

Sudan Coup 2021: Who Is Abdel Fattah al-Burhan?

Sudan's de facto ruler and the head of its armed forces, Burhan is seen as the man behind the coup. But who is he?

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If we take him at his word, then General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan was one of three Sudanese military figures to tell Omar al-Bashir that it was time to bring to a close his three decades in power.

“I went to see him and informed him,” Burhan [told the BBC](#) shortly after he was named head of Sudan’s transitional military council in April 2019. “I told him the leadership of the armed forces had decided the situation was getting out of hand and therefore he should step down.”

According to Burhan, Bashir simply said “OK”, then went on to express a desire that citizens were protected.

It must have been a difficult conversation for Sudan’s top general. A veteran soldier, Burhan had long been one of Bashir’s reliable lieutenants – both literally and politically.

Not long after the conversation, on 12 April 2019, he became chief of the military council that deposed Bashir, just one day after the president’s immediate successor – and former defence minister – General Awad Ibn Ouf stepped down.

As news broke this morning of another military coup in Sudan, Burhan, who has served as the chairman of Sudan’s Transitional Sovereign Council (TSC) since 12 April 2019 and is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, took centre stage, declaring a state of emergency

and dissolving the government.

Friends in Egypt, friends in the Gulf

Born in 1960 into a Sufi family in a village north of Khartoum, Burhan studied in a Sudanese army college, then later in Jordan and at the Egyptian military academy in Cairo, where fellow alumni included future Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. He is married and has three children.

Burhan and Sisi are longstanding friends, though the Sudanese general has lifelong affiliations with the kinds of Islamist movements that Sisi has outlawed. Still, as Patrick Smith, editor of Africa Confidential, told MEE, the two military leaders are united by “the greater good of stopping democracy”.

His first international trip after becoming Sudan’s de facto head of state was to Egypt in May 2019. From there he went on to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia.

Earlier in his working life, Burhan served briefly as Sudan’s defence attache in Beijing, but his military career under Bashir was defined by prominent roles played in South Sudan, Darfur and Yemen where, as head of the armed forces, he helped supply the Saudi-led coalition with Sudanese mercenaries.

Burhan has described Riyadh as an “eternal ally” and has longstanding relationships with military commanders there and in the UAE.

‘Blood on his hands’

“He was absolutely instrumental to the devastation caused in Darfur,” Smith says of Burhan, who fought in the region and was a military intelligence colonel coordinating army and militia attacks against civilians in West Darfur state from 2003 to 2005.

The Sudanese soldier has denied committing atrocities, but leaders in Darfur are in no doubt as to the role he played. Sheikh Matar Yonis of Darfur’s Justice and Equality Movement [described](#) Burhan as “a bloody murderer of the people of Sudan in Darfur since before 2014”.

Residents and displaced people in Central and West Darfur [said](#) he had “blood on his hands”, and that he was involved in “planning and carrying out genocide, burning of villages and displacement of unarmed residents”.

Burhan’s response to such accusations has essentially been to say that he was following orders, and that what happened in Darfur – widely viewed as a genocide – was a war in which each side would quite naturally accuse its opponent of doing awful things.

Burhan’s time in Darfur is significant also because it brought him into contact with the warlord Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo, widely known as Hemeti. Hemeti became leader of the Janjaweed, the Arab militias that brought death and despair to Darfur, and which have since morphed into the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), with Hemeti still at the helm.

Sources of power and money

As head of the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces respectively, Burhan and Hemeti are both allies and rivals. Hemeti serves as vice president of the transitional military council, but his family and the RSF benefit enormously from their control of gold mines in Darfur, as well as from the patronage of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Sudan's military has, in theory, a bigger budget, and is in control of a significant military industrial complex.

These various sources of power and wealth have come under threat from Sudan's civilian-led government and it is thought that this is partly why Burhan and Hemeti have moved when they have. Burhan was due to step down as the military's chair of the sovereign council this year, to be replaced by a civilian appointee.

Both he and Hemeti are said to be mindful of being held accountable for past actions in Darfur, and Burhan had been lobbying to dissolve the civilian-led council of ministers, according to [Africa Confidential](#).

This is Burhan and Hemeti's coup, Smith said, but the relationship between the two men is difficult "because, among other things, Hemeti projects himself as a leader abroad", and is closer to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed. Burhan is considered to be Egypt's man.

Hemeti is a more charismatic, more cartoonish figure than the quietly spoken, methodical Burhan, and the RSF leader is more closely associated with the atrocities surrounding the transition to democracy – most notably, the massacre of more than 128 people in Khartoum in June 2019 – than the armed forces general.

Once considered the archetypal apolitical soldier, Burhan is now in the middle of a very political situation. The streets of Sudan are full of people calling for democracy. Burhan's allies in Egypt and the Gulf will be watching to see how he moves from here.

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