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Research Report

For a peaceful transition in Sudan: Current developments and plausible scenarios

SWP Comment, No. 39/2019

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Suggested Citation: Weber, Annette (2019) : For a peaceful transition in Sudan: Current developments and plausible scenarios, SWP Comment, No. 39/2019, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin,
<https://doi.org/10.18449/2019C39>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256581>

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SWP Comment

NO. 39 OCTOBER 2019

For a Peaceful Transition in Sudan

Current Developments and Plausible Scenarios

Annette Weber

There seems to be no end to the good news coming from the Horn of Africa. First, the Nobel peace prize for Ethiopia's young reformer Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in October and then, in April, Sudan's dictator Omar al-Bashir was overthrown after thirty years of rule. After months of civil and peaceful protests, it was actually the Sudanese military that finally forced the ruler out of office. Then, less than four months later, military leaders and civilians led by Abdalla Hamdok, an economist with decades of experience at the United Nations, managed to form a government. Whether the transition continues to develop positively will depend on the willingness of the security apparatus to transfer power to civilian leaders. However, in stabilising the country and improving its economic performance much will depend on whether and to what extent external actors support Sudan's transformation process.

At the top of the agenda is the economic upturn required to satisfy the population's expectations as the tide of positive events begins to ebb. The new government will also need to find peace with armed groups in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains. Questions of accountability and justice are equally prevalent. This will be no easy task for the transition councils and the cabinet since, after thirty years of Islamist military rule, the population has little confidence in state structures, the judiciary or the security sector.

In addition to these tasks, the divergent interests of the actors involved are a massive stress test for consolidating the transition. As a result, the civilian side faces a security apparatus mainly comprising those who benefitted from the old regime. Not

only must the protesters' polarising ideologies and their demands for representation be taken into account, but so must those of the armed movements.

From protest movement to transitional government

Demonstrations were held in December 2018 after subsidies for bread, oil and petrol were cut, resulting in large parts of the population no longer being able to afford basic living costs. The protesters' demands for a better supply of basic commodities quickly transformed into a call for political change. The protests remained peaceful, despite provocation from the intelligence service and government-backed



militia. During the day, the streets were mainly occupied by women, students and representatives of various professional associations while, at night, young men picketed the gates of the barracks calling for the military to join them.

More than 250 people were killed by the security forces during the protests, thousands were wounded and hundreds were imprisoned, tortured and raped. These actions revealed clear rifts within the Sudanese security apparatus. The military police, who were subordinate to the intelligence service, and in particular the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) were responsible for firing tear gas and live rounds at protestors. However, some members of the military sided with the demonstrators and returned fire.

President Bashir was removed from office in a military putsch on 11 April and a Transitional Military Council (TMC) set up. The civilian actors who had joined the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) began negotiations with the TMC to form a government. However, progress was sluggish and eventually came to an abrupt halt after a violent attempt on 3 July to clear a protest camp claimed 120 lives.

The African Union (AU) sent an envoy flanked by the Prime Minister of Ethiopia and a prominent Ethiopian mediator. Despite the violent attacks on demonstrators and repeated breakdowns in the negotiations, they were able to establish a transitional government in less than eight months with the support of a Sudanese team of mediators.

The transitional government consists of a Sovereignty Council made up of six civilians and five members of the TMC. Lieutenant-General Burhan will lead the Sovereignty Council for the first 21 months, after which a non-military actor will take charge. In addition, the cabinet, also composed of civilians and military, is the executive body responsible for setting and implementing policy.

Whether the transition is successful, whether the government holds together and whether the country achieves peace, depend on two crucial factors: the leader

of the RSF, General Mohammed Hamdan Daglo — also known as Hemedti — and tangible progress on turning the economy around. Nevertheless, sociopolitical issues, such as giving young people a say in political matters and overcoming the discrepancies between urban and rural areas, are also important.

Actors

Civilian actors. The civilian camp of the transitional government is made up of representatives of professional associations and trade unions (the Sudanese Professionals Association, SPA), protesters without no ties to other organisations and the traditional political parties. In the case of the civilian forces, it will be a matter of reconciling the politically and ideologically contradictory positions of actors such as the Communists and the Islamists. It will also be important to represent the rights of the women and young people who risked their lives during the demonstrations, but who had no seat at the negotiating table and are insufficiently represented in the transition government.

Military. The grouping within the security apparatus with the most personnel is the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Despite their participation in the war in South Sudan and in Darfur they still enjoy a level of respect among the population because throughout the history of the country they have repeatedly overthrown dictators who came to power in coups d'état. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), directly under the control of President Bashir, are now represented by Lieutenant-General Burhan who will also be in charge of the Sovereignty Council for the next 21 months.

The RSF led by General Daglo (Hemedti) was also under the direct command of President Bashir. It is the most opaque and potentially decisive force in the security camp. Since the RSF soldiers fought in the war in Yemen as part of the Saudi-Emirati Coalition, they are better trained than the

SAF soldiers. They are also financially more independent because they were paid directly by the Gulf States, unlike the SAF whose salaries largely come from the state coffers. Some of them have now been deployed on behalf of the Emirates to support General Haftar in Libya, while others have taken on the role of the army and intelligence service in Khartoum and their presence is most visible there. RSF troops are also responsible for securing the border between Chad and Darfur and the border with Libya.

General Daglo is suspected of being involved in irregular gold mining operations and illegal smuggling networks. Over the past few years, he has mainly been recruiting fighters from the periphery who, like himself, are considered second-class citizens by the central elite. They are therefore more loyal to General Daglo, than they are to Sudan.

The third force in the security apparatus is the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), which is also responsible for counterinsurgency units and was considered a close ally to long-time ruler Bashir. The NISS were largely responsible for the arrests and incidents of torture.

Also deserving of a mention are the armed movements on the periphery, such as the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), which comprises armed movements from Darfur and the region on the border with Southern Sudan. The SRF is demanding to be a part of the transition government.

Scenarios

After thirty years of authoritarian rule, a radical new beginning is as necessary as it is challenging, given the marginalisation of those on the periphery and the mafia-like interdependence between the government apparatus, the Islamist elite and the military.

Military coup: Hemedti takes over

In this scenario, Hemedti takes power. Whether he makes himself leader after the

coup or controls the country from behind the scenes is of secondary importance.

Hemedti's particular strategic skills lie in communicating with the periphery, by acting as a mediator in conflicts between ethnic groups, seeking talks with Sheiks and local rural leaders and reaching out to the Darfur rebels. While the Sudanese elites of the Nile Valley underestimate them as uneducated and provincial, he has positioned himself as a populist and representative of the marginalised. Hemedti has built up his own independent empire in a very short space of time and, at the same time, is also the deputy president of the TMC. The RSF leader can rely on support from the Emirates. A coup would sour relations with the West. This would, in turn, harm the country's economic development, but would allow Hemedti to consolidate his power.

War in the security apparatus

In this scenario, centrifugal forces would cause the military council to fragment, possibly leading to a war between the military, the RSF and the intelligence services. The Western donor countries would cease their announced support, the AU would suspend Sudan's membership and the required economic recovery would be blocked. The Gulf States and Egypt, who are committed to maintaining a military government, a 'Sisi-light' scenario, would be called upon to mediate. Otherwise, still being of geopolitical interest, Sudan would become a playground for proxy wars. The result would be a destabilising of the region, from the Red Sea to the Sahel.

The civilian government collapses

In the protest camp there is resistance to the TMC continuing to form part of the transition government. Old political parties and the SRF claim to be directly represented in the transition councils. The ideological confrontations between the formerly powerful Islamists and secular political forces are exacerbating the situation and paralysing the government. If the various camps

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ISSN 1861-1761
doi: 10.18449/2019C39

Translation by Martin Haynes

(Updated English version of SWP-Aktuell 52/2019)

block the legislature and parts of the executive, it is not unlikely for the transitional military council to take power and proclaim a military government. Here it could count on support from the Gulf States, but not from the AU or the West.

Consolidation and reconstruction

Sudanese actors are subordinating their power interests to a larger national consensus. They see consolidation, which is supported by a wide range of international actors, as a historic opportunity. Everyone has an interest in seeing Sudan stabilised: the AU, the Gulf States, China, the West and the United Nations (UN).

Its greatest challenge is its weak economy. At present, the country is largely dependent on oil from South Sudan and injections of capital from the Gulf States. Prime Minister Hamdok has requested eight billion US dollars to support the strategy he intends to pursue over the next two years and two billion US dollars in foreign reserve deposits. His plans also require debt relief and access to international financial institutions. Moreover, it is important he initiates a rapid diversification of the economy and makes greater efforts to break up the mafia-like entanglements of the old regime. Expanding agriculture, promoting investment and building industry are just as necessary as the return of the well-trained Sudanese people needed to rebuild Sudan's ailing economy.

Recommendations

Outside financial support will be required to successfully consolidate the country. The Friends of Sudan is a group comprising multilateral organisations (AU, UN and EU), as well as Germany, France, the US and UK who have come together to work with the Gulf States to find a solution to Sudan's economic misery. This group could assume a coordinating role. A decision on resuming

German-Sudanese development cooperation, which was discontinued in 1989 after Bashir's military coup, should be taken by the Bundestag as soon as possible.

Despite the great euphoria, we should not lose sight of the potential dangers and setbacks for the transition. Next year, leadership is supposed to be handed over to the civilian part of the government. Then it will become clear whether the military is prepared to act as a supporter of democratisation or whether it succumbs to its own ambitions of power. Last but not least, the hybrid deployment of the AU and the UN in Darfur (UNAMID) should not be terminated prematurely. The political component of UNAMID continues to be important: the ability to register human rights violations and maintain access to humanitarian aid until a stable civilian government is firmly established in Khartoum.

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