Peaceful Transition in Sudan: Obstacles Along the Path

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May 21, 2019
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

"We're not turning back halfway," wrote (https://www.apnews.com/a72b61708d20477997c6014495edc82b) the head of the opposition Sudanese Congress Party Omar al-Degeir in a tweet referring to the wave of protests against Sudan's seventh president, Omar al-Bashir, who ruled the country with an iron fist for decades.

In the months that followed, Degeir's declaration became a driving force for members of the Conference Party, and despite being a newly-established party, it is known for its fierceness due to the predominance of youth elements among its membership. The party is one of dozens of political parties and institutions that form an alliance called "Freedom and Change." The statement also seems to have been echoing a popular sentiment already expressed on the Facebook wall of university student Abdel Azeem Abu Bakr, who gained martyrdom status after he was killed during the protests. "We're tired, my friend" Abu Bakr wrote "but how can we lay down when the battle goes on?"

Following months of unrest, protesters in Sudan were able to unseat not only Bashir, but also his initial successor, both of whom were the representatives of an extremist, ferocious and intransigent Islamist regime. Bashir fell after 30 years, and his deputy Lieutenant General Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf fell just a day after. But the Sudanese are still only halfway through their struggle. Meanwhile, the Islamist regime carries on with its attempt to stop the protestors and suppress the revolution.

Of particular risk to the recent peaceful transition of power in Sudan is the nature of the state. Indeed, one major challenge to the democratization process in the country is the Islamist character of Sudan's government. Since the establishment of the Islamist regime 30 years ago, thousands of government employees and public servants have been fired and replaced by loyalists, a practice that enabled the Islamists to take over all key public institutions and agencies.

Moreover, after assuming control over the state itself, the Islamists also established a parallel state structure with its own military, security, and civilian apparatuses, including commercial companies that play a major role in the Sudanese economy. Thus, in addition to the regime's Islamist ideology, another intractable obstacle to the establishment of a democratic government in Sudan is the fractured, decentralized nature of political power in the country.

The parallel state created by the Islamist regime has established security wings composed of unofficial militias and with civilians at their core. Underlying these wings are three government-affiliated organizations: the Popular Defense Forces, a quasi-military force, the People's Security—a secretive agency akin to the Sudanese National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS)—and the People's Police, a network of military units that acts like an unofficial police force. These groups are mobilized by an extremist religious doctrine of combat based on the call to jihad. It is a doctrine that equates political enemies to religious enemies with whom one cannot coexist, an approach exemplified by such slogans as, "let us restore to the religion its glory, or their blood will be spilled, or our blood will be spilled, or all blood will be spilled"

These influential militias operate on a national scale and have a history of violence. In 2007, for example, the International Criminal Court (ICC) accused Commander Ali Kushayb, a Darfur-based leader of the Popular Defense, of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in the region. Moreover, in South Sudan, the number of members of the Popular Defense Forces who fight under the banner of jihad is estimated to be around 90,000, including 10,000 active personnel and 80,000 reservists.

Although the work of the People's Security is shrouded in greater secrecy, it is also used as a tool against regime opponents. The People's Security was created by the Islamist regime from the remains of the Special Security, a secret agency that predated the Islamist government. After the Islamists took power in 1989, the People's Security turned into an important tool for running the state and began to carry out tasks that were in some cases hidden from the official security apparatus. The organization gathers information to track and monitor regime opponents, sometimes spying on its own ranks as well.

According to some reports, these Islamist militias, often operated by mujahedeen fighters, were involved in assassinations of protesters in September 2013 and during the current wave of protests that began in December 2018. As a matter of fact, from the protests' early days, it has been evident that the Islamist apparatus would pose a risk to the public display of civic unrest. After the protests initially broke out, Bashir's former deputy Ali Osman Taha threatened the demonstrators that he would mobilize forces to defend the religious foundations of the state; this has been understood by many as a threat to kill more protesters. Soon enough, protesters were posting videos of cars without plates carrying masked fighters who were accused of carrying out extrajudicial killings in the streets. These forces have subsequently been accused of assassinating protests using professional snipers during the popular demonstrations. Over the past five months, the number of dead has reached to at least 90. The shadow battalions are not a visible group, but individuals hiding behind civil service jobs, private companies and religious voluntary organizations. However, they are also real soldiers of the battalions whose leader make use of them at the time of emergency.

On the other hand, the Rapid Support Forces **(https://arabicpost.net/culture/2019/04/12/%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86/)** , a non-Islamist offshoot of the Janjaweed **incorporated (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/22/world/africa/migration-european-union-sudan.html)** into the Sudanese military, played a pivotal role in removing Bashir by refusing to implement his controversial instructions to disperse the sit-ins. As a matter of fact, the vice president of the Sudanese Military Council and commander of the Rapid Support Forces, Mohamed Hamdan "Hamidati" Dagalo, pushed back against the Sudanese president, stating, "We asked Bashir about solutions. He told us we are Maliki and the Malikis have a fatwa saying to kill a third and leave two-thirds to live in safety and dignity." Yet despite the group's action in the wake of the protests, the Rapid Support Forces has a complicated history and will eventually need to be merged into a national security system for the protests' objectives to be achieved.

The Rapid Support Forces and their commander initially won Bashir's trust after the eruption of the rebellion in Darfur, during which the Sudanese government began to employ tribal militias against the rebels. As time passed, tribal forces expanded and began to operate outside of Sudan, reportedly deploying units of about 6,000 fighters in Yemen after Bashir abandoned his alliance with Iran and joined forced with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. According to some reports, there are at least 50,000 fighters affiliated with the forces.

Although the organization ultimately aligned with the protesters and helped them in the process of Bashir's removal, its power has reached formidable levels and it still functions as a parallel-state institution. Hamidati's background and level of influence makes the situation even more complicated.

While Hamidati has not been indicted by any judicial body for war crimes in Darfur and was not placed on the sanctions list for involvement in crimes against humanity by Washington, he is surrounded by suspicion. Nevertheless, this April, he was appointed deputy head of the Transitional Military Council and currently oversees the handling of the economic crisis, looking into issues such as fuel production and banking liquidity. Furthermore, according to Hamidati, the Rapid Support Forces made a documented contribution to Sudan's economy by paying over a billion dollars to the Finance Ministry and the Bank of Sudan.

On the political front, Hamidati has met with diplomatic delegations from the European Union and the United States, as well as from the Sudanese opposition. Meanwhile, his highly autonomous forces remain a concern to many. Originally tribal militias that were incorporated into the security and intelligence apparatus and then the army, these forces are still made up of independent units that answer to Hamidati rather than to the military's official leadership. This situation worries many, who point to similarities between Hamditi's status and the status of Hassan Nasrallah's as the head of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Observers agree that the Islamist state infrastructure and the parallel state apparatus will remain obstacles in the path to change by impeding a peaceful and smooth transfer of power. By design, the Sudanese state under the Islamists' control is one with weakened official institutions that have to be supported by parallel agencies. Therefore, even if the parallel state apparatus does not actively stand in the way of negotiators, it will remain a continuing threat to the stability of the Sudanese state. The inherent danger in this situation is compounded by Sudan's great size and proximity to troubled states such as Libya, which is a hotbed for extremist Islamist groups like the Islamic State.

To overcome these obstacles, the transition process in Sudan must be peaceful and gradual. To preserve security and avoid a vacuum, it must be overseen in collaboration with the military. On the other hand, if army becomes weaker, decides to cooperate with parallel state agencies, or defects, the situation may become chaotic and Sudan could become the mirror image of Libya, Yemen, and Syria. This nightmare scenario could become a reality as political leaders fail to address security concerns as they remain occupied by petty rivalries and struggles over their agenda and status.

Accordingly, the Sudanese must lay the groundwork for the transitional period as soon as possible. They must be quick to build strong civilian governing institutions that would enable Sudan to become a democracy. Thus, during the transitional stage, it would be necessary to introduce plans to dissolve and disarm the militias affiliated with the old regime, to rehabilitate these militias' members, and to help militia fighters return to civilian life. It would also be crucial for the Rapid Support Forces to be fully incorporated into the Sudanese military–side by side with forces of the armed movements–by the end of the transitional phase.

Of course, achieving these ends would be far from easy. Indeed, for the transition to succeed, Sudan would need the help of the international community. International and regional powers should help the transitional government to reach a peace agreement with rebels. They should also offer technical and financial assistance to Sudanese partners

that will help them achieve stability and control the militias of the parallel state while also containing attempts to turn the militias into terrorist groups, a real threat given the presence of extremist religious figures who have had ties with the authorities for 30 years. ❖

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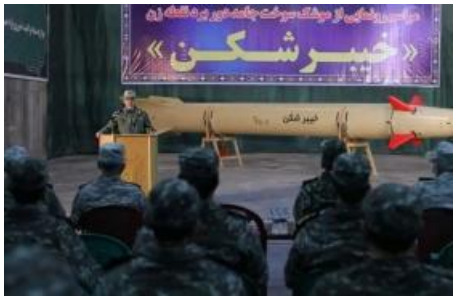

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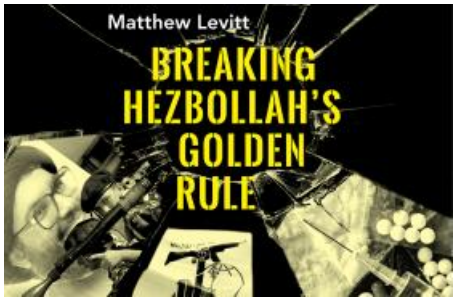

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