

Policy paper – Peace in Sudan: Inclusion is key

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Introduction

Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and his civilian government are navigating a narrow path in a transition from military-led dictatorship towards democratic elections under civilian leadership. He is doing so in the context of a power sharing agreement between military generals and civilian leaders appointed throughout the revolution, which was established after the ouster of former dictator Omar al-Bashir. Securing lasting peace for democratic elections to take place in 2022 is the main goal of the civilian government.

For the past thirty years, al-Bashir, a former general of the Sudanese Army, transformed the country into an authoritarian regime that was based on Islamic dominance, including the propagation of the sharia laws¹, and military establishment in the ruling elite. He continuously suppressed religious freedom and persecuted ethnic minorities composed of Animists, following African religions, and a small group of Christians living mostly in South Kordofan and the Blue Nile state. This suppression of non-Arab Sudanese eventually led to the long and bloody civil war in Darfur and the secession of South Sudan in 2011. Additionally, economic deterioration, including soaring inflation, and his refusal to give up power resulted in the coup d'état in 2019. One cultural group claiming dominance over other ethnic minorities and imposing their beliefs in a country that is so diverse as Sudan is thus not feasible without violence erupting.

Today, one year after the ouster of Bashir, improvements can be seen as minorities can freely pursue their religion and violent punishments from the sharia laws have mostly been abandoned. However, the transition stands at a critical juncture. The civilian government faces a struggle for leadership with an elite that is holding on to the former power structures and Islamic dominance. This prevents it from implementing structural reforms touching the root of the conflict. It also makes Hamdok vulnerable to disputes as he doesn't possess the dominance yet to define the position of the government against internal opposition. Highly debated and religiously charged topics, such as normalizing ties with Israel are thus critical decisions in the current transition, as they reflect the respect given to the opinions of religious minorities.

It is a fragile structure that seems to make a successful transition unlikely, however recent peace negotiations have shown promising results. This paper, based on thorough analysis of current literature, reports from UN organizations, existing policy papers and news reports, explores how cultural and religious differences can endanger ongoing peace negotiations and pose a threat for creating a rift within the transitional government's different actors. This is illustrated by looking at the current peace deal signed with rebel groups in Juba and by exploring how possible normalizations of diplomatic ties with Israel could spark religious disputes. It then makes the argument that a normalization could endanger the transition. The paper further provides a plea for the inclusion of all ethnic groups in the peace process as well as the representation of all geographic regions in the country to be part of the transition process.

¹ The sharia laws were introduced under previous leader Jaafar Nimeiry in 1983.

Structural differences within the transitional government

The revolution that ousted Bashir started out as collection of various groups from different layers of the population collected in the movement of Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). Three main groups could be distinguished: armed rebel groups fighting against regional and ethnic oppression, political parties that led the political opposition against Bashir and civil organizations standing up for specific interests in the population. A broad base was thus represented in the FFC which was the core strength of the protest movement and enabled them to generate the momentum for change.

Though after the military coup in April 2019, for the benefit of quickly reaching an agreement, a constitutional declaration was signed in August 2019 that excluded the rebel groups as well as large parts of the civil organizations from the transitional government. Left were political parties including the Sudan Congress Party, National Umma Party (NUP), the Sudanese Communist Party, the Unionist Association and the Ba'ath Party. From the group of civil society organizations, only the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) remained, as the others refused to politically organize. A great opportunity for inclusive governing was thus missed at this point.

Internal turmoil further aggravated the situation. Disputes about the political transition in May 2020 led to the NUP, an influential part of the opposition to Bashir, suspending its participation and in July the SPA, which represents large parts of the professional protest movement, announced its withdrawal from the FFC. A structural divide remained. On one side, the majority of the protest movement that was based on public support in the civil society groups and obtained strength through the armed rebel groups, representing the marginalized regions and ethnic minorities, was excluded from the civilian government. On the other side, the few political parties that control the FFC remained, but started to lose its connection to the former protest movement as the initial goals of the rebellion seemed to get lost in the administration of the transition.

Besides the exclusion from the government, the internal division extends to the underlying idea of the transition. Rebel groups suffering from suppression of religious cultures, especially in the Blue Nile region and South Kordofan, and regional neglect in Darfur, want to overcome the Islamic administration to gain religious freedom and economic integration. Though, Arab nationalist parties established in the Islamic North try to keep the Islamic culture as a dominant ideology for the country in place. The uneven representation of these interests in the government thus poses a threat to reaching a sustainable peace agreement and a successful transition.

Beneficiaries from the instability within the FFC are former political allies of Bashir as well as the military. Representatives of the National Program group (NPG), part of which include the Sudan Renaissance Alliance and the Popular Congress Party, which is backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, met with General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the Sovereignty Council, to discuss the NPGs objectives.² Even though public opinion still opposes the empowerment of the military, the generals are ready to use its assets to try to change the perception and garner the people's support by funding economic relief programs or providing emergency aid to rural areas. For the NPG, it opens the door to reenter the political arena as they were banned from political

² Sudan Tribune: <https://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article69791> 05.09.2020

involvement for being part of the dictatorial regime. The generals could maintain their power and independence, which they fear to lose if the civilian government gains more control in the transition process. FFC internal distractions can thus prove fatal for Prime Minister Hamdok as it strengthens his political opposition.

A step towards inclusion

Recent peace negotiations between the Sudanese government and the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) mediated by the South Sudanese president Salva Kiir could be a turning point for the transition and the disintegration of the FFC. Leaders of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM-MM), two major rebel groups from the Darfur region, signed the deal. More importantly, the peace deal guarantees the rebels a seat in the transitional government, thereby correcting a fatal shortcoming of the constitutional declaration signed after the revolution. It is a major success for the prime minister and his civilian government as it regains trust between the protest movement and the government. The peace agreement further includes commitments to bring Bashir and others responsible for crimes under his regime to justice, which has been a primary demand by the protest movement.

However, some rebel groups did not sign the agreement. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) led by Abdel Aziz al-Hilu and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA-AW) led by Abdel Wahid al-Nur issued support for the peace process, but refrained from signing, as the deal misses to address the fundamental topic of separating state and religion. Addressing religious differences thus again proves vital in achieving a comprehensive agreement. Hamdok started to engage in bilateral negotiations with al-Hilu and al-Nur to bring them back to the table, but separating state from religion has met broad opposition within the transitional government, especially from the military. Still, as the two rebel groups are important actors in the conflicted Nuba Mountains and Darfur region, including them in the peace process should be a key priority.

International involvement as a source of conflict

One has to note that the achieved peace agreement was largely mediated by South Sudan, not too long after its secession from Sudan, with international actors only acting as observers and providers for logistical support. It provides stability to the deal as South Sudan is directly affected from conflicts in the border region and shares a strong cultural as well as economic connection with Sudan. Sudan and South Sudan are so immanently connected that peace or conflict in one country directly affects the other one. This fact provides confidence for the signing parties, especially the rebel groups, that the agreement is mutually beneficial and not part of a foreign engagement.

Sudan, a country rich in natural resources, has largely been subject to foreign involvements for economic or security reasons. Under Bashir, who allied with the Muslim Brotherhood, the country received support especially from Qatar and Iran who tried to expand their influence in the MENA region against the Arab nations, neglecting the fact that the population suffered under the dictatorial rule. Once Bashir was ousted, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and especially the UAE, saw a chance to push back the Muslim Brotherhood by supporting the generals al-Burhan and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti") to quickly seize power. They would thereby gain a

military ally in the region. They supported them despite the fact that the generals were involved in war crimes and in supporting the oppression during Bashir's regime, which makes them unsuitable for leading and uniting the country. Even after the transitional government was established, the UAE held bilateral talks with al-Burhan to strengthen the position of the military. International security interests are thus not in line with achieving a sustainable development within the country. The same goes for foreign economic involvement. China and other countries from the Middle East have heavily invested in the Sudanese agriculture to extract resources for foreign markets without letting the local population participate.³ European oil companies invested in the country until South Sudan seceded from Sudan, taking with it 75% of the oil production capacities, thus making further investments unprofitable.

The current peace process is therefore even more promising, as it builds on mutual agreement between internal parties interested in enabling long-term stability for the country.

How to maintain stability

Reaching an agreement is the first step, but then respecting each other's opinion is required to make further progress. This is tested in the discussions about normalizing ties with Israel, which is linked to the delisting of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism by the US. Importance is given to the delisting as it prevents the country from debt relief and accessing funds from the IMF or the World Bank, therefore strongly hampering the development of the Sudanese economy. While important for Sudan, it is not a major concern for the US. At the moment, the US is rather focused on developing its Middle East peace plan which entails the Arab nations to reestablish diplomatic ties with Israel, but neglecting the negotiations between Israel and Palestine for a two state solution.⁴ Notably, this initiative comes at a time just before the US presidential elections. In a recent visit by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Sudan in August 2020, the delisting of Sudan has therefore become a bargaining chip for Sudan to establish diplomatic ties to Israel, so that the US gains support for its peace plan. Though, Pompeo pledged US support to the transition in Sudan, his main concern was developing the US led peace initiative⁵. It shows again the misalignment between foreign and Sudanese interests.

Engaging in a normalization with Israel at this point, in exchange for being delisted by the US, could prove fatal for the transition. Reducing the isolation of Israel is supported by the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, though Saudi Arabia hasn't formally committed to it yet. These countries are supporters of the military in Sudan, which is why the generals also support establishing ties to Israel. Therefore, committing to normalizing ties with Israel would strengthen the position of the generals as Sudan would side with the Arab countries and the US. The whole initiative however, is strongly disputed as it practically disregards the interests of Palestine in the negotiations to achieve a two state solution with Israel. These different opinions are also reflected in the transitional government. It could therefore erupt disputes, as it might be seen as a betrayal of members within the FFC, and Hamdok does not yet have the power and backing to control these disputes. Being neutral towards Israel is thus the best option for now. Besides that, pressure

³ Bloomberg: <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2019-sudan-nile-land-farming/>, 12.08.2020

⁴ The Israeli-Palestine conflict has been the reason for the long-term isolation of Israel in the Middle East.

⁵ Foreignpolicy: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/11/trump-extends-arab-push-normalize-ties-with-israel-sudan/>, 10.09.2020

on the US is mounting to remove Sudan from the list of terrorism sponsors, because it is not justified anymore. Sudan is cooperating in sharing intelligence to fight terrorism and actively tries to develop a democratic nation, thus the US has to delist Sudan soon, even without it giving in to US pressure.

Conclusion

Achieving peace in Sudan involves many internal actors as well as the navigation and consideration of foreign interests in the regional developments. Notable steps have been made, but the process is far from over. In order to obtain a comprehensive peace agreement, all conflicting interests have to be represented. Including rebel groups in the transitional government is a major step. Further steps should be to finally establish the transitional legislative council, which gives all regions and cultural groups a voice and a lever to influence the decision-making and building trust between the civilian government and the people. Even though it is still disputed, the government has to find a solution for granting religious and cultural freedom to the people without the domination of one over the other. Managing the cultural, regional and ethnic diversity is the root of the conflict. For the civilian leadership to continue this path, the international community, especially the US and the EU, should pledge its support and assure they stand behind prime minister Hamdok to strengthen his position in the power struggle with the military.