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Overcoming History: Sudan's Uncertain Transition to Democracy in the Face of Military Pressure

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Brief Analysis

Months after the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, Sudan's main opposition coalition and the ruling military council finalized a power sharing deal with the hopes of forging a path towards legitimate elections and civilian rule. However, the tools that Bashir used throughout his reign remain deeply embedded in the political system. And while generally viewed positively, the August 2019 power sharing agreement has also been met with a strong dose of skepticism concerning its ultimate success. While the solidifying of the power sharing agreement marked a critical juncture in Sudan's history, it remains to be seen whether it will be enough to successfully challenge the powerful, oppressive infrastructure of the old regime.

Finalizing the Agreement

The deputy chairman of the Transitional Military Council (TMC), Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (widely known as Hemedti), and a representative from the alliance Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), Ahmed al-Rabie, signed the constitutional agreement last August. The document outlined the division of power for the new Sudanese government in order to facilitate a smooth three-year transition to fair and free elections.

At the same time, both groups announced the disbanding of the military council that had ruled Sudan since the ousting of Bashir in April and the formation of a joint council comprised of five military and six civilian representatives. The joint council, also known as the Transitional Sovereign Council, is chaired by the former head of the TMC, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. Among the TMC appointed military members are Hemedti, Yasser Atta, Ibrahim Gaber, and Shams al-Din Kabashi.

The five civilian appointed members include Hassan Sheikh Idris Qadi, Al-Siddiq Tawer Kafi, Mohammed al-Fekki Suleiman, Mohamed Osman Hassan al-Taayeshi, and Ayesha Musa Saeed. Both sides came to an agreement on the

11th member, selecting Rajaa Nicola Abdel Maseehr, a Coptic Christian judge. The FFC also selected economist Abdalla Hamdok to serve as prime minister for the country's transitional period. Prime Minister Hamdok now leads the newly formed 18-member transitional cabinet; its members were selected by Hamdok from a list prepared by the FFC. The selection process is meant to check military power and fight corrupt structures set up by the previous regime.

According to the power sharing agreement, a military leader will rule the joint council for the first 21 months and switch over to civilian rule for the subsequent 18 in preparation for democratic elections in 2022. Yet civilians fear that when the first 21 months of military rule officially ends, the military establishment will overturn the constitutional agreement and refuse to handover rule.

Challenges of a Democratic Transition in Sudan

Decades of uninterrupted rule have allowed the military to remain a formidable force in Sudanese politics. The military has expanded its functional powers under Hamdok beyond those stipulated in the agreement, weakening the prime minister's power. The military establishment has also sought to monopolize state information while extending its influence over and undermining the authority of civilians in the transitional government. Civilians have lost confidence in the army's adherence to democratic principles; Sudan's history reveals that since its independence in 1956, the country has not been able to maintain a civilian government for more than two years.

Sudan's military faces internal divisions in which each group seeks to strengthen its own political position on regional and international stages. The military is currently divided into two conflicting spheres of power. The first sphere of power contains the Ministry of Defense, which is led by President of the Sovereign Council Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and currently remains subject to his indirect control. The opposing sphere of power is led by the RSF, which remain under the full control of Hemedti.

The visit by al-Burhan—who oversees the state's foreign affairs—to Uganda last February to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu serves as the most prominent example of the divisions within the military. At the controversial meeting, al-Burhan unilaterally concluded a preliminary agreement with Netanyahu on normalizing relations between Sudan and Israel. The meeting was conducted without consulting civilian stakeholders in Sudan who do not see normalization with Israel as a priority for the transitional government. Civilians see the primary goal for the transitional government as rebuilding Sudan's failing the economy and establishing voting centers for legitimate elections in 2022.

Some analysts believe that the rifts within the military establishment can be exploited to delegitimize military rule in the country. However, army officials still have the upper hand due to cracks within the civilian leadership that arose as a result of differences among politicians and lack of political experience. Similarly, the "deep state" and patronage networks in the political structures run deep and will continue to prevent a successful transition.

Meanwhile, Hemedti's growing influence also poses a risk to Sudan's democratic transition. The high-profile military leader is often referred to as Sudan's de facto leader and his involvement in the government has undermined civilian rule. Hemedti's RSF has become even more powerful than the army itself, controlling a majority of Sudan's cities and towns. There is hardly a street in the country where RSF troops do not have a presence—they even guard the homes of political leaders along with the entrances to the Presidential Palace.

Hemedti's rise to power can be explained by his support from regional actors such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Hemedti's power expansion is also a result of his major stakes in gold mining operations. His grip on the economy shows just how difficult it will be to save the Sudanese economy, which has been ravaged by years of conflict.

Moreover, Hemedti is also working to garner political support, typified by his catchphrase: "We came to serve the

Sudanese people. We did not come to support a particular political party or agenda.” Paradoxically, while Hemedti pledges to hold free and fair elections and bring about democratic change in Sudan, he has been consolidating his own power by forming his own political party. This party has gained support by offering to provide humanitarian and medical assistance to combat the spread of the coronavirus and on false claims that he is a peaceful leader who worked to resolve the conflict in Sudan.

Sudan's Uncertain Political Future

Sudan’s transition to democracy now depends on a number of internal, regional, and international factors. Internally, the improvement of the socio-economic situation of Sudanese citizens during the transitional phase will determine the success of the Hamdok government. On a regional level, the country’s future will be determined by how the dynamics in nearby conflict arenas play out, as well as whether a settlement can be reached on the Renaissance Dam crisis. On the one hand, stability in the region would catalyze the transition from military to civilian rule. On the other hand, continuation of these regional conflicts will likely embolden Sudan’s military leaders, making it increasingly unlikely that they will voluntarily hand over power to civilians.

However, the protests that erupted in June 30 under the slogan "correcting the course of the revolution" reflected the desire of a large segment of Sudanese society to attain a real and concrete political transition. The protestor’s support of Prime Minister Hamdok has had an important impact on the balance of power in Sudan, as the protestors demanded the departure of the military and the protection of the revolution. Therefore, the protestors’ refusal of the military component and their support of Hamdok have added weight to the civilian component in this period.

In response to the street’s demands, and after a week of protests, the Sudanese Cabinet issued a statement announcing its desire to make a cabinet reshuffle and demanded six ministers to resign—including the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Finance and Economic Planning, Energy and Mining, Health, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Transport and Infrastructure, and Animal Resources. PM Hamdok has also used his Twitter account to publicly support the demands of the protestors, stating “the trust that the people have given the transitional government obliges us to listen to the voice of the street.”

It is expected that these measures will temporarily placate the Sudanese street until the new government proves its efficiency and its compatibility with the demands of the revolution. It is also in the interest of Sudan’s politicians in the coming period to avoid being drawn into scenarios that could restore dictatorship in Sudan. Political exclusion does not operate in the interest of Sudan and the best course of action is to adapt an inclusive policy towards all balanced political forces with agendas consistent with the people’s choices.



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