. This presentation will explore some of the key similarities and differences in contemporary Ethiopia and Sudan, discuss the implications and prospects for continuing reforms, and the future trajectory for the protection and enhancement of human rights.

The Human Rights Drivers and Consequences of Sudan's 2018-2019 People's Revolution

Suliman Baldo, Senior Policy Advisor, The Sentry

Sudan's 2018/19 people's revolution was organized and led predominantly by youth and women groups from throughout the country and represented a generational phenomenon of unprecedented breadth and depth. The upheaval it created, and its discipline and unwavering commitment to nonviolence shook the repressive regime of deposed President Omer al-Bashir, but it also took the traditional political and trade union opposition completely by surprise. Baldo's presentation will focus on the mobilizing factors and demands of the youth and women groups behind the uprising. The presentation will in particular highlight the human rights and gender justice demands, and assess the performance of the transitional authorities in realizing these demands of Sudan's rising generations.

Human Rights Priorities during Sudan's Transition

Jehanne Henry, Former Associate Director, Africa Division, Human Rights Watch

This presentation will focus on the protest movement, the violent and bloody crackdowns, the transitional government, and the struggle for justice by victims of the bloody crackdowns and other violations during al-Bashir's regime in the year since the protests erupted. She will also discuss how Human Rights Watch researchers documented violations against protesters during the months leading up to al-Bashir's ouster and following his ouster, as the Sudanese "street" kept up pressure on the transitional military council to hand power to civilians.



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This symposium honors the life and work of human rights activist Alison Des Forges (1942-2009).

For more information, visit <https://www.alisondesforges.org/> or email Roger Des Forges at rvd@buffalo.edu, Ellen Dussourd at dussourd@buffalo.edu, or Shaun Irlam at irlam@buffalo.edu.