

Sudan on Edge: An Inevitable Fall or a Better Way Ahead?

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Brief Analysis

Washington needs to go fast on Sudan, not slow, frontloading relief to bolster the civilian government while warning regional leaders not to use the country as another geopolitical football.

On June 30, tens of thousands of Sudanese demonstrators poured into the streets of Khartoum and other major cities demanding change, including a full transition to democracy and civilian rule. A little over a year since the [fall of Omar al-Bashir's three-decade regime \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sudan-the-end-comes-for-bashir\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sudan-the-end-comes-for-bashir), the country could go either way—toward familiar patterns of dysfunction, or toward a groundbreaking path that benefits not just Sudan's 40 million residents, but the wider Arab world and beyond.

Africa and the Middle East are littered with political and economic basket cases, countries on edge, and cautionary tales. But in a region supposedly doomed to various species of authoritarianism, Sudan's unique history—as the first country to overthrow a long-established Islamist regime on its own—could shatter many ingrained expectations.

The United States has a fateful choice to make at this pivotal moment. It can treat Sudan as if it had all the time in the world to get things just right while hope unravels in Khartoum, or it can prioritize the country as an urgent case for immediate support—one that offers real dividends for U.S. regional interests.

WHAT HAS BROUGHT SUDAN TO THE EDGE?

The June 30 demonstration was organized by the Resistance Committees that formed much of the grassroots foundation for the Forces of Freedom and Change, the broad coalition of groups who proved essential in bringing down the Bashir regime in April 2019. That fall came in the form of a military coup, but it was unlikely to occur without the existence of a broad and lasting popular movement. The latest demonstration commemorated last year's June 30 "march of the million," which helped achieve a breakthrough in Sudan's transformation.

This year's demonstrators touched on many issues, but their core demands boil down to the following: faster transition toward civilian rule; more assertiveness by civilians already holding power; greater distancing from elements of the former Islamist regime still embedded in the bureaucracy; accountability for the past regime's abuses; and less power for the military. These changes are a natural next step in the process that has unfolded since Bashir's fall, which led to months of internal maneuvering by elements of the armed forces, violent repression against demonstrations, and then, miraculously, a July 2019 power-sharing and transition plan. Under this plan, the country is temporarily ruled by a shared military-civilian Sovereignty Council, with the civilian administration headed by a respected technocrat, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. This interim arrangement is supposed to last until general elections are held in late 2022.

One demonstration organizer in Darfur gave an optimistic account of the march's significance in remarks to the Ayin Network: "There is no retreat. Sudan has left the path of tyranny forever and the Sudanese will build their new state with full force." But dissatisfaction with the status quo runs deep, and the risk of backsliding is substantial.

It is not that Hamdok's government has failed to make progress. Since coming to power in late August 2019, he has put together probably the most diverse cabinet in Sudan's history. Women head four key ministries (Foreign Affairs, Social Development and Labor, Youth and Sports, and Higher Education), while the information minister is a former journalist and Amnesty International prisoner of conscience who was jailed and harassed for years. Hamdok has also chipped away at the Bashir regime's toxic legal legacy, allowing press freedom and repealing laws that curtailed women's rights and religious rights. In addition, he began the painful—and, in the eyes of critics, all too slow—process of bringing transparency and accountability to the regime's actions. Between \$3.5 and \$4 billion of Bashir's assets have been recovered, according to the Anti-Corruption and Regime Dismantling Commission.

In foreign affairs, the government has done most everything that the United States could dream of. Counterterrorism cooperation continues and has been productive. And in February, Gen. Abdul Fattah al-Burhan—the head of the Sovereignty Council and Sudan's de facto head of state—met with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

Despite the civilian government's evident sincerity and seriousness, however, Sudan cannot reverse three decades of kleptocracy and dysfunction overnight. The country made real progress last month at the "Friends of Sudan" conference in Berlin, securing \$1.8 billion in new assistance and improving long-frayed ties with the World Bank and IMF. Yet these encouraging, essential developments were just preliminary steps.

Sudan's already poor economy was steadily deteriorating even before the COVID-19 crisis and subsequent global downturn. Inflation is around 100 percent, unemployment has hit 25 percent, and the economy is expected to shrink by 8 percent this year after shrinking by 2.5 percent last year. The country is billions of dollars in arrears to global lenders because of the incompetence and cupidity shown by past leaders, and it has been ordered to pay \$826 million in damages for the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania—an early al-Qaeda attack facilitated by Bashir's regime. A deal to settle these claims for \$300 million is still stuck in the U.S. Senate.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

As usual, international lenders have advised Sudan's government to take fiscal steps that would further erode its popularity and make it an easier target for military and Islamist figures waiting in the wings. At a time when desperate Sudanese are scrambling for bread, medicine, and fuel, it is insanity to expect Hamdok's earnest but fragile administration to declare that long-suffering citizens must pay more, receive less, send money to American victims of terrorism, and simply wait for better days.

The logic of current U.S. policy on Sudan seems clear: to methodically address outstanding bilateral issues while holding out the hope of relief at the end of the tunnel. This includes dangling the promise of removing Sudan from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list at some point near or after the country's 2022 elections. Until then, the idea is to

continue gingerly reforming the security sector, safeguarding the civilian administration from overthrow, and keeping the military in line—especially the ambitious Darfur warlord Gen. Mohamed Hamdan “Hemeti” Dagalo, vice-chair of the Sovereignty Council. In other words, Sudan has so far gotten more promises from the United States than actual assistance.

The problem with this policy is that it presumes time is on Washington’s side. If the world economy was booming and Sudan was muddling through with mediocre economic figures, perhaps such an approach could work. But Washington risks realizing the opposite of its desired outcome by letting the current government be discredited in the hope of keeping Hemeti at bay, and by dangling future economic relief that will never fully arrive (given the reality of foreign governments overpromising aid and other factors). Instead of an empowered, liberal-humanistic, civilian government that has a positive track record since 2019, current U.S. policy could midwife a failed, discredited government that ensures the coming of a Hemeti regime or something much worse—perhaps a leadership that once again wraps its tyranny in the mantle of political Islam. Even if Sudan’s future is, regrettably, a new general on horseback, such a leader could be constrained if he takes over from a reasonably successful interim government rather than another disaster.

Washington should therefore go fast on Sudan, not slow. As much as possible, relief should be frontloaded in order to give Sudanese citizens tangible hope on the ground. Moreover, U.S. allies in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates need straight talk on how to be more forthcoming in their own assistance to the Hamdok government. Washington should warn both of these states and their rivals in Qatar and Turkey that Sudan is now an American priority, not another football in their internecine regional struggle. Prioritizing people-friendly initiatives that provide short- to mid-term relief is the way to go, not grandiose long-term projects that may never deliver.

Heir to a grim historical legacy and caught up in [Nile dam tensions \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-renaissance-dam-negotiations-an-egyptian-view\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-renaissance-dam-negotiations-an-egyptian-view) between neighboring Egypt and Ethiopia, Sudan would be easy to write off. Yet given the deepening despair and deadlock in most of the Arabic-speaking world, it is crucial that Washington do all it can now—not later—to ensure that Sudan emerges as a tolerant, civilian-led country rather than another failed state. This would be better not just for the United States, but also for a region that is starved for relative success stories amid the gathering gloom.

Alberto Fernandez is vice president of the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). Previously, he served as the U.S. charge d'affaires in Khartoum from 2007 to 2009, and as Sudan desk officer at the U.S. Information Agency from 1990 to 1992. ❖

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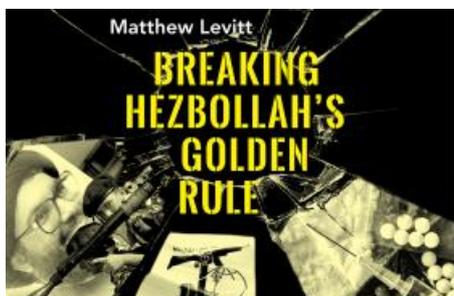
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