

Prospects for a Transformed Sudan

Five post-revolution scenarios

On 11 April 2019, former Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir was swept from power on a wave of popular protests that took place over 16 weeks. This momentous shift, now called the Sudanese Revolution, ended the National Congress Party's 30-year rule. Then on 17 August, the Transitional Military Council (TMC) – generals who had governed Sudan in the intervening months – signed a power-sharing agreement with the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC). While regime change has been achieved on paper, the Islamist security state is still very much alive. Against this background, what are the challenges facing the new transitional government and what will it take for a new Sudan to become a reality? This policy brief analyzes these questions in five different scenarios, before outlining key recommendations for international stakeholders.

Brief Points

- The Sudanese Revolution was prompted by a severe economic crisis, a kleptocratic regime, and an entrenched Islamic security state, leading to a coup d'état by the military.
- A civilian transitional government has now taken over, but the military and Islamic elements still hold significant control of key institutions of government.
- Authoritarian regimes have been uprooted by popular uprisings and peace agreements in Sudan before, only to end up with the status quo – a centralized oppressive regime marginalizing the peripheries.
- A transformed Sudan depends on a number of factors to become a reality. Whether the transitional government is able to mobilize a critical mass of allies, and whether they include military elements; whether or not the Gulf countries – on both sides of the equation – opt to use Sudan for their hegemonial competition; and whether the economy improves are all key factors that will determine the outcome.

The Uprising

It was the price of bread and fuel and the lack of cash that initially sparked off the demonstrations in Sudan on 19 December 2018. The protests quickly spread to all major cities in the country, fueled by built-up frustrations. Mobilized through social media, a powerful alliance of doctors, lawyers, intellectuals, civil servants, opposition parties and youth brought the regime to the brink. This alliance was called the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC). After five months of protests, in April 2019 former president Omar al-Bashir was removed from power and imprisoned.

After Bashir's incarceration, the Transitional Military Council (TMC), a group of generals who were remnants of the old regime, took over power. Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) was instrumental in this process. Reputed to be an opportunist, he seized the moment and soon became the strongman of the TMC. The TMC's claims that they were reformers were met with renewed protests. What appeared to be an increasingly desperate TMC-leadership went on a diplomatic tour at the end of May to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Not only were they reportedly promised financial support, they were also allegedly given a green light to crush the protests, following the Arab Spring pattern.

Just days after their return from the Gulf, on 3 June, soldiers from the RSF fired into the demonstrations and killed around 130 people. This attempted counter-revolution contributed instead to the downfall of the TMC. The reactions to the massacre were massive, both in Sudan and the international community.

A wave of social media support took off like wildfire under #BlueForSudan, in memory of 26-year-old Mohamed Matar, who was killed during the attack. The internet was quickly shut down, as had been done intermittently before – this time for three weeks.

After a period of paralysis, a tenacious FFC was able to reorganize and remobilize. It managed to communicate through text messages and organized a two-day general strike. Even more people went to the streets to protest. The TMC, and their allies in the Gulf, underestimated the resolution of the protestors. They were forced to re-open the internet and take a seat at the negotiating table.

Ethiopian Prime Minister (and 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner) Abiy Ahmed engaged and after him the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki. A power-sharing agreement was negotiated and signed on 17 July. This happened under intense pressure from the region and the international community. Negotiations continued and a Constitutional Declaration was signed on 17 August.

The parties agreed on a 39-month transitional period where a Sovereign Council – an 11-member governing body (5 TMC, 5 FFC, 1 civilian independent) – replaces the presidency, headed by a military general during the first 21 months, followed by a civilian for the remaining 18. A Prime Minister would be appointed by the FFC, as most of the Cabinet, while the TMC would select the interior and defense ministers. The Cabinet reports to a 300-member Legislative Council, where the FFC has the majority.

Just a few days after the signing, Abdalla Hamdok, an economist and former

UN official, was sworn in as Prime Minister, and the 18-member Cabinet of technocrats, including four women, was sworn in on 8 September. The military retained their hold on the security apparatus and the army. This marked the third time in Sudanese history that popular uprisings led to the ousting of an authoritarian regime. But years of democratic rule and intermittent peace have ended in another military coup. Will it be different this time?

A History of Protests

Since Sudan's independence in 1956, representatives of four riverine Arab tribes around Khartoum have always held power. They have, to a large degree, controlled the state apparatus and the security agencies, and managed to retain a dominant role in Sudanese politics and the economy, whatever the government. The concentration of power at the center has led to a marginalization of the periphery. This combined with weak democratic traditions and a governance system that enables the capture of the state by the few has led to multiple conflicts and popular uprisings in the country. When authoritarian rule has been combined with mismanagement of the economy, and at times also extreme Islamist positions, these uprisings have had dramatic consequences.

The first years were volatile. A military coup already in 1958 was overturned by the first popular uprising, in October 1964. Following elections, this democratic government was ousted through another military coup in 1969 by Colonel Gaafar al-Nimeiri. At the same time, the most marginalized region – the South – had mounted resistance. The Anyanya movement, led by South Sudanese freedom fighter Joseph Lagu, had been



Protests outside the University of Zalingei in West Darfur. Photo: UN Photo / Albert Gonzalez Farran / CC BY-NC-ND

fighting for independence since 1963. It was Nimeiri that negotiated the first peace accord, the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972, ending a 17-year conflict and providing for Southern autonomy.

Increasingly, however, Nimeiri turned to the Muslim Brotherhood for support, with Islamist Hassan al-Turabi as attorney general and a new constitution based on Sharia law. That, and the division of the Southern region, prompted the Southern Colonel John Garang de Mabior to jump ship and form the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in 1983. The second civil war began.

The second popular uprising occurred in 1985 after the execution of a modernist Islamic thinker opposed to Sharia law. The subsequent elections were won by Sadiq al-Mahdi (Umma party). Only four years later, on 30 June 1989, Omar al-Bashir seized power in a coup. He was the vehicle for the National Islamic Front (NIF), whose strongman behind the

scenes was Hassan al-Turabi.

The NIF-regime enforced strict Sharia laws and securitized institutions. It also provided training grounds for Osama Bin Laden (1992–1996). In the late 1990s, the regime tried to portray itself as more “civilized”, using more subtle authoritarian methods and changing its name to National Congress Party (NCP). A proliferation of security services nevertheless implied strict controls and surveillance. Increase in oil income (largely from the South) enabled military offensives in the marginalized areas of the South, Kordofan and Blue Nile.

Turabi was expelled from the NCP in 1999 after tensions with Bashir, strengthening his hold on power, while another strongman ascended, First Vice President Ali Osman Taha. It was the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001 that prompted revitalized talks between Khartoum and the SPLM/A under the auspices of the Intergovernmental

Authority on Development (IGAD), the regional organization for the Horn of Africa. Sudan wanted to improve their image. The negotiations, facilitated by the Kenyan Envoy, Lazarus Sumbeiywo, continued to be supported by the Troika (the US, UK and Norway).

When the negotiations stalled in 2003, Chairman John Garang needed a lot of convincing before he agreed to meet directly with Taha in Kenya in August. The latter had tried to reach out many times. An intense negotiation period followed over 16 months, mostly between the two leaders alone, behind closed doors and without a mediator, leading to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed on 9 January 2005. The CPA intended to create a New Sudan for all marginalized peoples in the country, with the Southerners granted a referendum on independence after 6 years if justice was not served.

Only 21 days after Garang was sworn

in as Vice President of Sudan, he was killed in a helicopter crash in South Sudan. Immediately after his death, Taha was sidelined in Khartoum and an emboldened president Bashir asserted himself as the sovereign leader of the country, manifesting authoritarian rule, often labelled the “NCP deep state”. The intention behind the reforms in the CPA – the New Sudan – was not realized. This prompted 98.8% of the South Sudanese to vote for independence in a referendum in January 2011, achieving independence on 9 July 2011.

Sudan lost more than half its oil-export income, leading to an immediate economic shock. The economy was not diversified, and the many companies with close ties to the NCP were exempted from taxation, leading to further economic deterioration. From being staunch supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, working with Iran, Sudan turned to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who needed allies after the Arab Spring and soldiers to help them fight the war in Yemen. Sudan got more than pocket money in return. On 4 January 2016, Sudan severed its diplomatic relations with Iran, a shift they knew would be appreciated by the US, who held the country under economic sanctions. But the economic crisis worsened and inflation sky-rocketed as people’s patience with an increasingly authoritarian and kleptocratic regime came to a halt. The 2019 popular uprising led to regime change. The question is whether the pattern of Sudanese history will now be broken: will the regime change this time, not just in words but also in deeds?

Managing the Transition for a Transformed Sudan

The mandate of the transitional government is to “dismantle the June 1989

regime’s structure for consolidation of power (*tamkeen*)”, the Islamic security state, and build a state of laws and institutions, as reflected in the Constitutional Declaration (Chapter 2, 7 (15)).

For this to happen, transformation of the security sector is imperative. Crucial reforms are also needed, both to ensure transparency and accountability and to improve the economy and living conditions of people. These include an effective, functioning, and inclusive public sector and a roadmap towards democracy and the rule of law (relinquishing Sharia legislation). These reforms cannot be dealt with one-by-one but have to be pursued in a synergic and interconnected manner, reinforcing each other.

The main challenges are the continued control of all security and military institutions by the military and Islamist elements, and the procedures whereby decisions in government are taken by consensus, and a two thirds-majority wins out in the case of a disagreement. This implies that the military leaders de facto have veto power. This will affect reform implementation. Furthermore, deputy head of the Sovereign Council Hemedti is in the process of establishing a firm grip on security in and around the capital. This former paramilitary leader and head of one Janjaweed group (the forces responsible for atrocities in Darfur) has provided thousands of soldiers to the Saudi war in Yemen and personally controls gold trade and smuggling routes to Dubai. His close links to both the Emirates and Saudi Arabia are a concern.

Against such challenges, the success of the transition will largely depend on the ability of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and his colleagues, many of them from the country’s peripheries, to

make use of strategic allies with leverage over the NCP and Islamist elements – be it domestic leaders, the armed opposition, international actors, or popular mobilization to push for major reforms. This will also be dependent on whether potential spoilers will be able to undermine the transitional government’s reform agenda, internal or external.

Another critical factor is the armed opposition. The transitional government urgently needs peace with the armed groups in Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile (organized in the Sudan Revolutionary Front, SLM-AW and the SPLM-North). There is now concern about Juba as the location for the talks and NCP-elements in their negotiation team.

Being a peacemaker motivated by political survival, such a role for President of South Sudan Salva Kiir Mayardit could extend his time in office. With the help of old NCP-cadres in Sudan, the South Sudan peace agreement (R-ARCSS) could have guarantors in Khartoum also post-Bashir. A Sudan peace agreement that is more on the military leaders’ terms would serve this purpose, and be in Juba’s interest. If such a status quo alliance materializes, it could undermine the transitional government under Prime Minister Hamdok.

Sudan Scenarios

First Scenario: The Status Quo

One scenario would maintain the status quo. In this case, the negotiations with the armed opposition would be handled by the Sovereign Council (former TMC), and not the transitional government. They will likely push for an agreement

that holds back on reforms, not least in the security sector. The NCP-forces would succeed in stalling reforms in Khartoum, utilizing their hold in key ministries of defense and national security and delaying as much as possible of the rest. Hemedti would use his powerful position to protect the Rapid Support Forces as a parallel force, and the UAE and Saudi Arabia may engage with individual leaders to retain their influence. How active such an engagement will be will depend on how critical Sudan is for them.

Second Scenario: A Tug of War

In the development described above, the status quo forces having the upper hand is countered by interventions from a transitional government that remains popular, is able to contain the most important spoilers, and makes use of popular mobilization, demanding reforms and change. The government is further able to push reforms through in certain sectors but faces difficulties in the security sector. If over time reforms that are politically costly are put on hold, the momentum in implementing the reform agenda can be lost. This can happen if the reforms are seen as going “too far” – for example, immediately repealing Sharia law. The Islamist movement may then stage pockets of protests around the country. The extent to which spoilers will use such methods will depend on how popular the government continues to be, and the economic situation in the country.

Third Scenario: Reversal

A bleaker scenario would be that the transitional government loses its popular support and the Islamists, together with their allies in the military, find a way to a regain power. This may transpire if the TMC loses momentum, with people not

seeing change – in either their economic predicament, or the government’s behavior. Then the Islamist elements can utilize the moment and mobilize their own people. Such a situation might then be compounded by further blockages from security elements. This could happen either through the Islamists running a shadow government that de facto controls the key institutions and policies, or the resignation of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, which would lead to the collapse of the transition government, and likely the power-sharing agreement between the TMC and the FFC. Either way, Qatar and Iran would be likely to support such a development.

Fourth Scenario: The Worst Case

Subsequently, a worst-case scenario could be the ultimate result, with a rise of the peripheries against such a development, generating a civil war that in the longer run may culminate in the implosion and possible disintegration of the Sudanese state.

These various scenarios depend on a number of factors:

- The extent to which Hemedti and the military leadership align with the Islamists, or whether Hemedti becomes an ally of the reformists from an opportunistic perspective;
- The extent to which the UAE and the Saudis are relying on Hemedti and Sudan, and whether the tensions between the two and Qatar will play out – Qatar having supported the Islamists (and trained the Sudanese Army) in the past;
- The extent to which internal spoilers manage to mobilize people in gov-

ernment institutions and Sudanese society to undermine the transitional government;

- Hamdok’s ability to mobilize internal partners and work with the armed opposition, who have leverage on implementation of reforms, not least in the security sector;
- The extent to which the FFC/reformists in Sudan are united and able to stick together, using popular mobilization to support Prime Minister Hamdok;
- The international partners’ willingness to exert adequate pressure for fundamental reforms and use their leverage; and
- Whether the economy will recover on the basis of sound policies, reforms and strong partnerships.

Many are of the view that the latter is by far the most critical factor. If the economy is doing better, the Prime Minister’s chances of succeeding are significantly improved. However, the reform agenda is equally important, and success is more likely if the reformers in the country unite.

Fifth Scenario: Reform

In such a final scenario of reform, where the peace agreement with the armed opposition is based on such a partnership with the transitional government, who takes overall responsibility for the talks, the chances of success in implementing reforms are greater. Should there be a split between the Islamist NCP-elements, with the military and Hemedti taking a more pragmatic reform-oriented approach (and should key Gulf states

refrain from meddling too much in Sudan's affairs), the reformers will have the upper hand. This is not least the case if allies in the international community and the region also use their leverage for reform. This includes the deliverables needed to lift US-sanctions (in particular, cleaning up the security sector), conditionalities for debt relief demanding transparency in key sectors, and the conditionality of International Financial Institutions on extra-budgetary financial flows (the IMF, the World Bank, the Paris Club-creditors). Here, the Troika will play an important role. In addition, the support from the region and their use of political pressure, carrots, and sticks will be important for the new transitional government to succeed. If all partners deliver on their responsibilities, this scenario can become a reality.

Prospects for a New Sudan

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) promised an ambitious reform agenda, a New Sudan in 2005. But it was halted – partly due to forces of the Islamic security state. This resulted in the secession of South Sudan in 2011 and 15 years of suffering in Sudan. The Sudanese Revolution has given the country another chance to deliver on these promises. As the NCP and its security state is still operational and will likely do its utmost to prevent *the dismantling of the June 1989 regime's structure*, I offer

the following recommendations for international stakeholders:

- For the region and the Troika to support the peace process between the Sudanese government and the armed opposition through integrated negotiations for all regions, and not piecemeal, as is the case now – preferably in a location with less vested interests in Sudan's fate.
- For the mediators and international actors in the region and beyond to press for and support security sector transformation, encompassing all security actors in Sudan, the Army, all organs of National Security and the Police.
- For the US, Sudan-creditors (Paris Club) and the IFIs to *utilize* the processes of lifting US sanctions, providing debt relief and establishing macroeconomic credibility, respectively, in order to promote transparency and accountability, confronting illicit and off-budget financial flows, as well as requiring security sector transformation.
- For the region and donor countries, including the Troika and Gulf-countries, respectively, to support Sudan with reform capacity, quick impact projects – providing dividends of the revolution – and generous develop-

ment assistance, as well as facilitating arrears clearance to enable loans from the IFIs.

The transitional period is short, the reform agenda massive, and the challenges enormous. If they are overcome, there is a good chance that the pattern of Sudanese history may finally be broken, delivering a just Sudan for all its marginalized peoples. ■

Further Reading

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