



## The question of democracy in Sudan

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### Introduction

Sudan is a country of 45 million people in northeast Africa. It borders Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya and South Sudan. The ethnically and geographically diverse country gained its independence from Great Britain and Egypt in 1956. It has experienced many changes in authority and sovereignty. In 2011 it ended a forty-year civil war by granting independence to the largely Animist and Christian southern provinces, which became the independent country of South Sudan. Only overwhelmingly-Muslim Sudan (north) is a member of the Arab League. Until 2019, Sudan was led by Gen. Omar Al Bashir, who led an authoritarian, military government. Since then it has struggled to find a new and stable way to govern itself.



Bashir earned his fame in 1989 when he led a military coup that overthrew the previous Sudanese government of Sadiq al Mahdi. He held a multitude of self-appointed leadership positions including the chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council for National

Salvation. In 1993, he finally was self-appointed as the President of Sudan. As soon as he took control, he became on strict control and handled measures such as strictly controlling the press, dissolving the parliament, and political parties. Bashir made vast efforts to Islamize the country with Hasan Al Turabi, a Muslim extremist.

In late 2018, hundreds of thousands of Sudanese civilians took to the streets to revolt against the Sudanese government. Sudanese people were enraged - the main cause at hand being bread. The Sudanese military reacted by shooting, beating, raping and stoning protestors. What seemed an extraordinary measure to protest against, bread is one of, if not the most vital food to the Sudanese diet. The price of bread tripled overnight, after the International Monetary Fund recommended that the Sudanese government increase the price of wheat and fuel. The cause of this recommendation being the economic crisis in Sudan, which has only worsened since the secession of South Sudan in 2011.

In January 2011, a referendum was held to determine whether South Sudan should become an independent country and separate from Sudan, with 98.83 percent of southern voters favoring for independence. The secession of South Sudan is important to note when addressing the grievances of Bashir, as it was under his military rule that encouraged the guerilla warfare in Southern Sudan when attempting to enforce Arab and Islamic identity on Christians and black Sudanese citizens. Prior to its secession, 75 percent of Sudan's oil reserves were located in Southern Sudan - the main source of revenue in Sudan.

By the end of October 2021, the Sudanese military took over and replaced the civilian

components of the transitional government, which had come into power in July 2019 and aimed to transition Sudan into a democracy by 2023. Since the takeover, widespread protests denouncing military rule and violent clashes with security forces have been constantly taking place. Sudan's complex crisis has left at least 14.3 million Sudanese in need of humanitarian help in 2022.<sup>1</sup>



## Background

Before the split in 2011 Sudan was the biggest country in Africa. For centuries Sudan was located at the intersection of Arab, African and Mediterranean cultures. Christians, Muslims and native African Peoples share the nation. In the 19th century Ottomans established their rule in Northern Sudan and British missionaries expanded their power from Kenya to Southern Sudan. It can be considered the roots of the split, which was finalized with the independence of South Sudan in 2011.

By the end of the 19th century Egypt and the British conquered Sudan turning it into a so-called condominium. In this form of Anglo-Egyptian rule, Southern Sudan was largely impacted by British Christian influence, while Northern Sudan was under the influence of Muslim Egyptian culture. In 1953 Sudan established the first self-government, where dominant power was in hands of the northern Arabic political forces, leaving the Southern English-speaking Christians in minority. The promised autonomy for the South was not given, which triggered the escalation of the civil war. In 1956 Sudan declared independence. Until 1964 Sudan was under control of the military government. Later Sudan was declared to be Islamic Arab State, which once again created tensions with the substantial Christian minority. The period until the 1970s was marked by a series of coups.

In the 1970s Sudan was westernized and restructured by the IMF. It resulted in greater public austerity measures, agricultural crisis, and famine. Opening economy for international markets enhanced the flow of small arms both from the United States and the Soviet Union. The influx of weapons created an opportunity for the second civil war in 1987. Once again, the power in the country was taken over by military forces. In 2003 the hostilities escalated in Darfur, a region of western Sudan where the black African farmers clashed with the Arab Janjaweed militias.<sup>2</sup> In 2005 the UN helped to achieve a peace agreement between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, a political party representing South Sudan. As the result of the agreement South Sudan was given autonomy. In 2011 South Sudan conducted a referendum resulted in proclamation of independence.

<sup>1</sup> ACAPS, 2003. Sudan, 18 January 2023., <https://www.acaps.org/country/sudan/crisis/complex-crisis>

<sup>2</sup> HMD, n.d. 'Darfur: Genocide today', HMD, n.d., <https://www.hmd.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Darfur-Genocide-today-information-and-education-guide.pdf>

Abyei region remained to be contested between the North and the South.

## Current situation

After several months of street protests, Omar al-Bashir was overthrown as the result of the April 2019 Sudanese coup d'état, in which he was replaced by the *Transitional Military Council* (TMC). In July 2019 the TMC and the coalition of the rebels, Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) agreed to a 39-month transition process to return to democracy, including the creation of executive, legislative and judicial institutions and procedures. In 2019 the Draft Constitutional Declaration was signed by FFC, though with objections from the Darfur Displaced General Coordination, representing the displaced people of Darfur who demand justice, security, and investigations into crimes against humanity.



Sudanese soldiers stand guard as demonstrators protest against the regime near the army headquarters in the Sudanese capital Khartoum during the 2019 coup.

Despite the establishment of the Transitional Government and the peace agreement between Sudanese authorities and rebel factions, the protests never stopped in Sudan. In the period

between 2019 and 2021 protests continued. The triggers for the unrests included the nomination of a new Chief Justice of Sudan and Attorney-General, killings of civilians by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the toxic effects of cyanide and mercury from gold mining in Northern state and South Kordofan, protests against a state governor in el-Gadarif and against show trials of Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) coordinators.



Former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

On 25 October 2021, the Sudanese military took control of the government in a military coup. Civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok was forced into house arrest but later released. Under the pressure of continuing protests, Hamdok resigned. Since the military takeover, no new prime minister has been named, the economy has stagnated and internal conflicts in parts of the country have escalated.

In December 2022 Sudanese political parties and the military signed a framework deal on Monday that they said would pave the way for a two-year civilian-led transition towards elections. The deal could mark a new phase for Sudan, but has already faced resistance from protest groups opposed to negotiations with the military and from Islamist factions loyal to the regime of toppled leader Omar al-Bashir.<sup>3</sup> By January 2023 Sudanese political parties began talks to try to reach a final deal to form a civilian

<sup>3</sup> Abdelaziz, Khalid, 2022. 'Sudan generals and parties sign outline deal, protesters cry foul' Reuters, 5 December 2022,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudanese-civilian-parties-sign-framework-deal-new-political-transition-2022-12-05/>

government and resolve other outstanding issues more than a year after a military coup.<sup>4</sup>

## Role of the Arab League

Sudan joined the Arab League weeks after independence from the United Kingdom and Egypt. However, after the split in 2011 South Sudan lost the membership in the organization. A clause in the Charter of the Arab League accords the right of territories that have seceded from an Arab League member state to join the organization.

South Sudan had submitted its application to join the Arab League as an observer during a secret meeting at the 2016 summit in Mauritania. However, the application encountered resistance from both Arab League members, who find South Sudan not Arab enough, and the South Sudanese population, which blames the Arab League for reluctance during their struggle for independence.

However, there is a permanent Arab League delegation in the capital of South Sudan, Juba that has been active since 2007. The main goal of the delegation is to contribute to the development and reconstruction of South Sudan.<sup>5</sup> The League's main goal is to draw closer the relations between member states and to safeguard sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries. The strategically important location of South Sudan on the Nile River makes it very

important for the League to keep South Sudan stable and predictable partner.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years the Arab League has taken a more active position in support of democracy building in Sudan. In November 2021 after the military coup, a delegation from the Arab League States concluded a two-day visit to the Sudanese capital, Khartoum on Sunday with calls for a return to a civilian-led transition through peaceful negotiations in Sudan. The Arab League States emphasized the importance of enduring the partnership between the military and civil stakeholders and bringing the country to safety through holding elections.<sup>7</sup>



Secretary-General of the League of Arab States Ahmed Aboul Gheit

In January 2023 the Secretary-General of the Arab League, Ahmed Aboul-Gheit, held talks with the military administration and the Alliance for Freedom and Change, a wide political coalition of civilian and rebel groups in

<sup>4</sup> Reuters, 2023. 'Sudan factions start talks for final transition deal' Reuters, 10 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudan-factions-start-talks-final-transition-deal-2023-01-09/>

<sup>5</sup> Aman Ayah, 2018. 'Egypt seeks Arab League seat for controversial South Sudan', AL-Monitor, 28 March 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/03/egyptian-diplomats-seek-south-soudan-within-arab-league.html>

<sup>6</sup> Radio Tamazuj, 2018. 'South Sudan seeks observer status in Arab League', Radio Tamazuj, 7 March 2018, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/south-sudan-seeks-observer-status-in-arab-league>

<sup>7</sup> Sudan Tribune, n.d., 'Arab League supports civilian-led transition in Sudan', Sudan Tribune, n.d., <https://sudantribune.com/article222782/>

Khartoum in an attempt to break the deadlock and get out of the current crisis. He called for a civil government in Sudan. The objective of the Arab League at this stage is to focus on securing stability in Sudan, reaching compromise and stabilizing the situation. This includes a quick handover of power to civilians.<sup>8</sup>

However, the relations between Sudan and the Arab League were not always as good as they are now. In the beginning of 90-s the attempts of al-Bashir seizing power by any means including involvement of terrorist organizations made Sudan a pariah in the Arab League for nearly a decade. By that time Sudan was the only member of the Arab League to give Osama bin Laden and thousands of Afghan-Arab mujahedin a safe haven and consent to terrorist training camps surrounding Khartoum to continue their jihads throughout the Muslim world.<sup>9</sup>

## Role of the United Nations

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has been active in Sudan since 1965, helping millions of people in need, including local communities, internally displaced persons, refugees, returnees, migrants, women, and youth.

Driven by the vision of Sudan's democratic transition and ongoing peace efforts, and with dedicated assistance from the international community and national partners, UNDP's work currently focuses on five portfolios: Peace and

Stabilization; Rule of Law and Justice Reform; Democratic Transition and Economic Recovery; Health for Development; Access to Energy & Climate Change.<sup>10</sup>

In 2011 the UN Security Council established The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). The Mission's mandate includes four pillars, namely, protection of civilians; creating conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance; supporting the Implementation of the Revitalised Agreement and the peace process; and, monitoring, investigating, and reporting on violations of humanitarian and human rights law was extended until March 2023.<sup>11</sup>

## Landmark UN resolutions

On 3 June 2020, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted resolution 2524 (2020), establishing the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), a special political mission, to provide support to Sudan for an initial 12-month period during its political transition to democratic rule. On 3 June 2022, the Security Council renewed UNITAMS mandate for an additional year until 3 June 2023, according to resolution 2636 (2022).<sup>12</sup>

The UN (A/HRC/RES/S-32/1) condemned in the strongest possible terms the military takeover on 25 October 2021 by the Sudanese military against the transitional Government led

<sup>8</sup> Dabanga, n.d., 'Arab League calls for a civilian government in Sudan', Dabanga, n.d., <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/arab-league-calls-for-a-civil-government-in-sudan>

<sup>9</sup> TWI, 2006. 'Darfur and the Arab League', TWI, 28 August 2006, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/darfur-and-arab-league>

<sup>10</sup> UNDP, n.d., 'About UNDP in Sudan', UNDP, n.d., <https://www.undp.org/sudan/about-us>

<sup>11</sup> UNMISS, n.d., 'Background', UNMISS, n.d., <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/background>

<sup>12</sup> UNITAMS, n.d., 'Mandate', UNITAMS, n.d., <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/mandate#:~:text=On%203%20June%2C%20the%20United.political%20transition%20to%20democratic%20rule>

by Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok, the suspension of transitional institutions and the unilateral imposition of measures that are contrary to the Sudan Constitutional Declaration and the terms of the Juba Peace Agreement.<sup>13</sup> Following the coup, the UN Human Rights Council took urgent action by adopting a resolution requesting the High Commissioner to designate an Expert on Human Rights in the Sudan.

In 2004, the UNSC imposed sanctions in relation to Sudan in response to the ongoing humanitarian crisis and widespread human rights violations. The sanctions regime has been amended and renewed by several subsequent UNSC resolutions. Following the split the Republic of South Sudan in 2011, the UNSC's Sudan Sanctions Committee confirmed that the sanctions regime in relation to Sudan does not apply to South Sudan. In 2015 the UNSC decided to impose separate sanctions in relation to South Sudan in view of the deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation, including ongoing human rights violations and abuses. In July 2018, the UNSC imposed an arms embargo on South Sudan in response to ongoing hostilities and peace agreement violations.<sup>14</sup>

## Country and bloc positions

The Arab League seeks for stability in the region. The unstable situation in Sudan can lead

to growth of terrorism and extremism, which may spillover to other Arab nations. There are three main questions that the Arab League tries to address. First, the democratic transition in Sudan. Second, the unrest in Darfur. Third, peace in South Sudan. The Arab League as an organization tries to involve all stakeholders in negotiations and often plays the role of a moderator.

**Egypt:** Sudan and Egypt have strengthened ties since the ouster of former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 amid a public uprising against his nearly three-decade rule. The two nations signed an agreement to increase military cooperation in March 2021. Egypt, however, is concerned that ongoing political turbulence could destabilize its southern neighbor. The turmoil has worsened after the military coup in October last year. The military takeover removed a Western-backed, civilian-led administration and upended Sudan's short-lived transition to democratic rule.<sup>15</sup>

One of the common issues for Egypt and Sudan is the Ethiopia's controversial, unfinished dam on the Nile River's main tributary. Egypt and Sudan want an international agreement to regulate how much water Ethiopia releases downstream, especially in a multi-year drought, fearing their critical water shares might be impacted.

**United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia:** Relations between Sudan and the UAE were warm, when 14,000 Sudanese troops were fighting in Yemen as part of a Saudi and UAE-

<sup>13</sup> United Nations. General Assembly Resolution A/HRC/RES/S-32/1 (2019) (New York: United Nations, 8 November 2021). [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a\\_hrc\\_res\\_s\\_32\\_1.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_hrc_res_s_32_1.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> DFATAU, n.d., 'Sudan and South Sudan sanctions regimes', DFATAU, n.d., <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/security/sanctions/sanctions->

[regimes/Pages/sudan-and-south-sudan-sanctions-regime#:~:text=Why%20are%20sanctions%20imposed%3F,by%20several%20subsequent%20UNSC%20resolutions](https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/security/sanctions/sanctions-regimes/Pages/sudan-and-south-sudan-sanctions-regime#:~:text=Why%20are%20sanctions%20imposed%3F,by%20several%20subsequent%20UNSC%20resolutions)

<sup>15</sup> APNEWS, 2022, 'Egypt's leader meets with Sudan's military ruler in Cairo', AP NEWS, 24 September 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-general-assembly-africa-egypt-sudan-4dfbb7fcd3c92a79e089ec6e7acf5567>

led military coalition against Iranian-aligned rebels. The UAE invested billions of dollars in Sudan. In March 2018, the UAE channeled a total \$7.6 billion in the form of support to Sudan's central bank, in private investments and investments through the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development.<sup>16</sup>

However, later in 2018 the Emirates and Saudi decided not to support Sudan sliding into an economic crisis, with bread, fuel, and hard currency in short supply. The reason was Bashir's refusal to get rid of the Islamists and support Saudi Arabia and the Emirates against Qatar.

After the recent military coup, the UAE, along with the United States, The United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia helped broker cross-party talks. The UAE has been a leading investor in Sudan in recent years, an ally of its military generals and a large consumer of Sudanese gold.<sup>17</sup>

**Qatar:** Along with UAE and Saudi Arabia, Qatar used to be the economic donor for Sudan in the last decades. Qatar helped to mediate talks between Sudan's government and the rebels in Darfur and other regions. When Qatar was boycotted by most of the Arab League countries for their support of the radical Islamist group, Muslim Brotherhood, Sudan declined to align itself with the Saudi-led bloc risking losing their support. Qatar continues to support Sudan nowadays.<sup>18</sup>

### Some Possible Proposals for Action

Due to the conflicting interest of the member-states it is difficult for the Arab League to take any decisive actions in relation to Sudan. When some nations want to see Sudan more liberal others prefer to create a more conservative ally. However, one thing that all Arab League member-states agree on is that the main goal is the stability of the region. Staying on the Nile river Sudan becomes a strategically important partner for many nations, including Egypt, one of the most influential members of the Arab League.

**Acceptance:** for the Member States of the Arab League, the easiest, most natural position is to accept the government of Sudan as it is. Above all, Arab League governments seek to strengthen their national sovereignty and keep other states from meddling in their domestic affairs. Their natural tendency, baring external shocks such as mass riots or catastrophes, is to insulate each other from criticism. If any state is to be criticized, they wish it to be Israel, criticized for its treatment of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). Many Arab League Member States view the internal affairs of each other as a distraction from this higher priority.

**Sanctions:** Economic sanctions, arms embargo and personal sanctions against particular political figures and groups may become a significant tool in the hand of the Arab League promoting peace and stability in the region. However, to imply any of it, the member-states must reach a consensus on the type of government they want to see in Sudan. Most of

<sup>16</sup> Abdelaziz, Khalid, 2019. 'Abandoned by the UAE, Sudan's Bashir was destined to fall', Reuters, 3 July 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-bashir-fall/>

<sup>17</sup> APNEWS, 2022. 'Sudan strikes deal with UAE firms for \$6 billion port', AP NEWS, 13 December

2022, <https://apnews.com/article/sudan-6dd6458400d1261c896020142d700ce8>

<sup>18</sup> OCHA, 2022. 'Sudanese government praises Qatar Charity's relief interventions', OCHA, 6 November 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudanese-government-praises-qatar-charity-relief-interventions>



## The question of democracy in Sudan



the Arab League member-states support the democratic transition. Economic sanctions and arms embargo can push the Sudanese military to transfer power to the democratically elected government.

**Humanitarian Aid:** The ongoing conflict in West Kordofan and Central Darfur increases the numbers of internally displaced people and the level of food insecurity. It creates a spiral effect mobilizing the rebel groups against the government and each other. To prevent this development and stabilize the political situation Sudan needs humanitarian aid. The Arab League nations must be the most interested stakeholders in providing humanitarian aid to Sudan. The

Arab League can also call for stronger international action through the United Nations.

**Monitoring and peacekeeping:** In 2006 the Arab League committee on Sudan backed Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir's refusal of a UN peacekeeping force in the war-wracked Darfur region<sup>19</sup>, justifying their position by repeating, like Khartoum, that a UN force in Darfur represents a threat to the Sudanese sovereignty.<sup>20</sup> Nowadays the region is still unstable. The Arab League can take a more decisive position in relation to Darfur sending a monitoring mission and calling for the UN presence along with the African Union (AU) force deployed in Darfur (AMIS).

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<sup>19</sup> TWI, 2006. 'Darfur and the Arab League', TWI, 28 August 2006, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/darfur-and-arab-league>

<sup>20</sup> Hasbani, Nadim, 2007. 'About The Arab Stance Vis-à-vis Darfur', Crisis Group, 21 March 2007, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/about-arab-stance-vis-vis-darfur>



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