

Power relations in Sudan after the fall of Bashir: from revolution to war

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SWP Research Paper

Gerrit Kurtz

Power Relations in Sudan after the Fall of Bashir

From Revolution to War



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- War has raged in Sudan since April 2023 following fundamental changes in the political balance of power in recent years. The previously dominant security sector is deeply divided and the once weakly organised civil society has mobilised.
- Competition within the security sector made it possible to form a civil-military transitional government. Yet the continued rise to power of the Rapid Support Forces increased the risk of armed conflict, especially after the coup in 2021.
- Since Bashir's fall in 2019, the security forces have twice tried in vain to establish sole military rule. The civil-military transitional government also failed because the military still had considerable power resources at its disposal. Sudan's political elite contributed to this outcome by paying too little attention to the establishment of transitional institutions and too much attention to its own visibility.
- International actors who wanted to strengthen Sudan's transition process could have repelled the security forces more decisively instead of reflexively accepting them. Many international as well as Sudanese efforts suffered from the fact that they viewed the inclusion or exclusion of the security forces as a binary issue.
- A new non-inclusive, elitist deal with Sudan's violent entrepreneurs will not bring peace if there are no civilian forces at the table. Instead, Sudan's best chance lies in the social capital of its citizens' voluntary commitment to humanitarian aid, democracy and local reconciliation.

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Table of Contents

5	Issues and Recommendations
7	Starting Point
	Collapse and legacy of NCP rule
9	The transition as an opportunity for transformation
11	Power Resources and Challenges for the Key Players
12	Loss of trust in political parties
13	Non-violent resistance
14	Division of the security forces
16	Opportunistic leaders of armed groups
17	Interim conclusion
18	Failure of the Civil-military Transition
18	Partnership instead of distance from the security sector
20	Zero-sum policy and lack of civilian institutionalisation
23	Failure of the Military Coup
23	Transactional patterns of action no longer work
24	Rise of the RSF to the political centre of Sudan and tensions in the security sector
26	Sudan's Renewed War and Its Consequences
26	Outbreak of war due to an escalation spiral
27	Conflict dynamics between civil war and mass atrocities
28	Prospects for a future political order after the war
30	Accommodation instead of Accountability: Discussing the International Approach to Sudan
32	Conclusions and Recommendations
34	Abbreviations

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Power Relations in Sudan after the Fall of Bashir. From Revolution to War

The outbreak of war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on 15 April 2023 plunged Sudan into a deep crisis. Within a short space of time, millions of people have been displaced, Sudan's infrastructure and economy have been destroyed, and society has become increasingly polarised and militarised. Sudan's capital has become a battlefield, and a de facto division of the territory between the warring parties seems possible. Massacres are being carried out in Darfur and targeted violence is being used against ethnic groups.

Germany was one of the most important supporters of the transition in Sudan. It invested considerable diplomatic and financial capital in its success. But the outbreak of war caught the German government off guard, just like many of its partners. It evacuated hundreds of Germans and other foreign citizens. Since then, Germany has been searching in vain for an effective way to deal with a war that has led to the largest displacement crisis in the world.

The considerable mobilisation of Sudan's non-violent protest movement and the negotiated transitional constitution in 2019 seemed promising. In principle, the involvement of parts of the (security) elite of the former regime increased the chances of successful democratisation, even if this power-sharing arrangement met harsh criticism from civil society. A well-organised civil society exerted pressure on the civil-military transitional government to actually implement the goals of the transition. Civilian politicians in the transitional government were able to draw on this pressure during negotiations as soon as the security apparatus made any attempt to block the transition.

Nevertheless, the transition process failed when the military staged a coup in October 2021. Given the many coups in Sudan's history, most recently to overthrow Bashir, it was not surprising that the military seized all power once again. However, unlike previous forced endings of civilian governance in Sudan and transition processes in the region, the security forces failed to form a stable coup government. Instead, they began negotiations to form a civilian government, and those arrangements were about to be finalised in

April 2023. It was also unusual that the war broke out within the security sector, between two security forces of almost equal military strength, albeit with complementary capabilities. Fighting broke out in the centre of the repressive apparatus, not on its periphery and not between it and the democracy movement. The war between the SAF and RSF thus also symbolises fundamental changes in Sudan's political system.

This study analyses how these shifts in political power came about and culminated in a war that calls into question Sudan's social, political and economic integrity. The analysis focuses on the power resources of the main groups and their negotiation behaviour after the fall of Bashir in April 2019. However, the roots of these changes go back to the pre-Bashir era, when the Sudanese government began outsourcing to ethnic militias the fight against insurgencies by armed groups in the marginalised periphery. Civilian opposition groups, for their part, have been practising non-violent resistance techniques and organising themselves at grassroots level for more than a decade. With the removal of Bashir from power and the formation of a transitional government in August 2019, these and other longer-term developments crystallized.

The violent escalation of tensions between the SAF and RSF was the result of two failed processes: the democratic transition process and the coup that followed it. During the first, the democratic political actors failed to maintain their cohesion and to substantially reduce the power of the security sector. The transitional government under Prime Minister Hamdok sought to deepen its partnership with the security forces but was unable to gain their full support or that of the democratic protest movement. Instead of institutionally securing the terrain for civilian politics, the political parties pursued a zero-sum policy, both among themselves and increasingly towards the military. The security forces then failed to consolidate their rule after removing civilian members from the government. Thus from the summer of 2022 onwards the security forces agreed to cede power to a civilian government, since there was no united political force that wanted to serve as stooge for a military government. This was thanks to the ongoing mobilisation of civil society as well as international pressure. In addition, the coup deepened differences between the SAF and the RSF, who relied on different political partners, and who in turn regarded each other as their main opponents: the SAF relied on the Islamist loyalists of the Bashir regime,

while the RSF adopted a democratic rhetoric to win over important political parties (which nevertheless endeavoured to remain independent).

The fact that, after Ethiopia, another transition process in the region ended in massive violence should give international actors cause to reconsider their approach to promoting such transitions. Responsibility for the war lies with the parties involved in the conflict, but Sudan's international supporters and its political elite could have done more to defuse the situation that created this escalation. They could have provided stronger incentives for establishing democratic institutions and exerted more pressure on the security forces to use some of their economic and financial resources – including those abroad – for public services.

In order to advance transition processes such as that of Sudan more effectively, a modified international approach should be applied which also provides orientation for peace talks. Throughout Sudan's history non-inclusive agreements have repeatedly created a breeding ground for violence. A renewed power-sharing agreement that grants the security forces a role in politics would likely perpetuate this history of violence. Instead, international actors should: curb the international financial and support networks of the security forces as far as possible; provide more flexible support to civil society actors; and, in a future transition process, place greater emphasis on institutionalising democracy-promoting changes at both national and local levels. Comprehensive security sector reform should be at the centre of a potential post-war order in Sudan.

Starting Point

On 11 April 2019, the rule of Omar al-Bashir came to an end when his own security forces ousted him.¹ Since 30 June 1989 Bashir had been the head of an authoritarian state, supported by the National Congress Party (NCP) as part of an Islamist movement. In the end, his system of rule failed due to its own contradictions. The conditions that led to Bashir's fall and the end of the NCP government continued to have an impact and later made it difficult for its former elements to regain power.²

Collapse and legacy of NCP rule

The NCP regime was never able to build on a broad base in society, but rather had to stabilise itself through other mechanisms. These included violent repression; buying the loyalty of opposition parties and parts of the population; and international support. Its relative prosperity lasted during the oil boom from 1999 until the secession of South Sudan in 2011. With the peaceful secession of the south in July 2011, Sudan lost 70 per cent of its state revenue, since most of the oil wells are in the south. Increasing gold production could not compensate for this slump, which the government tried to offset for a while by monetising the resulting budget deficit, i.e. the central bank massively increasing the amount of money in circu-

lation.³ However, this strategy drove prices up, and people onto the streets, even before 2018.

The NCP regime's capacity for repression dwindled as both the Islamist movement and the security forces fell apart for different reasons. Dissatisfied with the secession of South Sudan and the lack of Islamist rule consolidation, leading members turned away from the movement and founded their own Islamist parties.⁴

Bashir lost control of the security sector. Members of the SAF sided with the protesters in 2019, as did the offspring of high-ranking SAF generals. The SAF, the national intelligence service and the paramilitary joined forces against Bashir to prevent an open confrontation between parts of the security forces, which would have jeopardised their respective political and economic privileges. Last but not least, the violent repression alienated important sections of the Sudanese business elite, who saw their long-term interests jeopardised by the threat of instability, and who also had sons and daughters in the democracy movement.⁵

Finally, Bashir could no longer rely on international support. He tried to balance the two blocs in the Arab world at the time – Qatar on the one hand and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia on the other – but was ultimately too dependent on financial support from the latter two. The UAE and Saudi Arabia were disappointed because Bashir had remained

1 The study is based on research trips to Khartoum in December 2019 and March/April 2022, telephone interviews and consultations since 2019, the assessment of statements and documents by the actors involved, and relevant secondary literature.

2 When people in Sudan talk about “members of the Bashir regime” they are referring to various elements: members of the National Congress Party (formerly the National Islamic Front, NIF), the now banned ruling party; but sometimes also members of the Sudanese Islamic Movement or any sympathisers and former employees of government organisations. Other common names are *al-Ingaz* or National Salvation Regime (as the coup government called itself in 1989) and *Kizan* (literally “cup”, as NIF leader Hassan al-Turabi called his followers).

3 Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa. Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2015), 69ff. Between 2015 and 2019, the money supply increased by 736 per cent. Central Bank of Sudan, *Economic & Financial Statistics Review* 60 (October-December 2019): 4, <https://cbos.gov.sd/en/content/4th-quarter-2019> (accessed 29 February 2024).

4 Atta Elbattahani, “Sudan: Transition to Democracy after 2011, a Dismembered State Navigating Uncertainties,” in *Democratic Transitions in the Arab World*, ed. Ibrahim Elbadawi and Samir Makdisi (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 269–304.

5 John Young, *Sudan Uprising. Popular Struggles, Elite Compromises, and Revolution Betrayed*, Human Security Baseline Assessment for Sudan and South Sudan (Geneva, June 2020).

Overview of important events since December 2018

December 2018	Protests against rising bread prices begin in Ed-Damazin in the south and shortly afterwards in Atbara in the north.	10 February 2021	Formation of the second, “political” cabinet with leaders of the armed groups and the FFC.
1 January 2019	Declaration of Freedom and Change, founding the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC).	25 October 2021	Military coup. Burhan declares a state of emergency and has ministers arrested.
6 April 2019	Start of the sit-in organised by professional associations in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum.	21 November 2021	Political Declaration signed between Burhan and Hamdok, who returns to office.
11 April 2019	Security forces oust President Omar al-Bashir. The following day, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan becomes Chairman of the Transitional Military Council.	2 January 2022	After Hamdok fails to form a government, he resigns.
3 June 2019	Security forces destroy the protest camp in Khartoum, killing over 120 people.	9 January 2022	UNITAMS begins consultations to resolve the political crisis.
30 June 2019	Large demonstrations throughout the country, organised by resistance committees and professional associations, despite the internet ban.	4 July 2022	Burhan announces that the SAF will stay out of the negotiations and clear the way for a civilian government.
17 August 2019	Ceremonial signing of the transitional constitution between the military and the FFC. On 21 August, former UN official Abdalla Hamdok becomes Prime Minister.	5 December 2022	The security forces, the FFC and other civilian organisations sign a framework agreement that provides for the formation of a purely civilian government. The five outstanding issues include security sector reform.
3 October 2020	Signing of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) between the government and armed groups. Only the SAF and the RSF sign for the government.	26 March 2023	Draft of the final agreement on the formation of a civilian government.
31 December 2020	UN-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) ends. On 1 January 2021, the political mission UNITAMS takes over to support the transition and JPA implementation.	15 April 2023	In the morning, fierce fighting begins between the SAF and the RSF in Khartoum.

neutral in the Qatar crisis in the Gulf from 2017, and had not separated himself from the Islamists in his government. They therefore decided to stop payments to Bashir since they saw him as unreliable.⁶

Even without Bashir, the patronage system of “empowerment” (*Tamkeen*) that he and his ruling elite had created remained in place. The system meant that the ministries were full of unqualified people, while the intelligence service exercised the actual power of government. The security sector controlled a large part

of the economy.⁷ After decades of US economic sanctions, its productive forces lay largely idle. For years, the state had squeezed out the peripheries and rural areas with the help of militias and security forces. Women were discriminated against by law and their personal freedom of movement and action was restricted. Although Sudan had endeavoured to forge closer ties with the Gulf states and, more recently, with Western countries, the country had hardly any robust foreign policy partnerships.

⁶ Jean-Baptiste Gallopin, “The Great Game of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sudan”, in *Africa and the Middle East: Beyond the Divides*, The Project on Middle East Political Science Studies, no. 40 (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, Institute for Middle East Studies, June 2020), 25 – 30.

⁷ Anette Hoffmann and Guido Lanfranchi, *Kleptocracy versus Democracy. How Security-business Networks Hold Hostage Sudan’s Private Sector and the Democratic Transition*, CRU Report (The Hague: Clingendael, October 2023).

The transition as an opportunity for transformation

Bashir's fall was also an opportunity for a more profound change in the militarised political system that he had decisively shaped. Research on regime change shows that non-violent movements have a greater chance of success than violent uprisings.⁸ However, "success" here means achieving the overthrow of a government, not necessarily lasting democratisation. Research on democratic transitions has long emphasised that the participation of forces from the former regime in terms of a negotiated transition offers the best prospects for a peaceful change of political regime.⁹

If a negotiated transition is to be successful, domestic and foreign policy pressure on the transitional government must remain significant.

Such "negotiated revolutions" often follow when systems of government centred on an individual ruler collapse. Other favourable factors include: division of the security sector and, in some cases, support for change from parts of the security apparatus; the rejection of violence by the reforming forces, combined with explicit support for non-violence; openness towards liberal international actors; and a rather weak state.¹⁰ These transition processes are often based on negotiations between reformers of the old system and moderate opposition forces. It is important that the internal and external pressure on the forces of the former regime remains even after the transition has begun, so that they submit to a further loss of power when strengthening the rule of law, increasing public participation and opening the economy. Non-violent transitions are more likely to lead to democracy if they involve protest movements even after the change, or if the latter actively demand

participation, and if the civilian political elite pursues moderate goals and is willing to compromise.¹¹

In the case of Sudan, it was a combination of four factors that favoured the negotiated transition.¹² Firstly, there was the ongoing mobilisation of a broad social movement throughout the country, driven primarily by young people. The first protests began in December 2018 in the periphery, namely in Atbara in the north and Ed-Damazin in the south, before they reached Khartoum. This movement was resilient even in the face of fierce repression. A turning point was the "Million March" on 30 June 2019, in which hundreds of thousands took to the streets despite internet and telephone blackouts after the security forces violently dispersed the central protest camp in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum on 3 June. The security forces could only have suppressed this movement with sustained and ruthless armed violence.

This option was not open to them because they were divided – and this was the second decisive factor. It remained attractive for parts of the security forces to present themselves as the true representatives of the revolution and to court the population's favour. Massive use of force against the civilian population would have deepened this rift between the security forces and therefore increased the risk of an armed conflict in the security sector, since one force might have sided with civil society, even if only rhetorically.

Thirdly, opponents of the security sector were still well organised, at least at the beginning of 2019. With the Declaration of Freedom and Change on 1 January 2019, a common civil front was formed that included political parties, trade unions, grassroots movements and armed groups – the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). In the form of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), there was an organisation that could act as a transmission belt within the FFC between the old guard of the political parties¹³ and the young activists on the street. The SPA and FFC were able to negotiate on behalf of the

⁸ Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works. The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

⁹ Gary A. Stradiotto and Sujian Guo, "Transitional Modes of Democratisation and Democratic Outcomes," *International Journal on World Peace* 27, no. 4 (2010): 5–40.

¹⁰ George Lawson, "Revolution, Nonviolence, and the Arab Uprisings," *Mobilisation* 20, no. 4 (2015): 453–70 (465).

¹¹ Jonathan C. Pinckney, *From Dissent to Democracy. The Promise and Perils of Civil Resistance Transitions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹² See Sharan Grewal, "Why Sudan Succeeded Where Algeria Failed," *Journal of Democracy* 32, no. 4 (2021): 102–14.

¹³ Political parties were generally permitted in Sudan but suffered considerably from repression and co-option by the NCP regime. Some parties contested (unfree) elections and provided individual representatives in the (undemocratic) parliament.

democracy movement, resulting in the transitional constitution of 17 August 2019.

Finally, the regional and international players that had influence in Sudan were relatively united at the beginning of the transition process. Although Arab powers provided the military with a generous financial injection of three billion US dollars shortly after the fall of Bashir,¹⁴ they advocated negotiations between the democracy movement and the military after the massacre on 3 June 2019 because they feared massive instability in Sudan. The USA, the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) also supported the democratic transition process, not least because its key players in Sudan's civilian political scene were liberal in the broader sense. They explicitly opposed the social oppression by the Islamist Bashir regime, with its dress code for women, backward-looking Sharia legislation, and morality police.

14 By the end of 2019, Sudan had received US\$500 million in cash injections from the central bank and US\$1 billion worth of in-kind support (including fuel and wheat). "Sudan Has Received Half the \$3 Billion Promised by Saudi Arabia and UAE", *Reuters*, 8 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-emirates-saudi-idUSKBN1WN137> (accessed 13 October 2023).

Power Resources and Challenges for the Key Players

Put simply, every transition process is characterised by a tug-of-war between the forces of (progressive) change and the forces of inertia of the *ancien régime*. In fact, the most important players in a transition often pull in more than two directions, as was the case in Sudan. All actors bring different power resources to bear, which they have at their disposal based on their organisation and basic orientation. Such resources relate to four fundamental fields of political conflict in every state: security, economy, legitimacy and international relations. The distribution of these power resources forms the structural framework within which the political competition of a transition process takes place. Factors such as the political actors' technical expertise, experience and organisational skills in relation to the other actors, as well as their willingness to enter into coalitions and make compromises, play a role in determining their power to act.¹⁵

The change in power relations is constitutive for a transition process after decades of authoritarian rule. In contrast to stable authoritarian or democratic regimes, there is considerable uncertainty about which “rules of the game” still apply in the political arena, and therefore also about who can deploy resources and how.¹⁶ The fall of Bashir and the inability of the military to govern alone in the face of ongoing protests shook up political relations in Sudan.

In the competition between these forces, the decisive factor is “who can learn more quickly and put

that learning to better effect”.¹⁷ The actors involved interpret every measure or political statement as a move in a game that defines the power of the individual players. This game means that the respective players are always trying to expand their room for manoeuvre, but never know exactly how far they can go without arriving at a breaking point. It is true that the fluidity of a transition process offers the opportunity for more far-reaching changes to the political system than usual. But too rapid a change also renders a relapse into authoritarianism more likely because the democratic forces are not yet secure, and their ideas are not yet sufficiently institutionally anchored. If change is too cautious or too slow, there is also a risk that the same or new elites will use the state's exploitative institutions for their own ends (“state capture”)¹⁸ or that renewed waves of protest by a mobilised civil society will bring about a revolution. Only very few transition processes manage to balance these two forces to bring about truly sustainable change towards a stable liberal democracy.¹⁹

Both the power resources and the dynamics that arise from the ways in which the most important actors learn and adapt their behaviour as well as the strategies they pursue are therefore central to the outcome of transition processes. After the fall of Bashir, these central groups of actors were primarily the political parties, the civil society, the security forces, and armed groups. Economic elites and members of the former regime also played a background role, but their individual input is difficult to discern.

¹⁵ The focus here is on the agency of the central political actors in contrast to strongly structurally based approaches; see Roger Mac Ginty, “Key Concepts in Political Transitions”, in *The Elgar Companion to Post-Conflict Transition*, ed. Hans-Joachim Giessmann et al. (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2018), 10–24.

¹⁶ Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule. Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 5.

¹⁷ Michele Dunne, “Fear and Learning in the Arab Uprisings,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): 182–92 (191).

¹⁸ Christine Cheng et al., *Synthesis Paper: Securing and Sustaining Elite Bargains that Reduce Violent Conflict*, Elite Bargains and Political Deals Project (London: Stabilisation Unit, April 2018).

¹⁹ Mac Ginty, “Key Concepts in Political Transitions” (see note 15).

Loss of trust in political parties

Political parties play a decisive role in the transition process from an autocratic to a democratic system. With their personnel and programmes, they form an alternative to the previous ruling party as well as a transmission belt to the social movement that initiated the transition process. Nevertheless, they themselves are weakened by authoritarian rule. They lack experience of government, have only limited support among the population and may be trapped in a zero-sum understanding of politics, which makes cooperation difficult. These problems are all apparent in Sudan.

The zero-sum approach of the political parties exacerbated the polarisation of civil society.

Sudan has a diverse spectrum of political parties. These include the two “traditional” parties and their spin-offs, the National Umma Party (NUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Both emerged from links between Islamic religious orders and the emerging merchant class, which date back to the British colonial era.²⁰ In addition, there used to be the “modern” parties on the respective fringes of the political spectrum: the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) and the National Islamic Front (NIF, later the National Congress Party, NCP) with their respective offshoots. The NCP was banned after President Bashir’s overthrow. Finally, there are a number of smaller but nevertheless influential parties that have emerged from university politics (such as the Sudanese Congress Party) or pan-Arab connections (Baath Party).

The political parties are suffering from a considerable loss of trust among the population and especially in the non-violent resistance movement. Activists accuse them of repeatedly co-operating with the military and military governments. Co-option has happened for a long time. All phases of civilian rule were ended by coups in which the military co-operated with individual political parties: the NUP (1958), the SCP (1969) and the NIF (1989) all found it opportune to ally with the military against their domestic politi-

cal opponents.²¹ The zero-sum mentality of many political leaders encouraged polarisation and led to them being primarily concerned with their political survival and elites behaving “like dictatorships” when they eventually came to power.²² Furthermore, political leaders emerged from a narrow social class that suffered less from the consequences of their mistakes than the population as a whole.²³

One difficulty for cooperation between the political parties during the 2019–2021 transitional government was that it was completely unclear how much support individual parties had among the population. There were no opinion polls. Population and economic data were mostly outdated or incomplete. The last democratic elections had taken place in 1986,²⁴ when the majority of today’s population had not even been born. At that time, the NUP had received the most votes. Under NIF/NCP rule, the NUP was also considered the most important opposition party. In the opposition coalitions against Bashir, the NUP was therefore dissatisfied when it was represented in the respective decision-making bodies on a par with small cadre parties such as the Baath Party, “who had never made it into an elected parliament”.²⁵

Leading representatives of the political parties spoke openly about their structural weaknesses, their lack of experience and inadequate political training. “We were not prepared when Bashir was toppled. We did not expect the change so quickly,” said an NUP representative.²⁶ A member of the politburo of the Sudanese Congress Party said that political parties were not mature, but also that they would not be-

²⁰ Magdi el-Gizouli and Edward Thomas, *The Price of Life. Revolutionary Agency and Political Impasse in Post-Bashir Sudan*, XCEPT Research Paper (Rift Valley Institute, February 2023), 11.

²¹ Salah Ben Hammou, “The Varieties of Civilian Praetorianism: Evidence from Sudan’s Coup Politics”, *Armed Forces & Society* (online), 28 February 2023, doi: 10.1177/0095327X231155667.

²² Nada Ali, *Stubborn Historical Legacies. Power Relations and Government Policy in Sudan*, ERF Working Paper, no. 1551 (Dokki [Giza]: The Economic Research Forum [ERF], May 2022), 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8f.

²⁴ Although the NCP regime held regular elections, many opposition parties boycotted them because the government used state resources for itself and suppressed free organisations.

²⁵ El-Gizouli and Thomas, *The Price of Life* (see note 20), 16.

²⁶ Interview with a leader of the National Umma Party, Khartoum, 30 March 2022.

come more mature unless they were part of the government.²⁷

Nevertheless, the political parties contributed power resources that other actors did not (at that time) have at their disposal in this way. The respective party leaderships were contacts for national and international consultations. The parties also had a certain degree of political organisation, which enabled them to take part in elections and negotiations. Finally, they possessed political and tactical expertise, which they brought to bear in negotiations with other stakeholders, particularly the military.

Non-violent resistance

Sudan has a long tradition of non-violent protests. In 1964, 1985 and 2019, non-violent protest movements led to the overthrow of military governments. Civil resistance emerged in a context of extreme authoritarian repression under the NCP regime. The latter banned trade unions and professional organisations, which had played leading roles in the earlier uprisings together with the universities, and established trade unions loyal to the regime. The National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) established a dense surveillance network that made it difficult for democratically oriented actors to organise effectively. Fragmentation and co-optation therefore posed considerable challenges for civilian actors. Although protests against the NCP regime flared up time and again, for example inspired by the successes in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 or against rising prices in 2013, there was a lack of organisation “capable of leading, and giving direction to the protests”.²⁸ In the face of armed violence, arrests and infiltration attempts, the opposition had to be resilient.

Initially, the SPA played an important mediating role between the protest movement and the political parties.

The relationship between the democracy movement, often known simply as “the street” in Sudan, and the political elite is crucial for any chance of successful civil resistance.²⁹ The Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an association of unofficial trade unions and professional organisations founded in July 2018, played a central role in this. When anger against the NCP government spread across the country in December 2018 due to the increase in bread prices, the SPA capitalised on it. The situation provided the sought-after link between the protesting masses and the existing elitist parties.

One lesson learnt from previous protests and the experiences of the Arab Spring was to form as broad a coalition as possible.³⁰ It was hoped that this would make it more difficult for the authorities to break up the protest. The SPA therefore drew up a declaration of principles that was endorsed by all relevant opposition forces in the country. The explicit aim of this declaration in favour of freedom and change was to create “political backing” for the protesters.³¹

This broad mobilisation is primarily a success of the decentralised, informal associations, the Local Resistance Committees. They began around 2013 and have become particularly widespread in the course of the protests since December 2018, which is why some have labelled them the “main innovation of the December Revolution”.³² Young people in particular can be found in these local resistance committees. Youth activists benefited from years of training in non-violent tactics, organisation, gender issues and leadership skills after the 2013 protests, whose tactics

²⁷ Interview with a member of the politburo of the Sudanese Congress Party, Khartoum, 29 March 2022.

²⁸ Azza Mustafa and Sara Abbas, “Learning from Uprisings: Sudan’s December Revolution,” in *A Region in Revolt. Mapping the Recent Uprisings in North Africa and West Asia*, ed. Jade Saab (Ottawa and Amsterdam: Daraja Press and Transnational Institute [TNI], 2020), 9–37 (21).

²⁹ Grewal, “Why Sudan Succeeded Where Algeria Failed” (see note 12).

³⁰ Khalid Mustafa Medani, “Understanding the Roots, Dynamics and Potential of an ‘Impossible’ Revolution. The Prospects and Challenges of Democratisation in Sudan”, in *Struggles for Political Change in the Arab World. Regimes, Oppositions, and External Actors after the Spring*, ed. Lisa Blaydes et al. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2022), 249–71.

³¹ Mohamed Nagi Al-Assam, *On the Experience of the Sudanese Professional Association: Personal Testimonial* (Paris, Beirut and Tunis: Arab Reform Initiative, December 2022).

³² Mustafa and Abbas, “Learning from Uprisings” (see note 28), 28.

made it difficult for the regime's extensive surveillance networks to infiltrate these groups.³³

Especially for young people who had grown up in a climate of social and political repression and economic decline, working together in the resistance committees created an enormous sense of self-empowerment in the face of patriarchal power structures.³⁴ This enabled the revolutionary movement to maintain its mobilisation despite massive violence and hardship. Volunteers are also involved in basic services, for example in the context of "Emergency Response Rooms" after the outbreak of war, which organize mutual aid for the local population, for example with community kitchens and the coordination of medical services.³⁵

The local resistance committees have considerable power resources in the domestic political conflict. They have a high level of legitimacy in their neighbourhoods and are firmly anchored there. They exist throughout the country, in cities and rural areas. In a mapping exercise commissioned by the Sudanese transitional government, the Carter Center came up with 7,238 youth organisations for 2021, including 5,289 resistance committees³⁶ – a reach that no political party can compete with.³⁷ The non-violent nature of these committees sets them apart from other young people who join armed groups, militias and security forces. The civilian movement countered the economic power of the security sector with strikes and blockades.

33 Magdi el Gizouli, *Mobilisation and Resistance in Sudan's Uprising. From Neighbourhood Committees to Zanig Queens*, Briefing Paper (Rift Valley Institute, January 2020), https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Mobilization-and-resistance-in-Sudans-uprising-by-Magdi-el-Gizouli-RVI-X-Border-Briefing-2020_0.pdf (accessed 7 May 2024).

34 Ahmed Ismat: "Our Agenda Is to Bring Real Democracy to Sudan", *Progressive International*, 22 August 2023, <https://progressive.international/wire/2023-08-22-ahmed-ismat-our-agenda-is-to-bring-real-democracy-to-sudan/en> (accessed 31 August 2023).

35 Rawh Nasir et al., "How Mutual Aid Networks Are Powering Sudan's Humanitarian Response", *The New Humanitarian* (online), 2 August 2023, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/08/02/how-mutual-aid-networks-are-powering-sudans-humanitarian-response> (accessed 31 August 2023).

36 The Carter Center, *Sudan's Youth and the Transition. Priorities, Perceptions and Attitudes* (Atlanta and Khartoum, August 2021).

37 El-Gizouli and Thomas, *The Price of Life* (see note 20), 5.

The local resistance committees are not a unified actor that could easily be involved in negotiations. Their members represent different political positions. In order to exert concrete influence in a representative system, they are therefore dependent on a transmission belt, such as political parties. The resistance committees have in turn developed their own coordination mechanisms at the federal level in order to articulate their political ideas.

Division of the security forces

The military is so closely linked to the state and society in Sudan that it has not only brought governments it favours to power through coups, but parts of the military have also helped revolutionary movements overthrow these governments again. This has mainly been due to the social proximity of police and military forces to the leaders of respective uprisings, who have generally come from the upper middle class in the centre of Sudan.³⁸

The split in the security sector has deep roots. Time and again, there has been an estrangement between the top echelons of government, who come to office in a coup, and the rest of the military.³⁹ After his coup in 1969, Jafa'ar Nimeiri began setting up competing security organisations in order to protect his regime from a coup ("coup proofing").⁴⁰ Since the 1980s, governments, initially under Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi (NUP), have outsourced counterinsurgency in various conflicts to militias, often ethnically or religiously defined.⁴¹

38 Willow Berridge, *Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan. The "Khartoum Springs" of 1964 and 1985* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 121ff.

39 Harry Verhoeven, "Surviving Revolution and Democratisation: The Sudan Armed Forces, State Fragility and Security Competition," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 61, no. 3 (2023): 413–37.

40 Willow Berridge et al., *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy. The Promise and Betrayal of a People's Revolution*, African Arguments (London: Hurst & Company, 2022), 165.

41 Jérôme Tubiana, *Remote-control Breakdown. Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-government Militias*, Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan, Issue Brief, no. 27 (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, April 2017), <https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/HSBA-IB-27-Sudanese-paramilitary-forces.pdf> (accessed 7 May 2024).

In addition to the regular armed forces (SAF) and the police, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the General Intelligence Service (GIS, formerly NISS) with its operational units, and the Popular Defence Forces were formed. Due to its size, its political role since the fall of Bashir and the outbreak of war in April 2023, the RSF are of particular importance.

The RSF emerged from Arab militias in the Darfur region of western Sudan, which the Bashir government deployed there to fight the insurgency, often in conjunction with targeted violence against the civilian population; they were known locally as the “Janjaweed”. RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, belongs to the Mahariya, a tribe of northern Reizegat nomads from Darfur. During the peak of violence in Darfur in 2003/04, Hemedti became an important militia leader. After a brief period of rebellion against the state, he was appointed as security adviser to the governor of the state of South Darfur in 2008.⁴² In 2013, President Bashir created the RSF, initially under the control of the NISS. In two major offensives in 2014 and 2015, the RSF defeated and expelled armed groups from Darfur in coordination with regular army units. During the years that followed, the RSF became involved in the smuggling of migrants and gold production. In addition, RSF troops were deployed in large numbers in the Yemen war under the leadership of the UAE and Saudi Arabia (alongside a smaller SAF contingent).⁴³ With this backing, the financial strength of the RSF and its leader grew considerably.⁴⁴ 2017 was an important year for the RSF: Hemedti’s rival Musa Hilal was arrested, and the RSF was transformed into a “regular armed force” under the sovereignty of the Supreme Commander of the Security Forces, i.e. President Bashir, based on a separate law. As a result, the RSF became de facto Bashir’s personal guard.

SAF and RSF share the goal of retaining or completely gaining dominance over the Sudanese state. However, their conceptions of the state differ. The

SAF officer corps sees the armed forces as the only truly “national”, pan-Sudanese institution (although the SAF leadership is predominantly drawn from the Arab tribes of central Sudan). Their strategic interest is to solder the fragmented security sector and bolster the state and society. They see pluralist civilian politics, characterised by democratic arguments, as a recipe for fragility and state collapse, as experienced by several countries in Sudan’s wider neighbourhood (Yemen, Libya, Somalia).⁴⁵

The SAF and the RSF differ in their conceptions of the state.

The RSF are far less institutionalised than the SAF. Its leadership is largely made up of members of the Dagalo family. Hemedti’s deputy is his brother Abdel Rahim Dagalo, who also heads the most important company associated with the RSF, Al-Junaid. It is primarily active in the extraction and export of gold. Members of the Reizegat tribe form the core of the RSF and provide most of its commanders. Their ranks include fighters from many other ethnic groups from Sudan’s periphery, as well as nationals from Chad, South Sudan and apparently other countries in the region. Many young men have joined the RSF mainly for financial reasons, since they pay comparatively high salaries.⁴⁶ However, there are still forces in the RSF that pursue an ideology of “Arab supremacy”. This ideology already inspired the “Janjaweed” militias in the 2000s to carry out genocidal violence against non-Arab groups from the Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit tribes.⁴⁷ The RSF are striving for dominance over the security sector and want to build a new army to replace the old SAF structures. Overall, the RSF make greater use of informal and personal relationships than the SAF, and they try to exert influence primarily with the help of material resources and ethnic connections, while the SAF also utilise their access to public institutions. These different approaches also explain the different attitudes of the SAF and the RSF towards civilian government. While the RSF primarily

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bel Trew, “‘It’s Our Biggest Employer’. How a Lucrative War in Yemen Fuels Conflict in Darfur 2,000 km Away”, *The Independent* (online), 22 December 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/darfur-yemen-civil-war-sudan-soldiers-conflict-employment-a9256046.html> (accessed 26 July 2023).

⁴⁴ “Exposing the RSF’s Secret Financial Network”, *Global Witness*, 9 December 2019, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-minerals/exposing-rsfs-secret-financial-network/> (accessed 26 July 2023).

⁴⁵ Verhoeven, “Surviving Revolution and Democratisation” (see note 39), 17f.

⁴⁶ Edward Thomas and Magdi El Gizouli, “Creatures of the Deposed: Connecting Sudan’s Rural and Urban Struggles”, *African Arguments* (online), 11 November 2021, <https://africanarguments.org/2021/11/creatures-of-the-deposed-connecting-sudans-rural-and-urban-struggles/> (accessed 7 August 2023).

⁴⁷ Julie Flint and Alex de Waal, *Darfur. A New History of a Long War* (London: Zed Books, 2008).

favour a weak state with little regulation, the SAF prefer to keep the state under their authoritarian control.

These security forces have considerable power resources at their disposal, which they can use not only against civilian actors, but also against each other. Most obvious is their role in the security of the country, since they can contribute to it, but also impair it. They also have great economic and financial power.⁴⁸ The SAF controls around a quarter of the economy, the RSF almost half.⁴⁹ Additional power resources lie in their privileged, often personalised foreign relations. The SAF maintains close relations with Egypt, while RSF leader Hemedti has close ties with the UAE. Both SAF and RSF co-operated with the Wagner Group and the Russian government and had a good relationship with Saudi Arabia.

However, the security forces lack three important resources: a civilian support apparatus following the demise of the NCP, as well as domestic political legitimacy and Western support. The position of the RSF is more precarious than that of the SAF, since it has used considerable violence against the civilian population as a paramilitary unit. In contrast, the existence of the SAF is not questioned by political parties and the democracy movement.

Opportunistic leaders of armed groups

Numerous armed groups exist in the country as a side effect of Sudan's other armed conflicts and because of the way Sudanese governments deal with insurgencies. A rough distinction can be made between groups from western Darfur, those from the context of the north-south conflict, and from eastern Sudan. Following South Sudan's independence in 2011, several groups joined forces to form the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), although its members remained

largely independent.⁵⁰ In 2014, the SRF joined the Sudan Call alliance, which comprised both opposition parties as well as armed movements and which opposed NCP rule.

There was an important difference between the groups that still had substantial troops in Sudan at the time of the 2018/19 protests and those that were de facto militarily defeated and only had a few scattered units in Libya and South Sudan. The Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement-North (SPLA/M-N) under the leadership of Abdel-Aziz al-Hilu and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA-AW) headed by Abdel Wahid al-Nur control territory. The SPLA/M-N holds areas in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, while the SLA-AW controls the territory around the Jebel Marra massif in Darfur. Their locally anchored power allowed them to be cautious in negotiations with the new civil-military government in Khartoum, especially as they no longer had to fight any major battles with the security forces.

The situation was different for groups from Darfur such as the SLA faction led by Mini Minawi (SLA-MM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) under Gebreil Ibrahim. At the time of Bashir's fall, they no longer had their own troops in Sudan and only had units in Libya and South Sudan that often worked for other armed actors when it proved convenient.⁵¹ Furthermore, it seems they had little support among the population. They were therefore all the more interested in negotiating with the new authorities in order to gain access to posts and rents, which in turn would enable them to expand their decimated movements. Their power resources consisted of their transactional negotiating skills from previous talks, in which they resembled Hemedti; and the economic rents they were able to draw on for their members, some of whom were newly recruited in the peace negotiations. Both the security forces and the civilian forces in the FFC tried to involve representatives of the armed groups in their respective causes.

⁴⁸ Catherine Cartier et al., *Breaking the Bank. How Military Control of the Economy Obstructs Democracy in Sudan* (Washington, D.C.: C4ADS, 2022).

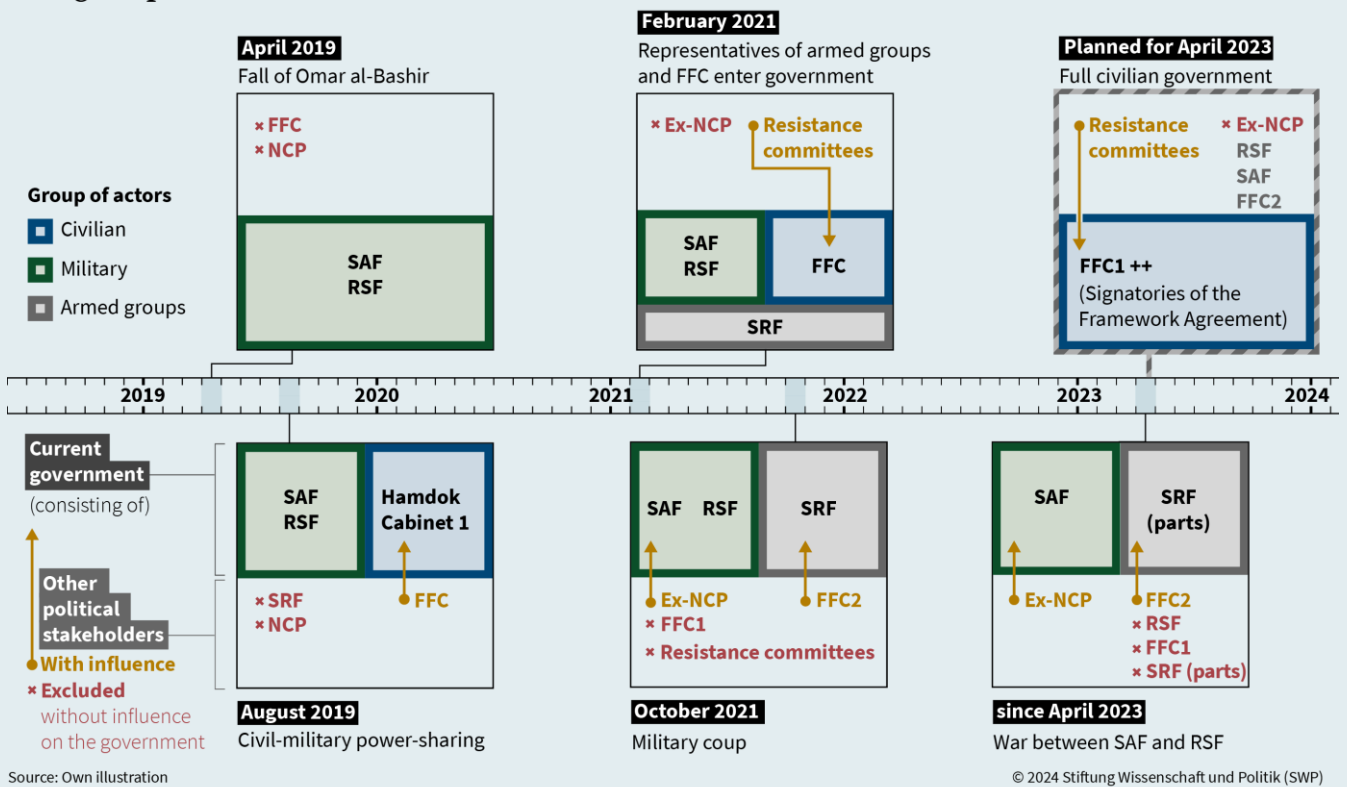
⁴⁹ According to the chairman of the Dismantling Committee, Altayed Osman Yousef: Katharine Houreld and Hafiz Haroun, "Generals' War Chests Have Fueled Fighting in Sudan. Now They're at Risk", *The Washington Post* (online), 19 April 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/19/sudan-burhan-army-hemedti-rsf/> (accessed 26 July 2023).

⁵⁰ Andrew McCutchen, *The Sudan Revolutionary Front. Its Formation and Development* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, October 2014).

⁵¹ Chairperson of the African Union Commission/Secretary-General of the United Nations, *Special Report on the Strategic Review of the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur*, 18 May 2017 (S/2017/437), paragraph 5.

Figure 1

Change of power relations in Sudan since 2019



Interim conclusion

After the fall of Bashir, no single group of actors had sufficient power resources to prevail against all the others. The security forces (above all the SAF and RSF) controlled a large part of the Sudanese economy as well as coercive means using the military and police. In this way, they ensured that the civilian actors could not ignore them. Nevertheless, their division weakened them decisively, especially since they no longer had a civilian vehicle for conducting government business after the fall of the NCP. They lacked legitimacy among the population, who showed great perseverance and creativity when organising themselves. The democracy movement was able to orchestrate protests and contribute to the provision of basic services for the population at the local level. However, when it came to negotiations with the powerful security sector and with international actors to support the transition, the population was dependent on political parties that were each pursuing their own interests. The transition process was therefore based on an extremely fragile and at the same time dynamic relationship between these different groups of actors,

according to the varying distribution of power resources. The resulting uncertainty also opened up a space in which the decisions of the actors involved were particularly important.

Failure of the Civil-military Transition

The chances of success for the transition, which began in 2019 and was abruptly halted in 2021, depended largely on two negotiation processes: one concerned the relationship between the civilian and military components of the transitional government, the other the relationship among the civilian actors (see Figure 1, p. 17). The responsibility for the premature end of the transition lies with the repressive security forces. However, the civilian actors could at least have lessened the risk of another coup.

Partnership instead of distance from the security sector

There was intense debate in Sudanese civil society as to whether the constitutional declaration of August 2019, which provided for the participation of the security sector in the transitional government, undermined the chances of real change and whether other arrangements would have been possible. After all, the people at the central protest camp in front of the military headquarters had demanded a “Madaniya”, a civilian rule, and were not satisfied with the replacement of the president by the military. Some observers believe that the significant internal and international pressure on the civilian negotiators led to them agreeing to a “premature deal” that contained many contradictions, ambiguities, and loopholes.⁵² In any case, a central problem was that the military knew how to exploit these weaknesses in the transitional constitution, while the civilian side failed to seize even those opportunities that it would have had according to the agreement.

The transitional government decided to upgrade the necessary cooperation with the security sector to

the level of a partnership. “The Sudanese model is based on a partnership between civilians and the military to build a democratic state and the rule of law,” said Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in December 2019.⁵³

The transitional constitution of 2019 actually envisaged a limited role for the military. It nominated five out of eleven members of the Sovereignty Council including its chair for the first 21 months of the transition period. In addition, the Ministers of Defence and Interior were nominated by the military. According to the transitional constitution, the Sovereignty Council was primarily to take on formal tasks that were previously the responsibility of the president, such as the confirmation of ministers, governors and members of the transitional parliament, as well as the signing of bills into law. The transitional constitution explicitly stated that the word “confirm” only referred to the “formal signature” required for a decision to enter into force. If the Council did not make a statement within 15 days, the decision or law would enter into force.⁵⁴ The actual executive power should lie with the Prime Minister.⁵⁵

In addition, the tasks of the transitional government were poorly prioritised. The list in the transitional constitution and its concretisation by Prime Minister Hamdok suggested that all objectives could complement each other. However, supporters of this implicit understanding of a “liberal transition”, in which peace, democracy, human rights and market-economy reforms were to come together, neglected

⁵² Brooke Davies, *Sudan's 2019 Constitutional Declaration. Its Impact on the Transition* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2022), 23.

⁵³ “Sudan’s Revolution Is the Result of Civilian-military Alliance: Hamdok Says”, *Sudan Tribune*, 25 December 2019, <https://sudantribune.com/article66872/> (accessed 24 July 2023).

⁵⁴ Art. 11 (2) of the Constitutional Declaration as of 4 August 2019.

⁵⁵ Art. 70 (4) a of the Constitutional Declaration as of 4 August 2019.

significant trade-offs in the realisation of such a transition.⁵⁶ Although Hamdok always spoke of the transition being “non-linear” and “messy”, he did not specify how he intended to deal with the resulting setbacks.

Many political issues concerning the transition process could not be delegated to technocrats.

As a “technocratic” government, Hamdok’s first cabinet was actually intended to avoid the disputes that had plagued previous coalitions. However, many fundamental questions of the transition process were of an elementary political nature, i.e. they concerned the distribution of values, fundamental trade-offs, and the constant tug-of-war between representatives of opposing interests. How should the relationship between the state and the market in stabilising the economy look like? What weight should violent entrepreneurs be given in the peace process and even beyond, in the institutions of the transitional government? What compromises should be made with the old security elites in the interests of stabilising the transition process when it comes to dealing with crimes and disentangling the economy? Answers to these questions could not be delegated to technocrats but required a broad and intense public debate.

Discussions about cooperating with the security sector often became polarised, as if there was only a choice between close partnership and a complete separation of the military from all civilian spheres. The FFC were divided into two camps. One was led by the communists and wanted to use the momentum of mobilisation to transform the political system and to form a purely civilian government. The other camp, led by the NUP, the Sudanese Congress Party and other parties, was in favour of a government with the participation of the military. The aim was to gradually shift the balance of power in favour of the civilian side during the transition. As early as December 2019, a leading representative of the FFC described the communist strategy of completely excluding the military from power as “a very dangerous strategy that will lead to a civil war in Sudan because there

are huge divisions within the military”. If the civilian side demanded more, the pressure could intensify these differences between the SAF and RSF. This would lead to a “fight even here in Khartoum”. After that, civilian influence would be reduced to zero.⁵⁷ Everyone else would then also take up arms to push through their ideas, and support from the population would no longer play a role.

In the face of these risks, the mainstream parties of the FFC favoured a more reformist approach to the security forces. The problem with this approach was that it “ensured the political survival of the generals and their continuing influence”, according to one analysis, even though it was clear to all involved that the security actors would be the biggest obstacle to the political goals of the revolutionary movement.⁵⁸ Moreover, the proponents of this strategy depended upon maintaining the unity of the civilian camp across the many controversial but necessary decisions of the transition process. Explicit cooperation with actors who were ultimately responsible for the violent dispersal of the sit-in in Khartoum damaged the trust between the FFC and the protest movement in the long term.

Contrary to their initial goals, the FFC did not succeed in increasing their power at the expense of the military during the transitional government. FFC representatives were disappointed by Hamdok’s consideration towards the security forces, since he was always reluctant to publicly criticise the military.⁵⁹ Hamdok gave in to the military’s demand that all cabinet decisions be approved by the Sovereignty Council.⁶⁰ As a result, Hamdok found himself caught in the middle and without any power of his own.

Under house arrest for a short time after the coup on 25 October 2021, Hamdok became a figurehead of the large-scale protests that broke out immediately after the coup became known, which were organised by local resistance committees. However, he squandered this capital by agreeing to a joint declaration with military leader Burhan on 21 November 2021. Although this brought him back into office, the preamble to the declaration used Burhan’s euphemism

⁵⁶ See Roland Paris, *At War’s End. Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Oliver P. Richmond, “The Problem of Peace. Understanding the ‘Liberal Peace’”, *Conflict, Security & Development* 6, no. 3 (2006): 291–314.

⁵⁷ Interview with Khaled Omer Yousif, (then) Secretary General of the Sudanese Congress Party, Khartoum, 7 December 2019.

⁵⁸ Young, *Sudan Uprising* (see note 5), 53.

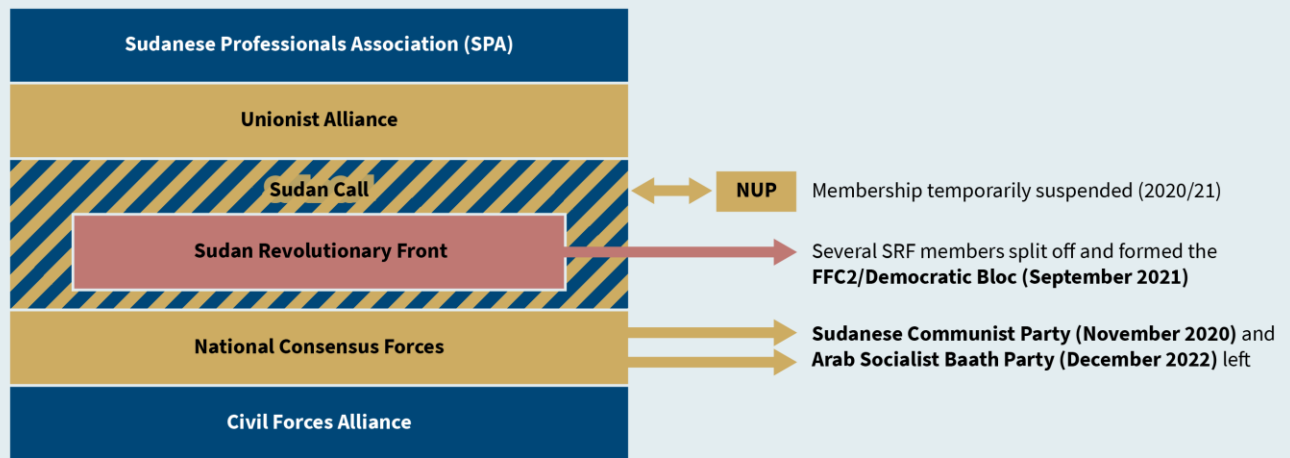
⁵⁹ Interviews with FFC representatives, Khartoum, March 2022.

⁶⁰ Davies, *Sudan’s 2019 Constitutional Declaration* (see note 52), 34.

Figure 2

Civilian coalition building in the Forces of Freedom and Change

The FFC consist of five blocs, which in turn contain several member organisations. Members are **civil society organisations**, **political parties**, and **armed groups**.



Source: Own illustration based on information from an FFC member

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for the coup, stating that it was necessary to “complete the path of democratic correction.”⁶¹ Outraged, the FFC ministers who were not in prison resigned the following day. Hamdok subsequently failed to form a new government and resigned on 2 January 2022. His credibility with the democracy movement was spent.

Zero-sum policy and lack of civilian institutionalisation

The unity of the civilian front within the FFC crumbled after a short time (see Figure 2). This made it difficult for civilian actors to hold the military accountable for arbitrary extensions of their constitutional powers and to institutionalise democratic mechanisms. The reasons for this fragmentation lie not only in the divisive efforts of the security forces or the diversity of political positions, but were also due to the narrowly defined power interests of the political parties. The latter have always striven for visibility and influence and were strongly characterised by the zero-sum politics of the authoritarian context that they were familiar with.

As soon as Bashir was toppled, political differences in the FFC came to light. SPA co-founder Nagi al-Assam

reports how he and his fellow campaigners spent time and energy mediating disputes between the political parties in the FFC, which were only interested in their own advantage.⁶² Already during the negotiations for the constitutional declaration, which took place in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, the armed groups of the SRF separated themselves from the FFC. This made the peace negotiations another task for the transitional government. The SPA, which had formed an important transmission belt between the non-violent resistance movement and the political parties during the protests against Bashir, lost importance when some members under communist influence turned away from the FFC. Some member organisations of the SPA accused the Communist Party of manipulating the board elections at the first SPA convention for their own purposes.⁶³ The NUP criticised the FFC leadership council for failing to contain numerous differences within the coalition.⁶⁴ Shortly after-

62 Nagi Al-Assam, *On the Experience of the Sudanese Professional Association* (see note 31).

63 Mohammed Amin, “‘Playing with Fire’: Sudan Revolution in Peril as Splits Appear among Its Protagonists”, *Middle East Eye* (online), 19 May 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/playing-fire-sudan-revolution-peril-splits-appear-among-its-protagonists> (accessed 28 July 2023).

64 National Umma Party, *Social Contract – Principles of Political Law* (official German translation from Arabic), Khartoum, 26 March 2020.

61 Political declaration between Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Abdalla Hamdok, 21 November 2021.

wards, it suspended its activities in the FFC and called for early elections, believing it had a good chance.⁶⁵

The political parties fought for their own visibility in all the major issues of Sudan's transition process. For example, the FFC protested against the gradual reduction of subsidies in the 2020 budget, which the government nominated by the FFC itself had planned. As a result, the government left the subsidies in place and postponed the discussion until a national economic conference could convene, which did not take place until autumn 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

From the perspective of the FFC parties, the peace process with armed groups also risked marginalising them. The representatives of the security sector dominated negotiations in the South Sudanese capital Juba, which FFC representatives later described as a major mistake.⁶⁶ The armed groups that signed the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) on 3 October 2020 had previously negotiated a quota of 25 per cent of cabinet posts and three additional positions on the Sovereignty Council for themselves, even though their importance for the security situation in most conflict regions was rather marginal. In fact, the number of fatalities from armed violence increased after the peace agreement.⁶⁷ Now the FFC parties were also pushing Hamdok to participate more visibly in government, having already demonstrated their veto power on the issue of subsidy cuts. Thus, on 10 February 2021, the new "political cabinet" was inaugurated with members of the groups that had signed the JPA as well as FFC politicians.⁶⁸

However, the arrival of the FFC politicians also worsened relations between the civilian and military parts of the transitional government. Its civilian members were now under greater obligation to achieve progress in accomplishing tasks. In March 2021, the

partners in the government agreed to bring companies controlled by the military under civilian supervision.

Despite these attempts to gain visibility, the FFC did not succeed in establishing important components of the transitional arrangement. Institutions were to be created to control the increasingly military-dominated executive, to provide a platform for the deliberation of political plans, to place transformation plans on a broader social basis and to ensure legal arbitration mechanisms. These institutions would have at least made it more difficult for the military to seize power again. However, they would also have reduced the individual influence of the smaller member parties of the FFC.

The planned transitional assembly was never set up.

The establishment of a Transitional Legislative Council (TLC) with a planned 300 delegates, which was supposed to pass laws and monitor the work of the government, was repeatedly postponed and ultimately did not take place. Back in September 2019, RSF leader Hemedti promised the armed groups that the assembly would only be installed once a peace agreement had been concluded.⁶⁹ Protests from the FFC were not heeded.⁷⁰ Later, the FFC members were unable to agree on the distribution of deputies among the individual member parties. The body was to be fully appointed, but there was no reliable basis for the allocation of mandates. FFC representatives later pointed to blockades from the security sector, which had to approve all appointments, but admitted that most of the blame for the delay lay with themselves.⁷¹

The transitional government also made little effort to strengthen civilian structures at local and state levels. At the time of the coup in October 2021, all 18 states had governors appointed by the civilian government, but no ministries. Some smaller parties in the FFC rejected early local government elections. These would have allowed the population to partici-

⁶⁵ "Sudan's Umma Party Freezes FFC Membership, Proposes 'New Social Contract'", *Dabanga Radio TV Online* (online), 23 April 2020, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-s-umma-party-freezes-ffc-membership-proposes-new-social-contract> (accessed 10 October 2023).

⁶⁶ Interview with a member of the politburo of the Sudanese Congress Party, Khartoum, 29 March 2022.

⁶⁷ In 2020, the conflict database Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) counted 574 fatalities from political violence in Darfur; in 2021 it was 1,058 (own calculations).

⁶⁸ "Sudan's New Govt Sworn In", *Dabanga Radio TV Online* (online), 11 February 2021, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-s-new-govt-sworn-in> (accessed 1 August 2023).

⁶⁹ *Juba Declaration for Trust-building Measures and Pre-negotiation Principles*, 11 September 2019.

⁷⁰ "Juba Declaration Violates Sudan's Transitional Constitution, Says FFC Official", *Sudan Tribune* (online), 29 September 2019, <https://sudantribune.com/article66342/> (accessed 30 August 2023).

⁷¹ Interviews with representatives of the National Umma Party and the Sudanese Congress Party, Khartoum, March 2022.

pate in public institutions in their immediate neighbourhood, but would also have challenged the power of these parties at the national level.⁷²

Moreover, the transitional government did not appoint a new constitutional court after having dissolved the old one. As a result, many ambiguities and loopholes in the interim constitution could not be resolved by legal means, but were de facto dealt with by the Ministry of Justice. However, this had neither the capacity nor the authority to make binding decisions.⁷³

The difficulties did not stem from the political parties' different orientations. Their plurality was more of a strength, insofar as it reflected the different currents in Sudanese society. However, the constant quest for dominance made it difficult for the parties to consolidate an institutional framework within which they could have defended their interests. It was also easier for the security forces to seize power if they only had to arrest the most important civilian leaders.

72 Interview with Ibrahim Mudawi, human rights defender, Khartoum, 1 April 2022.

73 Davies, *Sudan's 2019 Constitutional Declaration* (see note 52), 38.

Failure of the Military Coup

The fact that something fundamental had changed in Sudanese politics with Bashir's fall became clear after the military coup in 2021 at the latest. The security forces were able to conjure up a national crisis relatively easily and remove Hamdok and the FFC ministers. However, they were unable to establish a new stable government. The old pattern of repression, cooption and a civilian façade no longer worked. This was the second time since 2019 that the attempt to install a purely military government failed.

Transactional patterns of action no longer work

The security forces succeeded in escalating the already tense situation into a national crisis in early autumn 2021, which prepared the ground for the coup. The situation came to a head after an attempted coup allegedly by supporters of the NCP regime in September 2021. A weeks-long blockade of the harbour in Port Sudan exacerbated the economic supply situation in Khartoum. The blockade was organised by the High Council for the Tribes of the Beja, led by former NCP MP Sayed Tirik, ostensibly out of frustration with the Eastern Sudan Protocol of the Juba Peace Agreement.⁷⁴ In early October, 16 political and armed groups formed a rival FFC faction.⁷⁵ Led by Gebreil Ibrahim and Mini Minawi, who owed their government positions to cooperation with the security sector, this faction, called FFC2, organised protests and a sit-in blockade in front of the presidential

palace lasting several days and openly calling for military rule.⁷⁶

On 25 October 2021, the security forces declared a state of emergency. They did not achieve their actual goal of creating a civilian façade for their rule by means of a technocratic government. The security forces had also hoped to keep Hamdok in office along with his good international connections.⁷⁷ The FFC2 parties were too weak to install a so-called expert government, and the remaining FFC1 parties and independent technocrats refused to act as stooges for the military.

The massive pressure from ongoing demonstrations and strikes played a large part in the fact that no civilian façade for a military government could be established. Contrary to what the security forces had expected — not least in light of other coups during this period — the Sudan coup was not greeted by jubilant crowds, but rather many demonstrators opposing it. There were more demonstrations after the coup than during the (shorter) protests against Bashir in 2018/19, and two thirds of them took place outside Khartoum state.⁷⁸ The security forces used lethal force against these protests, in which over 120 people had died by March 2023.⁷⁹ However, the repres-

⁷⁴ Abdu Mukhtar Musa, "Blockade of Port Sudan. What's behind It and What Can End It", *The Conversation* (online), 6 October 2021, <https://theconversation.com/blockade-of-port-sudan-whats-behind-it-and-what-can-end-it-169264> (accessed 1 August 2023).

⁷⁵ The breakaway FFC faction first traded as the National Consensus, later as the Democratic Bloc, and informally as FFC2. The remaining faction called itself the FFC-Central Council (CC) or FFC1.

⁷⁶ "Sudan: Protesters Demand Military Coup as Crisis Deepens", *BBC News* (online), 17 October 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58943013> (accessed 1 August 2023).

⁷⁷ Hemedti later claimed that Hamdok had been privy to the security forces' plans but had wanted the FFC's approval. "Sudan's General Dagalo: Military Takeover Was the 'Best Option'", *Al-Jazeera*, 26 November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PtPwVS6j4GA> (accessed 2 August 2023).

⁷⁸ Own calculations based on ACLED.

⁷⁹ UN Human Rights Council, "Interactive Dialogue on the High Commissioner's Oral Update on Sudan with the Assistance of the Designated Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Sudan", Media Center, 6 March 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/03/human-rights-council-discusses-situation-human-rights-sudan-and-occupied-palestinian> (accessed 14 October 2023).

sive measures taken by the security forces fell short of the scale of the June 2019 massacre.⁸⁰

The resistance committees did not allow themselves to be co-opted by security elites. Instead, after Hamdok's declaration with Burhan on 21 November 2021, they also turned away from the political parties in the FFC1. The committees then began an elaborate process to formulate a charter with political demands.⁸¹ At the centre of these was the establishment of a transitional parliament to effectively oversee the work of a new transitional government. Decentralisation and local politics were to play an important role – precisely the areas that the FFC had neglected during their time in government.⁸² The members of the transitional parliament were to be appointed by grassroots assemblies in all neighbourhoods.⁸³ The resistance committees invited political parties and other civilian forces to join them. They themselves rejected direct negotiations with the security forces under their current leadership.⁸⁴

Another factor in the military's failure to establish a façade government was the behaviour of international donors and financial institutions after the coup. They suspended their bilateral cooperation, stopped payments of around one billion US dollars in 2021 and a further two billion per year in 2022 and 2023 that had already been promised, and interrupted the debt relief process.⁸⁵ As a result, prices skyrocketed; the price of bread in the state of Khartoum

alone increased sixfold within three months.⁸⁶ At the same time, the government discontinued the Family Support Programme with its direct transfers to needy families because the international funds for this were no longer flowing. Economic decline following the coup also affected members of the security forces. There were reports of looting by those in uniform who did not benefit from the security forces' business interests. All these difficulties also aggravated the relationship between the SAF and the RSF.

Rise of the RSF to the political centre of Sudan and tensions in the security sector

Perhaps the most profound change in Sudan's political system was the rise of the RSF to become one of the two most powerful armed forces in the country, whose leadership simultaneously controlled a large part of the economy and exercised significant political influence. The presence of two security forces of roughly equal strength in the form of the SAF and the RSF increased the risk of civil war in a situation whereby both were vying for control of the state and there was no longer a supreme authority (President Bashir) or common opponent (the civilian component in the transitional government) (see Figure 1, p. 17). Neither SAF leader Burhan nor RSF leader Hemedti could credibly assure the other that they would honour agreements on restructuring the state without recourse to third parties. Both had an incentive to take over the power of the other. Typically, such a competitive situation prepares the ground for a coup or a purge, i.e. the exclusion of a competitor and his allies from the ruling elite, especially if the competition has an ethnic dimension.⁸⁷

Because the two competing security forces were equally strong, the danger of civil war grew.

After the fall of Bashir, the RSF gained so much power that the SAF were unable to take it over by replacing their leaders. An open confrontation, it became increasingly clear, meant war. The coup risk

⁸⁰ When the sit-in was crushed in June 2019, roughly as many people died in just a few days (around 120 according to estimates) as in the 17 months following the coup in October 2021 in the context of protests.

⁸¹ "55 Groups Sign New Charter for Sudan's Resistance Committees", *Dabanga Radio TV Online* (online), 30 September 2022, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/55-groups-sign-new-charter-for-sudan-s-resistance-committees> (accessed 1 August 2023).

⁸² Interview with representatives of resistance committees, Khartoum, 29 March 2022.

⁸³ Alan Boswell and Maryam Elfaki, "The Future of Sudan's Resistance Committees", *The Horn*, 26 July 2023, <https://shows.acast.com/60affad1bcce600012cebcf1/64c139878577ee00112caac5> (accessed 1 August 2023).

⁸⁴ Interview with representatives of resistance committees, Khartoum, 29 March 2022.

⁸⁵ World Bank, *Sudan Economic Update: Missed Opportunities amidst Deepening Fragility* (Washington, D.C., 2023), 17, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/40450> (accessed 8 January 2024).

⁸⁶ Background paper by a Sudanese research institute: *The Cost of the Coup*, March 2022.

⁸⁷ Philip Roessler, *Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa. The Logic of the Coup-civil War Trap* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

thus became a war risk, especially after the elimination of the civilian component with the coup of October 2021.

The RSF under Hemedti's leadership were already a powerful and wealthy player when Bashir was overthrown in April 2019, especially following the lucrative use of mercenaries in the Yemen war on behalf of the UAE. However, the influence of the RSF grew even further when the transitional government was formed. Hemedti had proclaimed himself Burhan's deputy and retained this position when the Transitional Military Council became part of the Transitional Government's Sovereignty Council. The fact that the Sovereignty Council was given an executive role not originally intended for it also increased Hemedti's political influence. Meanwhile, the RSF recruited new members in many parts of Sudan, such that, according to estimates, they almost tripled their personnel within four years.⁸⁸

Islamist supporters of the NCP regime retained great influence in the SAF and over Burhan himself. The SAF leadership belittled Hemedti and his family as upstarts from the periphery, and ordinary soldiers distrusted him because of the RSF's role in the suppression of the protest camp in June 2019.

SAF and RSF also relied on different international partners, whose rivalry they exploited for their domestic political gain. Although they had been able to count on the joint support of Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia after the fall of Bashir, the relationship between these regional powers also deteriorated.⁸⁹ Egypt's intelligence service reportedly played a crucial role in the weeks leading up to the 2021 coup by mediating between the SAF and the RSF, enabling them to seize power.⁹⁰ The UAE and Saudi Arabia supported United Nations efforts to organise talks between the military and the FFC after the coup. As part of the Quad Group with the US and UK, they facilitated the confidential talks that eventually resulted in the Framework Agreement on 5 December 2022.

The framework agreement provided for the formation of a purely civilian government. The UAE showed its appreciation for the agreement: just over a week later, the Abu Dhabi Ports Group and Invictus Investment signed a preliminary investment agreement to build a harbour in northern Sudan worth six billion US dollars.⁹¹ Egypt, on the other hand, organised a meeting among leaders of the armed groups and political parties under the mantle of the FFC2 (including Minawi and Ibrahim), who then rejected the negotiations and later the framework agreement. From the perspective of some FFC1 politicians, Egypt's efforts were designed to undermine the entire process.⁹²

As long as Hamdok and the FFC were part of the government, they ensured that tensions between the SAF and RSF did not escalate. This dynamic changed after the coup. Burhan, not least under pressure from hardliners in the military leadership, brought thousands of NCP regime supporters back into the civil service and the judiciary to gain control of the state apparatus. The NCP had fallen into too much disrepute to be able to officially lift its ban and formally rejoin the government. However, its members and leaders, such as former foreign ministers Ali Karti and Ibrahim Gandour, returned to public life after the military government released them from prison following the coup.⁹³ The resurgence of NCP supporters was bound to alarm Hemedti, whom they accused of treason.

⁸⁸ Telephone interview with Walid El-Rayah, FFC, 13 October 2023.

⁸⁹ Stephan Roll, *Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE: The End of an Alliance. Divergences of Interest in Bilateral Relations Offer Opportunities for Germany and the EU*, SWP Comment 47/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, August 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C47v02.

⁹⁰ Jan Pospisil and Alice Jenner, *Fragmented Transitions in the Context of Competitive Regionalism: The Case of Sudan*, Global Transitions Series (Edinburgh: Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, 2022).

⁹¹ "Sudan to Develop Red Sea Port in \$6-bln Initial Pact with Emirati Group", *Reuters*, 13 December 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/sudan-signs-6-bln-agreement-with-emirati-consortium-develop-red-sea-port-2022-12-13/> (accessed 9 August 2023).

⁹² "Sudan's Militaries Want to Have Transitional Government They Control: FFC Leader", *Sudan Tribune* (online), 6 February 2023, <https://sudantribune.com/article270507/> (accessed 9 August 2023).

⁹³ "The Former Regime Is Back — Burhan Reinstates the National Congress Party", *Ayin Network*, 25 May 2022, <https://3ayin.com/en/ncp-returns/> (accessed 1 September 2023).

Sudan's Renewed War and Its Consequences

In the spring of 2023, all the conditions were in place to enable the outbreak of massive armed violence in the Sudanese capital on 15 April and made it considerably more difficult to end quickly. The security forces used any means at their disposal to gradually regain more influence. Many of those who were involved continued to see politics as a zero-sum game in which one party's gains ensure losses for the other. The FFC parties had failed to anchor the revolution more deeply in institutional terms.

Hemedti was able to establish more power for himself and the RSF.

At the same time, the security sector's old transactional behaviour, namely maintaining power through repression and co-option, no longer applied. Opportunistic representatives of armed groups and offshoots of political parties contributed to the division of the civilian camp by seeking their own advantage through closer cooperation with the security sector in the form of posts that would ensure their political survival in the absence of social support. However, the military was constantly rejected by members of the Sudanese elite whom they had approached for ministerial posts. Since the fall of Bashir, Hemedti had risen to the highest echelons of Sudanese politics and was able to consolidate more power for himself and the RSF. The 2021 coup and the subsequent refusal by the FFC1 parties to be co-opted by the military brought RSF and SAF into direct competition for the political and military leadership of the state. Sudan's long-standing susceptibility to coups became the risk of armed conflict at the centre of the state – the very scenario that civilian politicians such as Khalid Omer Yousif had been warning about for years. From the outset, rivalry within the security sector was the greatest threat to Sudan's transition.

Outbreak of war due to an escalation spiral

The outbreak of armed conflict between the SAF and RSF on 15 April 2023 was the result of an escalation spiral, which was in turn due to a security dilemma. From a purely rational point of view, war between the SAF and RSF could not serve the interests of either, because no swift military resolution could be expected and a prolonged armed conflict would weaken both. The conflict between SAF and RSF was not new; both understood each other's capabilities. In the weeks beforehand, they had amassed troops in strategic locations so as to be prepared for a possible attack by their opponent – or to use the opportunity for a quick seizure of power. Last-minute mediation efforts by members of the Sovereignty Council and the UN up until the night before the outbreak of war seemed to succeed, but, then fighting broke out on the morning of 15 April.

It is not known who fired the first shot. Both parties accuse the other. Some sources suggest that SAF generals, in coordination with actors of the former NCP regime, wanted to pre-empt their disempowerment, which might have ensued with the establishment of a civilian government or a coup by the RSF. This interpretation fits with reports that the SAF initially agreed with the RSF and the signatories of the Framework Agreement on a plan for a phased integration of the RSF within ten years,⁹⁴ but they distanced themselves from this at the end of March 2023.⁹⁵ The fact that Tut Gatluak – advisor to South Sudan's President Salva Kiir Mayardit, adopted son of Omar al-Bashir and chief mediator for the Juba peace agree-

⁹⁴ *Principles and Foundations of Military and Security Sector Reform*, Khartoum, 15 March 2023 (Arabic original available to the author).

⁹⁵ International Crisis Group, *A Race against Time to Halt Sudan's Collapse*, Africa Briefing, no. 190 (Nairobi and Brussels, 22 June 2023).

ment — brought his family to safety from Khartoum a few days before the outbreak of war also caused a stir.⁹⁶ Even though the use of force might have been initiated by an SAF unit, the RSF were better prepared. They had weapons depots all over the capital region and, on the morning of the first day of the war, they invaded the guest house of the president, who escaped with difficulty to nearby military headquarters.⁹⁷

The ever-growing tension between the SAF and the RSF had created a situation that neither side could now control. Once the battle began, they pursued it relentlessly.

Conflict dynamics between civil war and mass atrocities

The war metastasised within a few months, such that there are in fact overlapping conflicts. In addition to the conflicts over political and military dominance in the state of Khartoum and over strategic infrastructure in the rest of the country, there is a different dynamic in parts of the Darfur region. Satellite images and statements of people who have fled to Chad show that the RSF and Arab militias are deliberately driving out members of the Masalit, burning their villages, raping women and killing civilians en masse.⁹⁸ An extensive legal report by the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights qualified these acts as genocide.⁹⁹ The RSF accuse the Masalit of not joining them in the fight against the SAF and instead allowing themselves

to be armed by the SAF. Arab tribes are also pursuing their own local goals, partly out of resentment at the Juba peace agreement, which, for example, provided for the return of (non-Arab) internally displaced persons. Even if the RSF leadership were serious about its commitment to confronting these crimes, it would not want to alienate these tribes and therefore be unlikely to urge them to show restraint towards the civilian population.

Furthermore, some armed groups have been using the outbreak of war for their own purposes. The SPLA/M-North under Abdel-Aziz al-Hilu has captured several SAF positions in South Kordofan, thereby expanding its territory.¹⁰⁰ The SLA-AW is pursuing similar goals in Jebel Marra. In November 2023, JEM and SLA-MM ended their military neutrality after members of the joint force that they had formed to protect supply convoys came under increasing fire from the RSF.¹⁰¹ Burhan thanked the former rebel groups for their participation in SAF operations in February 2024.¹⁰² These non-state armed groups each pursue their own objectives, which only temporarily coincide with those of the SAF or (to a lesser extent) the RSF.

The RSF control a significant part of the city of Khartoum as well as large parts of the Darfur region in western Sudan, the southern states of West and North Kordofan and the state of Al-Jazira in the centre of the country. In contrast, the SAF holds most parts of Omdurman, Khartoum's sister city on the Nile, as well as the north, east and centre of Sudan. The country is moving towards a de facto split. A decisive military result cannot be expected. The SAF and RSF have different military capabilities. Because the SAF have an air force, heavy artillery and tanks, they are more focused on the defence of fixed locations. The

96 “Kiir’s Security Advisor Was Informed in Advance of Sudan War — Sources”, *Sudans Post* (online), 2 July 2023, <https://www.sudanspost.com/kiirs-security-advisor-was-informed-in-advance-of-sudan-war-sources/> (accessed 11 December 2023).

97 Oscar Rickett, “Sudan: How an RSF Attack on Burhan Set the Tone for a Bitter Conflict”, *Middle East Eye* (online), 3 May 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-attack-burhan-rsf-set-tone-bitter-conflict> (accessed 8 January 2024).

98 Sudan Conflict Observatory, “Evidence of Alleged Widespread, Systematic, and Targeted Mass Atrocities in Darfur, 15 April — 10 July 2023”, 14 July 2023, <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/apps/sites/#/sudan/pages/darfur-1> (accessed 30 August 2023).

99 Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, “Breaches of the Genocide Convention in Darfur, Sudan (April 2023 — April 2024): An Independent Inquiry”, Montreal, 14 April 2024, <https://www.raoulwallenbergcentre.org/en/news/2024-04-14> (accessed 3 May 2024).

100 Ali Mahmoud Ali, “Situation Update: August 2023. Sudan: Heightened Violence in Kordofan Region as More Militia Groups Step into the Conflict”, *ACLEDA* (online), 11 August 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/08/11/sudan-situation-update-august-2023-heightened-violence-in-kordofan-region-as-more-militia-groups-step-into-the-conflict/> (accessed 30 August 2023).

101 “Darfur Movements: ‘We Renounce Our Neutrality’”, *Sudan War Monitor* (online), 16 November 2023, <https://sudanwarmonitor.com/p/darfur-movements-we-renounce-our> (accessed 11 December 2023).

102 “Al-Burhan Welcomes Darfur Groups in ‘Battle of Dignity,’ Calls for Future Integration”, *Sudan Tribune*, 21 February 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article282507/> (accessed 29 February 2024).

RSF have highly mobile infantry on pick-up trucks, which are also equipped with portable air defence missiles and drones. To evade air strikes, the RSF dispersed quickly across the city of Khartoum and took over residential buildings, which the SAF targeted with explosive weapons.¹⁰³ In the meantime, the RSF have captured several SAF bases and seized more heavy weapons. The RSF benefit from arms deliveries from the UAE via Chad, while the SAF benefit from deliveries of Turkish drones through Egypt as well as drones and other weapons from Iran.¹⁰⁴

SAF leader Burhan called on the population to arm themselves.¹⁰⁵ The SAF opened recruitment camps in the areas under their control, and the RSF also recruited more fighters. Some units are switching allegiance between the two parties. These calls and recruitments have led to a further militarisation of society. As a result, the opportunity for civilian forces to make their presence felt politically is shrinking considerably.

People are also suffering great hardship in areas that are not directly affected by the fighting.

In Khartoum, important parts of the infrastructure such as the supply of water, electricity and telecommunication services have been destroyed. A third of the population of the state of Khartoum, more than 3.5 million people, fled within the first nine months,

103 Hager Ali and Gerrit Kurtz, *Stopping the War in Sudan. Civilian Actors, Not Just the Parties to the Conflict, Should Lead the Peace Negotiations*, SWP Comment 28/2023 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, May 2023), doi: 10.18449/2023C28.

104 Declan Walsh et al., "Talking Peace in Sudan, the U.A.E. Secretly Fuels the Fight", *The New York Times* (online), 29 September 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/29/world/africa/sudan-war-united-arab-emirates-chad.html> (accessed 11 December 2023); Benoit Faucon et al., "Ignoring U.S. Calls for Peace, Egypt Delivered Drones to Sudan's Military", *The Wall Street Journal* (online), 14 October 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/world/africa/ignoring-u-s-calls-for-peace-egypt-delivered-drones-to-sudans-military-6f7fdca> (accessed 11 December 2023); "Iranian Cargo Flights Arrive in Sudan", *Sudan War Monitor*, 30 January 2024, <https://sudanwarmonitor.com/p/iranian-cargo-flights-arrive-in-sudan> (accessed 29 February 2024).

105 "El Burhan Calls for Sudan's 'Young and Capable' Civilians to Fight against RSF", *Dabanga Radio TV Online* (online), 29 June 2023, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/el-burhan-calls-for-sudans-young-and-capable-civilians-to-fight-against-rsf> (accessed 31 August 2023).

including a large part of the country's political and economic elite. The ministries controlled by the SAF have relocated their government activities to Port Sudan. During 2023, Sudan became the country with the highest number of internally displaced persons in the world (over 9 million, in addition to more than 1.8 million mixed cross-border movements including refugees).¹⁰⁶ The centralisation of the state and economy in the capital region proved to be particularly detrimental to the country during the war. During the fighting in and around Khartoum, many markets, shops and banks were destroyed, meaning that the supply of everyday goods and financial resources to the rest of the country was also severely affected.¹⁰⁷ As a result, people are suffering great hardship even in areas that are not directly affected by the fighting.¹⁰⁸

Prospects for a future political order after the war

The first few months following the start of the war saw a plethora of international mediation attempts, all of which quickly faltered. It was the African Union that brought together the largest group of states on 20 April 2023 to initiate a so-called expanded mechanism. In addition to all neighbouring states, this included Arab countries as well as the permanent members of the Security Council, the EU, Germany and other donors.¹⁰⁹ However, the AU's efforts were delayed. Meanwhile, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) announced a roadmap and presented a quartet of mediators in the form of the presidents of Ethiopia, Djibouti, South Sudan and Kenya (which chairs the group).¹¹⁰ In parallel, the US

106 International Organisation for Migration, "Regional Sudan Crisis Response. Situation Update" (Geneva, 7 March 2024), https://mena.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1686/files/documents/2024-03/sudan-regional-crisis-response-situation-update-44_0.pdf (accessed 11 March 2024).

107 Norwegian Refugee Council, *Sudan. One Hundred Days of War* (Oslo, 24 July 2023), https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/sudan-100-days-of-war/2023-nrc-sudan_100_days_final.pdf (accessed 30 August 2023).

108 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Revised Humanitarian Response Plan Sudan*, 17 May 2023.

109 African Union, *Communiqué of the Ministerial Special Session on Sudan* (Addis Ababa, 20 April 2023).

110 Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), *Final Communiqué of the 14th Ordinary Session of the IGAD Assembly of Heads of State and Government* (Djibouti, 12 June 2023).

and Saudi Arabia brought SAF and RSF negotiating delegations to Jeddah, where they signed a Humanitarian Declaration of Principles in May 2023 and created a Humanitarian Forum in November 2023, led by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA). After numerous promises of ceasefire were not honoured on both sides, the negotiations were postponed. The USA and Saudi Arabia did not involve their Quad counterparts, the UAE and the UK, or other countries in these negotiations, nor did they include civilian representatives.¹¹¹ Both the AU and IGAD promised consultations with Sudanese stakeholders from the civilian spectrum, but could not agree (as of early May 2024) on who should be invited to the consultations. Tensions between the Arab regional powers were also evident in these mediation offers. In contrast to the Jeddah talks, Egypt brought heads of state and government from Sudan's neighbouring countries to Cairo for an initiative but did not invite the parties involved in the conflict.

Various civil associations were formed and declarations made. In October 2023, a meeting of social and political actors in Addis Ababa agreed on the establishment of a Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (*Taqaddum*), whose preparatory committee is headed by former Prime Minister Hamdok. There is disagreement about who is allowed to join such coalitions and how exactly the goals should be formulated. For some, being against the war itself is not enough, because under this maxim the SAF and RSF would be treated equally, although the SAF, at least institutionally, had greater legitimacy as the national military and the RSF were responsible for massive looting in Khartoum and violence against the civilian population. *Taqaddum* was criticised as taking a one-sided position when Hamdok and Hemedti signed a joint declaration on 2 January 2024 promising an end to the war and reconstruction of the state.¹¹² Others want to create as broad a front as possible and include sympathisers of the former regime, which some

FFC leaders vehemently reject.¹¹³ The fact that many members of the elite have fled or been displaced makes coordination more difficult. A key issue that has already preoccupied the SPA and the FFC is the establishment of an effective organisation, including the appointment of leadership bodies.¹¹⁴ The relationship between political parties and the rest of civil society within the coalition remains tense.

The war will only end when there is a real chance for a new political order.

It is clear that the war in Sudan will only end if there is the prospect of a new political order. A complete military victory for SAF or RSF is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Neither renewed power-sharing between SAF and RSF nor between the security sector and political parties, as was attempted after the fall of Bashir in 2019, seems promising. In the past, international peace mediation always strengthened a system that legitimised the use of force to enforce political interests.¹¹⁵ Due to the proliferation of militias and armed groups, each pursuing their own objectives and controlling territory, no process focussing solely on SAF and RSF or even Burhan and Hemedti will suffice in any case. Given the current geopolitical tensions, unified high-level international mediation does not appear to be on the cards either. Military or other security policy guarantees from major international players are even further away. However, such guarantees would in fact be necessary to enforce an agreement to clarify the future relationship between the SAF and the RSF, including the disbanding of militias and the integration of fighters.

¹¹¹ In November 2023, IGAD took part in the negotiations, simultaneously representing the AU.

¹¹² *Addis Ababa Declaration between the Coordination Body of the Democratic Civil Forces (Taqaddum) and the Rapid Support Forces*, 2 January 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article280972/> (accessed 29 February 2024). *Taqaddum* invited both Burhan and Hemedti. However, a meeting with Burhan did not materialise by the time this study was published because the SAF leader insisted on meeting in Port Sudan.

¹¹³ Yasir Arman, "African Union-IGAD Initiative Should Not Reward Sudanese Islamists", *Sudan Tribune* (online), 1 August 2023, <https://sudantribune.com/article275619/> (accessed 30 August 2023).

¹¹⁴ Elshafie Khidir Saeed, "Sudan Trade Unions. The Nucleus of the Civil Front against the War", *Fikra for Studies and Development*, 7 July 2023, <https://us8.campaign-archive.com/?u=a52f171f5b264d075dd231cfb&id=4332462b18> (accessed 25 July 2023).

¹¹⁵ Sharath Srinivasan, *When Peace Kills Politics. International Intervention and Unending Wars in the Sudans* (London: Hurst, 2021).

Accommodation instead of Accountability: Discussing the International Approach to Sudan

The outbreak of war in Sudan also triggered a debate about the approach of Western actors during the transition process in Sudan. The implementation of the transitional government's reform plans depended crucially on the cooperation of the security sector. However, the international pressure that went beyond statements tended to primarily affect the population. In their decisions, international actors repeatedly responded to the priorities of the security forces and respected their power resources, although the non-violent, ongoing resistance of Sudanese civil society called those priorities into question.

As regards security, the UN Security Council decided to end the joint hybrid mission of the UN and AU in Darfur (UNAMID) on 31 December 2020 at the request of the Sudanese government. This left the responsibility for physical security solely with the Sudanese security forces in a region where various population groups hoped to gain more influence from the political change in Khartoum and therefore came into conflict.¹¹⁶ As the most powerful security force in Darfur, the RSF emerged strengthened from the withdrawal of UNAMID.

The security forces also played a dominant role in the economy. They controlled most of the economic output and benefited the most from tax privileges. However, conditions for the multilateral debt relief process and the mobilisation of international financial support did not envisage tapping into the re-

sources of the security sector, but instead cutting subsidies and liberalising the exchange rate regime. The security forces made a one-off voluntary contribution of two billion US dollars to the national budget in 2020, one sixth of the planned expenditure.¹¹⁷ Research into the economic resources of the security forces suggests that further contributions would have been possible in subsequent years.¹¹⁸

Sudan's international partners repeatedly faced a similar challenge. Should they support processes that Sudanese elites had largely negotiated with each other and which, at least on paper, offered the possibility of further reform? Or should they stay out or exert more targeted pressure because they did not believe the promises of the security forces and political elites?

In any case, the institutional conditions and political decisions of the international partners created some conflicts of interest. Without the withdrawal of UNAMID, the deployment and training of a joint protection force of the signatories to the Juba peace agreement, which was supposed to provide security, could have been carried out more thoroughly and with less time pressure in view of the escalating violence in parts of Darfur. The US government made

116 Gerrit Kurtz, *The Spoilers of Darfur. Sudan's Protracted Political Crisis and the Intensifying Violence in Darfur Are Closely Connected*, SWP Comment 53/2022 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2022), doi: 10.18449/2022C53.

117 International Monetary Fund, *Sudan 2019 Article IV Consultation Staff Report*, Country Report, no. 20/72 (Washington, D.C., March 2020), paragraph 33.

118 Illegal gold exports alone may have accounted for up to US\$13.4 billion annually: "Russia Is Plundering Gold in Sudan to Boost Putin's War Effort in Ukraine", CNN, 29 July 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/07/29/africa/sudan-russia-gold-investigation-cmd-intl/in dex.html> (accessed 14 October 2023).

Sudan's removal from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, which was a prerequisite for economic aid and debt relief, dependent on Sudan normalising its diplomatic relations with Israel in the context of the Abraham accords.

The seemingly pragmatic approaches that Sudan's international partners pursued in conjunction with the Hamdok government and the FFC repeatedly strengthened those who had material power, especially the military and the security forces. However, this kind of consideration was questionable in view of the well-organised non-violent resistance by civil society. In retrospect, some of the diplomats involved criticised this prioritisation.¹¹⁹

Time and again, key international players such as the Quad sought a power-sharing deal with the military, even after their representatives had openly lied to them.¹²⁰ After Hamdok's controversial agreement with Burhan on 21 November 2021, UN Secretary-General António Guterres caused displeasure amongst the resistance committees in Sudan by appealing to the "common sense" of all parties involved, calling it "very dangerous for Sudan" to question the agreement.¹²¹ This kind of international support helped to consolidate the position of the generals who were under massive domestic political pressure.

At the same time, the punitive measures taken by international actors hit the population hard. The World Bank and international donors suspended large parts of their aid immediately after the coup. Members of resistance committees and representatives of development organisations could not understand why even funds for projects outside the direct control of the coup government were permanently suspended, even if economic pressure helped to

isolate the coup leaders.¹²² Neither the USA nor the EU were able to agree on targeted sanctions against companies or individuals from the security sector until the start of the war,¹²³ with the exception of US sanctions against the Central Reserve Police.¹²⁴ At least in retrospect, stakeholders such as the then US special envoy for the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, argued that more pressure might have changed the security forces' considerations: "We avoided exacting consequences for repeated acts of impunity that might have otherwise forced a change of calculus. Instead, we reflexively appeased and accommodated the two warlords. We considered ourselves pragmatic. hindsight suggests wishful thinking to be a more accurate description."¹²⁵

Would a different approach have been more successful? Sudanese actors and dynamics played the most important role. Debates between international actors partly mirrored the discussions that took place in Sudanese civil society. Perhaps a key problem was that the question of how to deal with Sudan's violent actors was presented as either a matter of accommodation or complete rejection. Both positions were unrealistic. The highly mobilised civil society could not be repressed, not even by force. Nor was it possible to negotiate away the dominance of the security forces over the means of coercion and the economic resources. During Sudan's transition, more priority should have been given to gradually reducing the power of the security forces, especially through deeper institutional reforms, international incentives and more political distance.

119 "Former Horn of Africa EU Envoy: Sudan Descending into 'Civil War'", *CNN*, 2 May 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/tv/2023/05/02/amanpour-alex-rondos-sudan.cnn> (accessed 11 August 2023).

120 Abdi Latif Dahir and Declan Walsh, "'They Lied.' Inside the Frantic Days Leading to Sudan's Coup", *The New York Times* (online), 29 October 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/29/world/africa/sudan-coup-general.html> (accessed 11 August 2023).

121 "Press Conference by Secretary-General António Guterres at United Nations Headquarters", 1 December 2021 (SG/SM/21054), <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sgsm21054.doc.htm> (accessed 11 August 2023).

122 Interviews with members of resistance committees as well as humanitarian and development organisations, Khartoum, March/April 2022.

123 Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer, "The Battle for Khartoum Exposes Waning U.S. Influence", *Foreign Policy* (online), 3 December 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/03/sudan-military-coup-khartoum-us-influence/> (accessed 11 August 2023).

124 U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Sudanese Central Reserve Police for Serious Human Rights Abuse", press release, Washington, D.C., 21 March 2022, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0668> (accessed 11 August 2023).

125 Jeffrey Feltman, "The Eruption of Violence in Sudan Shows the Generals Can't Be Trusted", *The Washington Post* (online), 18 April 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/04/18/sudan-civil-war-generals-negotiations/> (accessed 11 August 2023).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The war in Sudan is an expression of the enormous risks involved in changing an entrenched authoritarian regime dominated by violent entrepreneurs. Bashir's fall was a consequence of the contradictions of his system, but did not represent its end. Ultimately, the war between the SAF and RSF is a late consequence of the way in which the NCP regime allowed militias to fight insurgencies and stoked rivalry in the security sector in order to secure its own rule. Since 2019, civilian forces have not succeeded in substantially reducing the capacities of the security sector. Rather, power-sharing in the transitional government gave the security forces the opportunity to torpedo its work and, in the case of the RSF, to establish themselves in the country's political structure. Since the FFC1 always feared another military coup, they became at least implicitly dependent on the RSF, which Hemedti knew how to exploit. Both Hamdok and the FFC1 found it difficult to make decisive use of the power resource that could have been their greatest asset: the legitimacy of a well-organised and mobilised civil society.

Germany supported Sudan's transition processes in a variety of ways. The German government co-founded the Friends of Sudan contact group, organised the first partnership conference for Sudan and negotiated, together with the UK, the mandate for UNITAMS in the UN Security Council. In September 2019, Heiko Maas was the first Western foreign minister to meet the transitional government in Khartoum, followed by Federal President Steinmeier in February of the following year.¹²⁶ This marked a change in Germany's foreign policy, since the German government, like

other Western governments, had favoured rapprochement with Bashir's regime shortly before his fall.¹²⁷

In 2020, the Bundestag decided to resume bilateral development cooperation with Sudan after a thirty-year break.¹²⁸ Germany was also involved in the negotiation, design and financing of both the Family Support Programme and the multilateral debt relief process. However, the coup meant that these entry points for German support were no longer available.

For donor countries such as Germany, it was difficult to find effective access to the Sudanese democracy movement in its entirety. The Federal Foreign Office can only directly support organisations that are officially registered, which many civil society movements shied away from. Intermediary organisations such as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Goethe Institute were able to take on some projects concerning democracy promotion. However, discussions about economic reforms and financial aid were largely centred on the government as the direct counterpart. Donors such as the German government were faced with the challenge of setting up projects that would directly support the civilian part of the transitional government while at the same time be resilient to changes such as another coup. The Family Support Programme did the former, but not the latter.

Germany should learn from these experiences in order to contribute to ending the devastating war and to lay the foundations for a new transition process.

■ The German government should lobby its regional partners, who should retain the lead in mediation,¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Germany and the EU cooperated with Sudan on migration management as part of the Khartoum Process. The UK conducted a strategic dialogue with Sudan. The USA lifted most of the sanctions against Sudan in 2017.

¹²⁸ However, specific bilateral development cooperation projects with the Sudanese transitional government could not begin before the coup in 2021 made them impossible.

¹²⁹ Since the end of UNITAMS, which was forced by the Sudanese authorities in December 2023, the UN has only

¹²⁶ Gerrit Kurtz, *Steinmeier Visits Khartoum. Seizing the Opportunity for Sudan's Transition*, DGAP Commentary, no. 5 (Berlin: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik [DGAP], February 2020).

in favour of a broad and inclusive approach to mediation. In addition to representatives of the SAF and RSF, armed groups with control over territory and a range of civilian actors should be involved in a multi-stakeholder format. Where desired by civilian actors such as (but not limited to) members of the Taqaddum coalition, Germany should make offers that can strengthen their capacity to participate effectively in a political process.

- Germany should support civilian Sudanese actors in developing approaches for dealing with perpetrators of violence in a future political order. Important areas for this include security sector reform, transitional justice and the promotion of the rule of law. Any ceasefire that regional actors may agree to with the parties involved in the conflict will only lead to longer-term peace if there is at least the prospect of the cornerstones of a new political order. The central challenge will be to ensure that the security forces also find themselves in this order and that they agree to a reduction in their economic and political power. They will probably do so only under pressure.
- Germany should endeavour to extinguish the material and military support network of the Sudanese violent entrepreneurs. Companies operating in the EU internal market should be prohibited from doing business with RSF, SAF and their respective most significant companies. To this end, the EU member states should agree on further names for the sanctions regime list established in October 2023.¹³⁰ In addition to Sudanese companies, these measures should particularly affect

played a minor role in Sudan beyond humanitarian issues. In November 2023, Secretary-General Guterres appointed the Algerian diplomat Ramtane Lamamra as his personal envoy to Sudan, whose office is supported by Germany, among others. Lamamra's focus has been to coordinate the various existing mediation platforms. Security Council Report, *Sudan: Vote on Resolution Ending the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan* (New York 1 December 2023), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2023/12/sudan-vote-on-resolution-ending-the-un-integrated-transition-assistance-mission-in-sudan.php> (accessed 12 December 2023).

130 European Union, *Council Regulation (EU) 2023/2147 Concerning Restrictive Measures in View of Activities Undermining the Stability and Political Transition of Sudan* (Brussels, 9 October 2023), <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/2147/oj>. On 22 January 2024, the Council listed six companies, three from RSF and three from SAF, under this sanction regime.

Emirati companies that buy gold from the RSF, one of which apparently even has a subsidiary in Germany.¹³¹ In order to uncover the complex network of companies in the Sudanese security sector and its international business partners, Germany should also strengthen the relevant investigative capacities of the EU. The sanctions should be linked to a coherent political strategy to push back the influence of the violent entrepreneurs and to end the war.

- Germany should lobby members of the UN Security Council to extend the UN arms embargo on Darfur to the whole of Sudan and thus also the mandate of the UN Group of Experts. In principle, both the permanent members of the UN Security Council and the neighbouring states have already spoken out against military and financial support to the parties involved in the conflict.¹³²
- In cooperation with a future transitional government in Sudan, the institutional anchoring of reforms should take centre stage. Inter alia, this would mean forming a parliamentary assembly and strengthening civilian control and participation formats at state and municipal level. Even under conditions of peace, it will take a great deal of perseverance to reorganise the Sudanese state according to the interests of the population. Nevertheless, a new civilian government should be encouraged to fill important positions in the judiciary and administration according to competence and not according to political or other irrelevant criteria.
- In the meantime, the German government should cooperate with international and non-governmental organisations that support Sudanese civil society and its political self-organisation in the long term, even under conditions of war. This should include the provision of platforms, expertise, financial support and skills training.¹³³ Sudanese actors have shown that they are capable of networking and organising themselves despite the immense challenges of war and displacement.¹³⁴

131 Hoffmann and Lanfranchi, *Kleptocracy versus Democracy* (see note 7), 43.

132 African Union, *Declaration of the Expanded Mechanism on the Crisis in Sudan* (Addis Ababa, 4 December 2023).

133 Jakob Hensing et al., *Supporting Civil Society in Acute Crises* (Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute, March 2023).

134 One example is the conference on humanitarian issues that took place in Cairo in November 2023 with over 400 participants, more than 100 of whom travelled from Sudan.

Abbreviations

AU	African Union
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EU	European Union
FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
GIS	General Intelligence Service
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
NCP	National Congress Party
NIF	National Islamic Front
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Service
NUP	National Umma Party
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SCP	Sudanese Communist Party
SLA	Sudan Liberation Army
SLA-AW	Sudan Liberation Army-Abdel Wahid (al-Nur)
SLA-MM	Sudan Liberation Army-Mini Minawi
SPA	Sudanese Professionals Association
SPLA/M(-N)	Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (North)
SRF	Sudan Revolutionary Front
TLC	Transitional Legislative Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNAMID	United Nations – African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur
UNITAMS	United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

