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Sudan

The Struggle for Sudan

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On April 15, 2023, an alliance between General Abdelfatih Burhan of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (“Hemedti”), the leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), collapsed, catapulting the country into an unprecedented war.

The war initially began around the capital city of Khartoum, but it quickly spread to other parts of Sudan, including Darfur, Port Sudan and by December 2023 the previously peaceful Gezira state, the country’s agricultural heartland situated at the meeting point of the Blue and White Nile rivers.

The nature of the fighting—spanning both rural and urban settings—and its scale, has led to a severe humanitarian crisis. As many as 9 million Sudanese have fled, more than one million of them across the country’s borders. Human Rights Watch has reported ethnic cleansing in Khartoum and Darfur and the targeting of thousands of civilians and villages. The crisis has been compounded by food insecurity, affecting some 60 percent of the population, as fighting disrupts agricultural production across much of the country. The WFP recently warned that the country is facing “the world’s largest hunger crisis.”[1]

Economic Crisis and the Roots of Popular Protest

To a large extent the war in Sudan is a direct result of the sheer strength and scale, across social, regional and ethnic divides, of what Sudanese term the “Glorious Revolution” of 2018.

One of the key factors behind the popular protests that ultimately toppled Omar al-Bashir’s authoritarian regime was the secession of South Sudan on July 9, 2011. After more than a decade of relative economic growth, South Sudan’s secession cut off much of the state’s oil revenues (two-thirds of Sudan’s oil resources are in the South), leading to a deepening economic crisis. Between 2000 and 2009, oil accounted for 86 percent of Sudan’s export earnings.[2] The South’s secession led to the loss of 75 percent of Khartoum’s oil revenues.[3]

The absence of oil revenues eroded the former regime’s patronage networks, strengthening the rivalries among al-Bashir’s ruling National Congress Party’s (NCP) leadership. It also exacerbated social and economic grievances across a wide spectrum of Sudanese society in both urban and rural areas, laying the groundwork for the popular uprising of December 2018.

The protests began in the working-class city of Atbara in River Nile state, approximately 200 miles north of Khartoum—led by secondary school students, who were very quickly joined by thousands of the city’s residents. The initial spark was a three-fold increase in the price of bread. But in the peripheries where the uprising started, economic grievances had preceded the state’s loss of oil revenues. During the oil boom period, although Sudan’s formal economy was expanding, the benefits were unequally distributed. The allocation of services, employment and infrastructure projects remained concentrated in Khartoum state and were designed to appease urban constituencies. As one study noted, during the two decades prior to the revolution, approximately five major projects in the central triangle in the North accounted for 60 percent of development spending.[4]

As of 2009 (a decade before the uprising) the incidence of poverty among the rural population was 58 percent, compared to 26 percent among the urban population. Moreover, figures in this period show that poverty levels were

far higher in Darfur and in the east than in Khartoum and the central states.[5] The inequality across regions and between the center and the peripheries of the country partially explain why the initial protests that led to the 2018 popular uprising erupted, for the first time in Sudan's history, in the periphery of the country rather than in the capital.

Within days, however, anti-government demonstrations spread across a wide range of cities and towns throughout the northern region and in the capital city of Khartoum. Protestors chanted slogans, such as the well-known chant from the Arab uprisings: al-sha'ab yurid isqat al-Nizam, "the people want the fall of the Regime".

New Networks of Popular Mobilization

Following the lead of cities in the periphery, demonstrations in Khartoum also began as protests against a deep economic crisis associated with the rise in bread and fuel prices and a severe liquidity crisis. But their demands quickly evolved into calls for al-Bashir's ouster.

In the run up to the revolution, Sudan's youth leaders linked up with the unions of physicians, pharmacists, lawyers and secondary school teachers. The Sudanese Professional Association (SPA)—a network of parallel (or unofficial) trade and professional unions composed of doctors, engineers and lawyers among others—took the lead in organizing and scheduling the protests. In late December 2018, they called for a march to the parliament in Khartoum, demanding the government raise public sector wages and legalize the informal professional and trade unions. After security forces used violence against peaceful protests, their demands escalated into the call for the removal of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP), the structural transformation of governance in Sudan and a transition to democracy.

Their demands echoed those of previous popular protests, including in 2011, 2012 and 2013. But the 2018–19 protests were unprecedented in terms of their length and geographic breadth. They also followed a remarkably new, innovative and sustained process. Demonstrators learned from the mistakes of previous protests, which were highly centralized, mostly limited to middle class Sudanese and lacking in strategies for confronting the state's ubiquitous security forces.

Led by the SPA and organized at the level of the street by youth-led neighborhood resistance committees (NRCs), the demonstrations were coordinated, scheduled and essentially designed to emphasize sustainability over sheer numbers. The protests were also spread throughout middle class, working class and poor neighborhoods, and there was coordination with protestors in regions far from Khartoum, including the states on the Red Sea, to the east, and Darfur, to the far west of the country.

Beyond the regional scale, the protests were also distinguished by never-before-seen levels of solidarity across class and ethnic lines. Youth activists and members of professional associations not only challenged the political discourse of the Islamist state, they played a significant role in engineering cross-class alliances in the context of these demonstrations. The slogans they used were designed to resonate and mobilize support across ethnic, racial and regional divides.

Over the course of the six-month long protests, strikes, work stoppages and sit-ins were held, not only on university campuses and secondary schools, but also among private sector and public sector workers. Among the most important examples were the strikes by workers of Port Sudan on the Red Sea, demanding the nullification of the sale of the southern Port to a foreign company, and several work stoppages and protests led by employees of some of the country's most important banks, telecom providers and other private firms.

While much focus is rightly placed on the central role of the street protestors, resistance committees and the SPA, Sudanese opposition parties also played a role: not only in organizing protests but also by providing the ideational support to the demands of the protests. The political parties took the lead in drafting the Declaration of Freedom and Change in January 2019 at the very height of the protests. Along with the SPA, Sudan's main political party coalitions, most notably the National Consensus Forces and Sudan Call (Nida al-Sudan), drove the formation of the wide network of opposition, which was united under the banner of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). The FFC was primarily responsible for coordinating across social classes, including those working in the informal sector.

Indeed, and most importantly, the FFC engaged not only middle-class youth associations and groups but informally organized neighborhood resistance committees—some of which represented the poorer urban quarters. These NRCs had their roots in 2013 civil disobedience against al-Bashir and served as the foot soldiers of the protests. They took the lead in redirecting protestors away from the security forces and played a central role in sustaining the protests despite the great violence deployed by the security forces and militias to quell the uprising.

The relative strength and initial legitimacy of the main opposition parties and their coordination with street protestors and informal unions played the most crucial role in sustaining the protests that ousted al-Bashir. Following the revolution, resistance committees would assume a more direct political role, working to build a grassroots consensus around a blueprint for a legitimate and popular-based transition to civilian democracy, consistent with the goals of the revolution.

Counterrevolutionary Violence

After the fall of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, however, Sudan remained a quintessentially hybrid authoritarian regime.

Initially, al-Bashir was replaced by a military junta in the form of the Transitional Military Council (TMC). The TMC was headed by General Burhan of the Sudanese army (SAF), and its deputy leader was Dagalo, the commander of the RSF. In response to the military's assumption of power, sit-ins and protests continued, demanding a transition to full civilian rule. On June 3, 2019, security forces of the TMC, including the RSF militia, violently dispersed one of these sit-ins, killing hundreds and injuring thousands in what became known as the Khartoum "Sit-in Massacre."

The civilian leadership, represented by the FFC, finally reached an agreement with the military in July. By August 2019, the parties had signed an ostensible power-sharing agreement in the form of a constitutional charter, and the FFC put forward Abdalla Hamdok as prime minister. This charter was amended with the 2020 Juba Agreement, signed between the transitional government and several opposition groups.

The transitional government, however, never established a clear separation of the branches of power: Through the constitutional charter, the military maintained the right to reject any items put forth by civilian leaders in the coalition. Moreover, they were granted immunity from investigation of past crimes (including the Sit-in Massacre) and wielded veto power over civilian ministerial appointments, like the chief justice and attorney general. The transitional government thus operated with a marked imbalance between the authority of the military and civilian leadership.

For their part, Sudan's neighborhood resistance committees and the general protest movement continued (and does so even now) to push for five important priorities. The first is a transition to full civilian rule that is predicated on the rejection of another partnership with military leaders (captured by the "three No's" slogan: no negotiations, no partnership and no legitimacy for the military). Second, they are calling for the reformulation of the Juba Agreement to make it more inclusive of those directly impacted by war at the grassroots. Third, they are demanding

constitutional reform discussions to prepare for a constitutional conference that takes full account of the structural and ethnic-based inequities of the past and would ultimately oversee free and fair elections. Fourth, they want accountability for the state actors involved in violence against civilians, including for the Sit-in Massacre. And finally, they seek the quick establishment of a legislative council following a cessation of hostilities.

Among this network of civil society organizations are groups that had thrown their support behind the civilian government, including the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) and the two main youth organizations (Girifna and Sudan Change Now). Ultimately, the failure on the part of Hamdok and the civilian arm of the transitional government to incorporate the key demands and participation of the resistance committees undermined concrete progress when it came to popular demands for accountability and justice. It has limited the social base and support for the civilian leadership. The delay in establishing a legislative assembly to prepare for elections further undermined the popularity and legitimacy of Hamdok and the political parties more generally. The military leadership, under what was then a strong partnership between Burhan and Dagalo, deftly exploited these divisions, paving the way for the October coup.

On October 25, 2021, General Burhan of the SAF and RSF commander Dagalo jointly instigated a coup against Hamdok. Persistent widespread protests immediately followed, calling for a return to civilian rule. These protests, led by the popular resistance committees, forced the SAF and RSF to agree to negotiations with the civilian opposition. The negotiations paved the way for the now annulled framework agreement, which sparked fierce rivalry between Burhan and Dagalo. More specifically, the SAF and RSF bitterly disagreed over the issue of merging the latter into the regular national standing army. Moreover, both forces rejected attempts to dismantle their vast economic fortunes—a key objective of the revolution.

The disagreement between the two generals over security sector reform and their mutually held ambition to retain control over vast swaths of the country’s wealth are two of the most important factors that drove Sudan into war.

The Origins of the RSF

If the rivalry between the Islamist-backed Sudanese army officers and the RSF militia now threatens to destroy the state, it is their long history of partnership that undergirds the present war.

The RSF’s emergence dates to the Darfur war of the early 2000s. Responding to an insurgency that began in Darfur in 2003, the Bashir regime executed a scorched earth counterinsurgency war that resulted in the death of over 200,000 civilians. The war was primarily waged by the so-called Janjaweed militias, which were created, financed and controlled by the regime in Khartoum. The current commander of the RSF, Dagalo, himself served as a commander of the Janjaweed during these years. (Burhan, too, was stationed in Darfur so that the SAF could coordinate counter-insurgency efforts on Khartoum’s behalf.)

In 2013, following the Islamist regime’s restructuring of the military, the Janjaweed were turned into the RSF under Dagalo’s leadership. Concerned over both the threat posed by insurgents in Darfur as well as repeated cycles of pro-democracy demonstrators in Khartoum, al-Bashir institutionalized the RSF as a counter-insurgency arm of the Sudanese army. In addition to deploying the militia against the insurgency and popular protests, a third aim was to weaken the national standing army so as to prevent any attempts by mid-ranking officers to oust al-Bashir’s party (the NCP regime) through a military coup. Al-Bashir famously gave Dagalo his nickname, Hemedti, “my protector.” In 2017, the ruler legalized the RSF via executive decree, formally establishing the militia as an independent security force, thereafter, more aptly categorized as a state-paramilitary militia.

Following the revolution in 2019, Burhan allowed and promoted the expansion of the RSF throughout the residential areas of greater Khartoum, setting the stage for the capital city to become the epicenter of violence at the war's onset.

It is a fatal irony of Sudanese history that the RSF—the ostensibly loyal militia arm of the former Islamist NCP regime—would, in April of 2023, take up arms against its former benefactor. Its primary reasons for doing so were twofold: its insistence on command-and-control autonomy and to realize Hemedti's own rising ambition to gain economic and political dominance in the country.

A War Over the 'Illicit' economy

The power of the Sudanese army, especially among its upper ranks, has its roots in the foundation of Sudan's present deep state and the linking of the domestic economy to military and security interests.

After the coup in 1989 brought Bashir's Islamist-backed military regime to power, the government ushered in an economic strategy of tamkeen (empowerment). This policy established political and economic hegemony in favor of the country's Islamist elites, who were organized around the National Islamic Front (NIF) and later the National Congress Party (NCP). Under a policy of ostensibly neoliberal, pro-market reforms, state owned enterprises were sold off to the regime's allies. Businessmen were coerced to grant shares of their companies to NCP loyalists, and tax reductions if not full exemptions were awarded to regime-friendly business.[6]

In addition to buying regime loyalty, the state purged its rivals from the government and civil society. Upon assuming power, the Islamist regime dismissed thousands of members of the military and civil servants from the bureaucracy.[7]

In a pattern reminiscent of the present war, Islamist leaders began hoarding and selectively distributing commodities like wheat, flour and oil. Oil, in particular, played a central role in the regime's Islamist-authoritarian durability until the South's secession in 2011. The Bashir regime, flush with a boom in oil revenue, which directly fed the state's coffers, utilized this revenue to strengthen and expand its patronage networks throughout the country, channeling funds to loyalists and their home regions. But if the economic policies of tamkeen resulted in the Islamists' monopolization of both the formal and informal economic sectors in Sudan, they also expanded the role of the Sudanese army in the economy.[8] The creation of the Military Industrial Corporation (MIC) in the early 1990s granted the SAF control over a dozen companies that produced military hardware. Their economic activities later grew beyond the MIC to include a range of civilian industries.

It is against this backdrop that the economy became a key arena of political competition following the 2018–19 uprising. During the transition that followed the revolution, two elite factions emerged in the center: the remnants of the NIF's Islamist coalition, linked to members of the NCP—who had been primarily responsible for building the deep state in the 1990s—and the Transitional Military Council (TMC) composed of leaders of the SAF and RSF militia.

Whereas in the past, Islamists represented a relatively coherent group, in the transition, fissures emerged between the military leaders heading the TMC and a resurgent Islamist ideological group, wielding significant control over the state's security services, including the infamous and militant kattayib al-zil, or "shadow brigades."[9] In response, the TMC assumed control over many large Islamist-owned businesses and curtailed the power of Sudan's intelligence services. They even worked toward dismantling several militia forces by confiscating their assets and closing bank accounts. Following the coup of October 25, 2021, however, Burhan found himself increasingly isolated with no significant constituency or legitimacy in civil society. He quickly mended relations with the Islamists, reinstating their

leaders in the bureaucracy and state's security apparatus. Both are now fighting the RSF.

Military leaders, backed by Islamist hardliners, are struggling to retain and revive the vast financial wealth and political advantages they enjoyed because of their monopoly over a deep state. Burhan's objectives in the current war are thus driven by SAF companies and investments as well as the long history of SAF and Islamist manipulation of the informal economy, which enabled their hold over the state. The fact that, together, they are intent on realizing this objective by any military means necessary and regardless of the human cost partially explains the logic of the mass-scale violence in the ongoing civil war and, in particular, the targeting of the civilian population—most of whom have struggled to dismantle the legacy of the deep state. Indeed, one of the central aims of the revolution from it outset was: tafkeek al-nizam wa izalat al-tamkeen (dismantling the regime and removing its "empowerment" policies).[10]

From Oil to Gold

The policies of empowerment (tamkeen) along with the oil boom fueled the rise of an Islamist-dominated deep state. In the current war, however, it is mining gold for export that is fueling Hemedti's parallel militia and generating political violence.

Following the loss of oil revenue with South Sudan's secession in 2011, al-Bashir turned to gold to bolster his weakened patronage networks. Between 2012–2017, gold production increased by an astronomical 141 percent.[11] In 2018, one year before the revolution, the country was the world's twelfth-largest producer.

But unlike oil, the benefits from this new gold boom have been distributed in a far more decentralized fashion. Most gold exports are smuggled illegally out of the country, mainly to markets in the UAE. The bulk of the value of gold thus escapes the battered formal economy, undermining the state's ability to generate revenue and allocate resources to its civilian population. A recent study found that the gap between Sudan's reported gold exports and the imports recorded by trading partners equaled $4.1 billion.[12] The discrepancy suggests an astronomical 47.7 percent of Sudan's gold revenues end up in private hands.

While the military and the Islamist dominated security apparatus are fighting to control companies involved in oil, gum Arabic, sesame, weapons, fuel, wheat, telecommunications and banking, Hemedti is monopolizing gold (and to a lesser extent livestock and real estate), to expand his war effort. The violence underpinning the war is directly related to his personal wealth, which he amassed, in large part, from his participation in the illicit gold trade.

In 2015, a report released by the UN Security Council found that Hemedti's forces were generating $54 million a year from control of the Jebel Amer goldmine.[13] This revenue enabled him to recruit poor and unemployed youths from across the Sahel to the RSF, including from Libya, Chad, Mali and Niger, who are the main perpetrators of the violence in Darfur, Khartoum and central Sudan. His paramilitary force currently numbers an estimated 40,000. Compared to their counterparts in the SAF, its rank and file enjoy great access to financial resources and training from outside actors.

The emergence of gold as Sudan's most lucrative commodity helps to explain the decentralized nature of the war and the high levels of violence meted out by the RSF militia, particularly in the gold-rich regions of Darfur and Kordofan.

Fueling a Proxy War

While the primary dynamics driving the war in Sudan are internal, regional powers and others further afield are playing influential roles. Chief among them are the countries of the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Here too the emergence of gold as Sudan's most lucrative commodity is significant. Unlike oil, gold is a lootable resource, motivating external actors, like the UAE, to intervene on the side of the RSF, regardless of the consequences in terms of violence against civilians. The UAE is reportedly supporting Hemedti and his RSF with arms shipments through Chad and Libya.

Beyond the illicit trade in gold, Hemedti has also benefited from the Gulf countries' regional interests and concerns over the Red Sea. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have long worried about Iranian encirclement through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb. These concerns were strengthened by Iranian support for the Houthi movement in Yemen, which led to military intervention by a Saudi-led coalition in 2015. Hemedti received millions of dollars from both Saudi Arabia and the UAE for sending his militia forces to fight in the war.

While the majority of RSF soldiers have returned from Yemen, the recent escalation of violence in the Red Sea due to Houthi attacks on commercial shipping vessels in response to Israel's war on Gaza, has fueled the concerns of Saudi Arabia, in particular. Riyadh, along with the United States, has taken the lead in attempting to broker a cease-fire agreement between the two warring parties with a strategic view to retaining a strong alliance with whichever post-war regime emerges in Khartoum.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have successfully established military bases in the Horn of Africa—Saudi in Djibouti and the UAE in Eritrea. The UAE is also seeking to establish similar facilities in northern Somalia. But competition over influence in the Red Sea region is not limited to these states. Qatar, Turkey and Russia have all increased their engagement in the region and made overtures about establishing miliary bases off Sudan's Red Sea coast.

While in part strategic, Gulf states' interest in Sudan also stems from longer-term economic objectives. They see investment in Africa as a means to diversify their economies and are eager to expand trade in the resource-rich continent, to which Sudan is a gateway. The UAE has vigorously pursued a port development project off Sudan's Red Sea coast. In 2022, it was reported that Khartoum formally awarded a contract to the UAE to operate part of Port Sudan, in which the UAE would invest $6 billion.

Sudan's agricultural lands are also crucial to helping the Gulf states meet the skyrocketing demand of food imports. In Sudan's agricultural heartland, the Gezira, for example, investments by Gulf countries (totalling an estimated $8 billion) were facilitated by neoliberal policies that plunged small farmers into debt and decimated the small-scale agricultural sector. Much of the land leased by Gulf investors has been transformed into large-scale agribusiness projects that have cut through herding routes and absorbed plots once used for rain-fed subsistence farming. Incidentally, the pauperization of Sudanese farmers and rural workers has helped fuel the success of the RSF's militia recruitment, with fighters hailing from now-dispossessed rural populations.

Egypt, for its part, supports General Burhan and the SAF. Not only is Cairo concerned over a revitalized Islamist influence along its southern flank, it is also worried about the Nile River basin. In 2020, Ethiopia started filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a $4.8 billion hydroelectric dam on the Blue Nile, which Cairo views as an existential threat to its own water resources. Hemedti has close ties to Ethiopia as well as to the UAE, which, despite being a major benefactor of Egypt, is also a regional rival for influence. As such, Egypt views an RSF-dominated Sudan as a threat to its national interests.

One result of these competing rivalries is an array of “peace” efforts operating at cross-purposes. At the time of writing, a total of four different forums are operating simultaneously to seek a ceasefire and a peace agreement between the warring factions: The Riyadh Talks (led by the United States and Saudi Arabia), the IGAD-African Union initiative led by Djibouti, talks in Cairo attempting to forge an alliance between the civilian opposition and Egypt’s ally, the SAF, and a more recent initiative led by the UAE but held under the auspices of the government of Bahrain.

These initiatives reflect the interests of the states behind them and their relationships with the respective warring parties rather than efforts to support the Sudanese people and civil society in finding a workable framework for a cease-fire.

The Enduring Promise of the Revolution

In contrast to other civil wars in Sudan’s history, the warring parties in Sudan at present have no significant constituency or legitimacy in civil society. Both parties are waging a war against the Sudanese people precisely because, in the wake of the wide-scale pro-democracy revolution of 2018, Sudanese civil society overwhelmingly rejected a future dominated by autocratic military leaders.

Indeed, the 2018–19 revolution clearly showed, and the present devastating war has affirmed, that prospects for peace and democracy lie in Sudan’s enduring civil society of professional associations, trade unions and its youth and women’s organizations. The war has only affirmed the importance of these networks. Even now, the youth-led resistance committees, despite their differences, agree that the priority is to end the war and restore peace by addressing the root causes of Sudan’s conflicts as the revolution intended.

During a devastating war and in the face of mass displacement, an influential grassroots youth-led movement has shown significant capacity to collaborate across ethnic, gender and social divides for democratic objectives. In the absence of adequate international aid, for example, youth-led emergency response rooms have mobilized mutual aid across the country.

Amid the waning legitimacy of political elites in Sudanese civil society, youth leaders continue to enjoy strong support among a wide spectrum of Sudanese. Leaders of the youth movement, women’s organizations, independent scholars, artists and millions of Sudanese in the diaspora are near unanimous in meeting the present challenge of the war by working toward strengthening civil society in ways that rebuild trust, resolve conflict and build a sustainable peace.

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Source: MERIP.

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