An Inevitable Tragedy or Tentative Hope in Sudan?

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Whether the recently agreed peace deal in Sudan, allegedly aimed at a democratic transition and civilian rule, will lead to stability is far from a forgone conclusion.

After months of stalled negotiations between the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the Declaration of Freedom and Change (DFC) – an umbrella movement representing Sudan’s vibrant strains of civic activism – police and paramilitaries launched a coordinated assault to clear the main protest site outside the Ministry of Defence in Khartoum and satellite camps across Omdurman and other Sudanese cities. Blue-clad security personnel killed at least 100 people and injured over 650 on 3 June, firing live ammunition, burning tents, raiding medical clinics and dumping bodies in the Nile. With scenes analogous to the Rabaa massacre in Egypt, the crackdown many feared finally materialised.

While the ferocity is shocking, a comparable outcome has been anticipated since the overthrow of Omar Al-Bashir in April. State-sponsored violence is a familiar orthodoxy in Sudan, after years of ‘counter-insurgency on the cheap’ – a blend of militia attacks and scorched-earth suppression – in South Kordofan, Blue Nile State and Darfur. Rapid Support Forces (RSF) cadres, an outgrowth of Darfur’s infamous Janjaweed, used similar tactics to disperse protesters across Khartoum in 2013, and it seemed likely the same treatment would be applied again six years later.

The main surprise is that it took so long, a delay due in part to disputes within Sudan’s ‘hydra-headed’ military apparatus over how to handle the nation-wide protests. The current divisions stretch back to December 2018. Ironically, the confusion was a legacy of Al-Bashir’s own coup-proofing efforts after having stoked competition between derivative security agencies throughout his rule. Under the pressure of relentless demonstrations, this fragmentation hindered decision-making and boiled over into shootouts between army units and the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). Twenty-four hours after the president’s detention, his successor, Lieutenant General Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf, resigned, having failed to resolve these rifts. With the TMC now headed by Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, it was unclear where the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) would or could constrain Sudan’s ‘multitudinous, mutually suspicious and avaricious’ paramilitaries.

Whether they were willing collaborators or were simply overtaken by events, the military was not a passive bystander in laying the groundwork for justifying a crackdown. The ramp-up of belligerent rhetoric started in May, with senior government figures casting ‘unruly demonstrators’ as threats to national security. Leading activists were branded as ‘agents of foreign intelligence’. Talks were repeatedly suspended. The protest’s carnival atmosphere, so iconic in the lead-up to Al-Bashir’s ouster, started to fray and demonstrators were intermittently attacked by ‘unidentified’ assailants. After shoring up support from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, it appears Sudan’s securocrats finally felt confident enough to finish the job using RSF militiamen.

In contrast to this steady escalation, the fallout has been frenetic and unpredictable. Al-Burhan initially seemed recalcitrant: blaming demonstrators for their implacability in negotiations; dismissing the incipient agreements already reached with the opposition and calling for elections within seven months. A day later, he somewhat incongruously encouraged further, ‘inclusive’ dialogue to expedite a solution and allay activists’ concerns. The protesters themselves have continually oscillated. Rejecting calls for reconciliation, the Sudanese Professionals’ Association – a coalition of highbrow trade unions – demanded the barricading of main roads to ‘paralyse public life’ and the DFC likewise encouraged strikes and civil disobedience.

While this rebuttal was eventually tempered by conditioning any talks on third-party mediation from Ethiopia or the AU, there is no denying demonstrators are now at a significant disadvantage. Khartoum’s encampment had become the frontier of Sudan’s protests, lending not only symbolic capital to activists as they courted international media, but also a rallying point for organising an organic, decentralised and nationally inclusive movement. It developed as its own ecosystem, creating space for civic innovation, experimental forms of governance and new social structures that displayed the ‘future Sudan’ protesters envisioned. The sit-in was also the DFC’s main point of leverage in negotiations, providing a well-situated hub for disrupting the
capital’s infrastructure and pressuring the TMC. Without it, any coordinated resistance was considered too difficult to revive, with the RSF establishing checkpoints across the city, jamming communications and blocking internet access.

And yet the key ingredient of street politics – momentum – seems to have survived the disruption. Nearly a million demonstrators marched against the regime in late June, defying government expectations and refuting any suggestion the protests were waning. International pressure is also building, even as Sudan’s economic free-fall continues. Western powers circulated the usual boilerplate condemnations, but more surprisingly, the AU, after delaying punitive measures, finally suspended Sudan’s membership ‘with immediate effect’. Of course, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt still have a clear interest in preserving a pliable government in Khartoum – all three share an intolerance of political Islamism and want to protect their investments in Sudanese agriculture. Aside from curbing Qatari influence following their spat in 2016, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are eager to continue renting the RSF and Darfuri militiamen for counterinsurgency operations in Yemen. Cairo is likewise keen to avoid the optics of a successful civilian-led transition in the region, given the disposition of President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi’s own military regime, and is looking to secure Khartoum’s support in the ongoing dispute over Ethiopia’s Grand Renaissance Dam. But the barrage of international criticism has taken a toll and it is becoming apparent that an unpopular client administration without any semblance of local ‘legitimacy’ may not be capable of safeguarding the Gulf’s long-term strategic interests.

More importantly, Arab largesse cannot fix the Sudanese economy alone, leaving the TMC short on friends and shorter on cash while grappling with the same socioeconomic malaise that precipitated protests in the first place. These factors created a new window for bargaining, facilitating the design of a tentative power-sharing deal in early July after DFC leaders agreed to temporarily drop their preconditions and enter a 72-hour period of intense negotiation brokered by the AU. Framed as a ‘consensual and balanced agreement towards a democratic transition and civilian rule in Sudan’, the arrangement describes an 11-member ‘sovereign council’ – five civilian and five military with the eleventh stakeholder jointly approved – running a technocratic government until elections are convened in three years. Crucially, an army general – most likely Al-Burhan –
will lead this hybrid administration for 21 months before rotating to a civilian for the following 18 months.

On paper, this is a reasonable compromise, but the lack of detail reveals many of its limitations. For a start, the DFS had to ‘shelve’ proposals for a civilian-dominated legislative body and with it any concrete, institutional mechanisms for enforcement or executive oversight. It is unclear whether a promised ‘impartial investigation’ into the 3 June massacre will be conducted by an international or Sudanese entity and the military has refused to announce when it will restore internet access. Most importantly, demands for a comprehensive, renegotiated social contract were pushed downstream, exposing the deal as a rather superficial stopgap that avoids addressing the fundamental disagreements between activists and the TMC. This disjunction precipitated the crackdown in early June and while debate should be encouraged, it is a fallacy to think that the nature and proclivities of the regime have changed in any meaningful way.

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The government’s various ruptures fed into the protesters’ previous strategy, leveraging the turbulence within the TMC to achieve tentative compromises including a three-year transition period and a shared agreement over the need for some iteration of civilian-led technocratic governance. Al-Bashir’s National Congress Party (NCP) and its militias were disbanded, senior Islamist leaders arrested, and Al-Burhan promised to both dismantle NISS and investigate the killing of protesters.

But in reality, these proved to be rather cosmetic concessions. Notorious intelligence chief Salah Gosh was simply replaced by Lieutenant General Abu Bakr Mustafa, an army acolyte who extended SAF’s control over a rival institution but otherwise allowed NISS to continue its day-to-day operations, disrupting demonstrations and spreading misinformation. As a political outfit of functionaries loosely affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, the NCP was similarly expendable, enabling Khartoum’s strongmen to curry favour with wealthy benefactors in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Crucially, the most salient proposition – relinquishing authority to an independent civilian body – was never going to be palatable to the regime. The TMC essentially operates as the front for a profligate oligarchy enmeshed deep in Sudan’s political economy, protecting a system of state-capture in which ruling networks exploit governing infrastructure and public institutions for the purpose of resource extraction. This mercantile logic, nurtured and exploited by Al-Bashir, has long conditioned Sudanese politics and the same pathologies persist under his successors, leaving little hope of officials renouncing their impunity to expropriate and profiteer. The government may have enticed the protesters’ demands to buy time, but its kleptocratic disposition was always framed by a zero-sum incentive structure incompatible with transparency or accountability. As a result, negotiations were almost inevitably going to fail.

The new deal does not resolve these fundamental problems and the lead-up to the 3 June massacre was paved with broken promises. Under the rubric of ‘reconciliation’, the TMC may simply be trying to buy itself time to consolidate its power, address internal fragmentation and reassure its regional sponsors.

Crucially, election exploitation is also 101 for aspiring authoritarians. Al-Bashir used the optics of voting to ‘legitimise’ his rule and the TMC can recycle the same mechanics, reinstating or replacing the NCP as a proxy for those at the top. Scheduling a vote, as enumerated in the peace agreement, may therefore be in the interests of Khartoum’s strongmen, as democratisation is a long process and even under fair conditions, Sudanese protesters would struggle to have a concerted impact. Years of dictatorship have either co-opted or atrophied traditional opposition groups, and due to the heterogeneous composition of interests represented under the DFS – from uptown urbanites in Khartoum to displaced farmers in Northern Darfur – there is unlikely to be any unifying political position beyond a rejection of the status quo. Faction between the affluent ‘centre’ – a socio-political enclave of self-ascribed Arab, Islamic elites enconced in the Hamdi Triangle, the self-ascribed traditional core of the Sudanese state between Dongola, El-Obeid and Sennar – and the rest has been a staple feature of Sudan’s history. This requires holistic remediation, changes that can only be delivered through an inclusive, nationwide social contract rather than a political compromise bottled up in Khartoum. Unfortunately, the DFS, and the wider protest movement have become increasingly insular, franchising voices in the capital while neglecting the aspirations, interests and grievances of peripheral populations. In this context the peace deal appears to be ‘yet another incarnation of the centre’s domination’. Even if elections were to proceed as scheduled, ‘pro-democracy’ stakeholders would consequently be fragmented by the same demographic and political cleavages that constantly consume Sudanese society.

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Islamism is another variable whose effects are unknown. While the NCP, as an offshoot of the National Islamic Front (NIF), gradually shed much of its ideological baggage, Al-Bashir at least tried to maintain the cultural aesthetic of Sheikh Hassan Al-Turabi’s Islamic State to appease Khartoum’s religious powerbrokers. These measures helped secure control over the state apparatus after Turabi’s arrest in 1999, but their superficiality gradually weakened the regime’s attachment to Sudan’s diverse community of Islamists. By dissolving the NCP and arresting senior ideologues, the TMC seems to have largely abandoned this pretence to placate its Gulf allies in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. This shift is important as, despite little appetite for political Islamism among protesters due to its toxic association with Al-Bashir, Islamist movements usually do well at the ballot box. The legacy of social outreach and welfare provision that helped mobilise turnout
in Egypt and Tunisia may not apply in Sudan given the violence, corruption and economic dysfunction marking the NIF’s tenure in government, but they have deep pockets and good connections. Groups like the Popular Congress Party are also known quantities in a context marred by uncertainty. They may have been peripheral in the drama so far – any reference to Sharia was conspicuously absent from the demands submitted by the DFC – but these stakeholders could become significant spoilers should the TMC marginalise them further or abandon the peace deal, leaving demonstrators without viable alternatives. This could be dangerous given the historical tendency for endogenous tensions within Sudanese Islamism to exacerbate conflicts in areas like Darfur. If local Islamist organisations receive greater prominence in the uprisings, their linkages with Qatar and Turkey could also lead to the ‘people’s organic revolution’ being hijacked by foreign agendas, amplifying a destructive competition between Middle Eastern rivals.

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Finally, it is difficult to trust the promises of a stakeholder that does not, or cannot, speak with one voice.

In contrast to Egypt, the Sudanese army does not have the capacity to govern the country alone and so must bargain a parallel security infrastructure operating outside of its control, including large paramilitary outfits like the RSF. Despite being folded into the SAF command chain in 2017, the group continues to function as an independent entity under the leadership of General Mohamed Hamden Dagalo ‘Hemeti’, establishing lucrative parastatal structures in Darfur and developing its own culture, economy and even ‘foreign policy’ after supplying manpower for Riyadh’s campaign in Yemen. This has long been a source of tension, with Hemeti’s ambition and lineage ruffling the conservative sensibilities and Arab-supremacism of Sudan’s riverine elite.

To domesticate what it sees as an ‘ill-disciplined militia’, the army has tried professionalising strands of the RSF through bouts of inter-agency training or embedding both NISS and SAF officials to impose greater oversight. Efforts were also made to diversify the group’s ‘Darfuri Arab’ complex, expanding recruitment to rebel defectors, non-Arab communities and other tribes outside Darfur. Such programmes were nominally designed to improve the RSF’s general behaviour, but they also sought to dilute its mostly Mahariya membership (a sub-branch of Southern Darfur’s Rizeigat Arab population), from which Hemeti was able to centralise control by drawing on shared familial linkages and kinship affiliations. While these measures largely failed, they nevertheless reflect the friction between autonomous paramilitaries and regular army officers from Khartoum. Naming Hemeti deputy leader of the TMC implies some arrangement was reached, but he has the leverage to challenge Al-Burhan if he becomes dissatisfied with the prevailing dispensation. Should the ‘existential threat’ of popular protests recede, the RSF may wish to increase their lot – the army, however, could struggle to accommodate their demands. Having burned any social capital and credibility he had in Khartoum after the crackdown, Hemeti is also unlikely to commit himself to a deal that empowers his critics. Rumours already abound of contact between the general and various Darfuri insurgent groups, with rebel commander Minni Minawi indicating the ‘real enemy was the center’. The prospect of a crosscutting ‘anti-Khartoum’ coalition, combining the RSF and residual elements of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army, not only upends Sudanese political norms but amplifies the real dangers of civil war within the TMC.

Even the SAF itself does not necessarily function as a unified body. Tensions between senior leaders and local soldiers were apparent before Al-Bashir’s fall and seemingly persist given the detention of officers following the crackdown. Whether these arrests were the consequence of a thwarted coup attempt, as alleged by the authorities, or a convenient vehicle for suppressing resistance within the ranks, it is clear the regime is not only grappling with civil disobedience but opposition inside the military. These are precarious foundations for any political project and questions are already emerging over centrifugal propensities of the TMC and the eclectic, rather fragmented institutions that underpin it.

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The peace deal may therefore salvage some hope from the bloody aftermath of 3 June, but it is strewn with uncertainties and serious risk. In shoring up short-term stability, the agreement simply pushes Sudan’s unresolved conflicts further down the road.

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