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Prominent Sudanese geneticist freed from prison as dictator ousted

Muntaser Ibrahim was released alongside several other academics and civilians who had been detained amid nationwide protests.

Declan Butler



Protestors call for immediate civilian rule in Sudan, after dictator Omar al-Bashir was ousted on 11 April. Credit: Ahmed Mustafa/AFP/Getty

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Muntaser Ibrahim, a leading geneticist, has been freed from prison in Sudan alongside hundreds of other civilians, including academics, who were detained in recent months for protesting against the regime of now-toppled dictator Omar al-Bashir.

Their release was ordered last week by the army, which ousted al-Bashir on 11 April amid a popular revolt sparked by rising bread and fuel prices that has rocked the nation since mid-December. Al-Bashir seized power in a coup in 1989.

“We are delighted that Professor Ibrahim has been released,” says Martin Chalfie, chair of the Committee on Human Rights at the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. “The detention of scientists and scholars for the peaceful expression of their views is contrary to the most fundamental principles of international human rights, and devastating for scientific research and progress.”

Ibrahim studies the genetics of cancer and of tropical infectious diseases affecting the region at the Institute of Endemic Diseases in Khartoum, where he was jailed in February. He has actively taken part in meetings and discussions related to the protests, says Suad Sulaiman, a parasitologist and member of the board of the Sudanese National Academy of Science alongside Ibrahim. He has been a politically active member of the Sudanese Communist Party since his youth, as have many in his family, she adds, and is popular among young people and other protesters. “Muntaser is a polite, peaceful and a social person,” she says.

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Geneticist Muntaser Ibrahim was imprisoned for his part in protests before the Sudanese coup. Credit: The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS)

During the protests, authorities detained thousands of civilians, including academics, lawyers, doctors, journalists and students. Dozens of demonstrators were killed and hundreds injured in the government's violent repression of the protests.

The military has now installed a temporary council, which it says will run the country for a maximum of two years. But protesters are demanding immediate civilian rule, and have entered into negotiations with the army. Reuters reported this week that hundreds of academics and students from the University of Khartoum had marched to join a sit-in protest at the defence ministry to call for a civilian transition government.

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Sulaiman says that Ibrahim's colleagues had expected the regime to imprison him during the protests. But the long period of incarceration was a cause for concern because he has health issues. "We were all upset and worried about him," she says.

Ibrahim is also a founding member of the African Society of Human Genetics, which last month condemned his treatment as "shameful" and urged the Sudanese government to release him immediately.

"I was fortunate to meet him and work with him," says Giorgio Sirugo, a geneticist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia who co-wrote an editorial in *PLoS Genetics* on Ibrahim's plight last month¹. "Muntaser has strong ethical values," says Sirugo.

Academics have been prominent in two previous major uprisings in Sudan: the October Revolution of 1964 and the April Intifada of 1985, both of which ousted military regimes and ushered in spells of democracy.

The outcome of the current revolt is far from clear, says Sulaiman. "The role of the organizers, planners and advisers from academia is very much needed."

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References

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