

The spoilers of Darfur: Sudan's protracted political crisis and the intensifying violence in Darfur are closely connected

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The Spoilers of Darfur

Sudan's protracted political crisis and the intensifying violence in Darfur are closely connected

Gerrit Kurtz

The Juba Peace Agreement of October 2020 has not pacified conflicts in Sudan, and has instead actually created new alliances between armed groups and security forces. After decades of marginalisation, conflict entrepreneurs from the periphery are now shaping Sudan's national politics and undermining the country's potential to return to democratic transition. Insecurity in Darfur could escalate and contribute to further destabilisation of the country. International donors should pressure these conflict entrepreneurs to relinquish power. They should also prudently promote projects to foster peace in Darfur at the same time.

Sudan's political crisis continues. In July 2022, both the leader of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the leader of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, promised to hand over power to a civilian government if the political parties and social movements reached an agreement. But Sudan is still far from being able to transition to functioning, broadly popular non-military leadership. Thus, the country remains in limbo. Since the October 2021 coup, security forces rule and they have only appointed a caretaker government.

Representatives of armed groups that supported the coup are a major obstacle to ending the political crisis (see below info box "Sudan's conflict entrepreneurs"). They have become part of the government over

the course of implementing the October 2020 Juba Peace Agreement (JPA).

Their inclusion in the government has not pacified Sudan's conflicts in the peripheral regions of the country, but rather fuels them. As is often the case in Sudan, armed violence in rural regions is exceedingly worse than in the political centre that is the area in and around the capital. While around 120 people have died in Khartoum since the coup at the hand of security forces during demonstrations, around ten times as many have died in attacks and armed confrontations outside the capital during the same period – most notably in the five states of the western Darfur region.

The Sudanese government is trying to depoliticise the violence in Darfur, portraying it as purely "tribal conflicts". In reality, however, the conflicts occurring there have complex causes. The volatile



Sudan's conflict entrepreneurs

State security forces whose organisation is regulated by law:

- Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF; led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan)
- Rapid Support Forces (RSF; emerged from Darfur's Janjaweed militias; led by Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo – who is also called Hemedti)
- Police, Central Reserve Police, and the General Intelligence Service (GIS)

13 armed groups from across Sudan that are **signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement**, including:

- Justice and Equality Movement (JEM; Islamist; from Darfur; led by Sudanese Finance Minister Gebreil Ibrahim)
- Sudan Liberation Army – Minni Minawi (SLA-MM; from Darfur; led by Governor of the Darfur region Minni Minawi)
- Sudan People's Liberation Movement – North/Revolutionary (SPLM-N [Agar]; from the Blue Nile state; led by Member of the Sovereign Council Malik Agar)

Groups and ethnic/tribal militias that are **not signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement**, some based in Libya, including:

- Sudan Liberation Army – Abdel Wahid (SLA-AW; based in Jebel Marra/Darfur; led by Abdel Wahid al-Nur; most influential rebel group in Darfur)
- Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N (al-Hilu); based in the Nuba Mountains; led by Abdel Aziz al-Hilu; controls the most territory in Sudan)

Most of the signatory groups were originally part of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), but split from them in October 2021 and named themselves the FFC-National Accord (FFC-2); from August 2022 they rebranded as the National Consensus Forces. SAF leader Burhan is chairman of Sudan's governing Sovereign Council, and Hemedti describes himself as his deputy even though the constitutional document of 2019 does not include a deputy position.

political situation in Khartoum is exacerbating local tensions in the periphery, while the peace process for the conflicts in Darfur and other peripheral regions of Sudan is shifting the balance of power in Khartoum in favour of conflict entrepreneurs who are not known to be friends of democracy.

Conflict dynamics in flux

Internationally, the Darfur region is mostly known for the mass atrocities against civilians in 2003/04, which then-US Secretary of State Colin Powell described as genocide. The Janjaweed (militias armed and supported by the Sudanese government) terrorised the civilian population, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths.

The current violence in Sudan is not as intense. According to a database maintained by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), over 2,600 people have died as a result of armed vio-

lence in the five states within the Darfur region since the beginning of the Sudanese revolution in December 2018. Still, the number of internally displaced people in Sudan (largely concentrated in Darfur) increased from 2.3 to 3.2 million between 2020 and 2021.

The main parties to the conflict have also changed. By the time Omar al-Bashir was ousted in April 2019, most armed groups from Darfur had already shifted their focus to Libya, mainly by offering mercenary services to Khalifa Haftar paid for by the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In 2018, clashes between rebels (especially the SLA-AW) and security forces were responsible for most of the victims of organised violence in Darfur. Nowadays, however, clashes with and among ethnically grouped, irregular militias claim the highest number of lives, especially when members of the Arab Rizeigat are involved. The change in conflict dynamics is also reflected in the shift of geographical hotspots: there are now fewer incidents in Central Darfur (the base

of the SLA-AW) but more in South and West Darfur (see Map below).

The outbreaks of violence in Darfur follow a pattern. They are often triggered by individual disputes and criminal incidents with members of one ethnic group sometimes holding entire other groups accountable for the misconduct of just one or a few antagonists. The attacked group is often armed and fights back. State security forces hold back, intervening belatedly or even retreating because they are no match for the attackers. Such violent clashes can sometimes involve up to 3,000 fighters with vehicles on one side alone, as has been observed with the Rizeigat. Some members of the Rizeigat militia reportedly wear official RSF insignia during their attacks.

Old and new causes of conflict

The current conflict dynamics in Darfur can be traced back to both the long impact of past violence and the influences of the power struggle in Khartoum.

First, competition between groups pursuing different types of livelihoods is intensifying due to desertification and erratic rainfall. Farmers may come into conflict with nomads with livestock, as conflicts often erupt over the use of arable or pasture land and water.

Second, socioeconomic inequalities and high youth unemployment contribute to conflict. Darfur's nomadic communities have the least access to health and education, with only 9 per cent of 9 to 13-year-old girls and 17 per cent of boys of the same age attending school; compare this to the 50 per cent of internally displaced children who attend school. This remarkable finding also seems to be the result of one-sided international support that has focused on internally displaced people (IDPs).

Third, traditional conflict management mechanisms have been weakened by decades of civil war, local government reforms and the arming of ethnic militias. When marginalised groups rebelled against the government in the early 2000s, Khartoum

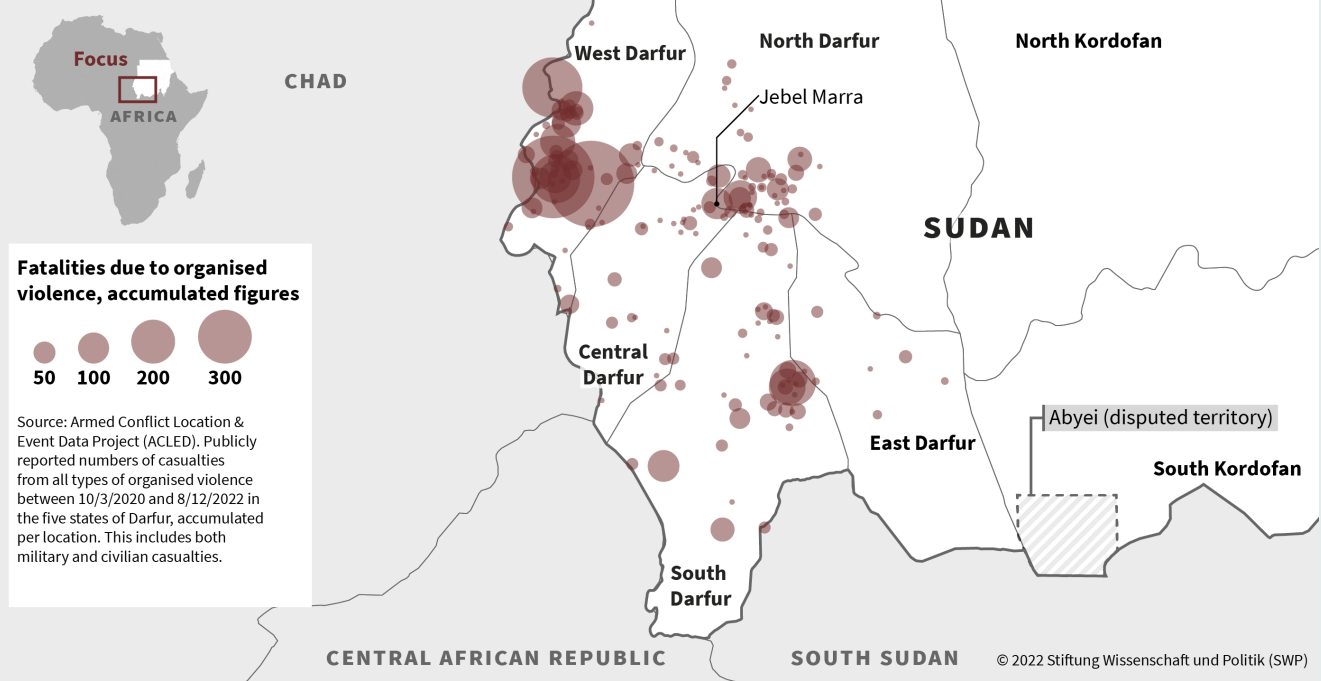
armed and supported Arab militias loyal to the government to fight the uprisings. In doing so, the Sudanese government of the time also instrumentalised the widespread notion among the Arab population that they were superior to the non-Arab population and thus the rebels. As a result of this outsourcing of counterinsurgency, formal rule-of-law mechanisms have been eroded and police forces undermined. They are often unable to solve criminal incidents and small arms are widely used in Darfur.

During the civil war, Sudan developed into a "militarised political marketplace". Armed attacks serve as a tool for political conflict entrepreneurs to make their presence felt and raise the price of their loyalty in negotiations with government representatives. The 2019 Sudanese transition and the 2021 military coup have brought a new dynamic to this marketplace. Both (Arab) nomadic tribes and (non-Arab) displaced groups in Darfur felt empowered by the new arrangement in Khartoum. The former counted on support from the rise of Hemedti, who himself belongs to a Rizeigat tribe; and IDPs' hopes grew that they would benefit from a peace process that would, among other things, allow them to permanently return to their fields. However, returning IDPs now often come into conflict with the current users of the land.

The violence in Darfur is exacerbated by rivalries between armed movements seeking to gain greater influence in Khartoum. Some Arab groups feel set back by the recruitment of non-Arab RSF members and Hemedti's alliance with the signatories of the JPA. Their desire for attention and patronage manifests itself in recurrent attacks on villages and IDP camps. They succeed with such efforts. Hemedti spent more than a month in the summer of 2022 in West Darfur attending tribal reconciliation conferences and building alliances with local elites.

Meanwhile, tribal self-defence units, such as that of the Masalit in West Darfur, are increasingly organising themselves. They are often well-armed and sometimes able to inflict heavy losses on attacking Rizeigat militias.

Hotspots of organised violence in Darfur since the signing of the JPA



Hemedti himself blames Islamist forces loyal to the old Bashir government for the outbreaks of violence in Darfur as they strive to tie down his RSF forces in the periphery. The exact role of the Islamists remains unclear, but it is clear that they have gained momentum in the shadow of the coup. Their representatives are back in the civil service and Bashir’s former foreign minister Ali Karti was recently appointed secretary-general of the Sudanese Islamic Movement. The Movement continues to wield influence in the SAF, which Islamists see as a competitor to Hemedti’s more difficult-to-control RSF.

Peace agreement with weaknesses

The current violence in Darfur also reveals the weaknesses of the JPA and its implementation. These exacerbate Sudan’s political crisis.

The main armed groups (including JEM, SLA-MM and SPLM-N; see above info box “Sudan’s conflict entrepreneurs”) showed solidarity with the civilian actors even

before the JPA, with whom they signed the Declaration for Freedom and Change in January 2019 – which is the founding document of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). However, over the course of the revolution these armed groups were marginalised. It was ultimately the non-violent methods of civil society that brought down Bashir and renewed military rule, not the decades of rebels’ armed struggle. For the FFC representatives, the installation of a civilian-led transitional government was the top priority. They did not want to delay this with peace negotiations, and therefore they tasked the transitional government with these negotiations instead.

Peace negotiations began in October 2019 in Juba with South Sudan as the mediator. The civilian components of the transitional government left the talks predominantly to representatives of the security agencies. The outcome, which was solemnly signed in October 2020, has so far mainly served to provide the signatory actors opportunities to enrich themselves and access government positions. It has hardly contributed to the pacification of the

region. For at the time of the signing, the parties involved hardly had any troops of their own left in Darfur or other parts of Sudan (with the exception of the Blue Nile state in the South). At the same time, those actors who played the most important roles in conflicts in Darfur were not adequately represented. Hemedti himself could not speak for all Arab groups, and neither IDPs, women nor young people were sufficiently included. One of the most influential groups in Darfur, the SLA-AW, rejected the talks.

Of the many promises that the JPA made to marginalised segments of the Sudanese periphery, hardly any were fulfilled. It was already clear at the time of signing that the government would need to rely on international donors to implement the agreement. However, these donors showed little willingness to provide substantial support to a peace agreement that they had hardly been involved in drafting. Anyways, the JPA had left the clarification of many details to implementation commissions.

The agreement does not specify how many fighters are to be demobilised or integrated into state security forces. The government has not yet appointed a demobilisation commission for Darfur. Contrary to the expectations of the armed groups, Hemedti made it clear that he only wanted to integrate a small part of Darfur's fighters into the RSF.

The JPA provides for the formation of a joint protection force numbering 20,000 soldiers, half of whom would come from government troops and the other half from armed movements. This force was a key argument used by the transitional government to justify its push for the UN-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) to withdraw from the region after its mandate expired at the end of 2020.

However, with considerable delay, the government only just reported the completion of training for the first 2,000 members of the joint protection force in the end of June 2022. Moreover, it is unclear why this force should be better able to protect the civilian population from violence than the individual units that are to be absorbed

into it. After the withdrawal of UNAMID however, the prospect of a renewed international peacekeeping mission is extremely slim. Therefore, only Sudanese units can make up a protection force.

Even the Permanent Ceasefire Commission, which was established with the JPA, can only make a modest contribution to the implementation of the JPA. The United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) chairs the Commission and its sectoral sub-units, which consist of representatives of the signatories to the JPA. The Commission supports the demobilisation or training of members of the armed groups and can investigate violations of the ceasefire at the request of one of the parties. However, those involved in today's conflicts often do not belong to one of the signatory groups.

New players in Khartoum

The dynamics of conflict in Darfur are also having a significant impact on Sudan's national politics. Hemedti's rise to become the country's most important political actor is shaking the traditional foundations of Khartoum politics. Darfur serves as a source of income, a recruitment pool for the RSF and a base for Hemedti's political ambitions at the national level.

Hemedti thereby operates on both the demand and supply side of security in Darfur. Although major acts of violence are a challenge to his authority, they allow the RSF leader to present himself as a peacemaker at tribal reconciliation conferences. However, the agreements reached at these conferences do not address the roots of the conflicts. His own RSF's attacks on villages and IDP camps usually go unpunished, creating a climate of impunity. An example of this can be seen in allegations that the chairman of the Peace and Reconciliation Committee and commander of the RSF in West Darfur, Mousa Ambeilo, led an attack against civilian populations in late 2019.

The Juba peace process also allowed Hemedti to forge alliances with his former

opponents. Like the rebels, he did not trust the Sudanese armed forces under Burhan's leadership. He resisted attempts to integrate the RSF into the regular army. Through cooperation with armed groups, Hemedti was able to build a "counterweight to the transition at the centre" and thus to the sphere of influence of the SAF and the civilian parties of the FFC.

In fact, the Juba peace process undermined democratisation from the beginning. The transitional government assured the armed groups that a transitional parliament would not be convened so long as peace negotiations were ongoing. Even after the Juba Peace Agreement was signed, differences within the FFC blocked the formation of the transitional parliament, which could have formed a counterpart to the security sector and thus a safeguard against military takeover. The JPA gave the militias important government positions, and the influence they were able to exert therefrom spanned far beyond their actual political significance. For example, Gebreil Ibrahim, the leader of JEM, became Sudan's Minister of Finance, and Minni Minawi, leader of the SLA-MM, became Governor of the Darfur region. The SLA-MM had not fought against the armed forces in Sudan since 2014, JEM since 2015.

As members of armed groups became members of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok's cabinet in February 2021, the FFC parties also insisted on assuming government posts for which they had previously only nominated experts. However, the "political cabinet" entered into an increasingly open conflict with the representatives of the security sector. Here, representatives of the armed groups acted as allies of the military. They expanded the military's political base to include signatories of the Declaration for Freedom and Change and thus the original opposition to the Bashir regime. In early October 2021, 16 armed groups, led by JEM and SLA-MM, split from the FFC forming the "FFC National Accord" or FFC-2. Shortly afterwards, they organised a sit-in in Khartoum and demanded that the other FFC parties leave the government.

Consequently, the armed groups included the only non-military ministers and representatives in the Sovereign Council who retained their positions after the coup of 25 October 2021.

Finally, in the spring and summer of 2022, the FFC-2 representatives hampered the facilitation of the of AU-UNITAMS-IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) Trilateral Mechanism. They insisted on an "inclusive" round that included Islamist representatives (and themselves), while the remaining representatives of the groups now called the FFC-Central Committee, or FFC-1, rejected the participation of "pro-coup parties". The conflict between the FFC-1 and FFC-2 provided the military with the pretext to blame the "civilian" camp for the political crisis.

Current security risks

The rise of conflict entrepreneurs from Darfur and the lack of implementation of the JPA pose significant risks to security and stability in the region. After all, there are consequences if the state does not have the monopoly on the use of force. Stronger self-defence groups could develop into rebel groups – as they did 20 years ago – and conflicts between farmers and nomadic Rizeigat could escalate further.

Thousands of fighters from the signatory groups who have returned from Libya pose a risk to the population in Darfur as they often turn to criminal activities. At the same time, JPA signatories recruited new members en masse in Darfur to strengthen their following. One signatory group alone claimed to have already recruited 11,000 new fighters in the region. However, the groups have little to offer the recruits other than the tenuous promise of future posts in the state security forces.

Tensions are also arising from the possibly divided loyalties of the security forces in Darfur, which are officially under the high command of Governor of Darfur Minni Minawi, whose SLA-MM creates insecurity at the same time.

Moreover, the armed groups may lack credibility in the eyes of their members and supporters due to their involvement in the coup in Khartoum. The first members of the signatory groups have already turned their backs on their leaders and are now walking their own paths.

In addition, the SLA-AW under Abdel Wahid al-Nur is gaining popularity, as his notorious refusal to negotiate provides him with an image of trustworthiness. However, an attempt by the Sudanese Communist Party to persuade him to form a political alliance failed. The ceasefire between SLA-AW and SAF is currently holding.

Historically, albeit with few exceptions, conflicts of the periphery have rarely directly affected the population in Sudan's centre. With the presence of the leaders of the Darfur groups and some of their fighters in Khartoum, this could change. Crime is also said to have increased in the capital – in part due to triple-digit inflation and the growing supply crisis. The greatest potential for escalation would be a direct military confrontation between the SAF and RSF. Even if this is unlikely at present, the question remains how long their leaders will manage to keep the fighting between these rival security forces confined to Darfur. Violent conflict between and with their respective allied militias such as the Tamazuj, a signatory group said to have links to military intelligence, would also be possible. Indeed, in late July 2022, Hemedti blamed the Tamazuj for recent attacks in Darfur.

For Sudan's neighbouring states, there is a risk that armed groups will continue to retreat to their border regions or directly join parties to the conflict there. This applies particularly to Libya, where some Sudanese fighters are still present, but also to South Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR).

Entry points for international peacebuilding

The international community should not wait until there is a new country-wide transition process in place to address the conflicts in Darfur. Rivalries between conflict entrepreneurs jostling for influence and access to patronage and resources will continue.

The UN is right to call on international donors to support peace projects in Darfur. Effective programmes at the local level may be able to reduce some of the security risks. After all, Darfur is also an arena for the power struggle in the centre of the country.

Germany can promote these efforts as the largest donor to the UN Peacebuilding Fund, and it can also provide direct assistance to local civil society organisations where possible.

Effective peacebuilding requires a comprehensive and conflict-sensitive approach that addresses the needs of all groups, including nomadic pastoralists and settled or displaced farmers. Members of signatory groups who were recruited after the conclusion of the JPA should not receive greater benefits than those afforded to members of other groups, including informal ones. When it comes to peacebuilding measures, the conflict hotspots in Darfur should be prioritised. Conceivable activities include supporting community programmes for vocational training, nurturing basic services in the fields of education and health, and strengthening local conflict management committees. The latter should prioritise the inclusion of young people and women, not only tribal elders – as was the case with the agreements brokered by Hemedti.

The short-term goal of these measures should be to prevent the escalation of interpersonal disputes into larger conflicts that lead to the deaths of dozens or even hundreds. As long as the establishment of reliable and legitimate state structures and basic services remains a distant goal, the main focus – within the framework of humanitarian aid – should be to strengthen individual resilience.

More intensive peacebuilding efforts on the part of the EU and Germany should go hand in hand with deeper diplomatic engagement. Their pressure should not just focus on the military, but also on the armed movements that support the coup. Even if it may not be feasible to exclude them from power completely (partly because of their post-JPA recruitment), leaders of the National Consensus Forces should demonstrate their readiness to nominate experts for a new cabinet instead of vehemently holding on to their ministerial positions by threat of renewed war. After all, they are demanding that the FFC-1 member groups agree to a so-called technocratic transitional government as well. The Europeans and their transatlantic partners retain some leverage through the continued suspension of bilateral and multilateral financial assistance, amounting to several billion Euro, which clearly irritates the junta. Instead of generically calling for all political actors to find common ground, Sudan's international interlocutors should highlight the role that Darfur's conflict entrepreneurs are playing in standing in the way of the country's democratic progress.

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