

The Impact of Political Change on the Practice of Public Relations in Sudan

Marzok Juma Dahia Ngirkudu¹ | Mustafa Akdağ²

¹ Dr. Student, Erciyes University,
Kayseri/Türkiye

ORCID: [0000-0003-1971-8816](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1971-8816)

E-Mail:
marzokjuma571@gmail.com

² Prof. Dr., Erciyes University,
Kayseri/ Türkiye

ORCID: [0000-0002-1818-2960](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1818-2960)

E-Mail:
makdag@erciyes.edu.tr

Corresponding Author:
Marzok Juma Dahia Ngirkudu

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Abstract:

Purpose of the paper: The study aimed to evaluate the impact of the political change that occurred in Sudan on the practice of public relations. **Methodology:** The descriptive analytical approach was used to obtain the results, and it is defined as a method of analysis that focuses on sufficient and accurate information about a particular phenomenon or topic or a known period. The questionnaire was utilized as one of the tools that are used in the descriptive research to obtain the primary data and then analyze it. **Findings:** The study concluded that the practice of public relations in Sudan needs a more democratic environment, which helps the independence of public relations. The study also found that the intellectual and cultural shifts that accompanied the political change had a positive impact on the practice of public relations. This study indicates that the environment directly affects the practice of public relations, especially during political change. The study also emphasizes the importance of continuous training and education of public relations practitioners to deal with environmental change, especially political change. Therefore, public relations practitioners who work in public institutions should consider that successful public relations practice will be measured by its contribution to social advancement and the creation of harmony and consensus among the components of society. **Originality/value of paper:** This study contributes to providing a detailed assessment of the reality of public relations practice in Sudan before and after the political change.

Keywords: Sudan, Public Relations, Public Administration, Political Change, Private Institutions.

Öz:

Makalenin amacı: Çalışma, Sudan'da meydana gelen siyasi değişimin halkla ilişkiler pratiği üzerindeki etkisini değerlendirmeyi amaçlamıştır. **Metodoloji:** Sonuçların elde edilmesinde betimleyici analitik yaklaşım kullanılmış olup, belirli bir olgu veya konu ya da bilinen bir dönem hakkında yeterli ve doğru bilgiye odaklanan bir analiz yöntemi olarak tanımlanmıştır. Anket, tanımlayıcı araştırmada birincil verileri elde etmek ve daha sonra analiz etmek için kullanılan araçlardan biri olarak kullanılmıştır. **Bulgular:** Çalışma, Sudan'daki halkla ilişkiler uygulamasının, halkla ilişkilerin bağımsızlığına yardımcı olan daha demokratik bir ortama ihtiyaç duyduğu sonucuna varmıştır. Çalışma ayrıca, siyasi değişime eşlik eden entelektüel ve kültürel değişimlerin halkla ilişkiler pratiği üzerinde olumlu bir etkisi olduğunu sonuçlanmıştır. Ayrıca Katılımcılar, halkla ilişkiler kavramındaki netlik eksikliğinin, halkla ilişkiler faaliyetlerinin bilimsel imajında zayıf uygulanmasının nedeni olduğunu ve bunun Sudan ve birçok diğer Afrika ülkesinde halkla ilişkiler uygulamasının başlıca sorunu olduğunu değerlendirmişlerdir. Bu çalışma, çevrenin, özellikle siyasi değişim sırasında halkla ilişkiler uygulamasını doğrudan etkilediğini göstermektedir. Çalışma ayrıca, halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcılarının başta siyasi değişim olmak üzere çevresel değişimlerle başa çıkmada sürekli eğitim ve eğitimin önemi de vurgulamaktadır. Bu nedenle kamu kurumlarında görev yapan halkla ilişkiler uygulayıcıları, başarılı bir halkla ilişkiler uygulamasının toplumsal ilerlemeye katkısı ve toplumun bileşenleri arasında uyum ve fikir birliği oluşturmasıyla ölçüleceğini düşünmelidir. **Makalenin özgünlüğü/değeri:** Bu çalışma, siyasi değişimden önce ve sonra Sudan'daki halkla ilişkiler uygulamalarının gerçekliğinin ayrıntılı bir değerlendirmesini sağlamaya katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sudan, Halkla İlişkiler, Kamu Yönetimi, Siyasi Değişim, Özel Kurumlar.

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Introduction

Public relations constitute an essential interest for institutional organization and management, it is considered the most recent pillar of media studies, and this science witnessed a significant development during the twentieth century, based on many scientific theories and professional and ethical practices. The systems theory provides a more in-depth understanding of the state of public relations in the context of the professional practice of institutions. This theory describes institutions as systems that affect and/or affected by other systems (political, social, economic, and cultural) and other systems, and that public relations work to create a positive interaction between the institution and its external environment, which means that the organization may be affected by any change that occurs in the external environment and thus the practice of public relations (Jamal. R, & Ayad. K, 2014, p.15). The literature on public relations has, for a very long time, documented the external environmental influences on the practice of public relations (Sriramesh & White, 1992; Culbertson, Jeffers, Stone, & Terrell, 1993; Culbertson & Chen, 1996; Hatch, 1997; Van Ruler & Vercic, 2004). There have been several studies done that specifically focus on the role that public relations play in the democratic process (Sharpe, 1992; Hiebert, 1992; Turk, 1996; Bentele & Peters, 1996). However, prior to the transition to democracy, the nations covered in these studies did not have societies that were particularly well-developed in the field of public relations (Derina, R. 2005, p. 407). As a result, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effect that political shifts have had on the way public relations are practiced in Sudan, particularly because partisan ideology dominates both public and private institutions, and as a result, public relations departments.

Public relation in Sudan

There was no public relations in its scientific sense before the independence even though that period witnessed the presence of public relations offices in a limited number of foreign companies such as (Mitchell Coates), and it is found that the public relations activity in those offices was limited to

tasks that are considered traditional, such as reservations, receiving guests and following up Correspondence between these companies and government offices. (Salih Musa,2013, p.5).

In 1971, the Ministry of Service and Administrative Reform was established, with the aim of formulating and establishing administrative organizations, and to build a service that is a basic pillar in leading the development process (Ahmad yusuf, 2012, p.75). It was the responsibility of this ministry to have a communication system to collect information and deepen the concept of employee participation in decision-making, respecting the citizens' opinion, touching on their concerns and problems, and knowing their hopes, desires and aspirations, and this only comes through the establishment of public relations bodies (Abdul Qader, 2014, p.60). In 1976 the Sudanese Public Relations Association was established, and a constitution was drawn up for it headed by the pioneer of public relations, Jaafar Hamid al-Bashir, and the association was keen to contact all responsible associations and public service leaders in the country(Al Faddoul, 2014, p.68). In 1986, the Sudanese Public Relations Union was established, and many employees in the field of public relations joined it. Public relations offices and departments in Sudanese institutions and universities doubled. In the same year Sudan joined the African Public Relations Union, and in 1988 AD the Secretary General of Sudanese Public Relations was elected Vice-President of the African Union for Public Relations, North Africa (Fadlallah, 2004, p.50). This is how the practice of public relations began to expand in Sudan.

Political Change in Sudan

Sudan is considered as one of the countries of transformed societies, societies in which we find the state and its institutions has not fully crystallized, and the national construction project, with all its political, economic, and social dimensions, has not been completed in this regard (Suleiman, 2019, p.20). Sudan became independent country in 1956, and the main challenge facing the government was to balance the cultural and political components of Sudan with the requirements of the modern state in its political,

economic, and social dimensions. The Autonomy Constitution, which was signed in 1953, was adopted as a basis for government, in addition to the approval of liberal democracy as a framework for the political process (Al-Bathain Atta, 1988, p.65) .

Sudan has witnessed political changes and transformations several times after its independence, which in turn affected the activity and practice of public relations, most notably, the political change that took place in 1989 when the National Congress Party assumed power in Sudan. This period witnessed several changes, namely, the secession of southern Sudan (Suleiman, 2019, p.30). These changes directly affected the structures of governmental and private institutions, which in turn affected the practice of public relations in Sudan. Especially since the policies that were practiced by the government, including restrictions and lack of freedom of opinion and expression, made the practice of public relations only limited to protocol activities and some communication activities. Therefore, the paper seeks to find out whether the recent political change that occurred in 2019 will change the practice of public relations from its previous form.

Literature review

The literature for this research is mostly concerned with how organizational circumstances affect the practice of public relations. The theory of systems (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992, p.72) asserts that open systems that permit mutual change between themselves and their environment are more likely to be effective and survive. This is where the most common use of this principle in public relations comes from.

Practitioners of public relations act as boundary spanners in open system organizations, aiding the organization in the management of its connections with the many publics in the surrounding environment. On the other hand, organizational theory serves as a foundation for doing research on the influence that various organizational contexts have on the practice of public relations. Environmental analysis is vital because the actions of a company can only be

understood in the context of the environment in which it operates (Derina R, 2005.408). Methodologies such as resource dependence theory (Pfeffer, 1987), population ecology theory (Hannah & Freeman, 1984), and institutional theory (Selznick, 2011; Scott, 1987) are all helpful approaches to take when investigating the influence that organizational contexts have. Institutional theory, for instance, maintains that in situations dominated by social influences, such as Sudan, organizations would be rewarded for following to societal values, conventions, standards, and beliefs if they were to do so in a manner that was seen acceptable by society.

Contingency theory argues that chaotic, rapidly changing, and unpredictable settings are the most crucial (Robbins, 1990, p. 8). There is a higher likelihood of political and legislative shifts in dynamic and unpredictable environments, which could prompt public relations professionals to look outside the company for answers, requiring them to actively interact with the external environment (Grunig, 2013, p.470). Organizational behavior is also significantly impacted by environmental uncertainty. Uncertain managers create structures that mirror the complexity they anticipate in the surrounding environment (Aldrich & Mindlin, 1978; Weick, 2012). This point of view might be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the function that public relations professionals play as boundary breakers during times of transformation. Expanded boundaries are a method that organizations utilize to mitigate the effects of uncertainty by amassing information that can be use in decision-making (Holtzhausen, D.R. 2005, p.409). Therefore, it is reasonable to anticipate that during periods of transition, public relations will acquire a greater significance and will be given a greater emphasis on strategy. During the time that this study was being conducted, there were no scientific studies that dealt with the issue of the impact of political change on the practice of public relations in general or in Sudan in particular. Even though public relations are extremely important during times of change, particularly political change, there were no scientific studies that dealt with this issue.

Because of this, this study is an important addition to the literature on public relations in Sudan.

Method

The results were obtained by using a method of analysis known as descriptive analytical approach, which can be described as an approach to analysis that focuses on gathering sufficient and correct information about a certain occurrence or topic or a known period. To achieve the scientific goals, obtain the results, and then interpret them in a manner that is objective and consistent with the real data of the phenomena (Raja Wahid, 2000, p.10). As a result, this curriculum is seen as being suitable for researchers who choose to pursue the social sciences. This study used a questionnaire to collect data. The quantitative analysis of this study focuses on two aspects, which are the main questions that the study aims to identify through the answers of the sample, namely: 1) How do you evaluate the practice of public relations in Sudan during the rule of the National Congress Party? 2) Did the political changes that happened in Sudan change the way public relations are practiced? The research community consists of members of the Public Relations Association in Sudan, academics in the field of public relations, employees in public and private institutions, as well as public relations departments in organizations. The study used the simple random sampling method to identify the sample members, where the questionnaire consisted of two main aspects the first representing personal data related to gender, age, place of work, and years of experience. The second facet pertains to the primary research topic, which consists of the data related to evaluating the practice of public relations during the rule of the National Congress and the extent to which political change has had an impact on the practice of public relations in Sudan. The questionnaires were given out to a total of fifty professionals who work in the field of public relations. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21 was used to conduct the analysis on the collected data. To evaluate the veracity of the allegations, descriptive statistics were utilized. These statistics included frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Quantitative Findings

34% of the fifty respondents were female, while 66% were male, and their ages ranged from 25 to 60, with a median of 40. They reported between 5 and 30 years of experience in public relations work, with a median of 15 years. Age and years of experience were categorized into two groups for the purposes of this analysis. Age was divided by the median age and years of experience by a 15-year divide, which reflects the time when Sudan's political transformations began in 2013. Of the 50 respondents 48% were officials and managers of public relations departments in public institutions, while 52% were officials and managers of public relations in private institutions.

1.1. Is the political change that occurred in Sudan changed the way public relations are practiced?

More than 50% of the participants indicated that the political change that happened in Sudan had an impact on the way public relations were practiced in general, as the number of respondents ($n = 50$). Of those 60% ($n = 30$) said yes, 16% ($n = 8$) said no, and 24% ($n = 12$) were unsure. The only association that could be considered statistically significant between the responses to this question and the demographic factors is concerning the number of years of experience, with practitioners with an average of 15 years of experience 90% ($n = 45$) feeling that the political change that occurred had a positive impact on the public relations practices which are represented in ensuring freedom of expression, which will help the independence of public relations in institutions.

1.2. How do you evaluate the practice of public relations in Sudan over the extent of the rule of the National Congress Party?

Of the 50 respondents to this question, 52% ($n = 26$) of the respondents evaluated that the practice of public relations before the political change was politicized, and that most of the public relations departments in the institutions were working for the ruling party only and not for the public interest, while 18% ($n = 9$) of the respondents

evaluated the practice of public relations in this period as being worked for the public interest. While 18% (n = 9) of the total respondents evaluate the practice of public relations in this period (before the political change) as independent, providing its services through a harmonious two-way communication, and 12% (n = 6) of the total respondents evaluate the practice of public relations in this period as being neutral in its practices. This result indicates that the public relations departments during this period work only in order to convince the public (citizens) with the aim of winning public opinion and achieving the object of the ruling party, which led to neglecting the demands and needs of the citizen, resulting in a bad relationship between public institutions and citizens in general.

Qualitative findings

Table 1. Evaluating the practice of public relations in Sudan over the extent of the rule of the National Congress Party.

Opinions	Mean	SD
During this period, the practice of public relations was characterized as methodological and scientific.	2.9600	1.19455
Public relations during this period were characterized by freedom of expression and ease of access to the target audience.	2.8600	1.32496
Opinions	Mean	SD
During this period, public relations practitioners perform all the functions of public relations in their scientific form.	2.7600	1.27071
During this period, the government made a great contribution to the support of public relations departments in institutions, which facilitated the tasks of public relations practitioners.	2.8200	1.15511
The restrictions imposed by the government and the lack of freedom of expression during this period had a significant impact on the weakness of the implementation of public relations activities.	3.6200	1.17612
In this period, public relations activity in most institutions were a protocol.	3.8800	1.02300
During this period, the activities of the Sudan Public Relations Associations were suspended due to the restrictions		

imposed by the government.	3.4000	1.12486
The marginalization of public relations and describing it as the job of the unemployed was the main reason for the poor practice of public relations in this period.	4.0800	1.25909
The lack of clarity in the importance and concept of public relations and the scientific way of performing it were the reason for its poor implementation.	3.9400	1.21907
Most of the public relations Practitioners at the institutions at this period are public relations specialists.	3.0200	1.253

The results indicate that a 38% (n = 19) of the respondents evaluate the practice of public relations in this period that will not be described as a scientific methodology, and 32% (n = 16) are not sure, and this confirms the lack of clarity in the scientific concept of public relations in these periods among the general public as well as among the higher administrations in the institutions, which led to neglecting the role of public relations most of the time and describing it as a job for those who have no job, and this was confirmed by 76% (n = 38) of the respondents with an arithmetic mean and standard deviation of 4.0800 and 1.25909, respectively. And this indicates that public relations in Sudan should make many research efforts, especially in the applied aspects, which contributes to emphasizing the importance of public relations. In addition, 48% (n = 24) of the respondents see that the practice of public relations in this period is the face of the problem of lack of freedom of expression and consequently the difficulty of reaching the target audience, and therefore 62% (n = 31) evaluate with an arithmetic mean and standard deviation of 3.6200 and 1.17612, correspondingly. Meaning that the main reason for the weak practice and implementation of public relations activities is the lack of freedom of expression and the restrictions imposed by the government on the means of communication, which led to restricting the practice of public relations, especially in government institutions. It is known that public relations need the independence of its decisions, which will help in achieving its primary goal, to build positive

relations between the institution and its public, and then maintain that relationship. In this context, 72% ($n = 36$) of all respondents evaluate that the lack of clarity in the concept of public relations is the reason for the weak implementation of public relations activities in its scientific image, and this is the main problem for the practice of public relations in Sudan and in many other African countries, and this is in line with some research conclusions such as Osman .E. M. (2017) which aimed to determine (the effectiveness of public relations in the development of service institutions), it was found that the budget allocated to public relations was insufficient, and the public relations was not valued by the senior management, as a result, public relations was not understood correctly in public institutions. In this context, a study by Al Moez. H. A (2015) (The effectiveness of public relations in forming the mental image of institutions in Sudan) revealed that the Public Relations Department is faced with the problem of the public not understanding the public relations function.

This made many institutions look at public relations as a protocol activity, and this was confirmed by 70% ($n = 35$) of the respondents with an arithmetic mean and standard deviation ($M = 3.8800$, $SD = 1.02300$) that public relations in this period were viewed as like a protocol activity. However, the protocol is part of public relations activities, and public relations are administrative and communicative efforts based on research, planning, organization, and evaluation in addition to crisis management and other functions, so public relations should not be viewed as a protocol activity only.

In general, and through the data obtained from 50 respondents represent the public relations specialists and work as employees and managers of public relations departments in public and private institutions, it is noted that the practice of public relations in this period faced many difficulties, such as the public relations was not understood, which led to the failure to practice public relations in its scientific image, in addition to the failure of higher administrations in many institutions, especially public institutions, to give any importance to public relations and the role that it can play. This led to the public's mistrust of the

institutions, and the public became aware that these institutions do not care about their basic needs and requirements.

Table 2. Evaluating the impact political change on public relations practice in Sudan.

Opinions	Mean	SD
The political change that has happened in Sudan has changed the way of practice of public relations.	3.6600	1.09935
Public relations need a more open and democratic environment for its practitioners to best function, and the political change currently happened in Sudan is helping.	4.1600	1.09470
Opinions	Mean	SD
The political change that has happened in Sudan will provide public relations practitioners with freedom of opinion and expression, and thus ease of access to the target audience.	4.0000	1.08797
With the political change that has happened, public relations will turn into a more administrative function than a communication activity.	3.6800	1.21957
The political change that happened in Sudan will make the practice of public relations more professional.	3.7600	1.18769
Intellectual and cultural changes that have occurred during political change will positively affect public relations practice.	3.8600	1.06924
Changes in the political Environment is affect the practice of public relations.	4.0000	1.01015
The political change that has happened will not change anything in the way of public relations practices.	3.4200	1.10823

With the political change occurring, public relations practitioners will seek to clarify more about the concept of public relations and the way it is practices. 4.200 0.96890

An analysis of the second aspect, which evaluates the impact of political change on the practice of public relations, as the data indicate that the political change that occurred in Sudan has a positive impact on the practice of public relations, as 64% (*n* = 32) of the respondents evaluated that the political change changed the way of practicing public relations. In this context, 72% (*n* = 36) with an arithmetic mean 4,000, and standard deviation 18.797, confirm that the political change that occurred in Sudan will help ensure freedom of expression and the independence of public relations, and consequently ease of reaching the target audience. Also, 82% (*n* = 42) of respondents reported that public relations need a more democratic environment to achieve its goals, and they believe that the political change that is currently happening in Sudan will help create a democratic environment. In this context, some experts say that a healthy democracy with political stability, economic growth, and a dynamic media are essential elements that offer both the framework and motivation for a flourishing public relations industry. If this is the prevalent attitude, then it is reasonable to believe that without a healthy democracy, public relations cannot operate at full capacity. Therefore, the character of a democracy determines the success of public relations.

Also, 86% (*n* = 43) of the respondents reported that with this political change, public relations practitioners will seek to clarify more about the concept of public relations and the way of its practice, and this is what public relations need in Sudan and in many other African countries, in which its achievement requires the necessary professionalism in the practice of public relations, through continuous training in order to keep pace with the continuous development in this field. Also, more than 50% of the respondents reported

that the political change that happened would contribute to making the practice of public relations more professional. To achieve this, public relations practitioners in Sudan seek to form an association of public relations professionals, which will help unifying efforts and reconsider how public relations are practiced.

Not only has culture altered the backdrop of communication, but it also plays a significant part in bringing about shifts in the manner in which communication is carried out, so it is necessary for public relations practitioners who live in a multicultural environment such as Sudan, to understand the cultural reference frame of their audience, which helps in ease of understanding between the institution and its audience, in this Context 74% (*n* = 37) of the respondents reported that the intellectual and cultural changes that accompanied the political change will positively affect the practice of public relations in Sudan.

Discussion and conclusion

This article indicates that the political change that has occurred in Sudan has a positive impact not only on the practice of public relations but will also affect the way in which public and private institutions are managed, especially if it is evaluated in a way that contributes to the development of laws and legislations that help building state institutions and contribute to creating a positive relationship between the citizen and public institutions. The article also stated that the intellectual and cultural changes that accompanied the political change have a positive effect on the practice of public relations, so it is necessary for public relations departments in public and private institutions to consider the cultural diversity that characterizes Sudan, through understanding those cultures, which helps create consensus and ensure public interest.

The complex environment helps to enhance the importance of public relations as a strategic administrative function, because public relations is an administrative function that works to create harmony and compatibility between societies in general and between institutions and their societies in specific, and this is what Sudan needs

now that the Sudanese society has lost confidence between them as well as in public institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to give the necessary importance to public relations departments to work to bring the views of the components of Sudanese society, as well as between institutions and their audience, and this requires research through a higher interaction with the masses. This is what the respondents indicated that public relations with this change need to be an administrative function more than what was seen as a communicative function represented only in the protocol activity in most public institutions. the change is more achievable when it is supported by the legal system, therefore, new laws and legislations must be developed for public relations departments in institutions to help achieve the goal of public relations, which is to create compatibility between the components of society and thus achieve the desired goal, which is the establishment of a democratic system in Sudan.

This study supports the concept of public relations as an administrative and social activity that helps institutions to manage crises and address social issues. This study also supports the need for public relations departments to contribute to the democratic transition by urging public and private institutions to provide more services, job opportunities and education to the community in general. Thus, expanding the circle of participation and directly representing more communities in the institutions.

This article indicates that the environment directly affects the practice of public relations, especially during political change. The study also emphasizes the importance of continuous training and education of public relations practitioners to deal with environmental change, especially political change. Therefore, public relations practitioners who work in public institutions should consider that successful public relations practice will be measured by its contribution to social advancement and the creation of harmony and consensus among the components of society.

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