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Sudan's Transition in the Balance

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ABSTRACT

The once-in-a-generation opportunity that Sudan's popular revolution created faced strong headwinds from the beginning. These included obstacles from within and without: a significant part of the Transitional Government hailed from the former regime and powerful regional countries opposed the democratic change the liberal forces promised. The challenge for the revolution is to consolidate the protest movement's power into an organised political force that can shape the transition against these two headwinds with a view to ensuring that the elections marking the end of the transition are the true arbiter of Sudan's next government. In other words, ensuring elections are free and fair and that all political trends stand on equal footing rather than the elections being dominated by the better resourced military affiliated forces or the better organised former regime political cadres. While embracing the promise of a liberal, democratic Sudan, Europe has faced difficulty in translating this into effective support: creating space vis-à-vis the powerful regional countries and in evolving an approach towards the liberal actors that strengthens their development into a mature political force.

Sudan | *Domestic policy* | *Political parties* | *Political movements* | *Opposition*

keywords

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Introduction

The success of the 2018–19 Sudanese revolution hinged on a decentralised protest movement structure that achieved unprecedented mass mobilisation while evading state suppression. This strategy eschewed organisation into hierarchical political party structures even after the regime was toppled. However, the second phase of the revolution, which required the new civilian component at the head of the Transitional Government to deliver on reforms, necessitated coherently organised political power.

The absence of such capacity handicapped the civilian component, both in terms of its inability to represent the protest movement that had ushered it into power and in the civilians' competitive relationship with the military component of the Transitional Government. While the protest movement engineered the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir, the security apparatus remained, comprising the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the para-military Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). The schism between the SAF and the RSF was a key defining feature of the Sudanese post-2019 trajectory. The protest movement directed its anger at the President not the security apparatus as such. So after the President's ouster, the security apparatus remained, portraying itself as the servant of the people (and the peoples' will in the form of the protest movement), and entered into a tricky power-sharing arrangement with the civilian component.

Champions of each component – military and civilian – formed internationally. Sudan's more autocratic partners supported the military component while the Western democracies embraced the civilians. Since a basis of common interest

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was never established, the transition period, which was envisaged as carrying out key reforms and making peace with Sudan's armed opposition groups, was infused with tension. Objectives that ought to have been of national interest transformed into political opportunities to advance the strength of one component or the other. For example, negotiations with the armed groups were viewed by some within the military component as a chance to improve their status as peacemakers and create military strategic depth by incorporating the armed opposition groups into their extended camp.

While Europe and the European Union identified the change in Sudan as a historic opportunity to advance a liberal and more stable Sudan, two areas of policy intervention were lacking: engagement to create a coherent political power out of the protest movement that could align behind the civilian component; and successfully convincing the autocratic governments behind the military component – Egypt and the United Arab Emirates – to back the civilian component (or at least a modus vivendi).

1. The outbreak of the Sudanese revolution

The Sudanese protest movement emerged in December 2018, triggered by President Bashir's decision to cut subsidies to key economic staples: bread and fuel. The spark was struck when, on 19 December 2018, an office of the ruling National Congress Party was set afire in a small city nestled in the traditional support base of President Bashir's regime of Atbara.[1] The protests quickly spread to 28 cities before honing in on the capital Khartoum where an Egyptian-Maidan moment coalesced.

Unlike earlier protests in 2013, these linked the declining economic situation to a political demand: Bashir stepping down. Although the subsidy cuts represented the proximate cause, Sudan had experienced deep-rooted economic and political problems for years. High military spending – consuming up to 70 per cent of the national budget –, loss of revenue following the secession of oil-rich South Sudan in 2011, international sanctions, as well as corruption and nepotism plagued the country.[2]

It would later emerge that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) took the decision to pull the financial support that had been critical to propping up Sudan's economy in response to President Bashir's decision to allow their rival Turkey to build a naval base at Port Suakin. The naval base represented only the latest in a long string of President Bashir's arbitrage between middle eastern rivals, playing Iran off against Saudi Arabia for example, but it was the straw

[1] Mai Hassan and Ahmed Kodouda, "Sudan's Uprising: The Fall of a Dictator", in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (October 2019), p. 89-103, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/?p=5964.

[2] "Several Killed in Sudan as Protests over Rising Prices Continue", in *Al Jazeera*, 21 December 2018, https://aje.io/frbvu.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-217-6

that broke the camel's back. At the time not recognised for its significance, KSA's failure to renew a financial lifeline forced Bashir into the austerity measures that sparked the revolution; while the withholding of an emergency financial injection once unrest started tipped the scales against the former president.

Discerning the winds of change, Sudan's National Intelligence Security Services (NISS) Chief Salah Gosh began discreetly supporting the protest movement as a hedge to his personal fortunes and as means to create influence in any transition to come. Separately, a moment of truth arrived where Gosh and Mohammed Hamdan Hemedti, the leader of the RSF, a massive paramilitary force used primarily in Darfur, both refused President Bashir's order to forcibly disperse the protesters who had gathered in the capital's largest protest encampment. The refusal was also President Bashir's end; reflecting an internal consensus amongst the security apparatus that his ouster was now unavoidable.

On 6 April 2019, the unrest reached a tipping point following the sit-in in front of the military headquarters. Five days later, on 11 April 2019, the military announced that President Bashir had been overthrown by the newly established Transitional Military Council (TMC), led by Lt-Gen Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman Burhan.

Although Bashir was gone, the revolution was not over. The protesters were deeply concerned the TMC would install a new autocracy; continuing Bashir's system but with a new, sanitised face. Amid rising tensions as the protesters continued holding out for a full transfer to civilian rule, on 3 June a massive security clearance operation of the sit-in was launched by armed forces linked to the TMC. It is widely accepted that the operation was undertaken by the RSF but inquiries are ongoing.[3]

Taking Sudanese and international observers by surprise for its suddenness and brutality, the operation resulted in the deaths of up to 241 protesters. The ensuing outrage lent impetus to discreet diplomatic efforts by the "Quad" (US/UK and UAE/KSA) which supported the public facing mediation led by Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali, supported by the African Union's mediator Mohammed Lebatt. Together these efforts crystallised around an agreement to form a joint transitional government with a civilian and a military component. The result was a deal signed between the TMC and the Forces of Freedom and Change, the political coalition created in January 2019 that encompassed nearly all forms of opposition actors: civil society, political parties and armed opposition groups. The agreement, signed in July 2019, mandated the creation of transitional institutions, among them a Sovereign Council comprising both military and civilian components. With the Draft Constitutional Declaration signed in August, power was transferred from the TMC to the Sovereign Council and the other newly created transitional bodies.

[3] Kareem Khadder and Julia Hollingsworth, "Sudan Death Roll Rises to 100 as Bodies Found in Nile, Say Doctors", in *CNN*, 5 June 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/05/africa/sudan-death-toll-intl.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-217-6

2. Sudan's protest movement: Learning from experience

The Sudanese protest movement purposefully resisted structure and centralisation. This decision resulted from lessons drawn through a decade of successive (and unsuccessful) protest movements as well as comparisons with other movements in neighbouring countries: particularly Egypt. Decentralisation allowed it to evade state repression but also to generate geographically widespread grassroots participation. The result was an unprecedented degree of mobilisation: a truly mass movement. While this structural decision created a singularly effective protest movement, it came at a cost. The lack of a central structure nullified the protest movement's ability to play a leadership role in the new national situation it had created.

Past unsuccessful protests paved the way for those of 2019. The Change Now and Girifna movements organised protests in September 2013. At that time the sparks of protest were again lit by cuts to subsidies, this time to wheat and fuel. Like in 2019, the economic travails were a product of Sudan's foreign policy: the messy divorce with South Sudan leading to a loss of oil transit fees for Sudan that necessitated some belt tightening. The protests, organised by student movements using Facebook and other social media, took place at university campuses in Khartoum, Omdurman, El Obeid and other towns.

But organisation and communication weaknesses led to the 2013 protests being rolled up by the Sudanese security services before they could achieve critical mass.[4] Communication technology was penetrated by the security services, allowing protest locations to be found out ahead of time and protest organisers to be tracked down and arrested. Security services headed off gathering spots with advance intelligence and guarded existing gathering points such as Friday Prayer congregations. All of this prevented the emergence of a critical mass of protesters occupying a central location in Khartoum. Finally, the security services were willing to use overwhelming force as soon as the protests bubbled to the surface. This zero-tolerance approach was so brutal that some 200 protesters we killed during one clampdown.[5] By contrast, WhatsApp proved a game changer in the 2019 protests. The secure communications it provided to the protest organisers enabled a level of coordination and organisation that proved unbreachable and ultimately decisive.

The choice to eschew political organisation, once a new transitional government was formed, left the political leadership to other parties. This, in turn, had an impact on the very character of the Transitional Government. Its civilian component had been legitimised as being representative of the protests, but this was strictly speaking not represented. In fact, as the transition progressed, the protest

[4] Human Rights Watch, *Sudan: Violent Response to Peaceful Protests*, 3 February 2011, https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/02/03/sudan-violent-response-peaceful-protests.

[5] Mai Hassan and Ahmed Kodouda, "Sudan's Uprising: The Fall of a Dictator", cit.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-217-6

movement withdrew increasingly from the civilian component of the government while the opposition political parties – the late-comer elite component of the overall protest coalition – came to the forefront. Thus, the values that animated the revolution, demonstration of the democratic will that would lead Sudan towards democracy – and possible future engine for a renewed European commitment in Sudan – began to be less and less represented by the transitional government.

At its high point, the 2019 protest movement embraced a vast scope of actors ranging from local protest organisers through to elite political parties and the armed opposition. But the backbone of the mobilisation was the local interaction between community, student and youth actors. The organising unit was the Revolutionary Committee. These roughly mirrored in function and presence the government's Popular Committee structure: a decentralised extension of the ruling party that reached down to the neighbourhood level. In essence it was a form of (very) local government but with a largely informal mandate. Groups of Revolutionary Committees, which could be located either in neighbourhoods of large cities or comprise an entire rural town, were bound together by Local Coordination Committees. These were the next level in the political and organisational hierarchy, in loose coordination with each other. Overlapping with these but moving up the political (and social/economic) ladder was the Sudan Professional Association (SPA). This trade union-type, upper middle-class body was less geographically representative and rather more urban and elite-centred. Formed originally in 2016 as a product of the increasingly independent non-governmental "shadow" unions, it was composed of existing smaller unions of doctors, lawyers and journalists. Moving to more formal political parties and armed opposition groups, the Sudan Call, formed in 2014, comprised the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) armed group alliance as well as traditional national political parties, including Ummah, the National Consensus Forces (a coalition of political parties formed to stand against the National Congress Party during the 2010 Sudanese elections) and the Confederation of Sudanese Civil Society, a civil society grouping linked to the Sudanese lawyer Amin Mekki Medani.[6]

Women played an important role throughout these structures with groups and individuals taking key positions in the SPA and eventually in the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC).[7] Women shared the same general political/economic grievances but also had particular antipathy towards the Bashir government's Public Order Laws and Family Laws.[8] The latter codified an extremely conservative interpretation of Islamic law as it applies to women including permitting marriage at the age of ten, while the former placed burdensome strictures on women's participation in

[6] IRIN, "Sudan: Who's Who in the Opposition", in *The New Humanitarian*, 26 July 2012, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/node/252320; Tom Lantos Human Rights website: Dr. Amin Mekki Medani, https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/node/556.

[7] Nagwan Soliman, "Sudan Spring: Lessons from Sudanese Women Revolutionaries", in *GIWPS Blog*, 11 April 2020, https://giwps.georgetown.edu/?p=10925.

[8] Liv Tønnessen, "Sudanese Women's Revolution for Freedom, Dignity and Justice Continues", in *CMI Sudan Blog*, 2020, https://www.cmi.no/publications/7355.

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public life. In the protests themselves, women played different roles,[9] many joining the dangerous protests themselves and others helping organise support systems to sustain the protesters: food, water and other provisions.

As the protests gathered steam, an umbrella body was formed out of necessity to bring all of these actors under one tent: the Forces for Freedom and Change. Seeking to demonstrate a united front in the face of historical change, the FFC succeeded in clustering all levels of opposition under its banner. This included the SPA, but with only tacit approval, and the Local Coordination Committees. This notwithstanding, there were tensions due to the (justified) fear of the Local Coordination Committees, and to a lesser degree the SPA, that political hijacking could occur once the movement came under one structure. Experience dictated that the savvier organisational operators, the political parties, could and would find ways to turn the structure to their advantage.

The SPA had planned an economics-focused protest for 25 December 2018. Seeing how protests outside the capital had begun and how these had moved from demanding improvements on the economic situation to calling for Bashir's removal, the SPA decided to go political as well. With a turnout near the 10,000 mark, the event represented the largest protest the capital Khartoum had witnessed in decades.

Moving quickly, the SPA linked up with existing political opposition parties and the armed groups based outside Sudan to form the FFC. The SPA was already naturally situated in the middle between the political parties – with which it shared the same urban elite milieu although not a political party itself – and the Local Coordination Committees. Thus it was the SPA which on 1 January 2019 struck an alliance with 21 other organisations in a joint declaration calling for a national transitional government to replace Bashir. The declaration marked the birth of the FFC.

The events after the ouster of President Bashir in April 2019 forced the Local Coordination Committees into new terrain beyond mobilisation and demonstrations. They began to develop a political platform of their own, independent of the SPA and the FFC and often critical of their positions.

Two trends emerged: first, the maximalists who remained faithful to the letter of the SPA's January 2019 declaration and who demanded the surrender of power to a wholly civilian transitional government with no role for the army and the security apparatus; and the compromisers, willing to embrace a tactical arrangement with the TMC.

After the formation of the Transitional Government, protests continued to be used as a political tool by the protest movement; a kind of check on performance

[9] Sydney Young, "The Women's Revolution: Female Activism in Sudan", in *Harvard International Review*, 25 May 2020, https://hir.harvard.edu/the-womens-revolution-female-activism-in-sudan.

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and adherence to the "spirit of the revolution". But this tool emerged as limited in terms of accountability. It became clear that excessive protest would legitimise a countercoup by the military component. It could be claimed that protests, if they reached a massive scale, constituted a state of anarchy which the military component would be compelled to deal with under the rubric of restoring order and in the interest of the state.

3. The transition at the national level: A divided house

Two national-level dynamics are germane here. First is the tension between the established political/armed opposition and the new protest movements (SPA and Local Coordination Committees), which originated from the fact that, although a Transitional Constitution was formally negotiated in the name of the entire FFC, it was driven largely by the SPA leading to a de facto (if not de jure) exclusion of the armed opposition who were still based abroad. The second dynamic is the division between the civilian and military components in the Transitional Government, which were tied together in an impossible governing arrangement, with each trying to dominate the other.

It is difficult to overstate how dramatically the protests upended the power dynamic within the opposition. For decades, the Sudanese opposition comprised roughly two elements: mainstream major political parties and armed opposition groups. The former were Khartoum elites whose focus was the political centre of the country. The latter stemmed from the Sudanese peripheries, which had traditionally been the locus of armed uprising against political marginalisation.

For decades the armed opposition groups had concluded various peace agreements with the government of Sudan: in Darfur, in the Two Areas and even in East Sudan. These agreements tended to be classic wealth- and power-sharing arrangements that would catapult the armed opposition group leaders into central government positions while many aspects of redress to armed conflict were relegated to vague "implementation" processes left to technical committees and international development agencies. These agreements were invariably partial (not all leaders signed off on them) and were never fully implemented by the government. This led to the conclusion that a more root-and-branch approach was needed. This realisation crystallised around the idea of launching a national dialogue to address the Sudan problem in its entirety. The convergence of analysis between the periphery armed groups and the political opposition over the years led to the conclusion that the two must articulate a common vision of the problem and its solution. This found its expression in the creation of the Sudan Call, an overarching opposition body that included the armed opposition umbrella (the SRF) and the main political opposition forces: the Ummah Party, the Democratic Unionist Party and a smattering of leftists – Ba'ath, Nasserists and most importantly the Communists.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-217-6

All of these elites had difficulty in claiming massive popular support. In fact, both the international community and the opposition engaged with fantasies. The international community needed an opposition to engage in negotiations with the government, while the opposition itself used exclusive access to the negotiations to create a legitimacy it lacked via popular mandate.

This all changed radically when the protest movement gained momentum in 2019. For the first time in decades, there was clearly a mass movement apparent for all to see. Here were the masses that the elite opposition always claimed to speak for and be able to mobilise. But the protests had mobilised quite independently from the elite opposition. Indeed, when some opposition leaders tried to associate themselves with the protests – for example by joining the sit-ins – they were roundly rejected and shown the door.

The international community was so taken by the promise of the new Sudan the protesters' views seemed to herald, as well as by the overwhelming political power generated for the first time via popular mobilisation, that it abandoned almost completely its old negotiation paradigm revolving around the elite opposition. Sudan was turning a new page and would be guided by new political realities. So as the protests gathered steam, the elite opposition found themselves out of the loop with the protest leaders and out of contact with the international community.

The protests movement, sure of its overwhelming influence and sceptical of the "professional opposition", made very perfunctory gestures towards overall opposition unity by including the Sudan Call, nominally, within the greater FFC. But it was clear that the locus of decision-making was in Khartoum with the protesters, who were not depending on the Sudan Call for guidance or approval.

When the inevitable split came in June 2019, with the SRF pulling out of the FFC over the failure to agree on a common position in the negotiations with the TMC, its impact hardly registered. The sense was of the dawn of a new era: decades of "professional" opposition had not brought the change, but rather the new force of the protest movement did.

Turning to the other "house divided", the Transitional Government combined two opposing camps – the military and civilian components – with little incentive for real cooperation. This bifurcated leadership led to a form of government forum shopping amongst Sudan's partners. States could choose to engage either the military or the civilian component, in what was either a vote of support for that given faction or seeking the most favourable position on a given issue.

The military component felt it was the real power but needed to hide its hand for fear of the protest movement. It was encouraged in this position by its regional backers: Egypt for the Sudanese Armed Forces and the UAE for RSF leader Hemedti. The civilian component began with massive popular goodwill towards its head, new Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdouk. But the unknown and inexperienced executive he led proved hapless. Hamdouk himself enjoyed the backing of the protest

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-217-6

movement but once in office he relied more on the FFC, which grew to inhabit the role of ruling party (behind the civilian component). This was incongruous in that the more institutional the FFC grew, the further the protest movement withdrew from it. Thus, as the PM treated the "political party" more as his real caucus, its democratic bona fides was eroding, placing the real mass movement beyond the FFC's representation.

In the months that followed, as Sudan's economic situation not only failed to improve but deteriorated, goodwill began to evaporate. The protest movement remobilised in one of its biggest gatherings in summer 2020, directing its demands at PM Hamdouk.[10] Where this might have threatened PM Hamdouk's post – an unelected official in theory understood to be representative of the protest movement – the fear of a military-led countercoup tempered the protest movement. Understanding that calls to replace the PM could pave the way for the military to justify taking, the protest movement tempered its actions (though not its passion).

4. Return of the armed opposition: The Juba negotiations

There is a Sudanese political parable comparing the country's politics to a barrel of crabs: as soon as one nears escape the rest will pull it back down. So it was for the elite opposition who received their second chance in the fall of 2019.

Three factors led to the resurrection of their political fortune. First, the new government had set the incredibly ambitious objective of achieving peace with all armed groups. Having set this as the metric of success, the government bound its hands as peace was then for the armed groups to deliver. Second, the military component of the government was caught in a zero-sum competition with its civilian partners. They saw the armed groups as both a prize to demonstrate their bona fides to the greater population and as recruits to strengthen their side. The peace agreement would create an alliance and the armed groups would align with the military; all with a view to positioning for whatever might come after the transition period. Third, the regional powers – Egypt, the UAE/KSA, as well as Sudan's neighbours with the exception of Ethiopia – still judged the armed groups to be the "real" power and the protest movement as ideologically hostile and politically volatile, and wanted to help deliver the armed groups to the new government as a means of generating political capital. So the regional powers invested negotiation with the armed groups with the same inflationary attention that the international community once had.

[10] Theodore Murphy, "Sudan Peace Agreement: What It Really Means for the Country's Transition", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 2 September 2020, https://ecfr.eu/?p=8934.

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Thus, even as the international community discarded the armed opposition, it returned with a surprising splash with the Juba Declaration of September 2019. This marked the beginning of new negotiations between the Transitional Government and the armed opposition hosted and mediated by the Government of South Sudan (GoSS). The Sudanese government negotiation was spearheaded by the RSF's leader, Hemedti, rather than the civilian component's leadership (the PM), and Tut Gatluak, a senior security official from the GoSS, emerged as mediator. The Juba Declaration introduced a range of new armed groups in addition to the existing ones that in reality carried no arms but felt negotiations were their only way into power. The scope of the negotiation topics and the geographic range – not only the classic war-affected peripheries of Darfur and the Two Areas but also Eastern, Northern and Central Sudan – was stunning.[11]

Initially the international community, meaning the Western partners and the African Union/United Nations, reacted tepidly to the Juba forum for two reasons: first concerns that the military was taking the lead in negotiations and, second, concerns about the GoSS mediator, whom many avoided engaging as someone implicated in crimes in South Sudan.

While the Juba negotiations suffered from international neglect, the armed opposition parties enthusiastically engaged in the talks. They had discovered that the Transitional Government was so willing to reach an agreement that it discarded previous red-line positions with ease. Suddenly the issues that had proved intractable for years of negotiations were up for discussion, for example restructuring the administration of Darfur into a single region (rather than three states). So, while the absence of international engagement unnerved the armed opposition – particularly as their buy-in would be necessary to finance the implementation phase – they took the position that any agreement reached was at the very minimum a new high water mark they could refer to in future negotiations.

The international community adopted a posture of benign neglect, assuming the negotiations would peter out, but were forced to take notice as the scope of the topics negotiated began to emerge. Rather than harmless regional agreements, fundamental aspects of the Transitional Constitution were being amended: the duration of the transitional period, the composition of the Sovereign Council and of the Legislature. As this realisation dawned, covid-19 broke out in late winter 2020. The result was that while the talks neared conclusion and grappled with the weightiest issues, the international community's attention to Sudan diminished considerably.

In parallel to the advances being made in the Juba negotiations, the civilian component of the Sudanese government faced increasing difficulties in delivering

[11] JEM, SPLM-n, SLA/M, SLA/M Transitional Council, Beja Congress/Opposition, Popular United Front for Liberation and Justice, Kush Liberation Movement, Unionist Democratic Party/ Revolutionary Forces) and Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces.

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any economic improvement. The political party aligned to the civilian component, the FFC, suffered splits and even the SPA splintered. This led the government to grow more desperate than ever to secure successes. In turn, the negotiating power of the armed groups in Juba grew. While the FFC held out against some of the armed groups' demands – particularly those eating into its share of power in the Legislature – the combination of the military component's investment in recruiting an ally and the civilian component's desire for a demonstrable win outweighed the naysayers.

5. The region and Sudan: Transition in a sharp-elbowed neighbourhood

All of Sudan's key international partners saw the transition as a once in a lifetime opportunity to shape a new Sudan. They differed – fundamentally – in the political orientation they wanted to give it.

The Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) between the KSA, Egypt and the UAE, with the UAE in the lead, identified determining the trajectory of Sudan's transition as a core national security interest. As such they invested at a level far beyond the EU in terms of political/financial capital. The EU's inability to influence the MESA led to a drastic reduction in its ability to influence the internal political situation in favour of its stated goal of supporting the objectives of the civilian-led government.

Three key factors informed MESA's assessment of the absolute importance of shaping Sudan's future trajectory. First, Sudan's location in their neighbourhood meant it could be a source of threats. So the first-order objective was to avoid state collapse. Riven by internal fault lines and bankrupt, the potential for a Somalia scenario was conceivable. Second, as Sudan had been hospitable to political Islam under President Bashir, now there was a chance to uproot it. Finally, Bashir had made a practice of playing the MESA off against its rivals: Iran, Turkey and Qatar. Now it was imperative to firmly secure Sudan in the friendly "Sunni African" orbit of the MESA, and prevent a return to Bashir's opportunism vis-à-vis the Iran/Qatar/Turkey axis. In sum, the ideal outcome was for a Sudan that would be moderately Sunni, stable and pliant, and exclusively MESA aligned. But within this a very important schism existed and within the MESA points of disagreement existed as to specifics.

These played out between especially Egypt and the UAE. Egypt believed that it knew Sudan best and should be the intellectual lead for the MESA's approach. It also had a long-standing relationship with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the Army, which they felt was similar to the Egyptian Army and a reliable and loyal pillar on which to build. Here the UAE differed. Deeply preoccupied with the threat from political Islam, the Emirati analysis dictated that over the two decades of National Congress Party rule political Islamism had woven its way into all senior levels of government. To accomplish a clean sweep, rather than try to reform thoroughly

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-217-6

permeated bureaucracies, it was better to start afresh. This is what led them to invest so heavily in Hemedti, the RSF leader. The UAE saw him as the only friendly, existing vehicle that was sufficiently free from political Islam. The UAE's conclusion then was to build around the RSF as much intelligence and military capacity as possible so that the RSF might even replace the army and the intelligence at some point. With all parts of the Sudan's security apparatus discerning this agenda, concerns were raised in the strongest terms at the UAE's approach, which could lead to the very state implosion it sought to avoid.[12] Politically, the UAE also made the RSF the conduit for the lifesaving cash injections Sudan desperately needed to stay afloat. Rather than channelling these from government to government, they passed through Hemedti who could then use them to build patronage networks and public displays of largesse. The state's weakness at this moment only served to increase Hemedti's relative strength vis-à-vis the rest of the government.

The MESA viewed the protest movement dismissively. Ideologically the two were fundamentally at odds, a difference that could be managed but would never allow the foundation for a deeper relationship to flourish. Ideology aside, the MESA also did not appreciate the protest movement as an enduring political force. Here their view was that hard power in military institutions is the backbone of the state. Popular uprising brings force to bear but then dissipates like a receding wave. So even if pragmatic considerations could have bridged the ideological gap, the MESA was not convinced the civilians had staying power.

The civilian component's only real regional ally was Ethiopia. Led by Prime Minister Abiy, also brought to power by a popular protest movement in 2018, Addis Ababa aligned ideologically with the Sudanese protesters and the civilian government. The Sudanese protest movement, which eschewed international engagement, even among ideologically friendly western partners, felt Ethiopia under PM Abiy was beyond reproach, a full-fledged ally and a role model for what they hoped to soon achieve themselves.

Against this backdrop, in June 2019, the FFC announced its acceptance of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's role to lead mediation with the TMC towards a democratic transition in Sudan.[13] The decision was informed by the massive support and fascination among the Sudanese protest movement for the wide-ranging political and economic reforms Abiy launched after he took office in April 2018, following the successful removal by similar protest movement of Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn in February 2018. In Abiy the protest movement saw an ideological kindred spirit. Brought to power by public demands for democratic reform and social and economic inclusion, Abiy was seen to be their

[12] "Sudan: Protests in Front of UAE Embassy Opposing Fighting in Yemen", in *Middle East Monitor*, 27 January 2020, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/?p=382894.

[13] "Sudan Opposition Says It Accepts Ethiopia PM as Mediator", in *Al Jazeera*, 7 June 2019, https://aje.io/96xsv.

ISSN 2610-9603 | ISBN 978-88-9368-217-6

only true partner in the region.[14]

In August 2019, Ethiopia's mediation efforts resulted in an interim power-sharing deal between the main opposition coalition and the ruling military council, paving the way for a transitional government and subsequent democratic elections.[15] These efforts were built from discrete mediation efforts in the Quad Format (US, UK, UAE and KSA) which assured that the powerful Gulf backers of the military component were on board and moved in parallel to the AU mediation. The success of the mediation and the major role played by Abiy further consolidated favourable public opinion in Sudan towards Ethiopia. Key to Ethiopia's mediation role was the unique entrée it had with the protest movement.

Conclusion

Sudan's protest movement learned lessons from history and comparative movements in the region, which finally allowed them to become an incredibly powerful political force for change. But they are still grappling with what has come thereafter and their role in that. Sudan's transition is proving that affecting regime change is insufficient. Deeper national transformation requires organised politics and capable governance. For good reasons, the protest movement eschewed political parties or government. But the conclusion that protest needs to transform into politics may constitute the new lesson learned – the alternative being that protests merely pave the way for other players to take power. As it stands now, elites are again in power and the biggest change is the inclusion of the periphery into the centre. That many of the armed movements, representatives from Sudan's marginalised peripheries, now hold executive positions, surely marks a change.

The EU and its member states treated the political dynamics within the greater civilian camp as out of bounds for them. They were encouraged in this by the hands-off posture adopted by many in the protest movement. But this was a major miscalculation by the Europeans. The transition was as much a political competition between civilian and military as a technocratic reform process. In this competition the civilians' strength lay not in arms but in political representation. As the civilian political caucus splintered, and as the most representative element – the protest movement – distanced itself from the civilian component of government, the civilians grew weaker. Their ability to act cohesively was also deeply damaged, leaving the PM to tackle difficult reforms with no strong political backing, and instead being pulled in opposing directions by the various elements of the wider civilian block: the FFC, the SPA and the protest movement.

[14] "Abiy Ahmed Sworn in as Ethiopia's Prime Minister", in *Al Jazeera*, 2 April 2018, https://aje.io/cdad7.

[15] "Sudan Conflict: Army and Civilians Seal Power-Sharing Deal", in *BBC News*, 17 August 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49379489.

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The division between the civilian and military components codified in the Transitional Government was a pragmatic, split-the-difference arrangement that prevented further bloodshed. But in terms of delivering effective government for the hugely important tasks of the transition, it has been a disaster. There are in reality two governments – at times even more – pursuing different agendas and offering different entry points for outside interlocutors: a sort of intergovernmental forum shopping. The divide within the military component, with the RSF pitted against the SAF, replicates the conundrum surrounding Hezbollah, the powerful armed group that controls South Lebanon. As in Lebanon, once established, it proves enduring: a time bomb never buried too far below the surface.

The EU and invested member states enthusiastically embraced the promise of a new liberal Sudan. This success story underpinned policy, unlocking various forms of aid and high-level political recognition. But Sudan's civilians needed EU political support even more than financial. Directly following President Bashir's ouster, the MESA created new political realities – such as cementing the RSF – with Europe completely absent from the calculation. Both at this critical moment but also throughout the transition, Europe failed to engage the MESA in a meaningful way: at a level and with consistency that the MESA understood as serious. What emerged instead, was Europe engaging with the civilians and the MESA with the military, when what was needed was a real compact between the two. This dichotomy continues today: the military cannot mount a counter coup aware that the protest movement will mobilise en masse if they do, but no amount of protesting can create a more effective executive government. Sudan's spectre is a slow unravelling as the transition increasingly fails to deliver rather than a dramatic explosion in a counter coup.

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