

Sudan: Prospects for change that can lead to continued stability, peace and development

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The Transitional Military Council (TMC) that overthrew the Government of former President Omar Hassan Al Bashir, and leaders of the widespread popular movement that prompted the change, finally reached a deal on July 5 for a three year and three-month transitional power sharing arrangement. National elections will follow at the end of that period.

The fall of Omar Al Bashir's regime was precipitated by a combination of political and economic failures emanating from its sectarian Islamist ideology and a short-sighted and kleptocratic economic policy that divided and impoverished the country. The Islamist regime defined Sudan, a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-lingual country, as an Islamic and Arab state which led to the bleeding wars in the non-Muslim and non-Arab peripheries with devastating consequences. The regime depended on the military to maintain control; however, Bashir feared a united and strong army that could overthrow him and his Islamist regime. With advice from the father of Sudan's Islamist movement, Hassan Al Turabi, Bashir embarked on 'coup-proofing' the military by dividing it into competing units each of which reported directly to him: (1) The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF); (2) the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), an auxiliary force; and (3) the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS). These entities controlled not only the security of Bashir's regime but also the resources of the country that led to the impoverishment of the rest of the population.

Bashir's Islamist ideology and support for the Islamist movements in the wider Arab region also threatened the political interests of Sudan's neighbouring Arab states, notably, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, which stopped bailing him out when the Sudanese economy finally collapsed and widespread mass protests ensued. The RSF had been strengthened greatly by Bashir at the expense of the other branches of the military in Sudan, and by the Saudis and Emiratis for its role in support of their war in Yemen. It was thus in large part the RSF – though many believe the mastermind was Major General Salah Gosh, former head of the NISS – that finally abandoned and pushed the internally and externally besieged and estranged Bashir out of power, with support from its backers in Egypt and the Arab Gulf states.

With this background, what are the prospects for fundamental change in the country that could lead to continued stability, peace and development?

The agreement that has been reached in Sudan has come as a result of continuing mass demonstrations against military rule, internal divisions that weakened both the TMC and the civilian organisations that pushed for change, as well as regional and broader international pressure.

The diversity of and divisions within the civilian organisations (from the Sudan Communist Party to some Islamist leaning parties opposed to the Bashir regime) that pushed for change, and their inability to act as a structured and strongly coherent political force, is the main weakness of the civilian opposition. It will take some time for a unified, dominating political force to emerge that would be an anchor for firm democratic reforms leading to continued peace and development in the country. It is probable that persistent divisions between the traditional parties and new groupings such as the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) - which led the mass demonstrations - continue to weaken the civilian opposition. Forthcoming elections are likely to wean out the weaker organisations, hopefully leading to the emergence

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of firm coalitions founded on sound political and economic policies that can lead to stability and development.

Similarly, the military is also divided. Within the SAF, particularly the rank and file and low-level officers are quite unhappy with the increasing power assumed by the RSF leader Himidti, while high-level officials who are Islamists hand-picked by Bashir are content with the status quo. The NISS force is also disaffected that the military is now led by the RSF and its new leader of dubious repute. Many believe that Salah Gosh, the long-standing Sudanese intelligence chief, was the mastermind behind the fall of the increasingly isolated Bashir, in order to assume power himself. However, popular outrage at the brutal role of the NISS in maintaining the Islamist regime in power over the decades has led Gosh to step aside, perhaps until the failures of the Himidti-led military become apparent and then he will be welcomed back in.

Developments over the coming weeks and months will be decisive for Sudan's future trajectory. The agreement reached establishes a new civilian government, a Sovereign Council comprised of five civilians and five military members, plus one civilian of military background acceptable to both sides to chair it, and other transitional institutions including a 300 member parliament. The SPAs, which were the main drivers of the mass protests that forced the downfall of the Bashir regime, are not political parties, and what type of political organisation they will back is something that will develop during the transition period and beyond. This is not the first time the Sudanese population has taken to the streets to demonstrate against military rule and forced an existing government to fall. In the past two instances, elements within the military eventually decided to ride the wave of the mass movement, seemingly siding with its objectives, only to establish self-serving dictatorial power over time. History may repeat itself now too unless there is a concerted effort this time around, whereby the civilian organisations unify and reform the army, and permanently limit its role and that of other security institutions in defense of the country and its laws under civilian control. One would like to believe that such is possible this time around because the more experienced and determined Sudanese public would not allow otherwise. The firm position of the African Union – and the world at large – against military regimes is also an advantage the Sudanese can build on.

Mending the economy in Sudan is going to require a fundamental shift in policy. The Bashir Government that dominated the country for the last 30 years, had, besides allocating a major share of the national income and wealth of the country to the army and other security institutions, invested more in the extractive industries (such as pumping oil and mining) at the expense of other sectors of the economy (such as agriculture which employs more than 70 percent of the population). Sudan which has an abundance of land and water has the potential to become the bread-basket for the entire region surrounding it including the arid Arab states, but little attention has been given to the development of this asset and other sectors that provide Sudan and the Sudanese a relative advantage for development. Regional cooperation and investment can play a major role in the process, with the construction of the Ethiopian Millennium Dam regulating the flow of the Nile and generating power allowing for three harvests a year in the vast lands of Sudan. Investment from the surrounding Arab states that have the financial capacity and require food security, would enhance productivity and boost the development of agro-industries as well.

Finally, the new Sudan would have to resolve the conflicts that have hitherto been raging in the peripheries of the country, notably in Darfur, Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile states, by addressing their root causes of marginalisation in all aspects of governance and development. Similarly, ensuring justice for state and individual crimes perpetrated under the past regime and current military authorities will be a formidable challenge unless a

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fundamental break with the past is made. Only by ensuring equality and justice for the marginalised regions and peoples of the country can national reconciliation and healing be actualised and durable peace achieved – a difficult feat to accomplish within a short period. However, such a future can be actualised within the coming decade or so, and indications exist for such a possibility. The twin forces that have thus far impeded Sudan’s ability to fulfil its potential - namely Islamist ideology and military dictatorship - appear to be on their way out.



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