

After Al-Burhan's Seizure of Power, Where Is Sudan's Democratic Transition Heading?

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Brief Analysis

With Al-Burhan's coup sparking an international and popular backlash, the military may again look to Hamdok to renegotiate a power-sharing agreement.

On October 25, the Sudanese Army took power and dissolved the transitional government hours after forces arrested Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. The coup—which has been publicly condemned by the UN, the United States, the European Union, and more recently Saudi Arabia and the UAE—came more than two years after demonstrators ousted President Omar al-Bashir and only weeks before al-Burhan was scheduled to hand over leadership of the Sovereignty Council to a civilian-led government. In response, thousands of Sudanese people flooded the streets in protest. Security forces then opened fire on some protesters, killing three and wounding 80 according to the [Committee of Sudanese Doctors \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?beCRInQIIUykkszCFXif_88W6yIC4vTGVYb-j6jvaPTUZ4GEtzmOFUFG6Amp8sJ6tvI70b2vX1Q20GmoR2HkXP2RUwL0MwshOw59UNEfdngZ7JzIYfz8jKpmPbZMOZ7ze\)](https://url.emailprotection.link/?beCRInQIIUykkszCFXif_88W6yIC4vTGVYb-j6jvaPTUZ4GEtzmOFUFG6Amp8sJ6tvI70b2vX1Q20GmoR2HkXP2RUwL0MwshOw59UNEfdngZ7JzIYfz8jKpmPbZMOZ7ze). The arrests were not limited to the Prime Minister and several other ministers, but were also conducted against members of the Sovereignty Council, and party and political leaders.

The military coup constitutes a flagrant violation of the Constitutional Charter agreed to on July 5, 2019, after African and Ethiopian mediation between the Transitional Military Council and the Declaration of Freedom and Change Forces. Yet the leader of the coup, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, claims that he is correcting the democratic path in Sudan. Al-Burhan appears to think it is his responsibility to protect the interests of the Sudanese people, which requires him to establish a more inclusive government than that of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, which al-Burhan is characterizing as highly partisan.

Burhan's Justifications

Al-Burhan attributed the coup to the failure of Hamdok's government to form a true revolutionary legislative council, abolish the Council of Partners for the Transitional Period, restructure the country's regular forces, reform the judiciary, and form the Constitutional Court. Furthermore, al-Burhan claimed that the revolutionary demands of the citizens had been lost amid political power struggles and wrangling over posts. "We have not seen political forces talking about the elections or the concerns of citizens or solutions to their problems," he said.

The coup was not a surprise to the Sudanese street, the country's politicians, or its political analysts. In the days preceding al-Burhan's coup, the pro-Hamdok Freedom and Change Forces were inflamed, with tensions flaring in all parts of Sudan. In the western regions of Sudan, the desired peace promised by the transitional government has not been achieved, and Darfur continues to suffer from sectarian crises that periodically throw the region into turmoil. Eastern regions of the country also suffer from instability, with many local leaders calling for secession and the formation of an independent Beja government. Negotiations with the government had been underway to reach an agreement, but these have also hit a brick wall. In addition, there are problems in the al-Fashaga border region with Ethiopia.

Khartoum has become an arena for armed movements, as no finalized security arrangement has been reached. Armed actors and their weapons supplies are located in the capital—creating a ticking time bomb for the outbreak of a civil war, which could be triggered by the slightest political dispute. Moreover, accusations between politicians have exacerbated the situation. For instance, Vice-President of the Sovereignty Council Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo declared on September 22 that one of the reasons behind the coups was "the politicians who ignored citizens' services." On the same day, Al-Burhan declared, "We have not seen political forces talking about elections, and some of them only seek to maintain their posts." Two days later, a (now detained) member of the Sovereignty Council, Muhammad Al-Faki Suleiman, accused Al-Burhan and the military institution of attempting to control the political situation. Sudan's political history is rife with army coups against transitional governments, and therefore, there is little trust with regard to military support for political aims.

Coup Factors

Sudan's political forces, along with the international community, have denounced the coup. Al-Burhan was driven by several motivations—most prominently, the upcoming end of his chairmanship of the Sovereignty Council. According to the Constitutional Charter, its mandate was to end in 2022; after the peace agreement, 14 additional months were added to extend the period to 2024. It should be noted that with the extension of the transitional period, al-Burhan's chairmanship of the Sovereignty Council was automatically extended to December for the country. In keeping with this, he must transfer the chairmanship of the Council to a civilian after this date.

The second factor driving al-Burhan is the interests of regional countries who want to keep the “strongest undemocratic” military official in power, which could benefit outside actors’ interests in regional conflicts, as was the case in Yemen and Libya. Given the escalating crisis in Ethiopia, a similar outcome could be expected there as well with regard to Sudan’s involvement. Regardless of external support, however, the widespread protests since al-Burhan’s coup indicate that he lacks any domestic political base supporting his moves.

Possible Scenarios

In light of this deteriorating and ambiguous political situation, which represents a real threat to the democratic transition in Sudan, there are several possible scenarios.

If al-Burhan gets his way, he will manage to hold elections on his terms. This scenario would be similar to the 2013 Egyptian coup, which has facilitated Sisi’s control of the Egyptian state ever since. However, this outcome is unlikely due to popular rejection of the coup at home and by major actors abroad. Moreover, and unlike the Egyptian scenario, the international community and the United States may reimpose sanctions over the country—returning the country to the years of suffering it endured under the previous U.S. sanctions period that lasted about 17 years.

In contrast, Hamdok may capitalize on popular momentum and anger at al-Burhan’s actions and use it to his advantage to transform himself into an independent political leader. Under this scenario, Hamdok would return to govern in a more inclusive manner. While this is a possibility, it is unlikely in this period of domestic and external challenges. While the Sudanese street stands with Hamdok, the country needs a stable, strong government to overcome the its economic crisis and build sustainable relationships with regional partners, and it is unclear if Hamdok can truly offer this.

A third scenario is also possible: Hamdok returns to power with the agreement of al-Burhan. In fact, this is the most likely possibility and one that al-Burhan mentioned in a statement he delivered on Thursday evening, broadcast on Sudanese television. Al-Burhan stated that “[Hamdok is the leading candidate for prime minister, despite his confinement.](https://url.emailprotection.link/?bQ2JR8f0RIWN7tSPhtOTp4mOk6pzdMvpS4OvqBQmRIFIBt-WNJqSij3hu3gM6bUFdBXKH0Mf56t7LL8_eh5JgoMibN2WIVNPkofc034EZFCz1fiepefbYxWbybXJCUrH5pPMhPzczhdNrEesOIRb5D3e07bTM3QVMNNG86VpjEk-))”

The reality is that Al-Burhan has clearly failed to obtain popular support with regard to his political ambitions, and it is not in his interest to prolong a situation that may turn Sudan into an arena for civil war. As for Hamdok, his return to a joint government with al-Burhan is only possible if he agrees to make certain concessions, but the coup may paradoxically allow Hamdok to obtain stronger political power in the future, given the military’s immense privilege were he to make those concessions.

Having advantages over civilian politicians in the economy, intelligence, and power, it is expected that the military institution will continue to exert pressure to control the country. Despite the will of the street, it is unlikely that the military will give up this power and subject its institution to a civilian component without guarantees. In fact, the military will continue to exert its hegemony unless Sudan transforms into a stable democracy based on a strong economy. ❖

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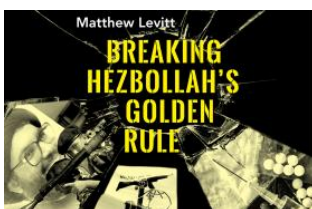
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