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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MESA'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM EXPRESS CONCERN OVER DETERIORATING CONDITION OF ACADEMIC AND PERSONAL FREEDOM IN SUDAN

February 27, 2019 – The Board of Directors of the Middle East Studies Association of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom strongly condemn the Sudanese government's violent suppression of peaceful public protests since December 2018, and the arbitrary detention of protestors, including many academics.

Background

Protests against the policies of President Omar al-Bashir and his National Congress Party (NCP) first erupted in December 2018 in the city of Atbara, roughly 200 miles north of Khartoum, in response to drastic increases in the prices of bread and fuel. Within a matter of days, the protests had spread to Khartoum and other cities and towns throughout the country. At the same time, the focus of the protests shifted from grievances over prices of basic commodities to opposition to the alleged corruption of the NCP regime, which has ruled Sudan since 1989, and to President al-Bashir's plans to amend the constitution to allow him to run for an unprecedented third term in 2020.

As the protests spread, the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) took an active role in scheduling and organizing protests, particularly in Khartoum. Initially the SPA's priority was advocating for wage increases for public-sector workers. But when government security forces responded to a peaceful march in Khartoum in late December 2018 with violence, the SPA shifted its demands to the removal of the NCP government and the transition over four years to a multi-party democracy. The protests, now entering a fourth month, have spread throughout Sudan and among all classes of society.

Repression

The Sudanese government has responded to peaceful protests with violent repression. National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) forces have fired live ammunition at street protestors, killing over fifty, according to some reports. More insidiously, NISS "hit squads" have abducted targeted protestors, either on the street or from their homes, and transported them to secret detention and torture centers.

The role of academics

Sudanese academics have taken a key role in these protests, not least by drawing the attention of international academic and humanitarian organizations to the Bashir government's violent suppression of dissent. On 6 January 2019, government authorities briefly arrested eight University of Khartoum faculty members in order to prevent them from leaving campus to participate in protests. One hundred other faculty members who had fled to a campus building were prevented from leaving for three hours. Undeterred, some 300 University of Khartoum faculty members, students, and staff held a peaceful sit-in on 30 January, denouncing the government's violence against protestors and calling for democratic elections. Fourteen faculty members were arrested as a result of their participation in this sit-in. After a second sit-in on 12 February, seventeen additional faculty members were detained. Violent repression of academics has not been limited to the University of Khartoum. On 1 February 2019, a teacher in Kassala state in eastern Sudan was detained by NISS forces on charges of organizing a protest and died in custody. An investigation by the Sudanese prosecutor's office concluded that the teacher had been tortured to death. In Darfur state in western Sudan, protesting students were paraded in front of television cameras and forced to "confess" their ties to the rebel Sudanese Liberation Army.

On 19 February, the Sudanese government closed all institutions of higher education in the country, including thirty-eight public universities and roughly 100 private institutions. While at least one university spokesperson has claimed that the closure is intended to alleviate students' suffering during this period of upheaval, an SPA spokesman who is also a University of Khartoum faculty member insists that the closure is designed to prevent student participation in protests. Quite apart from the issue of suppression of protests, the closure interrupts students' educations and paths to productive employment. The current closure could, by some estimates, result in the loss of a full academic year. In addition, as a result of the closure, hundreds of students have been obliged to vacate their university housing. Many lack alternative lodging options.

Media suppression

Since late December 2018, over seventy Sudanese journalists have been arrested for covering the protests, while others have had their media credentials revoked. Among foreign correspondents, reporters from *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya* have had their credentials revoked while scores of journalists from other news outlets have been expelled from Sudan. Sudanese newspapers have been forbidden to cover the protests. Protests by the Sudanese Media Professionals organization have been prevented by the NISS.

State of emergency

On 22 February 2019, President al-Bashir declared a one-year nationwide state of emergency, dissolving the national government and all regional governments. He has called on Sudan's parliament to delay the proposed constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for another term as president, and he has called on opposition groups to enter a political dialogue with the government.

The SPA and other opposition groups have rejected President al-Bashir's measures and called for further protests, and indeed, the number of protests appears to have increased. The security forces are again responding violently, firing live ammunition and conducting house-to-house searches for activists. The result of all these actions is tremendous uncertainty throughout Sudan, even as many protesters remain in prison and universities remain closed.

MESA's position

MESA unequivocally supports the right of Sudanese academics, whether students, university faculty members, or independent scholars, to voice their opinions nonviolently without fear of retribution of any kind. We stress that freedom of expression, freedom of association, and academic freedom are expressly protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Sudan is a party. We call on the Sudanese government and security forces immediately to cease violent suppression of peaceful protest and detention of non-violent protestors. We further call on them immediately to release all detained protestors, whether academics or otherwise. We express our alarm at the deteriorating condition of academic and personal freedom in Sudan and our hope that peaceful, democratic solutions will prevail.

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