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## Sudan's Transition: Living in Bad Surroundings

**AUTHOR**  
Gunnar M. Sørbø



UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN

**CMI** CHR. MICHELSEN  
INSTITUTE

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**Author**

Gunnar M. Sørbø

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## 1 Introduction

Following the 2019 April revolution, Sudan now finds itself in the middle of a profound and uncertain political transition. Should the transition succeed, the country could move in directions that are novel in Sudan's history. Should it fail, state fragmentation and new civil war could follow, with consequences not only for Sudan but for the wider region as well.

Developments since the overthrow of President Bashir have shown that the transition is painful. The protracted economic crisis that began under the former regime is worsening. The country's elites are still divided. Power remains contested, not only between the civilian and security elements that currently share power, but also between multiple political actors, parties and armed groups trying to establish their place in the new political-military order being forged in Khartoum. Devastating floods and the Covid-19 outbreak have further complicated the process.

The external dimension of the transition has received less attention but is significant. External actors play an important role in shaping the outcome of Sudan's revolution. The nature of these external interests and ways in which they interact with internal processes in Sudan's divided polity form the subject of this paper.

## 2 The international dimension

Since independence in 1956, cross-border and intra-regional dynamics have always been closely interlinked with conflicts in Sudan. There has been some measure of third-party involvement from all countries in the immediate region as well as in the wider Middle East. Several states, particularly Egypt, have perceived their national interests to be affected by developments in Sudan. During the Cold War, Sudan's relationship with the superpowers fluctuated according to the ideological posture of regimes in Khartoum and the country's alignment in the Arab-Israeli conflict. To illustrate, when I first arrived as a student in Khartoum in June 1970, the Nimeiri regime had close links with the Soviet Union and East Europe; when I left at the end of 1971, after a coup followed by a counter-coup, Nimeiri had turned to the United States (US) and western Europe for support.

Actors in the wider international community also played a vital role in promoting the negotiations that led to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 2005, which was followed by South Sudan's independence in 2011; there was strong external involvement in the Darfur crisis; and after 9/11, the 'war on terror' led to increased US engagement in Sudan, as Washington claimed that the Khartoum government which had harbored Osama bin Laden before he left for Afghanistan, was linked to a global, militant Islamist movement. The result was the US designation of Sudan as a 'state sponsoring

terrorism' (SST) and introduction of severe US sanctions. As expected, and indeed intended, both measures have had dramatic consequences for Sudan's economy.

At the time of writing, Sudan is struggling to manage its relations with several powerful states, run by governments with their own agendas in the larger region, including views on how Sudan should be ruled. Internally divided and desperate for financial aid, the ruling coalition in Khartoum is vulnerable to external exploitation and pressure of this kind.

### 3 A deteriorating economy

Sudan's dependence on external actors stems to a large extent from economic problems and increasing debt that started in earnest during Nimeiri's regime (1969-1985) but became particularly acute when the country lost most of its export incomes from oil after South Sudan gained independence in 2011.

When the Islamists came to power in 1989, the structural foundation of the large traditional sector within agriculture had been eroded, and the modern sector had stagnated and declined. While the Islamists' 'civilizing project' advocated self-sufficiency in food production and manufacturing, the decline continued. Development funding was routed through patronage networks and mainly benefited clients of the regime. The combination of massive corruption and the continuation of wars and conflicts threatened to cripple the economy, but once oil exports started in 1999, Sudan became wealthier and patronage networks widened, pulling more people into the Islamist camp. By 2010, the economy was more than twice the size it had been in 1999; yet social services spending remained among the lowest in the world on a per capita basis.

South Sudan's secession removed the southern oil fields from the control of the Khartoum government, reducing Sudan's oil production by three-quarters. Revenues more than halved, and the economy went into recession.

While such developments caused growing poverty, a more immediate problem facing President Bashir was that he had positioned himself at the top of a pyramid presiding over an extensive and expensive patronage system. His support was mainly found in the affluent urban elite, a salaried urban middle class that had benefited from the oil boom after 1999, and the army and rival security bodies. To maintain this transactional relationship, the president had to satisfy the needs of his constituencies on a continuous basis (ACLED 2020b).

The 'decarbonization' of the Sudan economy forced Bashir to increase his reliance on external patrons. Despite being indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2009 for war crimes in Darfur, he traveled extensively, to the oil-rich Gulf countries, China and Russia in order to get financial support vital for his political survival. At a meeting with Putin in Sochi (November 2017), he asked

for 'protection from the aggressive acts of the United States' (Radio Dabanga, 26 November 2017). At the same time, his diplomats tried in vain to get Sudan off the terrorist list in Washington.

In the process, Bashir was forced by Saudi-Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to cut his ties with the Shi'a regime in Teheran which had established 'cultural centers' in Khartoum and was providing military training. To further please his Gulf patrons, he leased the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to the Saudi-led military campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen. And he applauded the European Union (EU) decision to fund anti-immigration patrols on the borders with Libya, which also gave him some legitimacy in Europe.

In the end, however, Bashir was unable to obtain sufficient support, primarily because he was no longer trusted among his Gulf neighbors, or by the Egyptians. The 2017 crisis in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), discussed below, further weakened his position. When he was forced to gradually lift subsidies on flour and fuel, this was a step too far for the lower strata of middle classes at the bottom of his transactional pyramid and triggered his downfall.

#### 4 Trump's last deal?

A critical factor for the outcome of Sudan's revolution will be whether the civilian-led government is able to revive the economy which has steadily worsened. The single biggest obstacle to economic recovery is the SST designation and remaining US restrictions. An immediate priority for the transitional government, therefore, was to court the Trump administration in order to have Sudan removed from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism.

The SST designation was placed on Sudan by President Clinton in 1993 and has been a major obstacle to normalization of Sudan's international financial relations. It has prevented the country from seeking assistance and loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and made it ineligible for debt relief, a great problem given an international debt of about USD 60 billion. Until the designation is removed, private businesses will be reluctant to invest in Sudan and international banks will not reconnect to the country's financial system. Sudan is currently one of only four countries – along with Iran, North Korea and Syria – on the US blacklist.

Washington has also made lifting of SST subject to ongoing legal proceedings related to Sudan's role in the al-Qaeda attacks on US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salam in 1998 (which killed more than 200 people, including 12 US citizens) and on the US navy warship USS Cole in Yemen's Aden harbor in 2000 (killing 17 US sailors). A country on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism does not have legal immunity from civil lawsuits filed in the US by families of terrorist victims. Sudan has always denied involvement in the attack on USS Cole. As for the embassy bombings, Sudan is accused

of harboring al-Qaeda militants before the attack, providing them with Sudanese passports and facilitating transport of weapons and money across the border into Kenya.

While Bashir's regime in some respects cooperated with the US and other western countries on security issues – for instance, the famous French terrorist Carlos 'the Jackal' was handed over to the French by Sudan in 1994 – it was not until the 2019 revolution that hopes were raised in Khartoum that the SST designation would be removed.

On October 19, 2020, President Trump tweeted that he would do so as soon as USD 335 million had been paid as compensation to families of the victims of the al-Qaeda attacks. Sudan quickly deposited the money in an escrow account, probably paid with the help of non-Sudanese actors. At the time, Trump did not mention Sudan's relationship with Israel, but it soon became clear that normalization with Israel would also be part of the deal. Pressure had been building up after a secret meeting between the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the Sovereign Council, in Uganda in February; and in late August, US State Secretary Mike Pompeo traveled to Khartoum. On September 15, the normalization agreement between Israel and UAE and Bahrain was announced, followed, on October 23, by a televised conference call, where Trump triumphantly declared that Sudan had also agreed to normalize relations with Israel. This despite the fact that just three weeks before, he had decided to extend for one year the so-called 'national emergency' with respect to Sudan, which means that Sudan is still seen as a threat to US national security and foreign policy.

By November 2020, Sudan had not yet been formally removed from the SST list, but Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok has claimed this will happen on December 11. The status of the agreement with Israel is still unclear. On November 23, Israel Army Radio announced that Tel Aviv had sent its first official delegation to Khartoum to discuss security matters, to be followed by a larger delegation to discuss economic cooperation; yet, the cabinet in Khartoum was not aware of such a visit according to its spokesperson (Sudan Tribune, November 24, 2020). Information from the cabinet, including from Hamdok, suggests that the agreement is preliminary and will have to be approved by the yet-to-be formed legislative council.

Khartoum fears that additional pressure by the US for rapid normalization with Israel will create new rifts in the fragile ruling coalition and undermine the transition. Some civilian groups support normalization, both because of Sudan's desperate economic situation and because they have seen how the Palestinian issue has been used by authoritarian leaders in the Middle East for decades to deflect attention from domestic problems. However, it seems clear that the deal has been promoted mainly by the military, acting upon pressure from the US and the Emirates, probably supported as well by Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

## 5 Regional actors

As already indicated, Sudan's decade-long turbulence and current transition must be understood within the broader configuration of relations in its neighborhood - the Gulf, Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. This configuration includes increasing rivalries and competing interests among powerful Middle Eastern states, and, most recently, the dramatic upheavals across the border in Ethiopia. The winds sweeping through from the Gulf and elsewhere will have a strong influence on the direction that Sudan takes over the coming years.

As discussed in a new report from the US Institute of Peace, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and Turkey have all significantly increased their engagement in the areas around the Red Sea in recent years (USIP 2020).

The Gulf states pursue ambitious plans to diversify their economies and consider Sudan as an ideal location for investments as well as a 'breadbasket' for their own populations. They also increasingly see the Horn as 'a critical arena in which to gain strategic depth against what they see as an expansionist Iran' (USIP 2020: 24). Saudi-Arabia and the UAE have long worried about Iranian encirclement through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb. These concerns were further strengthened by Iranian support for the Houthi movement in Yemen, which led to military intervention by a Saudi-led coalition in 2015 (ibid.).

As part of their security-focused thinking, the Emirates and Saudi Arabia have engaged in port development and the establishment of military bases in the region. The UAE now has a base in Eritrea (Assab) and has begun the construction of another in Somalia, while Saudi Arabia has signed an agreement for a base in Djibouti. In Sudan's only seaport, Port Sudan, there was great anger among dock workers in April 2020 when it became known that the transitional government had decided to give the contract for running the container part of the port to Dubai Port World, a private company based in the UAE (Al Jazeera, April 25, 2020).

Sudan is also affected by the ongoing diplomatic crisis within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that began in 2017. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain broke relations with and imposed a land, sea and air blockade of Qatar. Supported by Egypt, they accused Qatar of supporting terrorism, cooperating with Iran, interfering in the internal affairs of its neighbors, harboring dissidents from other countries, engaging in unfriendly media coverage of its neighbors, and subverting regional security and stability.

The GCC crisis added another layer of complexity to an already fractured geopolitical landscape. For many years, Qatar provided much financial and political support to Sudan, including efforts to build peace in Darfur. For almost three years, Sudan under Bashir tried hard, together with Kuwait and Oman, to adopt a neutral position. However, when Qatar Airways which had 22 weekly flights



between Doha and Khartoum, stopped flying on April 1, 2020, only a few days before the downfall of Bashir's regime, it was clear that Sudan had been forced to pick sides in favor of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

As part of his erratic diplomacy during the last years of his rule, Bashir also approached Turkey for cooperation and assistance. President Erdogan was quick to align with Qatar in the GCC conflict. Turkey maintains a military facility in Doha and has signed another agreement to establish a naval base there. Erdogan also sees military access to the Red Sea as crucial in support of Turkey's wider regional ambitions (USIP 2020: 26). In 2017, Ankara was granted a 99-year lease to rehabilitate the ruined Ottoman city of Suakin on the Red Sea, to manage the port after rehabilitation, and turn it into a major transit point for pilgrims on their way to and from Saudi Arabia's holy sites. This caused consternation in Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which claimed this would result in a military base just across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia. The point was denied by both Ankara and Khartoum.

Different attitudes towards political Islam, and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, have fueled the GCC rift and influenced how Gulf states approach the Sudanese revolution. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt seek to limit the Brotherhood's influence which they see as a main threat, along with Iran, against their own regimes. Qatar and Turkey are more supportive of the movement. One reason why the relationship between Egypt and Sudan cooled after the military coup against President Morsi (July 2013), was the accusation that Sudan harbored and trained members of the Brotherhood who had fled Egypt. After General Sisi came to power in Cairo, Egypt declared the Brotherhood to be a terrorist organization and hundreds of its members were killed or imprisoned.

Egyptian activity along the Red Sea coast has also increased in recent years, not just because of the alliance with the Gulf countries, but also because it is wary of ceding too much influence in the Red Sea region to other Arab states, including its partners (USIP 2020: 27).

## 6 The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam

The more important issue for Egypt, however, is the Nile River which provides the country with almost all its water. This year Ethiopia started filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a USD 4.8 billion hydroelectric dam on the Blue Nile that is bound to transform relations between Egypt and its upstream neighbors.

Officials in Addis Ababa argue that the GERD will have no major impact on the water flow into the Nile, instead arguing that the hydropower dam will provide benefits to both Sudan and Egypt in the form of affordable electric power and as a major mechanism for the management of the Nile, including the mitigation of droughts and water salinity.

The Egyptian government has called the filling of the dam an 'existential threat', fearing the dam will negatively impact the country's water supplies. At this point, though, since the GERD is completed, Egypt has shifted its position to trying to secure a political agreement over the timetable for filling the GERD's reservoir and how the GERD will be managed, particularly during droughts.

Sudan has for years been caught between the competing interests of Egypt and Ethiopia. The 1959 Nile Water Agreement divided control of the Nile water between Egypt and Sudan only and Khartoum was, like Cairo, initially against the Ethiopian project. But in March 2012, Bashir announced that Sudan supported the construction of the dam. Bashir feared being isolated from the great majority of Nile basin countries which rejected the former treaties on the division of the Nile waters. He also seems to have concluded for the first time that Sudan's security and economy depended more on its relations with Ethiopia than with Egypt (Young 2020:11). The relationship with the latter had soured not only by Egypt's lack of trust in the Islamic regime in Khartoum after the attempt, orchestrated by Khartoum, to assassinate Egyptian President Mubarak in Addis Ababa (1995), but also because Egypt had occupied (in the 1990s) the Hala'ib Triangle which is an area adjacent to the Red Sea and claimed by Sudan.

According to Sudanese thinking at the time, The GERD would enable Sudan to use more water from its own allocation, instead of allowing this water to flow downstream to Egypt. It would end the seasonal fluctuations of the Blue Nile and allow the expansion of agriculture, thereby permitting two or three crop rotations every year instead of one (ibid.). Yet, the fear lingered that the operation of the GERD could threaten the safety of Sudan's own dams and make it more difficult for the government to manage its own development projects.

Sudan has been active in promoting mediation from AU, but there is still no agreement on the role that the dam will play in mitigating droughts. The three countries have agreed that when the flow of Nile water to the dam falls below 35-40 billion cubic meters per year, that would constitute a drought. At that point, according to Egypt and Sudan, Ethiopia would have to release some of the water in the dam's reservoir to address the drought. Ethiopia, however, prefers to have the flexibility to make decisions on how to deal with droughts. Afraid that a drought might appear during the filling period, Egypt wants the filling to take place over a much longer period (Mbaku 2020).

Both Egypt and Ethiopia have tried to sway Sudan towards their respective positions, which has deepened factionalism within the transitional government in Khartoum. Over the last year, the conflict intensified as Egypt has managed to secure full support from the White House. In fact, when the deal on Sudan's normalization with Israel was announced, Donald Trump recklessly stated on TV that the Egyptians 'should blow up the dam... they have to do something'. The GERD could become the catalyst for a military or proxy conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt, placing Sudan in a very difficult position.

## 7 Sudan's relations with Ethiopia

During the Derg regime (1974-1987), relations between Ethiopia and Sudan were conflictual. Addis Ababa was aligned with the Soviet Union and Sudan supported Ethiopian and Eritrean liberation movements. Things started to change during the latter part of the 1990s. As part of the reversal of Sudanese positions regarding the Renaissance Dam, Bashir started a process of reconciliation and good neighborly relations that continued for two decades. As Young wrote, this may have been Bashir's major foreign policy achievement (Young 2020).

After the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi in 2012, relations remained positive. The rise to power in Ethiopia of Abiy Ahmed in 2018 again introduced uncertainty in the relations between the two countries. The main reason was increasing political conflict in Ethiopia. At the time of writing, this has escalated dramatically into a war between government forces and those of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which dominated Ethiopian politics since Mengistu's fall in 1987.

In Addis Ababa, there have been concerns about a possible Khartoum-Tigray alliance, because Sudanese military and political officials had developed close relations with the Tigrayans during the reign of Meles. In 2018, Abiy warned Sudan not to meet with the TPLF (Young 2020). Given current developments in Ethiopia, combined with the conflict over the Renaissance Dam, Addis Ababa will be wary of any signs that Egypt and Sudan might be involved in supporting the Tigrayans. So far, Sudan has offered to mediate in the Ethiopian conflict, along with other countries as well as the African Union (AU), and announced on November 30 it had arrested one of the Tigray militias leaders.

Their shared border has also proved to be a continuous irritant in the relations between Sudan and Ethiopia. This is particularly the case in the Al Fashaga area, southeast of the Sudanese town Gedaref, which has 600,000 acres of fertile land that has proved attractive to poor Ethiopian peasants. On the Ethiopian side, a main border issue that crops up from time to time, concerns movements of small arms from Sudan to rebel movements in Ethiopia (ibid.).

On the other hand, Abiy was invited and played a key role as a mediator between the parties to the revolution in Sudan and helped pave the way for the agreement on transitional arrangements. This also reflects the fact that important elements in Sudan's transition would like to see even closer relations with Addis Ababa, which they view as a more liberal counterpoint to Egypt and the Gulf states. There is also the point that some ethnic groups straddle the borders; and for years, Sudan provided refuge for large Ethiopian (and Eritrean) populations as well as support for the rebel movements that came to power in 1991 after the fall of the oppressive Derg regime under Mengistu Haile Mariam.

At the time of writing, the movement of refugees goes the other way as thousands of Tigrayans have come across the Setit River into East Sudan. This is a part of Sudan which has seen rising inter-ethnic and urban violence during the last two years, and the influx of refugees, including ethnic groups with tribal relatives on the Sudanese side of the border, could escalate problems.

## 8 The Russians are coming

As the US has largely retreated from its role as the dominant external political power in the Red Sea arena, Russia is actively seeking to increase its influence. China's engagement, except for its military presence in Djibouti, remains anchored in economic activities.

Just before the revolution, in March 2019, Sudan and Russia signed a draft military agreement that involved a fleet logistics center near Port Sudan, which Bashir had apparently offered the previous year. On November 13, 2020, the Russian Government announced that Putin had authorized the signing of a draft agreement with Sudan on the establishment of a naval facility. The agreement would be valid for 25 years, with possibilities for extension, and able to accommodate up to four ships at a time and house up to 300 personnel.

Given that Khartoum is in the last stages of finalizing an important agreement with the US relating to the SST designation and depends on the Gulf countries for much needed financial aid, the announcement came as a great surprise. It sounded too much like the kind of contradictory decisions that sometimes were made by President Bashir. Indeed, a few days later, the government in Khartoum stated it would require more time before being ready to sign.

## 9 Conclusions: Living in bad surroundings

During the last decade, the geopolitical landscape which makes up Sudan's neighborhood has been fundamentally reshaped. Sudan and the Horn of Africa are now an integral part of security systems of the Middle East, the western parts of the Indian Ocean and the eastern Mediterranean, including Libya (USIP 2020).

This is a volatile and conflict-prone region where state and non-state actors compete to gain military and political advantage and undermine their adversaries. Their rivalry has undermined efforts to stabilize the most conflict-afflicted parts of the region, particularly in Yemen, Libya and Somalia. In Somalia, both Qatar and Turkey back the central government in Mogadishu against the federal states supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In Libya, Turkey plans to build two military bases and supports the internationally recognized government in Tripoli against the UAE-backed Libyan National Army of Khalifa Haftar.

Although weakened by domestic wars and conflicts, Sudan under Bashir was not a passive bystander to events and developments in the larger region. After taking power in 1989, the Islamist government under the ideological leadership of Hassan Turabi entertained international ambitions on behalf of Islam. As noted above, one result was the imposition of severe US sanctions. In addition to facilitating the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, there was also the attempted assassination of President Mubarak in Addis Ababa (see above), which badly affected the relationship with Egypt. Sudanese truck convoys, accused of carrying arms to Hamas on the Gaza Strip, were on at least two occasions annihilated by missiles in the northern desert along the Red Sea, probably by Israel. Flirting with Iran and Turkey were also among the activities that caused anger among Sudan's closest neighbors. And in 2011, Bashir, after having blamed Libya for supporting separatists in Darfur, helped to arm the Libyan opposition which toppled Gaddafi. In brief, Sudan was for many years an active player in the politics of the larger region, including areas west and south of Sudan (South Sudan, Chad, Central African Republic) which are not part of this paper. This is part of the legacy of the former regime which the current transitional government must live with and try to handle.

At present, Sudan is politically weak and divided as well as economically bankrupt, and the increasingly unstable environment in the region and beyond poses great challenges to the country's transition. The fragile government is facing continuous pressure to pick sides in external rivalries or risk losing assistance. The point was clearly illustrated in 2019 when demonstrations in Khartoum against the Saudis and the Emiratis made the two countries hold back USD 2.5 billion out of 3 billion they had promised as financial assistance after the revolution.

The situation is further complicated by the continuous internal disputes in Khartoum, not only between the civilian and military components of the government, but also internally among the civilian groups and parties, which means that there will always be a risk of domestic actors drawing upon the support of external actors in order to influence directions and decisions.

At the time of writing, power in Khartoum is about to be reorganized as rebel groups from the peripheries will join the government in accordance with the Juba Peace Agreement signed on October 3. They will operate alongside a fractious civilian coalition, appoint members to a new legislative assembly, and their forces will be integrated into the national army over a period of several years. This will all be very demanding and happens in a situation where the economy is in free fall and where violence has been on the increase, particularly in the towns of East Sudan but in other urban areas as well. According to Hamdok, the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement takes place in extremely complex circumstances, locally and internationally, and faces serious financial challenges (Radio Dabanga, November 30, 2020).

As has been discussed in a recent report by ACLED (2020a), the big question is this: To what extent will this arduous process bring about a 'revolutionary' peace in accordance with ideals of plurality,

democracy and equality? Or will the reordering of power be designed in such a way that the system, in one way or another, will continue to be dominated by Sudan's security organs, bent on accumulating capital and assets for themselves at the expense of justice and development for a population where food insecurity and poverty have been steadily rising?

While the outcome is highly uncertain, external actors and developments are likely to play an important role.

Since the April revolution, the cards have been stacked in favor of a troika consisting of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Egypt, with backing from the Trump administration, particularly regarding the Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile and normalization of relations with Israel. Many will also claim that it is only the rich Gulf countries that are able to provide the amount of financial assistance that Sudan needs.

The American attitude to the revolution is not entirely clear. Representatives of the State Department have come out strongly in support of a peaceful transition to democracy in Sudan, and Trump is likely to clear with Congress the removal of Sudan from the SST list. But Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were quick to support the Transitional Military Council after the removal of Bashir. While they have been cautious about their choice of words, there is reason to believe that their support for the generals was designed to (a) halt what they saw as a democratic tide, (b) weakening the Muslim Brotherhood and (c) backing a development towards a conservative authoritarian government cast in their own mold.

If this is a reasonable assumption, it will largely favor the military as against the civilian components of the current system of governance. Tensions between the civilians and the military have occurred with higher frequency lately, both regarding Israel and, most recently, with respect to the joint agreement between Hamdok and Abdelaziz al-Hilu from the SPLM-North regarding the relationship between religion and the state, a topic which also divides the civilian elements of the transition. We have also seen that the military chair of the Sovereignty Council, Burhan, has played an active role in foreign relations. He leads diplomatic efforts, security talks and recently directed the army to close the nation's borders to Ethiopia.

On the other hand, the situation in Sudan is complicated, also among the military. Burhan's deputy on the Sovereign Council is Hemetti. He comes from the Darfur semi-periphery with an Arab nomadic background, he is commander of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and is seen as the strongman in Khartoum despite his violent reputation during the Darfur crisis. Like Burhan, he enjoys close relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, based on their cooperation regarding Yemen, and he has a wide network as well into Libya, Chad and South Sudan. Hemetti clearly entertains personal ambitions that may bring him into conflict with Burhan and other generals of the Sudan

Armed Forces (SAF). Several rebel movements that are now joining the revolution will further complicate the picture.

Given that there is an equal complexity on the civilian side, with both personal, ideological and geographic dividing lines, it seems safe to conclude that the changes in governance that Sudan is badly in need of, to reduce poverty and to promote peace and justice, can only be attained by extraordinary patience and readiness to make compromises. There is always a danger that the domestic hurdles become insurmountable, but also that external actors may not take the need for patience and compromise sufficiently into consideration when dealing with Sudan's volatile transition.

The EU and individual European countries can play an important role in supporting the civilian government in Sudan and in providing highly needed development assistance. This is important, also because Europe risks facing serious consequences of a possible breakdown, by a growing number of refugees and migrants who would want to get away from Sudan. The future United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) will also work with the government to bring in financial resources.

Still, the US remains a key factor. The incoming Biden administration may want to re-engage in favor of more actively advancing and defending US interests in the region. Reasserting US power may entail efforts to influence or subdue the competition of rival Middle Eastern blocs. If this reduces the influence of Saudi-Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, it will help those groups in Sudan who seek changes in favor of democratization and human rights. If the GCC crisis is solved due to pressure from the US, it might also bring Qatar back to Sudan as a rich patron. But how US policy will play out is uncertain, as is the future role of Israel in Sudan.

Faced with potentially destructive foreign intervention, the progressive elements of the revolution still have two important cards in their hands. First, none of the regional powers want to see Bashir and the Islamists back in power; they will want stability; and they will therefore most likely continue to be careful and somewhat balanced in the way they approach and deal with Sudan. Second, the revolution was truly a people's revolution, and many people died in the streets to make it happen. The revolution is not over. Sudanese can march again.

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Following the 2019 April revolution, Sudan now finds itself in the middle of a profound and uncertain political transition. Should the transition succeed, the country could move in directions that are novel in Sudan's history. Should it fail, state fragmentation and new civil war could follow, with consequences not only for Sudan but for the wider region as well.

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#### Contact us

Phone: 47 93 80 00 (from Norway)  
Phone: +47 55 70 55 65 (from abroad)

cmi@cmi.no  
www.cmi.no

P.O. Box 6033,  
N-5892 Bergen, Norway  
Jekteviksbakken 31, Bergen

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MICHELSEN  
INSTITUTE