

# Sudan: Popular Struggles, Elite Compromises, and Revolution Betrayed

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*After more than six months of sustained and growing demonstrations across Sudan demanding the overthrow of President Omar al-Bashir, on 11 April 2019 the military placed him under arrest and attempted to rule the country for an indeterminate period before national elections would be held. This was the course taken by a previous generation of military officers in 1985 after similar country-wide demonstrations to remove President Jafaar Nimeiri, who like al-Bashir had come to power by overthrowing an elected government. After a one-year transitional military government dedicated to advancing the interests of Islamists and quashing the demands of the protestors an election was held in 1986 that brought Sudan's traditional elites under Sadiq el-Mahdi to power.*

*But Sadiq failed to end the country's southern civil war, overcome Sudan's economic decline, and so alienated people that when his government was overthrown in 1989 by Islamists under Hassan al-Turabi and al-Bashir few Sudanese protested. Thirty years later a weakened military was not able to rule without civilian partners, but the civilian component of the transitional government led by Abdulla Hamdok, a mainstream economist and his finance minister, Ibrahim Elbadawi, a former World Bank economist, seems well on its way to estranging the popular forces that brought them to power and making Sudan a client state of the US, its reactionary Gulf allies and Egypt.*

The weakness of the government is the product of an uprising which lacked leadership and organization and never pursued a transformative objective. Youth who were the mainstay of the uprising and largely viewed the political process with disdain, had no firm links to any of the political parties, even if their sentiments linked them to those on the left, never challenged the economic and social structures of Sudan, and unlike the 1964 and 1985 uprisings did not express anti-IMF sentiments, even though the Islamist government they attacked was dedicated to instituting IMF austerity.

The youth typically held liberal individualist values that reflected Western influences, which sometimes led to tensions with Sudan's socially conservative and collectivist mainstream society. According to Sudan Communist Party Politburo member Siddig Yousef the level of mobilization during the uprising was more extensive than previous uprisings, but political consciousness was lower. As a result, the youth were unable to stop politicians from reaching a power-sharing agreement with the generals, were marginalized, and short of going back to the streets under a leadership with a transformative agenda, cannot be expected to have a significant impact on the transitional period.

Despite the major role of women in the uprising, their unique problems of oppression were not highlighted by the Sudan Professional Association (SPA) which nominally led the rebellion, while the generals cultivated socially conservative and religious constituencies

who were not sympathetic to women's concerns. Like the youth, the young women protestors typically espoused liberal values of human rights and gender equality, and apart from concerns about government corruption had little to say about Sudan's systemic economic inequities that fostered mass poverty and fuelled the wars on the country's periphery. While the Legislative Council (yet to be established) will have 40 per cent female members, there are only two women on the powerful 11-person Sovereign Council in which the generals hold five positions, and there are four women in the 20-person Council of Ministers, in which the generals hold the ministries of defence and interior. In any case, there is nothing revolutionary about gender quotas or appointing a handful of women to elite government organs unless they are part of a regime committed to ending patriarchy and that is not the case with the transitional government.

The unions played a major role in the 1964 and 1985 uprisings, brought a class dimension to what were largely economically motivated struggles, and broadly represented Sudanese society in ways that were not possible for the youth in 2018-19 while the SPA was made up of the educated and liberal middle and upper classes and did not have close relations with the working class. The SPA was seriously under-represented in the country's periphery, had almost no women among its leadership, did not develop a class perspective on the conflict, never effectively raised issues of social injustice and uneven development, and never attempted to transform a popular struggle against the al-Bashir regime into a class struggle dedicated to upending capitalism and kleptocracy.

The centre piece of the uprising were the mass sit-ins throughout Sudan, particularly the one in Khartoum immediately outside the military headquarters, the acknowledged seat of power in Sudan, and they constituted a fundamental challenge to the state. The organization and activities of the sit-in provided an egalitarian and democratic model on which a radically different model of governance and society could have been constructed. Indeed, the sit-ins met Marx's definition of a transitory organ of revolutionary action, but few protestors appreciated its potential and the politicians viewed the sit-ins as merely an instrument to pressure the junta to achieve its political ends, after which they were to be abandoned and normal politics pursued. The military authorities understood better than the protestors the threat to the existing order posed by the sit-ins and was devoted to their suppression. The violent destruction of the Khartoum sit-in on 3 June 2019 in which an estimated 241 unarmed protestors were killed and many women raped undermined the domestic and international legitimacy of the junta. But instead of capitalizing on this revulsion of the military the civilian politicians agreed to share power with the generals. As a result, a once in a generation opportunity to replace a state that had ill-served the people of Sudan since independence was lost.

The resulting transitional government made ending rebellions in the periphery a priority but after a year there have been no agreements with the main rebel movements and violence in Darfur has continued. The SPLA-North forces of Abdelaziz al-Hilu in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile are committed to a secular Sudan, while the Sudan Liberation Movement forces of Abdelwahid al-Nur in the Jebel Mara mountains of Darfur have insisted that the government implement the demands of the revolution before peace negotiations can begin. Abdelwahid has further demanded that the head of state, Lt. Gen. Abdel-Fatah al-Burhan, be taken before the International Criminal Court. Separation of state and religion was a demand of the protestors, but this was not pressed by the SPA, is determinedly opposed by the generals, sectarian parties whose legitimacy is based on Islam, the de-throned but still powerful former ruling Islamist party, and the Gulf backers of the generals, who are

financially underwriting the transitional government.

Since its inception the Sudanese state has been defined by its rulers as Islamic, Arab, and rooted in elites from ethnic communities in the centre and north, and in response the African origins of ancient Sudan became a major theme of the Khartoum sit-in. The al-Bashir government played on fears of the centre being dominated by people from the periphery, particularly Darfur, and protestors raised the chant, 'We are all Darfur', but this friction remained. The Sudanese state has long had a predatory relationship with the peoples outside the core, and this problem crystalized around the demand of southern Sudanese for federalism. The refusal of successive governments to implement a federal system set southerners on the path to secession, and the needs of other marginalized communities are similar, have also been ignored, and remain a threat to the unity and stability of the country.

During the uprising the SPA and protestors called for independent economic and foreign policies, but under the power-sharing agreement, and with the security forces closely tied to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, together with Sudan's economic dependence on the Gulf states and a neo-liberal focused government this objective will not be realized. Despite widespread opposition the *jingaweed* based Rapid Support Services led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) remains engaged in the Saudi-Emirati war in Yemen and is believed to be employed by the Eastern Libyan Military Council of Khalifa Haftar. The same forces led the attack on the Khartoum sit-in. Meanwhile, under the influence of Egypt, Sudan has ended 20 years of positive relations with Ethiopia, is supporting Cairo's opposition to the Great Ethiopia Renaissance Dam, and is involved in border skirmishes with Addis Ababa.

Further constraining the prospects of an independent foreign policy is Sudan's USD 72.7 billion debt in 2018, which constituted 212 per cent of its gross domestic product (Countryeconomy.com, 2018), while in the previous year Sudan had a negative trade balance of USD 5.2 billion. The country's financial survival is only possible because of remittances by Sudanese workers, most of whom work in the Gulf states, and this gives these states enormous leverage.

Hamdok has said that cash-starved Sudan looks to the Gulf states for funds, is attempting to convince the US to end sanctions first introduced under President Clinton, and reach an agreement with the IMF, just as al-Bashir did. To win the favour of the US al-Bashir broke relations with Iran, ended support for Hamas, and tried to improve ties with US allies Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In March 2017 the US and Sudan announced the resumption of military relations, and a month later it was revealed that the CIA would open its largest office in the Middle East in Khartoum. Such arrangements can be expected to intensify under the transitional government, particularly when the main focus of the Trump administration's new Africa policy is on challenging Russia and China in Africa and denying the right of developing countries to have non-aligned foreign policies.

One critical example is pressure to recognize Israel, a move that seemed likely before the overthrow of al-Bashir. Thus, on 3 February 2020, Gen. al-Burhan met in Kampala with Benjamin Netanyahu, even though all previous Sudanese governments had refused to recognize Israel. Under the military-civilian agreement foreign affairs are the sole prerogative of Hamdok and his cabinet, but al-Burhan argued that as head of state his actions were in the interests of the country, specifically to get Sudan removed from the US state sponsor of terrorism list and 24 hours before the meeting US Secretary of State Mike

Pompeo invited him to Washington.

The IMF will in turn demand the imposition of austerity as a prerequisite to debt relief and granting new loans to Sudan, and this will further limit the role of the state in tackling economic injustices and instead foster the economic inequality and unequal development the transitional government must overcome if it is to improve the lives of Sudanese and end the country's multiple rebellions. Just as debt placed severe constraints on the al-Bashir regime, the transitional government faces similar obstacles, and just as the former regime felt compelled to introduce austerity measures, there is little chance the Hamdok government can avoid them.

The overthrow of al-Bashir was a remarkable feat that testifies to the courage and commitment of the protestors and the strong support they received from the Sudanese people and the diaspora. But the power-sharing agreement with the military falls well short of even the reformist commitment to a civil administration. Indeed, agreeing to sharing power with the military constituted a betrayal of the revolution. The leadership and activists of Sudan's 1964 and 1985 uprisings had a much firmer commitment to transformation than their counterparts in 2018-19, but those struggles were ultimately co-opted, and unless the protestors return to the streets under a revolutionary leadership Sudan will likely follow a similar trajectory.

The full report on which this analysis is based can be found [here](#).

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