

Sudan's Political Crisis and the Uncharted Course

Fekade Terefe and Zerihun Mohammed

Good Governance Africa – Eastern Africa

1. Introduction

The Sudan is the third largest country in Africa after Algeria and the Democratic Republic Congo measuring a little over 1.8 million km². The large parts of the landmass of the country are dominated by deserts in the north, semi desert in the west and arid mountains along the Red Sea coast and in its eastern frontiers.¹ Compared to its land size, the population size of the Sudan, however, is relatively small. It is ranked the tenth in Africa standing at 45 million as of 2021.² A great majority of the people of the Sudan profess in Islam.



Map of Sudan (*Map courtesy of Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.*)

On the other hand, Sudan is a mosaic of ethnic and linguistic diversity. It is reported that the country has more than 500 ethnic groups speaking more than 400 languages. “While intermarriage and the coexistence of Arab and African peoples in Sudan over centuries has blurred ethnic boundaries to the point where distinctions are often considered impossible, ethnic boundaries have re-emerged in

¹ <https://www.countryreports.org/country/Sudan/geography.htm>

² <https://www.worldometers.info/population/countries-in-africa-by-population/>

response to decades of conflict fuelled by political manipulation of identity”.³ Such diversity has also external dimension relating to the fact that Sudan shares borders with nine Arab and non-Arab African countries and, therefore, ethnic keens straddling international boundaries.

The Sudan gained independence from the Anglo-Egyptian condominium in 1956. After a brief exercise of politics in a civil way for about two years, in 1958 the country experienced the first coup d'état which brought General Ibrahim Abboud to power. Ever since, the Sudan witnessed 15 coups d'état, both successful and unsuccessful. These include coups against civilian rule such as in 1958 and 1989 and coups against military dictatorships as in 1964 and 2019, just to mention a couple of them. The incidences in coups are more than any other country in the continent, making it, as some call it, “a laboratory for students of coups”.⁴

The most recent is what transpired in October 2021 as General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the leader of the Sudanese Governing Sovereign Council, announced that he had ousted the civilian government led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. This put the fragile transitional process in limbo and triggered a political crisis with multiple dimensions. Though the civilian government was restored few weeks later, its impact in terms of conditioning the process of the transition continues to be felt. Against this backdrop, this note attempts to shed light on the background to the onset of the transition in 2019, explain the salient features of the transitional arrangement and process and appraise the implications of the coup.

2. Background

The Sudan gained its independence in 1956. There was a brief overture towards representative governance for the first two years. That trend was, however, quickly reversed. Ever since, the country is largely ruled by dictatorships of various forms. The various forms of dictatorships that reigned in the Sudan replaced each other mainly through coup d'état. That was how the longest authoritarian reign of General Omar al-Bashir began in 1989. Al-Bashir, an army general who hails from northern Sudan, staged a successful coup in 1989 against the civilian rule of Sadiq al-Mahadi. This time the coup enjoyed the backing of the National Islamic Front (NIF) led by Hassan al-Turabi. There was convergence of interest between the two. The Al-Bashir clique wanted to get a wider constituency of support through NIF and, on the other hand, NIF plotted to emerge as the ideologue of the military regime which, in fact, it dominated until the 1990s.

³ <https://minorityrights.org/country/sudan/>

⁴ <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/sudan-a-coup-laboratory>

The reign of al-Bashir's regime was consequential to the Sudan and the country's relations with its neighbours and beyond. It was during this time that the country was divided into two sovereign countries with the secession of South Sudan. It was also during this period that the Darfur Crisis unfolded causing massive deaths, displacement and overall humanitarian tragedy. It was again during this time that the two 'Sudans' began to fight over the Abiye region, a disputed resource rich territory along their common border. On foreign affairs, the Sudan under al-Bashir was at odds with its neighbours such as Eritrea and Ethiopia, particularly in the 1990s and to a degree afterwards. Overall, during the three decades of al-Bashir rule, the Sudanese people endured suppression of civil society, freedom of press and religion and any measure of democratic expression or development.⁵

The personalization of power in the person of al-Bashir and the marginalization of elites vying for influence (mainly non-Arabs like the case in Darfur) by co-opting loyalists widened the rift among groups contending for a space in the Sudanese political landscape. Alex de Wall, an expert on the politics of the Horn of Africa, argues that during these 30 years in power, al-Bashir built an elaborate political-security structure with himself right at the centre. A remarkable skilled tactical operator, he was able to balance various factions within his fractious government, manage an intricate patronage system often with very modest resources, and keep afloat amid the turbulent waters of Middle Eastern politics.⁶

Al-Bashir's authoritarian rule expressed in political suppression was also compounded by economic problems resulting from both external and internal factors. Externally, the Sudan suffered from sanctions imposed by the West, mainly USA, on grounds of the accusation that the Sudan harboured and sponsored terrorists.⁷ The sanctions crippled the Sudanese economy. Internally, the loss of significant oil revenue with the separation of South Sudan seriously affected the Sudanese economic health. Although Khartoum managed to generate some revenue through the negotiated \$24-per-barrel transit fee from South Sudan for oil passing through its territory to Port Sudan in the north, the Sudanese economy was crippled and, therefore, unable to resuscitate. As a result, youth unemployment and overall poverty levels skyrocketed. Compounding the problem further, the military regime became increasingly corrupt.⁸ According to some accounts, the Sudanese military maintains a wide array of business interests in the country and, as a result, it is deeply embedded in the national economy.⁹

⁵ Herman Cohen, "The Roots of Sudan's Upheaval". <https://www.cfr.org/blog/roots-sudans-upheaval>

⁶ <https://africanarguments.org/2019/04/cruel-april-sudan-spring/>

⁷ Al-Qaeda mastermind Osama Bin Laden was hosted in Sudan in the mid 1990s. Subsequently, in response to attacks on US embassies in East Africa in 1998, US bombed a pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan on allegations that it was manufacturing chemical weapons.

⁸ Herman Cohen, "The Roots of Sudan's Upheaval". <https://www.cfr.org/blog/roots-sudans-upheaval>

⁹ <https://adf-magazine.com/2021/12/sudans-new-governing-agreement-does-not-satisfy-democracy-advocates/>

Under the circumstances, the situation brought about a ‘revolutionary’ fervour. Popular protests became widespread. Civil society entities, particularly the Sudanese Professionals Association, became vocal and provided leadership to the demonstrators. The regime’s last ditch attempt to reorganize itself by dismissing civilian regional governors and appointing a new deputy president¹⁰ as the regime’s public face did not yield the desired result. Alex De Wall further argues that when agents of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) and other militia used violence, army units stepped in to protect the demonstrators. The spectre of different armed units fighting one another on the streets of the capital became frighteningly real. Al-Bashir’s chosen lieutenants-Vice-President Ibn Auf and NISS Chief Salah Abdalla (aka ‘Gosh’), along with Rapid Support Forces (RSF) Commander Mohamed Hamdan (aka ‘Hemeti’) – decided al-Bashir had to go. So, he went, initially to a house arrest on April 11, 2019 and later to Khartoum’s Kobar Prison a week later.¹¹ However, his political shadow still looms large and remains divisively impactful.

3. The Onset of a Political Transition

Once the old order was gone, internal forces and external interests were at work to influence the transitional arrangement. Initially, the Transitional Military Council (TMC), which replaced al-Bashir’s rule, rebuffed calls for transition to civilian rule. This led to violent clashes between TMC and protestors which led to the killing of about 120 civilian protestors by security forces on June 3, 2019 alone. The violent reaction of the TMC leaders and the security forces intensified the protests by the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), a coalition of civil society organizations. Equally there were strong international condemnation of the measures taken by TMC and the killing of demonstrators, among others, by the UN. The African Union also suspended Sudan’s membership to the Organization with “with immediate effect”.¹² The strong internal and external pressure forced the military to look for alternative solution including negotiation with civilian actors. Ethiopia also assisted in bringing the rival forces to negotiation. The pressure finally yielded when TMC and FFC agreed to a three-year power sharing agreement which they signed on July 17, 2019.

¹⁰ <https://africanarguments.org/2019/04/cruel-april-sudan-spring/>

¹¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/13/sudans-toppled-president-omar-al-bashir-charged-with-corruption>

¹² [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659413/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)659413_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659413/EPRS_BRI(2020)659413_EN.pdf) and also <https://au.int/en/articles/sudan-suspended-african-union>



Demonstration in Omdurman on October 30, 2021 (*Picture courtesy of AFP via Getty Images*)

The agreement created important government organs for the period of the transition, namely the Sovereign Council, the Cabinet and the Legislative Council. The agreement stipulates that the Sovereign Council is to be made of eleven members; five from the military selected by TMC, five others from civilians selected by FFC and one civilian selected in agreement between the two.¹³ The council is set to be chaired by a member from the TMC for 21 months and by a civilian member of the council for the remaining 18 months of the transition period. FFC retains the mandate to select the prime minister. Members of the Council of Ministers, not more than 20, were to be selected by the prime minister subject to approval by the Sovereign Council. Exceptions in this regard were, however, the ministers of defence and interior who are to be selected by the military members of the Sovereign Council and appointed by the prime minister, according to article 10 of the agreement.

As for the Legislative Council, to be formed in no more than 90 days from the date of establishment of the Sovereign Council, the agreement states that 67 percent of membership of the Council shall come from those opposition forces who signed the Declaration of Freedom and Change,¹⁴ while the remaining 33 percent were reserved for others outside of this group.¹⁵ After putting in place such a transitional institutional arrangement, the agreement under article twenty states that the functions of the transitional government include, among others, restoring peace in restive regions like Darfur, Blue Nile

¹³ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/uploads/media/5d306eb7c2ab1.pdf>

¹⁴ Declaration of Freedom and Change involves a wide political coalition of civilian and rebel groups in Sudan.

¹⁵ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/uploads/media/5d306eb7c2ab1.pdf>

and South Kordofan; addressing economic problems the country is facing, undertaking legal and institutional reforms as well as creating mechanisms for writing a new constitution and organizing a constitutional conference. Perhaps one more important feature of the agreement relates to what is provided in article 12, which states that members of the Sovereign Council, the Council of Ministers and regional governors shall not contest in elections that immediately follow the period of transition.

The agreement was hailed by internal political forces and partners of the Sudan near and far. For instance the UN appreciated the agreement and applauded the efforts of African Union (AU), IGAD and Ethiopia for their efforts to bring about a negotiated settlement to the crisis.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the transitional arrangement was a compromise to which the military wing grudgingly agreed under mounting regional and international pressure following the June 03, 2019 violence against civilian demonstrators in which about 120 were killed.

4. The Coup D'état

The October 25, 2021 coup against Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok by the military was an act that was waiting for its time. To begin with, Sudanese political history has always been dominated by the military since independence. Ousting both civilian and military rulers, the Sudanese military has kept the political establishment its prerogative. It was this political culture that hit back, dashing hopes for a democratic transition. With this deep rooted problem was added the triggers which worked against the country's transition to democracy.



General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok (*Pictures courtesy of AFP via Getty Images and Independent Press.cc*)

¹⁶ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc13929.doc.htm>

The fractious nature of the primary actors that made the deal - both TMC and FFC- contributed immensely to the weakening of the transitional arrangement.¹⁷ Indications for these can be drawn from several attempts of subversion. The perpetual postponement of the establishment of the Transitional Legislative Council provides indication about the designs of the powerful elements in the Sovereign Council to consolidate unconstrained power. Furthermore, there was an assassination attempt on Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok on March 9, 2020. Hamdok survived the attempt after the blast near his convoy in Khartoum.¹⁸ There was no clear investigation as to who is behind the attempt. Although a little know group, named the Sudanese Islamic Youth Movement, claimed responsibility, regional experts argue that the perpetrators could be from the military and remnants of the old regime.¹⁹ Further in such chain of actions, another indication for subversion against the transition relates to the rumoured coup Abdel Fattah al-Burhan attempt on September 21, 2021 allegedly designed by army officers who are believed to be al-Bashir loyalists.²⁰ Moreover, few days prior to the October 25, 2021 coup, General, the chairman of the Sovereign Council, demanded the prime minister to dissolve his cabinet on grounds that the country needed a new cabinet that enjoys broad participation, ensures resolving the political deadlock and overcomes the legislative crisis.²¹

The prime minister refused to give in. Supporters of the civilian rule held public rally on October 21, 2021 to show their support to the prime minister. Leaders of the FFC also expressed that the demand by the military for the dissolution of the cabinet was simply a 'creeping coup'.²² True to the correct reading of the situation by the leaders of the FFC, on October 25, 2021 the military staged a coup. Blaming the move on political infighting within the transitional coalition, the military dissolved the civilian government of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, arrested political leaders including cabinet ministers, put the prime minister under house arrest and declared state of emergency.²³

The coup intensified the already strong opposition to the military within the country and condemnation from outside. In some cases, like the USA, there were threats of sanctions and withholding of pledges for financial support made earlier. Finally, the internal and external opposition and pressure forced the coup makers to bend and agree to reinstate Prime Minister Hamdok to his office. The prime minister

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-59033142>

¹⁸ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/9/sudan-pm-abdalla-hamdok-survives-assassination-attempt>

¹⁹ <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/who-is-behind-the-attempted-assassination-of-sudan-s-prime-minister-34445>

²⁰ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/measures-being-taken-contain-failed-coup-attempt-sudan-official-source-2021-09-21/>

²¹ <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3241261/sudan's-burhan-calls-dissolving-hamdok-gov't>

²² <https://sudantribune.com/article222484/>

²³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-59033142>

agreed to reconstitute a government of technocrats in a deal announced on November 21, 2021, less than a month after the coup.²⁴ The deal was cautiously welcomed by the AU, UN, the Arab League and the West, including USA. However, FFC and pro-democracy activists rejected it, demanding the military to entirely exit politics. This led to further opposition activity making the future course of the transition uncertain.

5. Conclusion and the Way Forward

The Sudan has been and remains to be a laboratory of coups *d'état*. Recently, a sweeping mass opposition against the long reign of Omar al-Bashir succeeded in toppling the old order in April 2019. That led to a power sharing agreement between the military and civilian political forces which formed a loose alliance named Forces for Freedom and Change. They agreed to share power during the period of transition which lasts 39 months. This period itself was divided into two; the military to sit at the helm for the first 21 months and then after civilians take over for the remaining 18 months.

It was few months prior to handing over to civilians, as per the agreement, that the military staged a coup in what appeared to be a pre-emptive move to continue to retain power and positions of influence. Though civilian rule was restored in less than a month after the coup, the outcome of the new deal remains hazy. In consequence, the country's transition appears to be challenged.

Under the circumstances, the civilian wing of the transitional government became weaker. This can be explained in a number of respects. To begin with, members of the cabinet, except the ministers of the interior and defence, who initially were selected by the civilians are now reshuffled to the disdain of the FFC. The status of members of the Sovereign Council representing civilians also remains questionable. Unlike in the past, the date for transferring power to civilian rule is not included in the new agreement. Moreover, in the new deal there is no role for the FFC that is explicitly indicated. It appears that the military has plotted to isolate Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok from his support base. The net effect of all these is the shrinking of the constituency of support of the civilian government which ultimately increases its vulnerability to undue influence by the military.

On the other hand, it seems that the military emerged from the crisis stronger than the past. This enables it to continue to exercise undue influence over the civilian government, weaken civilian opposition at home and cultivate friends from the region and beyond for further consolidation of power. However, cultivating friends from the region and even beyond comes with its own problems. First, external supporters would like to push their own agendas in the region through the Sudanese military group. Second, it may upset the regional alliance system. In both cases Sudan under the military may be

²⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudans-political-transition-balance-2021-11-22/>

at odds with its neighbours such as Eritrea, Ethiopia and South Sudan, among others, and for this to happen there are multiple issues to invoke that have continued to be differed. Such developments, coupled with the problem at home stemming from the frustration of the popular forces for change because of the uncertain course of the transition, would have the potential to affect the already fragile security situation of the Horn of Africa.

Therefore, to reroute the transition to a realistic course and avert any possible chaos, at least for the interim, the following points need to be considered. First, political forces in the Sudan need to devise a mechanism that helps build the confidence of the military and induce it to yield to the demands for the civilian rule. Second, political forces which demand changes need to evolve into political parties with a more formal and orderly leadership as well as clearly spelt out political ideals, goals and objectives. Third, there is a need for CSOs and grassroots networks to continue to be active and vocal by widening and deepening the platforms they avail for articulation of people's interests in a more inclusive and representative manner. Fourth, external actors who desire to influence the transition process need to appreciate the local context and dynamics; and limit themselves to a facilitating role and assisting local initiatives instead of imposing their wills which would be counterproductive.