

The Struggle for Sudan's Soul:

The Perils of a Turbulent Transition

Dr. Christopher Zambakari, BS, MBA, MIS, LP.D.

Founder & CEO, The Zambakari Advisory

Hartley B. and Ruth B. Barker Endowed Rotary Peace Fellow

Assistant Editor, Bulletin of The Sudan Studies Association

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.¹ Chaos and states of emergency are almost commonplace, and millions of her people have been displaced. Poverty is widespread and

political oppression is the order – or disorder – of the day. Again.

And now Sudan has seen a surge in violence, with clashes between various political factions and the military. The current and deadly storm is essentially a house-divided against itself with civilians trapped underneath the trampling of two fighting elephants. The renewed fighting threatens an-already fragile peace agreement. The latest bloodshed – more than 400 dead and as many as 1,600 wounded in the first two weeks of the renewed fighting² – shakes its brutal clenched fist, suggesting the return to a full-blown civil war.³

A power struggle between Sudan's army and a notorious paramilitary force has rocked the country.⁴ The two rival groups are tearing the already-upside-down turf asunder.⁵ The fighting

¹ "Sudan military coup: History of successful and failed coup attempts since independence," *BBC News Pidgin*, October 26, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-59057559>.

² Morgan Winsor, "5 United Nations Staffers among Hundreds Killed in Sudan Conflict." ABC, Inc., <https://abc7ny.com/sudan-conflict-united-nations-staffers-africa/13187723/#:~:text=The%20international%20community%20has%20repeatedly,WHO's%20Eastern%20Mediterranean%20Regional%20Office>.

³ Declan Walsh and Abdi Latif Dahir, "Sudan Fears 'Ghost of Civil War' as Explosions Rock Capital," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/16/world/africa/sudan-civil-war-khartoum.html>.

⁴ Zeinab Mohammed Salih and Emmanuel Igunza, "Sudan: Army and RSF battle over key sites, leaving 56 civilians dead," *BBC News*, April 16, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65284945>.

⁵ Christopher Tounsel, "Sudan crisis explained: What's behind the latest fighting and how it fits nation's troubled past," *The Conversation*, April 17, 2023, <http://theconversation.com/sudan-crisis-explained->

has spread deep into the Spain-sized Darfur region in Sudan's western stretches – nearly 250,000 square kilometres of basement rock and volcanic plugs that have been the stage for a brutal cycle of violence, insurgencies and counterinsurgencies.⁶

It's horrible, unimaginable stuff, even when viewed from thousands of miles away. For those who have witnessed firsthand the butchery of the battle, it is *déjà vu*, a transition from authoritarian-military rule to civilian rule that 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 that began the second week in April 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).⁷ Their give-no-quarter tug-of-war once again has Sudan in the international spotlight.

How did this happen, again? What steps are necessary to end the violence? The questions are easy. The answers? Not so much.

Most analyses in the media have focused on the immediate impact of the fighting, the humanitarian consequences of the conflict or the outside players. To make sense of the fighting in Sudan, it is imperative to place the current breakdown into a socio-historical context and to focus on political factors. Context and factors that have retarded the people's movement toward a democratic governance.⁸ Context and factors that have given the military a chokehold on governance in the post-independence period.

The current bloodletting comes after a political impasse, a power struggle between military factions and civilians that failed to reach an

whats-behind-the-latest-fighting-and-how-it-fits-nations-troubled-past-203985.

⁶ Declan Walsh and Abdi Latif Dahir, "Sudan Fears 'Ghost of Civil War' as Explosions Rock Capital," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2023,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/16/world/africa/sudan-civil-war-khartoum.html>.

⁷ Jessica Corbett, "World Leaders Urge Cease-Fire as Dozens Killed in Sudan," *Truthdig*, April 17, 2023,

<https://www.truthdig.com/articles/world-leaders-urge-cease-fire-as-dozens-killed-in-sudan/>.

⁸ Christopher Tounsel, "Sudan crisis explained: What's behind the latest fighting and how it fits nation's troubled past," *The Conversation*, April 17, 2023,

<http://theconversation.com/sudan-crisis-explained-whats-behind-the-latest-fighting-and-how-it-fits-nations-troubled-past-203985>.

agreement on the future of Sudan.⁹ Sudan's most recent descent into political violence is a result of a faltering transition to a civilian-led government. Lt. Gen. al-Burhan and Vice President Hemedti came to power in a 2021 coup,¹⁰ but disagreements over a power-sharing arrangement, and conflicting ideas on how to integrate the paramilitary group into the country's armed forces, led to a falling out.

But, we can go back further still. In April 2019, the Sudanese military overthrew President Omar al-Bashir, who had ruled the country with an iron fist for 30 years.¹¹ 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.

Next, in October 2021, the military staged another coup,¹² this time ousting civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. This was a consequences-rich game of whack-a-mole, played with guns and armies and bad characters – Hamdok, after all, had been appointed to lead the transitional government in August 2019, just months after al-Bashir's dumping. This time, the military suspended the constitution, dissolved the transitional government and declared a state of emergency.¹³ The coup sparked widespread protests across the country, with civilians demanding a return to civilian rule and an end to military interference in politics.

Today, the multiple political actors involved have different agendas and goals. Understanding who these key players are, and what they want, is essential to finding a lasting solution to the conflict.

⁹ "Sudan conflict: why is there fighting and what is at stake in the region?," *The Guardian*, April 16, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/16/sudan-conflict-why-is-there-fighting-and-what-is-at-stake-in-the-region>.

¹⁰ "Who is al-Burhan, Sudan's military de facto head of state?," *Al Jazeera*, April 16, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/16/who-is-al-burhan-sudans-military-de-facto-head-of-state>.

¹¹ Maggie Michael and Samy Magdy, "Sudan's military overthrows president amid bloody protests," *AP NEWS*, April 20, 2021, [https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-](https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-international-news-omar-al-bashir-sudan-africa-3b259f7aacia4601a713103006de8687)

[international-news-omar-al-bashir-sudan-africa-3b259f7aacia4601a713103006de8687](https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-international-news-omar-al-bashir-sudan-africa-3b259f7aacia4601a713103006de8687).

¹² "Military Coup in Sudan: Implications for Human Rights," Lantos Human Rights Commission, December 1, 2021, <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/military-coup-sudan-implications-human-rights>.

¹³ Zeinab Mohammed Salih and Peter Beaumont, "Sudan's army seizes power in coup and detains prime minister," *The Guardian*, October 25, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/25/sudan-coup-fears-amid-claims-military-have-arrested-senior-government-officials>.

Actors and issues

The first group of political actors involved in the conflict is the military, rising like a bloody bullet to the top. Following its overthrow of al-Bashir, this group of weapons-toting thespians formed a Transitional Military Council (TMC) and promised to hand over power to a civilian government within two years. However, it only took that long before the military dissolved the civilian-led transitional government and declared a state of emergency, citing security concerns. The military is currently the most powerful actor in Sudan; it controls the country's security forces, and it boasts significant economic resources. The military's top brass, led by al-Burhan, has been accused of using violence and repression to maintain its hold on power, while also accused of committing war crimes and human rights abuses in the country's conflict zones. They have a single goal in mind: to maintain power and influence over the government and the country's resources. The goal goes hand-in-hand with violence and repression, the crimes and abuses are found hand in hand with the goal.

Civilian protestors make up the second group of actors. These are people with a real stake in the future of their beloved country, despite its sorry state. These are the people who have been demanding democracy and civilian rule since al-Bashir was bounced 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 and has called for peaceful protests and civil disobedience, urging the international community to pressure the military to relinquish power. This second group is multi-faceted, diverse: Civil society organizations, youth groups, religious congregants and even political parties are included. Protesting civilians insist on a government that represents their interests, and one that is accountable. To that end, the mantra has been for legitimate elections and an end to military interference in politics. If history is any indication, one might refer to this group as the underdogs.

Another group of import is the Rapid Support Forces (RSF),¹⁴ known as al-Quwat al-Da'm al-Sari' in Arabic, a paramilitary group formed in 2013 to counter rebel groups in Darfur. The irony

¹⁴ Tsega Etefa, "Sudan created a paramilitary force to destroy government threats – but it became a major threat itself," *The Conversation*, April 19, 2023,

<http://theconversation.com/sudan-created-a-paramilitary-force-to-destroy-government-threats-but-it-became-a-major-threat-itself-203974>.

of the new flare of violence is that the RSF were 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. RSF is loyal to the military and has been involved in various operations to suppress civilian protests and popular dissent.

There is a fourth group of political actors. Made up of rebel cells, this group has been fighting the government for decades. These cells or non-state armed groups are found mostly in the regions of Darfur, South Kordofan in the south of Sudan, and Blue Nile in the southeast corner of the country.¹⁵ Rebel groups like the Sudan Liberation Movement and the Justice and Equality Movement have been fighting for greater autonomy and resources in the country's conflict zones. These zones, long-neglected by the central government,¹⁶ have become breeding grounds for

rebel groups and criminal gangs who have been involved in sporadic clashes with government forces, exacerbating the violence in the country.

At the heart of the conflict tearing apart Sudan is the struggle for power and resources. Economic hardship,¹⁷ corruption¹⁸ and ethnic and regional tensions¹⁹ 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 the first steps in its march to independence. The country broke its colonial

¹⁵ African Union, "Darfur: The Quest for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation. Report of the African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur," *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies* 4, no. 2 (2009).

¹⁶ John Garang De Mabior, *The Call for Democracy in Sudan (Edited and Introduced by Mansour Khalid)*, ed. Mansour Khalid, 2 ed. (New York: Kegan Paul International, 1992). Edited by Mansour Khalid.

¹⁷ John Young, "Sudan Uprising: Popular Struggles, Elite Compromises, and Revolution Betrayed," Small Arms Survey, June 15, 2020, <https://smallarmssurvey.org/resource/sudan-uprising-popular-struggles-elite-compromises-and-revolution-betrayed>.

¹⁸ "Sudan's Coup: New Report Spotlights Corruption of Military and Security Services," *The Sentry*, November 3, 2021, <https://thesentry.org/2021/11/03/6424/sudans-coup-new-report-spotlights-corruption-military-security-services/>.

¹⁹ Yasir Arman, "The Sudanese Revolution: A Different Political Landscape and a New Generation Baptized in the Struggle for Change," *The Zambakari Advisory*, February 21, 2019, <http://www.zambakari.org/6/post/2019/02/the-sudanese-revolution-a-different-political-landscape-and-a-new-generation-baptized-in-the-struggle-for-change.html>.

chains in 1956, gaining its freedom from Great Britain. Trouble was, 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 the Sudan.²⁰ No national consensus was built through constitutional means, an important oversight in a “country that came to independence with no tradition of religious, cultural, linguistic or political unity,” noted researcher, historian and author Helen A. Kitchen in 1959.²¹ In fact, from the start, the popular will of the people was taken for granted, setting in motion a long-standing negligence.²²

Sudan marched to independence a divided country.²³ 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.

²⁰Abel Alier, “Southern Sudan: Too Many Agreements Dishonoured,” Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, January 19, 1999, <https://www.csrfsouthsudan.org/repository/southern-sudan-many-agreements-dishonoured/>.

²¹Helen A. Kitchen, “The Sudan in Transition,” *Current History*, Vol. 37, No. 215, New States of Africa (July, 1959), pp. 35-40.

²²John Garang, *The Call for Democracy in Sudan*, 2nd ed. (London: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1992) Edited by Mansour Khalid.

Author Douglas Johnson, in his *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil War* (2003),²⁴ writes that these effects have been consequential and far-reaching; witness the dismantling of the Constituent Assembly in 1958, rather than allowing the body to make decisions on federalism. Johnson points to the 1982 Southern Referendum, canceled to disallow the voicing of opposition to the subdivision of Sudan’s southern regions.

And so on. A democratic process would have taken these dangerous precedents into account by seeking a national consensus on the most important issues of state since independence.

Sudan has attempted to navigate the rutted road of government transition too many times.²⁵ The common speedbump in each? A violent, military-instigated *coup d'état*. The list is bloody, *ad nauseum*. The first transition, from 1956-1958, was interrupted in 1958 by General Ibrahim Abboud. The second, a four-year effort from 1965-1969,

²³Francis M. Deng, *New Sudan in the Making? : Essays on a Nation in Painful Search of Itself* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2010); “Divided Nations: The Paradox of National Protection,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 603, no. 1 (2006); Francis Mading Deng, “War of Visions for the Nation,” *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 4 (1990).

²⁴Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003.

²⁵Christopher Zambakari, “Post-Referendum South Sudan: Political Violence, New Sudan and Democratic Nation-Building,” *Georgetown Public Policy Review* (2013).

came to an end in 1969 when Jaafer Mohammed Nimeiri took power through a – wait for it – military coup. Nimeiri, no shy flower he, created a single ruling party, the Sudan Socialist Union (SSU), which abolished all other political parties in the country. Upon the dissolution of Nimeiri's rule, in 1985 General Abdel Rahman Swar al-Dahab came to power and experimented with a democratic government between 1986 and 1989. In 1989 Brigadier Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir came to power through yet another military overthrow. He tore up the temporary democratic government. The most recent transition came with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 and lasted until 2011.²⁶

Sudan is a country in need. Political instability is real and haunting. Economic hardship knocks at the door of most in the country, often leaving no other options than those life choices and bad decisions that feed the endless cycle of violence. High unemployment rates and high inflation rates retard 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.

Conclusion

The international community can play a significant role in resolving the conflict in Sudan. The United States, the European Union, the African Union, and the United Nations – each has expressed concern about the situation in Sudan and called for a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

Pressure must be applied, not only from the inside, but from the outside as well. The military must be called upon to return power to a civilian-led transitional government. Other tools include the imposition of targeted sanctions on military leaders, freezing their assets, as examples. Should the international community consider withholding humanitarian aid and financial assistance, heads could be forced to turn in Khartoum. As one step, the U.S. President Joe Biden administration has already suspended \$700 million in aid to Sudan in response to the coup.²⁷

²⁶ *The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (Cpa) between the Government of the Republic of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Sudan People's Liberation Army.* Christopher Zambakari, "In search of durable peace: the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and power sharing in

Sudan," *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, no. 1 (2013): 16-31.

²⁷ Lara Jakes, "The U.S. cut off aid to the Sudanese government after the coup," *The New York Times*, October 25, 2021,

While punitive measures are one way to grab the attention of Sudan's bad actors, support from the international community – think 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.

Just as the African Union and UN have facilitated peace talks between Sudan's government and rebel groups, others in the global community must find ways to assist and play a meaningful and effective role in the negotiations for a settlement and an end to the civil conflict.

There is an urgency to secure a successful, and a peaceful transition of government in Sudan. The quicker the resolution, the less likely the bloodshed is to spread to surrounding countries²⁸

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/25/world/africa/us-aid-frozen-sudan.html>

²⁸ David Pilling, Andrew England, and Andres Schipani. 2023. "Risk of regional powers picking sides raises stakes in battle for Sudan." *Financial Times*, Last Modified April 18, 2023, accessed April 24.

<https://www.ft.com/content/228f929d-a73f-4bb3-83b0-70707ee48348>.

²⁹ "Sudan's Imperilled Transition: Policy Recommendations for the U.S." International Crisis Group, February 1, 2022,

– a number of which are already dealing with conflicts of their own.²⁹

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.

A democratic decision-making process that brings together these stakeholders³⁰ – and others – and results in a comprehensive and actionable political arrangement can deliver a durable peace in Sudan and put the troubled transition back on track. The immediate challenge is to broker an enforceable cessation of hostilities, followed by a negotiated settlement among the key political actors. The military has long been at the center of political transitions in Sudan.³¹ For now, issues of

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudans-imperilled-transition-policy-recommendations-us>.

³⁰ Christopher Zambakari, "Peace Agreements in Sudan and South Sudan: The Need for a Democratic Process" The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs, December 14, 2012, <http://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2016/8/24/peace-agreements-in-sudan-and-south-sudan-the-need-for-a-democratic-process>.

³¹ Justin Willis, "Sudan coup: years of instability have made the army key power brokers," *The Conversation*, October

prosecution of those responsible for the unrest should be deferred or put on a separate track from the political transition to avoid spoilers. In the long-term, Sudan will require deep institutional reform to avoid a return to military rule. The demilitarization of the political process and security sector reform will require the integration of former combatants from the various regions and paramilitary groups. Subsequent accountability measures must be followed by healing and reconciliation in order to give peace and the troubled transition a fighting chance.

About the Author

Christopher Zambakari is a Doctor of Law and Policy, chief executive officer of [The Zambakari Advisory, L.L.C.](#), Hartley B. and Ruth B. Barker Endowed Rotary Peace Fellow, and assistant editor of The Bulletin of the Sudan Studies Association. His areas of research and expertise are international law and security, political reform and economic development, governance and democracy, conflict management and prevention, nation- and state-building processes in Africa and in the Middle East. His work has been published in law, economic, and public policy journals.

28, 2021, <http://theconversation.com/sudan-coup-years-of-instability-have-made-the-army-key-power-brokers-170676>.