Since December, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, Sudan’s embattled President, has stared down the deepening resistance against his 30-year rule with brutal repression. Protests sparked by a price hike have morphed into the ‘just fall that’s all’ movement, leaving many dead and several others detained, including opposition figures and journalists. The dissolution of the federal and provincial governments, declaration of a year-long national emergency, and installation of military officials in key positions are desperate acts of a dictator who seized power in a 1989 coup.

Mr. Bashir was indicted in 2009 by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Sudan’s Darfur region, the first instance of a sitting head of government charged by The Hague court. But the former army officer’s subsequent election as President is but one apparent limitation of the Rome Statute. When Mr. Bashir flew out of South Africa in 2015, despite the High Court’s instruction against leaving the country, it was one more occasion on which he was allowed smooth passage.

There is little sign of the autocrat loosening his grip in the wake of ongoing protests, except handing the ruling National Congress Party leadership to his deputy. Mr. Bashir has since put on hold a controversial move to make him eligible to run for a third term in 2020. The months-long protests have been characterised as the most formidable opposition to Mr. Bashir and parallels have been drawn with the region’s 2011 Arab Spring. But the beleaguered President has cautioned the Opposition of civil war and prolonged instability in some of the countries in the region.

The rate of inflation in Sudan is among the highest in the world. The country is among the bottom 10 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International. The combination of a large working age population and widespread unemployment is not healthy for the nation. Moreover, Sudan’s foreign currency reserves have dwindled since oil-rich South Sudan seceded in 2011. A ballooning trade deficit has compounded this situation, as the economy was opened up during Sudan’s bid’s for WTO membership. Meanwhile, the government’s efforts to earn debt relief have been hampered by lack of multilateral aid because Sudan, although out of the U.S. trade embargo, is still on its terror sponsor roster. It is lobbying hard to be taken off that list and is wooing investments in the energy sector. But foreign firms would be wary of falling foul of U.S. regulators, especially after investigations showed illegal transactions some years ago with Sudan and Iran.

Reports suggest that the protesters, mostly comprising millennials, have been rising above religious and ethnic divisions of the kind that led to the 2011 partition of Sudan. That is a most encouraging sign in this strife-torn nation. It is time Mr. Bashir sets in motion a peaceful transition.

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Promise amidst strife
It is an encouraging sign that Sudanese protesters are rising above ethnic and religious divisions

GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM