

Sudanese voice support for elections, accountability, limits on presidential powers

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 326 | Thomas Isbell and Elmogiera Elawad

Summary

Now that sustained popular protests have ended former President Omar al-Bashir's three-decade rule and achieved a power-sharing agreement among the military, civilian representatives, and protest groups (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019; AP, 2019; BBC, 2019; Morgan, 2019; DW, 2019), Sudan confronts the opportunities and potential pitfalls of shaping its political future.

The transition promises to be anything but easy. Economic problems that sparked initial protests in 2018 (Isbell & Elawad, 2019) still await complex solutions, and the state bureaucracy remains weak. How will the military and the clergy, both important players in Sudanese politics of the past, interact with democratic aspirations for the future?

In this dispatch, we use Afrobarometer survey data collected between 2013 and 2018 to explore what Sudanese citizens might be looking for as the new regime takes shape. Importantly, the most recent data were collected in July-August 2018, prior to the protests that would eventually upend the country's political scene. These findings thus reflect attitudes and perceptions as they evolved during the final half-decade of al-Bashir's rule, rather than up-to-the-minute opinions, which may well be influenced by recent events.

Nonetheless, these findings shed light on basic popular attitudes and perceptions on which the emerging system may be able to build. We find that as of mid-2018, Sudanese were widely supportive of democracy and the rule of law, and were growing increasingly critical of the extent of their own democracy. Most saw elections as the best way to choose their leaders and supported limiting their president to a maximum of two terms. They increasingly valued government accountability over efficiency, and a growing majority supported media freedom.

Most favoured a state ruled primarily by religious law and saw no contradiction between democracy and the teachings of Islam. But a majority also opposed religious leaders interfering with voters' decisions.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer heads a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across Africa. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys are planned in at least 35 countries in 2019/2020. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer national partner in Sudan, Sudan Polling and Statistics Center, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Sudanese between 22 July and 25 August 2018. A sample of this size yields results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Sudan in 2013 and 2015.

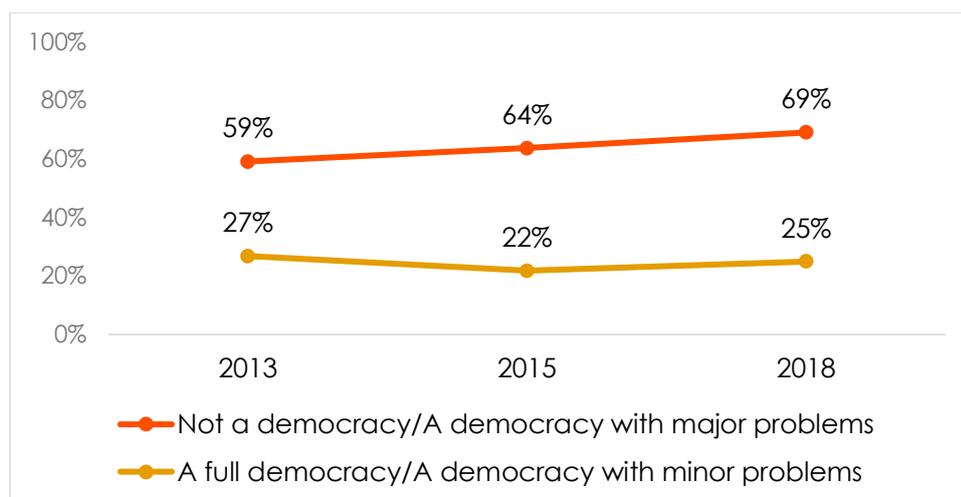
Key findings

- Between 2013 and 2018, in the final years of the al-Bashir regime, the proportion of Sudanese who said their country was “a democracy with major problems” or “not a democracy” grew from 59% to 69%.
- During the same period, support for democracy as preferable to any other form of government grew to 62% while opposition to one-man and one-party rule increased to 72%. Rejection of military rule also increased, from a minority (39%) to half the population (50%).
- As of 2018, eight in 10 Sudanese (79%) favoured choosing leaders through regular, open, and honest elections, but only about half (52%) said that the country needs many political parties. Most respondents (77%) supported a two-term limit for presidents.
- A majority (55%) of Sudanese prioritized accountability over efficiency in government. Two-thirds (65%) said the president should be bound by laws, and 55% said the president should be accountable to Parliament. Six out of 10 (61%) supported media freedom from government interference, a 12-percentage-point increase since 2013.¹
- Two-thirds (65%) of Sudanese said their country should be governed primarily by religious law, but the same majority (66%) would grant non-Muslims the same rights as Muslims.
- Majorities said that democracy does not contradict the teachings of Islam (69%) and that religious leaders should not interfere with voters’ decisions (56%).

Do Sudanese want democracy?

In Afrobarometer surveys in 2013, 2015, and 2018, during the final years of the al-Bashir regime, a growing share of Sudanese citizens described their country as “not a democracy” or “a democracy with major problems.” In 2018, not long before the protests that would lead to al-Bashir’s ouster, only one in four citizens said their country was “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems” (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Extent of democracy | Sudan | 2013-2018

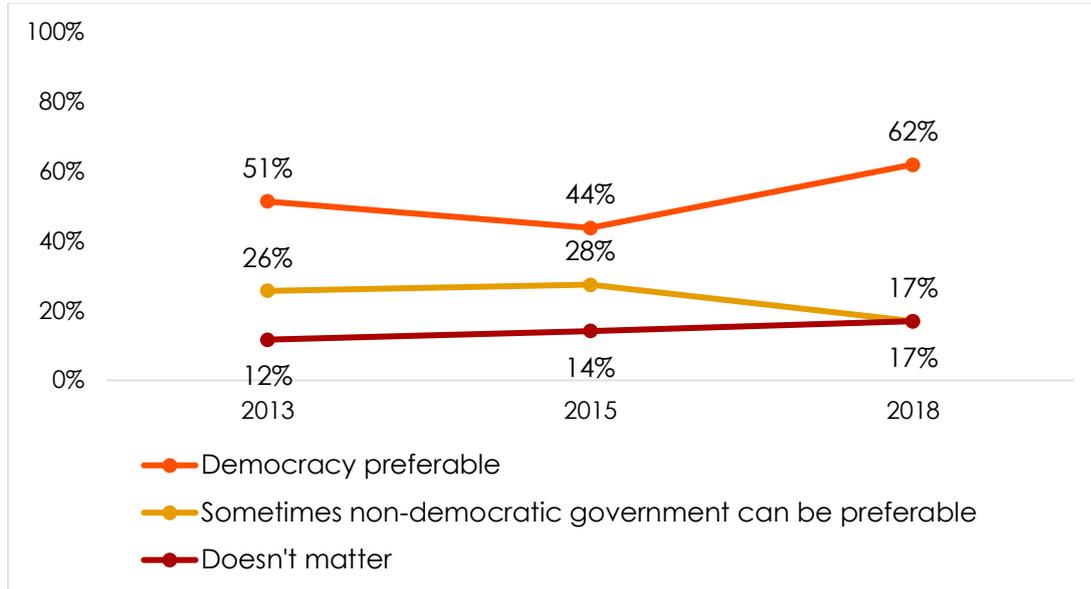


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion how much of a democracy is Sudan today?*

¹ This finding was reported incorrectly in an earlier version of this dispatch.

During the same time period, support for democracy as “preferable to any other kind of government” increased from half or fewer of ordinary Sudanese to 62% in 2018 (Figure 2).

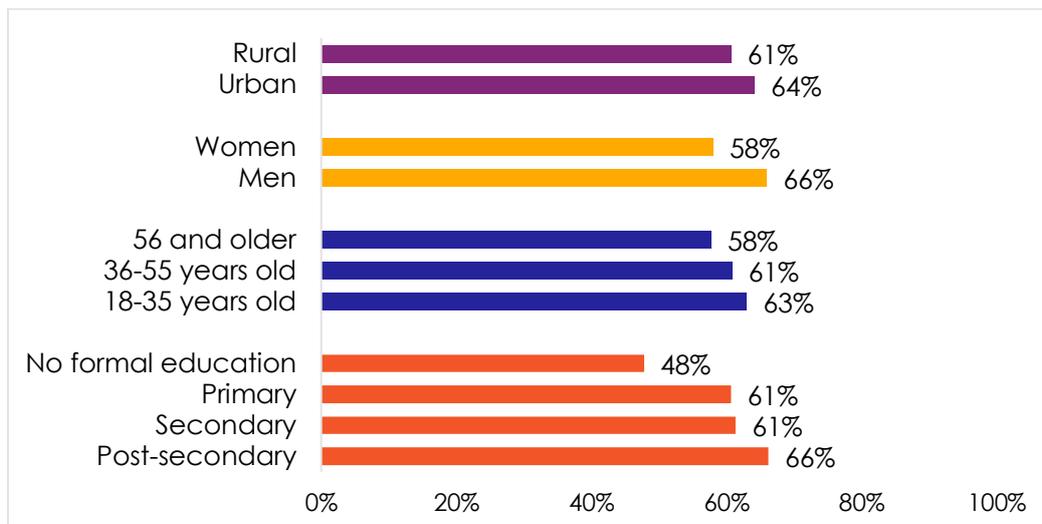
Figure 2: Support for democracy | Sudan | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Across socio-demographic groups, support for democracy was higher among men (66%) than among women (58%), among younger respondents (63% of 18- to 35-year-olds) than their elders (58%-61%), and among the more educated (66% of those with post-secondary education vs. 48% of those with no formal education) (Figure 3).

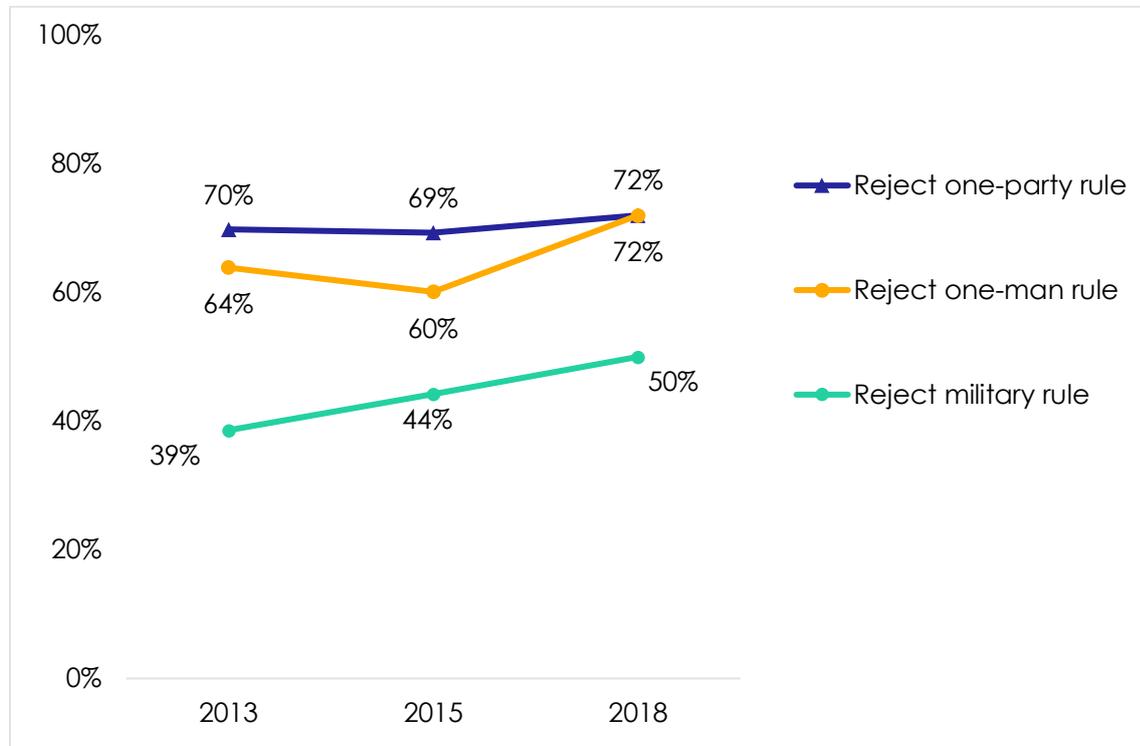
Figure 3: Support for democracy | by socio-demographic group | Sudan | 2018



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

More than seven in 10 Sudanese rejected the idea of one-party rule (72%) and one-man rule (72%, up from 60% in 2015). Only half (50%) rejected military rule, though that was an 11-percentage-point increase compared to 2013 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Reject non-democratic regimes | Sudan | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives:*

Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?

The army comes in to govern the country?

Elections and the National Assembly are abolished so that the president can decide everything?
 (% who "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove")

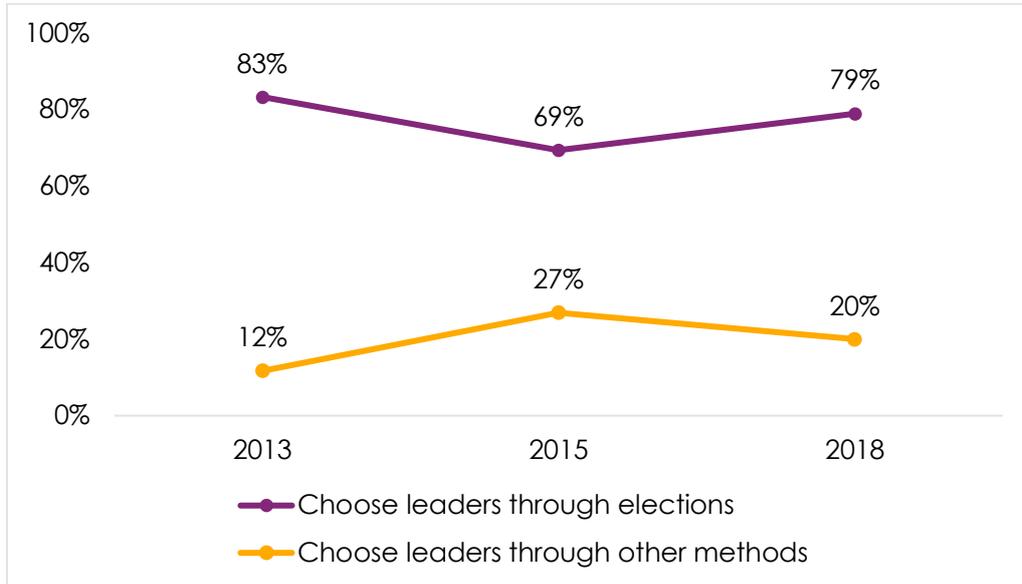
What do Sudanese want their government to look like?

Following the transition from the al-Bashir regime, much remains uncertain as to how exactly Sudan's institutional and political landscape will look going forward. In this section we explore what ordinary citizens want in institutions and power sharing.

As of 2018, Sudanese widely favoured choosing leaders through "regular, open, and honest" elections, rather than through other methods: 79% endorsed elections, a 10-point increase from 2015 though slightly below the 2013 level (83%) (Figure 5).

Despite widespread support for elections, Sudanese were more divided on the value of multiparty competition. About half (52%) said that many political parties are needed to ensure that voters have real choices, but more than four in 10 (43%) saw parties as divisive and said Sudan doesn't need many of them (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Choose leaders through elections vs. other methods | Sudan | 2013-2018



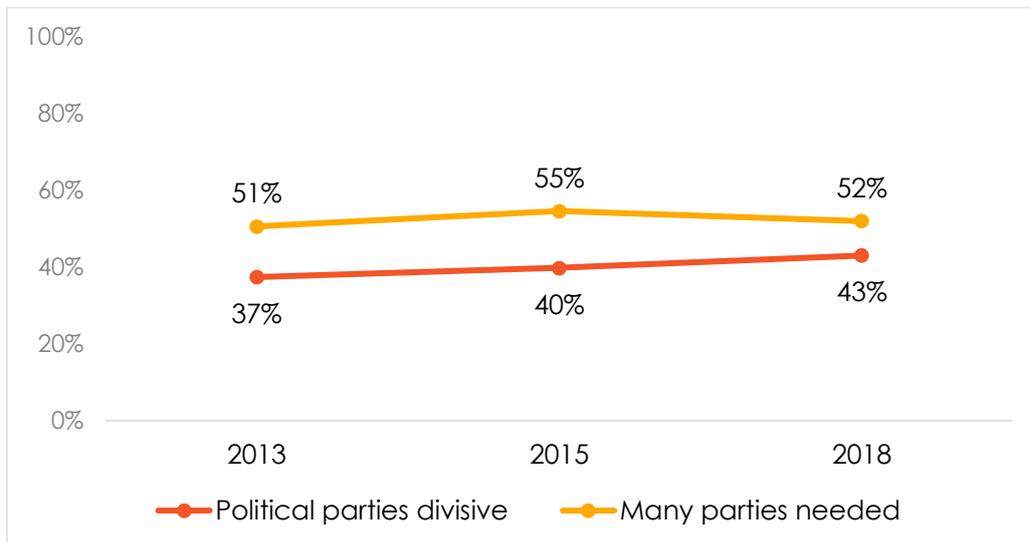
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.

Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 6: Political parties divisive vs. many parties needed | Sudan | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

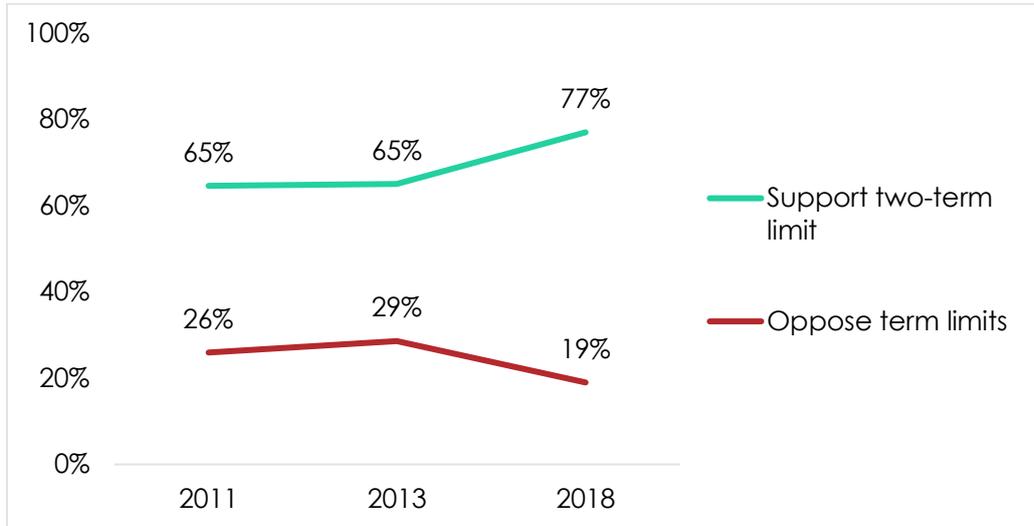
Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Sudan.

Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Sudanese have real choices in who governs them.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

In contrast, Sudanese came out strongly in favour of limiting presidents to two terms in office. In 2018, more than three in four respondents (77%) supported such term limits, up from 65% in 2013 and 2015 (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Views on two-term limit for president | Sudan | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

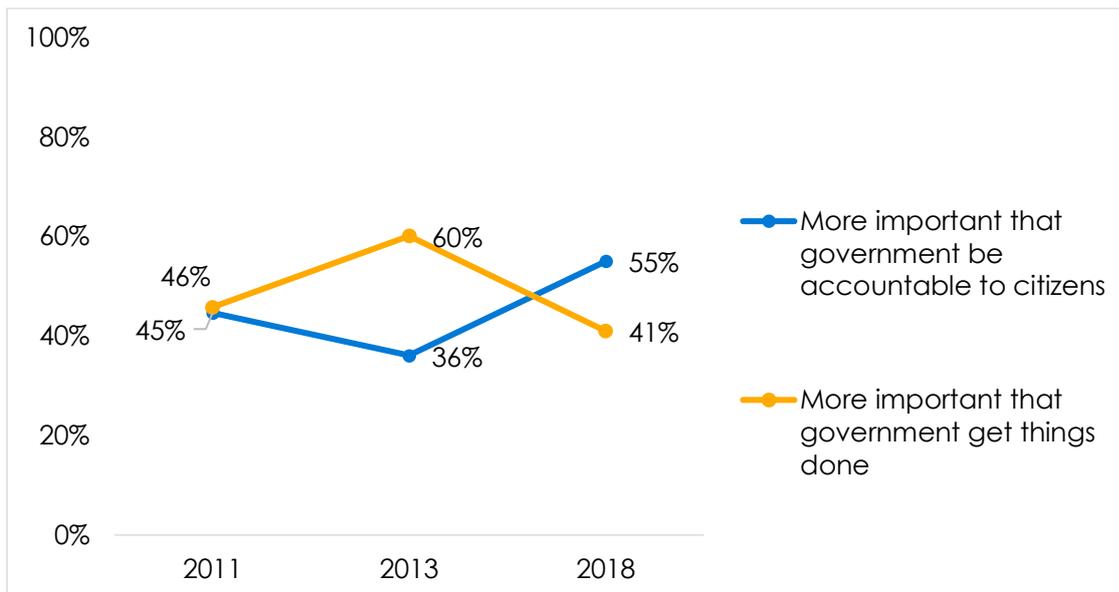
Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.

Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Sudanese also increasingly insisted on government accountability. Whereas 60% of respondents in 2015 considered it more important to have a government that could "get things done," in 2018 a majority (55%) favoured a government that is accountable to the people (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Government efficiency vs. accountability | Sudan | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

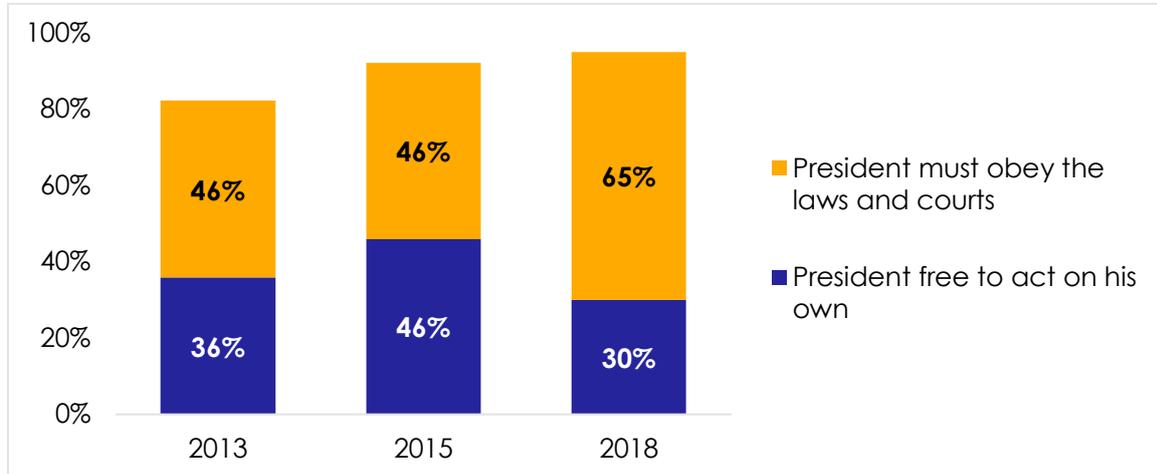
Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.

Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

More so than in the past, Sudanese in 2018 strongly endorsed legal restrictions on executive powers. Two-thirds (65%) of respondents said the president must always obey the courts and laws, compared to 46% in 2013 and 2015 (Figure 9).

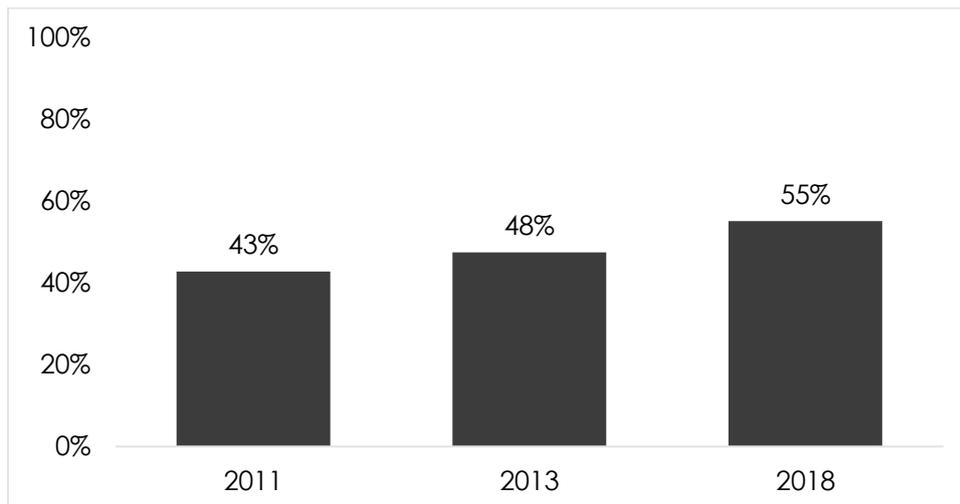
Figure 9: President free to act vs. must obey laws and courts | Sudan | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.
 Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

The proportion of Sudanese who support checks on executive power by Parliament also grew to a majority in 2018: 55% said the president should have to explain regularly how his government spends taxpayers' money, up from 43% in 2013 (Figure 10).

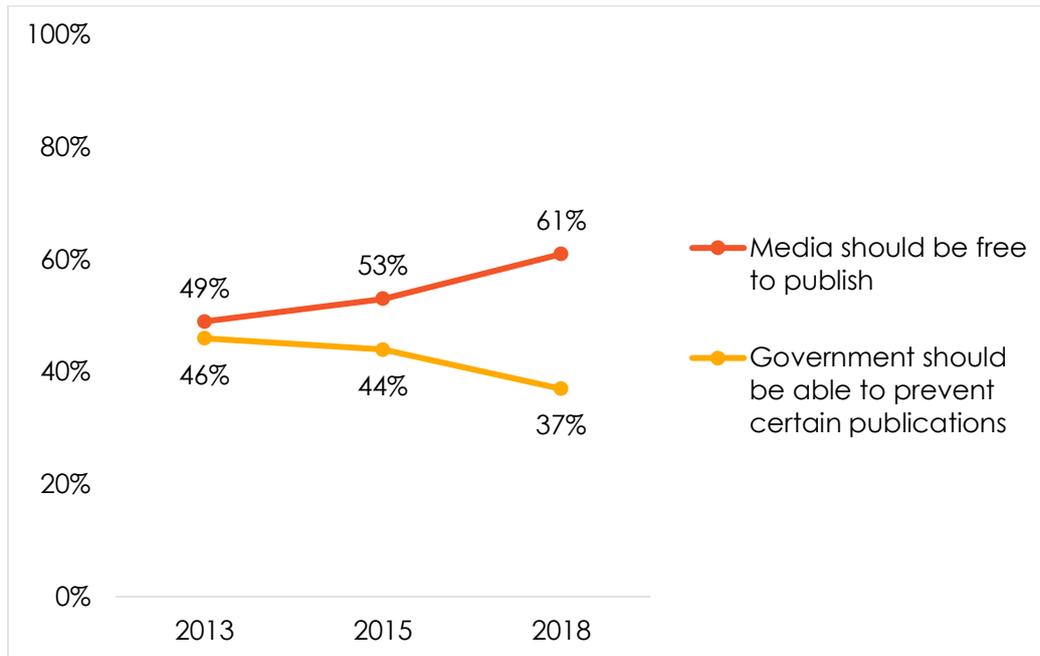
Figure 10: President should be accountable to Parliament | Sudan | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The National Assembly should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.
 Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

In addition to majority support for limits on executive powers through the courts and Parliament, the share of Sudanese who endorsed media freedom continued to grow. Six in 10 respondents (61%) said in 2018 that the news media should be free to publish “any views and ideas without government control,” up from 49% in 2013, while 37% endorsed the idea that the government should be able to block the publication of “things it considers harmful to society” (Figure 11). Among 34 countries surveyed in Round 7 (2016/2018), Sudan was the only country where support for media freedom increased significantly since Round 5 (2011/2013).

Figure 11: Media freedom vs. government control | Sudan | 2013-2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.

Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.

(% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

What role should religion play?

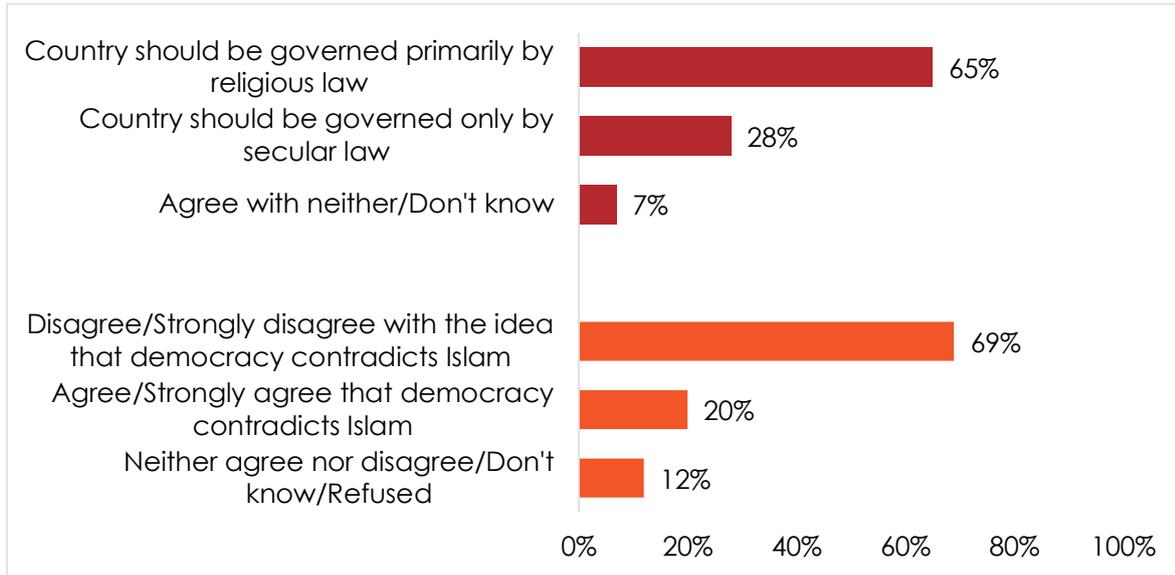
Among the many questions facing Sudan is the role of religion in politics. In the public narrative, some clerics have framed the uprising of 2018-2019 and a possible democratic transformation as a shift toward secularism and the abandonment of *sharia* (France24, 2019). In a mostly conservative Muslim society, these claims may loom large and position the clergy to play a role in the political life of Sudan moving forward.

Many Sudanese share the basic tenet: Two out of three citizens (65%) said the country should be governed primarily by religious law. Only 28% said Sudan should be ruled only by secular law (Figure 12).

About seven in 10 (69%) said they see no conflict between democracy and Islam, though one in five (20%) said democracy contradicts the teachings of Islam.

But while a majority would opt for religious law, only one in four (24%) of Sudanese said that non-Muslims should have fewer political rights than Muslims (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Islam and democracy | Sudan | 2018



Respondents were asked:

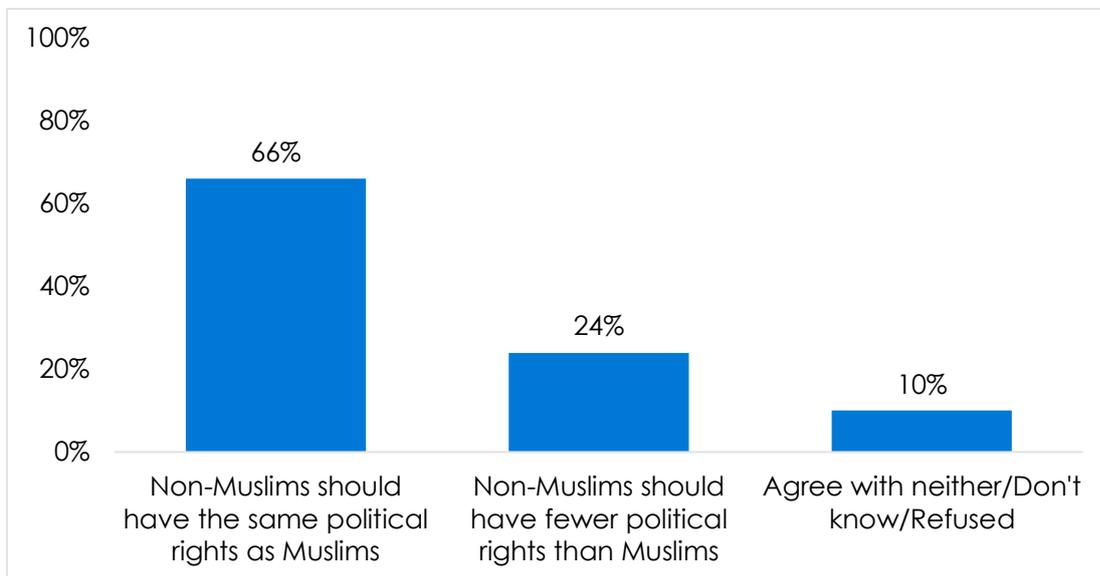
Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Our country should be governed primarily by religious law.

Statement 2: Our country should be governed only by civil law.

The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: Democracy is a system that contradicts the teachings of Islam.

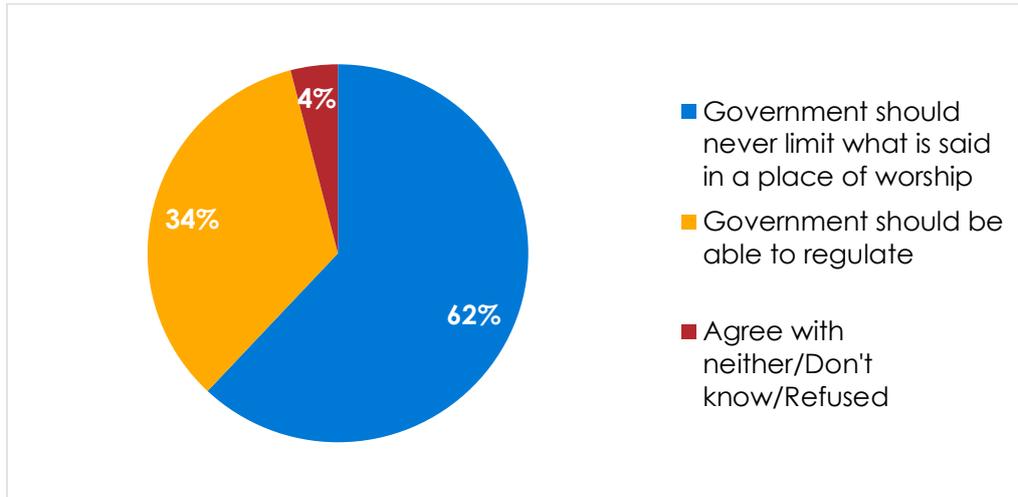
Figure 13: Should non-Muslims have the same rights as Muslims? | Sudan | 2018



Respondents were asked: The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statement: In a Muslim country, non-Muslims should enjoy less political rights than Muslims.

More than six in 10 Sudanese (62%) said the government should never limit religious speech in places of worship, while one-third (34%) said the government should be able to regulate such speech, especially if it might threaten public security (Figure 14).

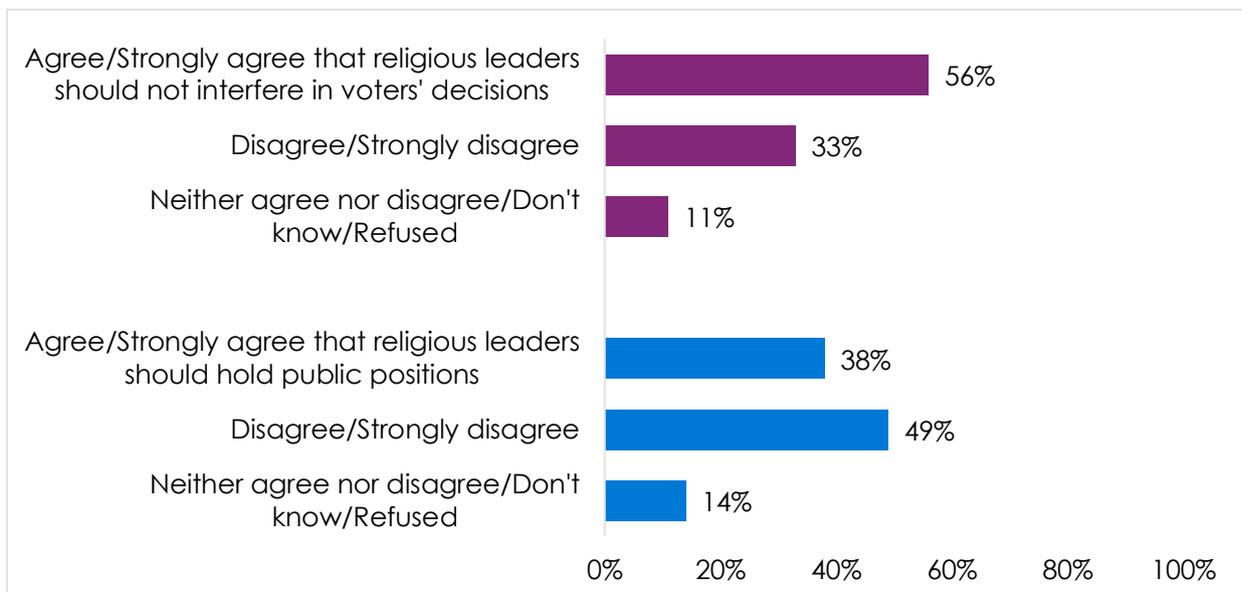
Figure 14: Freedom of religious speech vs. government regulation | Sudan | 2018



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Freedom of religion and worship are absolute, meaning that government should never limit what is said in a place of worship.
 Statement 2: Government should have the power to regulate what is said in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

And while a majority of Sudanese believe the country should be governed by religious law, more than half (56%) also said that religious leaders should not interfere with voters' decisions in elections. Only a minority (38%) said that the country would be better off if religious people held public positions (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Role of religious leaders in politics and government | Sudan | 2018



Respondents were asked: The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:
 Religious leaders like imams, preachers, and priests should not interfere in voters' decisions in elections.
 Our country is better off if religious people hold public positions in the state.

Conclusion

Despite success in ousting al-Bashir and ensuring a power-sharing agreement, advocates for stable, sustainable democracy in Sudan can hardly count on smooth sailing ahead. While support for democracy and for media freedom was increasing in 2018, popular attitudes also suggest substantial reservations, including significant support for military rule (41%).

The role that religion should play in public life was still being debated: A strong majority wanted the country to be ruled primarily by religious law, and significant minorities favoured religious people in public positions and clergy involvement in elections.

The country faces the daunting challenge of shaping citizens' aspirations into a political future at the same time as it addresses pressing problems in the economy, public service delivery, and other sectors. The government's success or failure may depend on how swiftly it can move, and how strongly Sudan's political elite engages in pursuit of a smooth transition.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, heads a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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