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A House Divided: Sudan's Troubled Transition

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Sudan is in crisis. Again. Sudan is further tattered, further cleaved and mutilated.

The third-largest country in Africa has been marred by political instability and violence for decades. The country has experienced multiple civil wars, military coups and political upheavals. Chaos and states of emergency are almost commonplace and millions of Sudanese people have been displaced. Poverty is widespread and political oppression is, again, the order – or disorder – across the country.

Recently, Sudan has experienced a surge in violence, with clashes between various political factions and the military. A power struggle between Sudan's army and a notorious paramilitary force has rocked the country. Fighting between the two rival groups is tearing the already upside-down turf asunder. The fighting has spread into the Spain-sized Darfur region in Sudan's western stretches, which has been the stage for a brutal cycle of violence, insurgencies and counterinsurgencies. The renewed fighting threatens an already fragile Framework Agreement between the military and dozens of civilian leaders which was signed in December 2022. The latest bloodshed left more than 400 dead and as many as 1,600 wounded within the first two weeks of the fighting, suggesting the return to a full-blown civil war. The violence is unimaginable even when viewed from thousands of miles away. For those who have witnessed firsthand the butchery of the battle, it is *déjà vu*, as the transition from authoritarian-military rule to civilian rule follows an old script—a two-act tragedy that begins with a military coup, then infighting between military leaders.

A Dark, Sad Backdrop

The fighting began the second week in April and is part of a power struggle between a pair of once-aligned generals: Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who heads Sudan's Transitional Sovereign Council and the Sudanese Armed Forces, and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, or "Hemedti," the council's deputy and commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Their give-no-inch tug-of-war once again has Sudan in the international spotlight.

Most media analyses focused on the immediate impact of the fighting, the humanitarian consequences of the conflict or the outside players. More than that, it is critical to place the current breakdown into a socio-historical context and to focus on political factors. Context and factors that have slowed the people's movement toward democratic governance. Context and factors that have given the military a chokehold on governance in the post-independence period.

The current bloodshed comes after a political impasse, a power struggle between military factions and civilians that failed to reach an agreement on the future of Sudan. Sudan's most recent descent into political violence is a result of a faltering transition to a civilian-led government. Earlier, in April 2019, the Sudanese military overthrew President Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country with an iron fist for 30 years. The military formed a transitional government, which was supposed to lead the country to free and fair elections for the first time in a decade. However, the transitional government was unable to stabilize the country, and tensions between military and civilian interests began to rise. Then, in October 2021, the military staged another coup, this time ousting civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. This time, the military suspended the constitution, dissolved the transitional government and declared a state of emergency.

Actors and Issues

The most powerful political actor in Sudan is, undoubtedly, the military. Following its overthrow of al-Bashir, the military formed a Transitional Military Council (TMC) and promised to hand over power to a civilian government within two years, yet that did not happen.

Civilian protestors represent another group of actors. Each protestor has a real stake in the future of their country and have been demanding democracy and civilian rule since al-Bashir was removed from office. The civilian political parties are led by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), which has been at the forefront of the pro-democracy movement.

Next, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), is a paramilitary group formed in 2013 to counter rebel groups in Darfur. The irony of the new round of violence is that RSF was created to destroy government threats – but it has become a major threat to the regime itself. The RSF has been accused of numerous human rights violations, including rape, torture and extrajudicial killings.

Made up of rebel cells, a fourth group has been fighting the government for decades. These non-state armed groups are found mostly in the regions of Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile. Rebel groups like the Sudan Liberation and Justice and Equality movements have been fighting for greater autonomy and resources in the country's conflict zones.

The struggle for power and resources is at the heart of the conflict tearing apart Sudan. Economic hardship, corruption and ethnic and regional tensions are also a part of the deadly mix. The country is facing an economic crisis, with inflation and unemployment rates soaring. Corruption is rampant, and the military has been accused of looting Sudan's resources. Ethnic and regional tensions have also been a long-standing issue in Sudan, with different groups feeling marginalized and discriminated against.

Democratic Experiments: Successes and Failures

There are paradoxes at work that have plagued Sudan throughout its postcolonial history; they date as far back as 1956 when the country broke its colonial chains, gaining its freedom from Great Britain. But it did so without the benefit of proper consultation or any manner of formal agreement among the different regions molded by Great Britain to form the Republic of Sudan. No national consensus was built through constitutional means. So, since 1956, and through the different "governments" installed, the Sudanese people have been disregarded and ignored in matters of national and local importance. Legal procedures and constitutional dictates have been circumvented – when and where they existed. Sudan has attempted to navigate the road of government transition too many times, consisting of violent, military-instigated coup d'état each time.

Conclusion

Sudan is a country in need. Political instability is real and haunting. Economic hardship is prevalent throughout the country, often leaving no other decisions that feed the endless cycle of violence. High unemployment rates and high inflation rates slow hopes for progress. And, on the displacement front, the ongoing, decade-long conflict in the Darfur region breeds increased carnage; pitting the government against the rebel groups has resulted in the movement of millions from their homes and, in some cases, their homeland.

The international community can play a significant role in resolving the conflict in Sudan. Pressure must be applied from inside and out. The military must be called upon to return power to a civilian-led transitional government. Sanctions imposed, including the withholding of humanitarian aid and financial assistance, could turn heads in Khartoum.

While punitive measures are one way to grab the attention of Sudan's bad actors, support from the international community – technical assistance, knowledge sharing, funding – is just as necessary. When directed at the war-torn country's civil society organizations, human rights defenders and independent media, such backing serves to promote democracy and human rights in Sudan.

The people cry out for peace. To answer their pleas and their prayers, it is imperative the world take note and act. It will take the participation of the major stakeholders in Sudan – the people, the leaders of the paramilitaries, civil society organizations and the firm backing of regional organizations like the African Union, The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Arab League, the UN and the U.S. The bad news is this: Once again, Sudan is in crisis. The good news? We have yet one more chance to work together and on the country's behalf to find a peaceful solution and give peace and the troubled transition a fighting chance. Let's get it right this time.