



HOW SUDAN TRANSITIONS

Sudan's path to democracy has been a rocky one, and there are several key players who need to ensure it never returns to an autocratic state

By Hamid Eltgani Ali

Now that the absolute power of autocracy has collapsed in Sudan and the people's revolution has succeeded in creating a power-sharing mechanism between the Transitional Military Council and the civilian Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), the challenge now is for this Sovereign Council to successfully manage the situation until general elections are held in 2022. In the meantime, the council must prevent the repetition of the cultural and ideological warfare of the past that had prevented the country from achieving peace and security.

The Sudanese situation will prove no exception to the tumultuousness that followed the Arab Spring in other countries, which were opened up to new possibilities. It will require patience, perseverance, and purpose to achieve equality, freedom, and social justice.

Despite all the provocations and atrocities committed by anti-revolutionary forces, the demonstrators remained peaceful throughout the uprising. Continuation on the path to peace is the moral parameter that defeated warmongers and the forces of tyranny. With a civilian prime minister forming a diverse and inclusive cabinet, the odds of a successful transition are increasing day by day despite some disappointment and discord among some civil society groups.

While reason now prevails over ideological rifts, political demagoguery and partisan politics did initially delay the transition process. However, given the gap between the youth and the older generation, the society of knowledge (or the digital society) appears to have won. They were able to defeat the regime, which the older generations had failed to do for the past thirty years.

All the more critical is that the ousted president and his associates were living in a state of delusion and self-deception while completely underestimating the capability of youth equipped with their digital devices. In a matter of five months, they succeeded in ousting the regime. Of course

◀ Sudanese protesters during a rally honoring the fallen at the Green Square in Khartoum, July 18, 2019. Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah/Reuters

other factors, including economic conditions, also played a part in accelerating the regime's collapse.

In fact, the economy was in complete meltdown by the time young Sudanese men and women took to the streets; the currency lost its value by more than 300 percent in just six months, and the inflation rate soared above double digits, bringing the ailing regime to a complete standstill. Former President Omar Al-Bashir found himself increasingly backed into a corner and forced to make piecemeal concessions.

The regime used three tactics to thwart the attempts for democratic change: declaring a state of emergency to allow the army and security apparatus to use lethal means to put down the uprising; reshuffling the government to include the familiar faces of the regime; and finally declaring that Al-Bashir would stand shoulder to shoulder with the Sudanese people. To understand Al-Bashir's failure, one must trace the evolution of the Sudanese revolution, its key players, and the recommendations for a long-term agenda for a successful transition to a democratic society.

Revolutionary Development

The sociological evolution of this uprising traces back to the days when armed groups formed in the desert far west in Darfur and from the trenches in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, yearning for freedom and social justice. It was a triumphant moment when the youth in the regions of Nyala, Al-Genaina, Blue Nile, and Atbara, the working-class city in the River Nile State in northeastern Sudan, lit the revolutionary torch of change and revived the spirit of the nation on December 19, 2018. This spirit quickly spread from city to city, and this historic moment not only unified the conscience of the nation, but soon became a journey of self-redemption and soul searching.

The slogan that united Sudanese civil society against the regime's tyranny was, "You arrogant racist, we are all Darfur!" This was a critical outcry that condemned the policy of division and hate orchestrated for three decades by the regime and its apparatus to suppress voices for change. Citizens in Darfur, Blue Nile, and Nuba Mountains had paid the revolutionary premium; they went through the agony of genocide and the destruction of their livelihood.

The genocide in Darfur resulted in the deaths of more than 300,000, the destruction of more than three thousand villages, and the displacement of more than four million people. It destroyed the region's social fabric, which could take decades to restore. The genocide also damaged the country's reputation and led to the indictment of Al-Bashir, and expected indictments of at least fifty-two high-ranking officials by the International Court of Justice.

These crimes should not only be seen as the responsibility of the ousted government, but also that of past generations who allowed such crimes to take place. The sacrifices of the people of Darfur, Blue Nile, and Nuba Mountains should not be forgotten in the mist of the political turmoil. It is time to help the victims heal and compensate them both financially and morally.

As rightly said by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, the most important priorities for the Sudanese transitional government are peace, social justice, and economic development. During this transition and afterward, respecting human lives and reversing the suffering of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees across the country should be the tool for measuring the success of this transitional government.

The transitional government must also address the increasing discontent from decades of marginalization in Darfur, Kordofan, and eastern Sudan. Among the IDPs and refugee camps, there is an increasing fear that the same elites are applying only cosmetic changes to continue the old tactics of deception and ethnopolitics. It is important that the entire transitional government visit these camps to listen to key stakeholders before taking any steps in the peace process.

Signing settlements with armed movements is necessary, but not entirely sufficient, to have peace. The government should start first with the IDPs and refugees before taking steps to initiate the peace process. If achieving peace is the popular demand, then the government must listen and act. Peace is not about creating positions and rewarding political leaders—that would be a fatal exercise—but about changing the dynamics of the power structure. This means establishing partnerships to empower the rural community and the marginalized sectors of society living in IDP camps and shantytowns.

The Key Players and their Adversaries

The call of the hour is preventing the transitional period from erupting into chaos. In other words, the Sovereign Council must move to stimulate collective action and constructive dialogue to lead the political process to a complete democratic transition. This should lead us to inspect the revolution's key players, the igniters of the revolution, and the secondary players who are acting on behalf of political parties.

Transitional Military Council

The adversaries of the uprising were led by the Transitional Military Council (TMC), which opportunistically shifted its position to wear the hat of the savior of the revolution, before its intentions were revealed in the aftermath of the June 3, 2019 massacre. The TMC was accused of killing dozens of protesters at a sit-in in front of the military headquarters, and dumping their bodies into

the River Nile. The public was outraged and the country was shut down in civil disobedience.

After massive demonstrations on June 30 and under public pressure, the TMC retreated and acquiesced to discuss the establishment of a civilian-led government. The TMC was dissolved after the agreement on August 20, 2019, as a result of the Draft Constitutional Declaration to have the Sovereign Council replace it. The Sovereign Council is composed of eleven members—five members of the military appointed by the TMC, five civilians appointed by the FFC, and one jointly appointed member.

Sudanese Professionals Association

Many consider the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) to be the principal actor. The political parties joined in the call for change—after the SPA had laid much of the groundwork—under the umbrella of the Alliance for Freedom and Change, which includes Sudan Call (the Umma Party, the Sudanese Congress Party, the Sudan Liberation Movement, and the Justice and Equality Movement) and the National Consensus Forces (NCF), consisting of the Sudanese Communist Party and the Sudanese Baath Party.

This paradoxical combination of political opportunism and sharply divided political parties overshadowed the advances achieved by the SPA and Sudanese youth. There are sixteen trade unions comprising the SPA, seventeen political and armed groups in Sudan Call and eleven political entities forming the NCF. There are twenty-nine political entities that do not belong to any group. Most youth do not belong to any established political force and are skeptical that the above-mentioned armed and political parties can manage the transition. Unlike the older generations who want to reap their fruit of long struggle against Al-Bashir, the country's youth are keen to replace the old political system with more effective institutions without diminishing the role of the state in providing safety nets.

The Rapid Support Forces

The Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary outfit, and their leader General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka Hemeti, played a critical role in bringing about political change in Sudan, and many have commended Hemeti's role in regime change. However, a lack of experience and his recent history as a tool of the ousted regime will always constrain his ambition to govern the country.

The RSF was created by the old regime to be loyal and quell dissidence because the government was not eager to settle the prolonged wars on Sudan's peripheries. No organization or politician should make the mistake of supporting the RSF in

their efforts to govern; doing so would push the country toward brinkmanship politics that could tip the country to civil war. True, the RSF has the means to seize power, but it is impossible for it to govern. Ruling a country like Sudan is challenging; it is too big to govern by force and the country is deeply politicized, beset by disparate armed groups, and burdened by an economic crisis.

Sudan needs collective wisdom to be governed. The best course of action for the RSF is to integrate into the Armed Forces and protect the transition. The alternative is for it not to be part of Sudan's future. The course of action for the armed groups following a peace agreement should be disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. Overall, the Armed Forces should be gradually reduced after the peace process concludes. With peace established in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and Blue Nile, there will be no need to have a standing army of 400,000 men. Resources should be directed to the development and restructuring of the army into smaller and more robust units to safeguard the peace.

The Egyptian influence

Egypt and Sudan have had historical ties that were marked by people-to-people exchanges, which have moved beyond the legacies of the colonial era. The relationship should be built on safeguarding mutual interests.

Egypt followed a cautious, wait-and-see approach as the events unfolded in Khartoum, but public opinion in Sudan has interpreted this negatively. The previous regime had repeatedly asked Egypt to expel members of the Sudanese opposition and armed groups from its territory. While the government in Egypt refused these requests on more than one occasion, it nevertheless preferred to see the continued survival of Sudan's political institutions, particularly the army.

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Egypt's primary concern is to maintain stability on its southern border, and to avoid the kind of chaos and insecurity that exists in eastern Libya today.

Egypt's best move is to invest in boosting economic relations and strengthening people-to-people ties in order to build trust and move beyond the current distrust. It is important that Egypt supports the civilian transition government and advises its partners in the region to refrain from interfering in a country that is already on the brink of chaos.

The youth and grassroots mobilization

Sudanese youth, who had been deprived of their democratic rights and oppressed for nearly three decades, have risen up to challenge the entrenched

autocratic system. This is the country's third popular revolution since its independence in 1956, when it embarked on a painful journey to establish national identity and a government for the people.

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The 2019 revolution is unique compared to similar movements in 1964 and 1985 because it is youth-led and not affiliated with any political parties. It was triggered through social media, with a blue Facebook profile image representing peace for Sudan and a hashtag #BlueforSudan. The ousted

regime had encountered many existential threats, but this one was a fatal vortex that felled the autocracy. The regime lost its central nervous system when its military machine was rendered ineffective in the face of young people armed with social media. The youth's mobilization tactics were robust and challenged the regime's propaganda, fabrication, and distortion of facts. The youth uprising was a social movement that broke away from older generations in its genuine wish for change. It departed from the old politics of division and opportunism by the rentier elites who were interested in seizing the state.

The new generation is non-ideological and deeply believes in the universal values of inclusivity and tolerance. Slogans of freedom, peace, and social justice were the mottos of the revolution in the face of the autocratic norms of oppression. The regime as always played for time to allow the revolutionary wave to pass, but this was not effective this time. The youth were organized and mobilized to push for accountability, peace, and job opportunities. Given the weakness of the political parties, they filled the political vacuum and are now shaping the future.

The international community

Sudan has been a focus of the international community for three decades, which has acknowledged that the region cannot afford to see another fractured country like Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Sudan is too big to be ignored, which is why the neighboring countries of Chad, Ethiopia, Egypt, and South Sudan collectively pushed harder for the Draft Constitutional Declaration to administer and manage the transitional phase.

The international community mounted pressure, particularly from Ethiopia, to bring the parties together. For example, the African Union invoked tenets of its charter to downgrade Sudan's membership status until the TMC transferred power to a civilian government. African mediation used two tracks: one track was led by an African Union team, and the other by the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who on October 10 won the Nobel Peace Prize for peace initiatives on his own country's border with Eritrea.

Ahmed put forward a proposal honoring the previous agreement between the FFC and the TMC, in which the FFC would form a civilian government led by a prime minister it would appoint. They were given 77 percent representation in the legislative branch. The point of contention was in the composition of the Sovereign Council.

Meanwhile, the international community led by the Troika (the United States, the UK, and Norway), the EU, and some permanent members of the United Nations Security Council called for a civilian-led transition and holding accountable those who commit atrocities in Sudan. The EU strongly predicated any economic aid to Sudan on a civilian-led transition, a policy which has borne fruit. It is now clear that the Sudanese people were not ready to roll back the clock to succumb to military rule again. The June 30 protest led by the youth, the SPA, and the FFC was a major demonstration after the successful call for civil disobedience on June 9.

The international community must stand behind them and ensure that the deep divisions among regional powers, which overshadowed peaceful settlements in Yemen, Libya, and Syria, do not (re)surface when it comes to Sudan. Instead, they should work toward Sudan's long-term stability, strengthen its institutions to share the benefits, and address the challenges together.

Revolution and Long-Term Agenda

To overcome some of these challenges, the forces of change need to manage the transitional process to empower an inclusive civilian-led government with wider representation, moving beyond the Nile River Belt. In the meantime, the process of regime change through popular uprising is in itself an educational tool for the public to practice the politics of governing. This process inevitably leads to a bigger debate on the quality of leadership; meritocracy-based governance should be the cornerstone to rebuild institutions.

Equally important, these new institutions must have a mandate to control political behavior by determining the rules of the game, the strategies, checks and balances, and reward systems, to which politicians must adhere. The accountability of the leadership will pave the road to creating a healthy environment and robust democratic institutions.

Call for a New Brand of Leadership

In Sudan, not all leaders are corrupt, but corrupt regimes breed corrupt leadership. There is an opportunity for a new political system to cultivate and harvest quality leadership from this young generation of activists. This is not without its challenges, however, as Sudan faces a national crisis in its multiplicity of political divisions based on familial, political, ideological, tribal, and regional affiliations. The fragmentation has increased political animosity

and has bred incompetent, ineffective, and corrupt leadership.

In the past few decades, politics became the *profession du jour* of those who have no profession. The previous regime encouraged degenerate leadership types, but like a plague, they must be removed. The autocracy produced a leadership of high school dropouts, and kleptocrats who had ascended to the highest positions on the political ladder. For this morally bankrupt leadership, politics and public

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office is not a call for duty or service, but a job and political opportunity for self-enrichment. These types of leaders' ingrained criminal attitudes and behaviors should not be a part of Sudan's future political fabric.

Nobel laureate George Akerlof once said that in the absence of information in the market, the bad cars (lemons) chase out the good cars (peaches). In Sudan, we have political lemons; good leaders were chased out and we were left with the mediocre. The current political leadership is not acceptable. Some leaders have occupied the political space for the last three decades or more. Their hold on power becomes a function of how far the leader is willing to indulge the country in politics of division.

To counter this, there should be a new set of public standards and litmus tests to determine who should be trusted to lead the nation as it moves forward; providing public service should be understood as a sense of duty and responsibility. Public service is a noble purpose, it should not be associated with criminality and ineptness. Today, the most capable people have fled the political scene due to decades of negative stigma. This plague needs to be addressed before the political process is to be initiated in order to have full democratic institutions, and before the capable members of society return to political life.

Political environment

The modernization of Sudan's political environment requires that more than 124 political and rebel movements be consolidated into five or six major entities led by competent leaders who will move the country forward. In order to create this momentum, the country needs a real vibrant civil society and think tanks to enrich the policy debate on critical issues such as reforming labor laws, the pension system, education, healthcare, judiciary, security, agriculture, and government administration.

Applying these reforms will require professionalization or technocratization of politics and policies. Technocrats should lead the reform based on evidence and away from politics to put the country on the path to success. Civil society will

set the agenda and participate as stakeholders to enrich and improve the policy process and its outcomes.

Democratization

So many countries started on the path to successful revolution but were thwarted by political division and distrust. As long as the Sudanese people remain united against all forms of division and gerrymandering, the blue symbol of the revolution, reflecting the beauty of the Nile River, will outlast the political maneuvers of the remnants of the old political class.

The militants in the government have attempted many times to derail healthy political discourse. To ensure their efforts are thwarted, the new transitional government's role is to build consensus to ensure the political process leads to an elected government. The transitional government should set the foundation for the separation of powers so that future elected governments have the capacity to generate policies without sharing power with non-elected bodies. In addition, there is an urgent need to have a national covenant to consolidate the political processes. This would ensure that no party is allowed to invest resources to create non-democratic regimes through military coups, or turn to violence and tribal domination.

The adequate safeguarding of these principles requires educating the public to recognize that democratic procedures and institutions are the most essential elements for governing collectively in a society recovering from civil wars and genocide. All are subjected to the mechanism of conflict resolution in accordance with specific laws, procedures, and institutions established to govern.

Civil liberties

Civil society is essential for political society to implement its values. It is important to encourage the creation of social, cultural, and political associations to advance dialogue and for society to move beyond elections to a truly pluralistic society with effective policy debate. It goes beyond the formal political institutions in shaping agendas and influencing the decision makers. It is incumbent upon society to put a high value on the core institutions of a democratic society, including political parties, elections, electoral rules, and political leadership.

For three decades, civil liberties were curtailed in Sudan. The state discriminated against its citizens based on regional, tribal, and geographical categories, especially in Darfur. The state allowed forces from the National Intelligence and Security Service and the RSF to have free reign to commit crimes, while independent civil associations were banned.

Social justice

Ninety percent of the population is living in poverty or relative poverty, which means that democracy will have no value to the common man if the trickle-down economy ceases to work. Therefore, society's endorsement of the political system must be contingent upon the capacity of the system to provide opportunities to advance. No one is demanding free handouts, but allowing for equal opportunity is essential.

The transitional government, and the one which succeeds it, should ensure equitable access and rights to education and healthcare. Economically, marginalized areas must be given priority access to education, healthcare, and opportunities to open businesses. All historical injustices must be addressed to chart a new beginning which entails the retirement of old political classes responsible for these atrocities and injustices.

Uphold the rule of law

During this transition, the state must uphold the rule of law. All citizens should be equal in receiving legal guarantees for freedoms and independent association. In the meantime, the leadership of the ousted regime should be held accountable for the war crimes they have committed. All the actors complicit in the crimes in Darfur, Blue Nile, and Nuba Mountains should be brought to justice. The people of Darfur must be guaranteed their day in court with those who committed genocide, perhaps in the International Criminal Court.

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The transitional government must also begin a process to establish a commission to investigate corruption cases and refer them to court. Asset recovery at home and abroad is a priority—as of today, some are still looting the country's resources. Many from the old regime are transferring assets they looted through corruption. Punishing these kleptocrats and those guilty of genocide for their crimes helps the nation heal. Therefore, an independent judicial system, supported by civil society, becomes all the more necessary to advance the rule of law and establish a new political culture.

Reconfiguration of autocratic institutions

The previous regime departed from the norms of other similar autocratic regimes, such as having hierarchical institutions, by destroying the bureaucracy and creating parallel institutions to protect themselves from accountability. The regime created multiple armies, a web of security apparatuses, and quasi-

government economic institutions exempt from constraints and owned by individuals. The central bank did not function independently and was a lending arm to the Ministry of Finance. The army, the most hierarchical organization today, is an institution led by generals who lost their professional standards because they were recruited through the political process. The most important criterion for appointing officials was loyalty, which was the regime's way of keeping institutions away from the control of adversaries.

The civilian and military leaders were more interested in business deals and promotions, or using their status to enrich themselves rather than developing the nation. A great number of the military rank-and-file is incompetent and corrupt. They lost their standards by dealing in the money market. This is why a rudimentary force such as the RSF has taken over military garrisons and armaments, including the military airbases.

This all forms a considerable challenge for the new government, which now must realign the military institutions and restructure them to perform their basic functions. Some actors in the bureaucracy, particularly in the army, should not be allowed any authority or influence that could lead to destabilizing the democratic state. The RSF and the rebel armies should be integrated into the Sudanese Army and their institutions should be reconfigured.

Political society

A civilian-led government should have greater institutional, symbolic, and absorptive capacities than military leaders to advance the agenda for democratic transition. For the civilian leadership to advance, all forms of military presence in cities and villages should disappear. Only the police force with a minimal security presence should be allowed. This will give the political society room to flourish and give the leadership the capacity to rebuild the state.

Previously, the outgoing regime represented by the TMC worked to derail the transition process. The civilian leadership needs the support of the key players and stakeholders domestically and internationally to thwart the military leaders who aim to split and undermine it. The revolution was initiated by civilians, and they should lead the transition to undo the dictatorship and create an enabling environment of healthy and inclusive dialogue to resolve the critical issues they inherited from the previous non-democratic state.

It cannot be stressed enough that the unity of the Sudanese people toward the common purpose will be key for a complete civilian-led transition. Dialogue with all regional countries is a must for a new beginning. All are looking for a Sudan that is at peace with itself and its neighbors. (R)