

SWP Comment

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Stopping the War in Sudan

Civilian actors, not just the parties to the conflict, should lead the peace negotiations

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Sudan's two main security forces are fighting each other. A swift military outcome is not to be expected in view of the relatively balanced power between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This strategic stalemate means that the chances for successful mediation are not hopeless. For this to happen, however, Sudan's international partners would have to abandon the approach that dominated negotiations for decades, namely giving violent actors a leading role in negotiations. Civilian actors formed a broad anti-war coalition that should set the tone for peace talks from the very beginning. This could well be in the interest of the parties to the conflict, as they will need a third actor to arbitrate their relationship in the future. The German government should strive for stronger coordination of the international mediation approaches under civilian leadership from Sudan, while the European Union (EU) should initiate constraints on the financial leeway of Sudan's violent actors.

Fierce fighting has rocked Sudan since 15 April 2023. The worst-case scenario that had long been feared has occurred: an open armed struggle between the SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF, which is under the command of General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti.

In contrast to previous wars, these clashes are not only taking place in Sudan's long-suffering periphery, but also in the greater metropolitan area formed by the megacities of Khartoum, Omdurman, and Bahri. The fighting makes it difficult to supply the population and already led to massive price increases for everyday goods.

If the fighting continues, the dangers for the country and the region are immense.

Hunger, a lack of basic services, and massive refugee movements would be the result. The Islamist movement in Sudan could gain further influence. Civilians who feel threatened could arm themselves for self-protection, while the existing armed groups could join either side. The fragile neighbouring countries could be destabilised themselves, and provide space for jihadist actors.

Interests of the conflict parties

The long-standing rivalry between the SAF and the RSF has intensified with Hemedti's political rise after the ouster of dictator Omar



al-Bashir. Bashir deliberately created the RSF in 2013 as a counterweight to the SAF and the equally powerful National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS, now General Intelligence Service, GIS). Competition in the security sector was meant to stabilise Bashir's rule in one of the most coup-prone countries in the world. The complementary operational specialisation of the SAF and the RSF allowed the two military organisations to co-exist in the same state.

Bashir's strategy of securing power failed because he ran out of resources to continue funding subsidies to the population and loyalty payments to the security sector. His closest allies turned against him in the face of nationwide protests that began in December 2018, not least because some SAF units also showed sympathy with the demonstrators (including children of influential SAF generals). Although the alleged architect of the plot, NISS chief Salah Gosh, went into exile, the Islamist loyalists of Bashir's regime held Hemedti, in particular, responsible for the overthrow of the system, as he had made a 180-degree turn from being Bashir's protector to his opponent.

In April 2019, the new Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Burhan — depending on the battle-hardened and ruthless RSF — made Hemedti the Vice-Chairman of the Transitional Military Council. But the marriage of convenience between the two generals set the collision course between the SAF and the RSF.

For the SAF and Islamist forces among them especially, it is unacceptable that the RSF, as a de facto parallel army, can operate independently and with its own sources of income within the same state. The relative strength of the RSF also makes it difficult for the SAF to gain full control over the executive, as Sudan's previous authoritarian governments have been able to do. Therefore, the SAF's goal is to dissolve the competing security force. Successfully integrating the RSF would increase the military's effectiveness and minimise coup risks.

Conversely, Hemedti wants to maintain the independence of his RSF for as long as possible and not be subordinated to a mili-

tary that is riddled with officers who dislike him and his troops. After the military coup in October 2021, Burhan brought back thousands of civil servants who had previously been dismissed for their loyalty to the Bashir regime. High-ranking representatives of the former regime were released from prison. The Sudanese Islamist Movement under former Foreign Minister Ali Karti makes no secret of its support for the SAF.

Hemedti is said to have political ambitions for the highest state office. For this, he would have to considerably broaden his political base, which would become more difficult if his RSF were to be absorbed into the armed forces. Experts estimate that the economic empire of the RSF and the Dagalo family accounts for half of Sudan's economic output. Hemedti thus benefits directly from the RSF's military capabilities and has deployed them in Darfur to forcibly capture gold mines.

The SAF and the RSF are equally concerned with preserving their privileges and achieving dominance in a future political order in Sudan. To that end, they are seeking legitimacy among the Sudanese public and international actors.

Strategic stalemate

Both the SAF and RSF will emerge from this war weakened even if one of the two parties should succeed. Presently, neither stands to win this conflict militarily or politically in the near future. The sooner they realise that they are in a strategic stalemate, the sooner they could gear up for serious peace talks.

Estimates for troop numbers in the SAF and RSF vary widely, especially as both have recruited heavily recently. However, the SAF and RSF control a comparable number of troops, with the SAF additionally drawing on units from the GIS and the Central Reserve Police. The military specialisations of the SAF and RSF make it difficult for either force to gain the upper hand; the SAF is designed for conventional warfare with heavy weapons and the defence of

fixed positions. The RSF, as a pure ground force, operates in a highly mobile manner with selective attacks that are often accompanied by marauding.

Consequently, neither the SAF nor the RSF are adequately prepared for extended urban warfare in Greater Khartoum. The SAF is unable to chase the much more mobile RSF through the streets, whereas the SAF's air superiority led the RSF to evacuate its bases in the capital and invade the private homes of civilians. The RSF, on the other hand, is having difficulty with their supply lines. In Khartoum, both are fiercely battling over strategic locations such as the presidential palace, the military headquarters, and the bridges over the Nile.

The RSF and the SAF run the risk of fragmentation due to the war and the possible involvement of other armed groups. Through recruitment and alliances, the RSF has troops from many parts of Sudan other than its area of origin in Darfur. RSF personnel also includes members of third countries, such as Chad and other Sahelian countries, who act primarily in an opportunistic manner. Islamist forces within the SAF may operate on their own after a certain point. The battle of attrition is ruinous for the military capabilities of the two opponents.

Politically, the SAF and RSF will emerge weakened from the violent conflict in any case. Consolidating their coup attempt had already failed before because they did not succeed in co-opting civilian political parties, unlike military governments before them. Burhan did bring members of the banned National Congress Party back into public life, but he could not afford to publicise the partnership. For that, protests of Sudanese civil society against his actions were too strong. Moreover, an openly Islamist government would have led to friction with Sudan's most important partners in the region – such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia. Although the UAE and Saudi Arabia had promised the military regime under Burhan and Hemedti a financial injection of \$3 billion after Bashir's fall, donors are now show-

ing more restraint. A multi-billion dollar investment from the UAE in a port with surrounding industrial estate has been repeatedly postponed and was only announced after an agreement in principle on a civilian government in December 2022.

The Gulf states know that the Sudanese economy will continue to deteriorate without continued macro-economic reform programmes from the International Monetary Fund, a reduction of Sudan's foreign debt of more than \$50 billion, and without support from the World Bank and Western governments – which would be bad for their investments.

These prospects were known long before the fighting broke out in Khartoum. A prolonged war would not be in the interest of both, the SAF and the RSF. There are indications that neither party to the conflict wanted this kind of confrontation, even though both mobilised and escalated the situation. It is likely that one side saw an opportunity for a decisive victory or to preempt a foreseeable attack by the other. Similar escalation dynamics have occurred in the past, most recently in February and early March. However, Sudanese and international mediators had managed to defuse those situations before force was used. Some observers, such as Sudanese analyst Kholood Khair, suspected that this posturing of escalation and de-escalation was a tactic by the security sector to avoid unwelcome compromises in the negotiations for a civilian government. At the time, Khair also warned of an armed confrontation between the two forces with “disastrous consequences”.

Deals with violent actors have failed

The peace and transition processes that Sudan engaged in over the past decades have always given a disproportionate role to violent actors. The use of violence as a means of asserting interests is often rewarded within the logic of agreements that are initiated under such auspices and

reached through international mediation. Rebel groups have long learnt this lesson: If you want attention and a place at the negotiating table, be as aggressive as possible.

This dynamic is widespread in the Horn of Africa, and the SAF and RSF behave accordingly. They are used to deploying brute force to deliberately violate the rules – and to get their way.

Diplomats usually justify their approach to these perpetrators with pragmatism and realpolitik, believing that any agreement is better than war and violence. Sudan is a good example of the flaws in this argument. Conflict-related violence in Darfur increased after the Juba 2020 peace agreement; the deal revitalised rebel groups that no longer had troops or relevant constituencies in Sudan itself, and it brought them into the transitional government.

Sudanese security forces were able to gain more and more power during the interim civil–military government established in 2019, even as Sudanese civil society proved its organising power in spite of massive violence by security forces. This was partly due to the behaviour of the Forces of Freedom and Change, which could not agree on how to distribute seats in the new transitional legislative assembly. Instead, they allowed Hemedti and Burhan to influence the day-to-day affairs of government. The military not only co-wrote the rules, but interpreted them arbitrarily as well.

It is no wonder that former international diplomats, such as the former US special envoy to the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, now reject this supposedly pragmatic approach. It presumes that the generals are well-intentioned actors who abide by agreements. They are not.

Competition for mediation

The conflict parties will likely become more serious about peace talks when they realise that they can no longer make advances through military force.

The many regional and international actors pursuing interests in and with Sudan would therefore have to pursue a unified line. Above all, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia should signal to the conflict parties that they should not expect any military support from them.

This is quite possible. No country in the region has stands to gain from a full-blown civil war in Sudan. Many foreign governments have sympathies for one side or the other, but none has yet officially expressed support for any party. On the contrary, at the initiative of the African Union (AU), neighbouring countries and relevant other governments – including all permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council – condemned the war and opposed external interference.

Nevertheless, competition for the leadership of peace talks is already taking shape. In the end, that will only benefit the violent actors themselves who will choose the framework that preserves their greatest possible freedom, whether individually or in relation to civilian parties.

The United States and Saudi Arabia succeeded in convincing the SAF and the RSF to send delegations to Jeddah, where the opponents have been negotiating a humanitarian ceasefire since 6 May 2023. Although the mediators are in contact with the civilian Forces of Freedom and Change, they are not directly involved in the talks, which are not supposed to be about ending the war. Washington and Riyadh ultimately represent the same approach to elite deals that have failed time and again. The US government's pressure on the military to stick to the timetable to establish a civilian government contributed to the escalation, even though there was no full agreement on the core issue of security-sector reform beforehand. The United States' Africa envoy and chief negotiator, Molly Phee, was partly responsible for the peace processes in South Sudan and Afghanistan that failed spectacularly.

From the perspective of the conflict parties, the invitation for talks in Juba by South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir Mayar-

dit, is even more attractive. Although Kiir is acting on behalf of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), he has his own interests; he is concerned about the security of oil exports via Port Sudan, on which South Sudan's national budget depends almost exclusively. Sudan and South Sudan already negotiated several peace agreements. But since agreements were purely transactional power-sharing arrangements between violent entrepreneurs, civilian actors were, at most, marginally involved.

IGAD mediations stand a better chance if Kenya's president, William Ruto, were to become more involved. Together with the heads of government of South Sudan and Djibouti, Ruto was mandated by an IGAD summit for peace talks in Sudan, and he already spoke out against continued military rule in Sudan. Kenya also plays a constructive mediation role in Ethiopia and eastern Congo.

The US-Saudi-led initiative at least brings together very influential countries. Other mediation offers from Turkey, Ethiopia, Israel, and AU Commission President Moussa Faki Mahamat would have less of a chance, especially because these actors are very close to the Sudanese security sector themselves.

It is, therefore, even more important that the EU and the German government advocate a different approach to negotiations with the international partners mentioned above. Germany could build on its leading role at the beginning of the Sudanese transition process, when the German government helped establish the diplomatic contact group "Friends of Sudan", organised the first partnership conference with and for Sudan, and, together with the United Kingdom, led the negotiations of the UN Mission in Sudan's (UNITAMS) mandate in the UN Security Council. The "Friends of Sudan" bring together Sudan's key Western and Arab partner countries in informal but regular exchanges.

Putting civil actors in the lead

What could an alternative approach look like? It would have to start with a different attitude towards the instigators of violence. Mediators should not believe their promises. Instead, mediators should assume that they will use every opportunity to their own advantage and disregard the rules. The repeatedly broken ceasefires are an expression of this dynamic.

From this stance, greater pressure would have to be exerted on the perpetrators of violence, also to limit their financial and diplomatic room for manoeuvre. The United States and the EU should impose financial and travel sanctions on selected individuals and institutions. However, they should be careful not to further complicate daily life for the citizens of Sudan. For example, civilians also have accounts in banks that are majority-owned by the security sector.

The parties to the conflict may well develop a vested interest in deferring to a civilian government. They cannot just go back to the status quo ante in which they shared power between themselves. Since no military victory is expected soon, they will need a third party to moderate their mutual relationship after the war. A civilian government and unified international actors could play this mediating role. They could moderate a structured process that both frees the SAF from Islamist influence and integrates all militias, including the RSF, thus gradually dissolving them.

Germany should push for a leading role among the political parties and other civil society actors in possible peace talks. Major parties, trade unions, resistance committees, women's organisations, and other non-governmental initiatives and associations have already formed a broad anti-war coalition. This Civil Front offers a credible, constructive counterweight to the generals. Efforts by traditional leaders and local volunteer committees to negotiate and monitor geographically limited ceasefires are encouraging, too. Volunteers also provide first

aid to victims of armed confrontation, safe escape routes, and organise assistance.

Within the Friends of Sudan, which it co-initiated, the German government should argue against taking any side among the conflict parties and work to ensure that the Sudanese anti-war coalition is quickly given the leading role in negotiations. International pressure should not exacerbate the confrontation between the violent actors any further, as it did in the weeks before the war broke out. Rather, the newly formed Civil Front should decide what kind of international support it wants, and which form of support would be more detrimental to its cause.

Conclusion

Undoing the influence of the security forces in the economy, politics, and society will take a long time. The minimum ambition of any civilian government should be to stop the growing hegemony of the security sector in the short term. The unity of the civilian anti-war coalition could easily falter in new negotiations if political parties try to outmanoeuvre each other again. The experience of the massive fighting in recent weeks should therefore also lead to a rethink among Sudanese politicians.

Setbacks, including renewed coup attempts, are probable, given authoritarian instincts of violent actors. A new approach in Sudan would not immediately and fully lead to freedom, peace, and justice — the slogan of the 2018/19 revolution. But it offers the best hope that Sudan will take a more stable path towards it. Putting civilian actors at the centre is thus more “realistic” than any deal that only involves the generals.

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