

**MILITARY CONFLICTS AND POLITICAL CHAOS: HOW SUDAN FOUND ITSELF
AT THE EPICENTER OF CRISIS**

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Abstract: *This paper looks at the complex dynamics of military conflicts and political chaos that have situated Sudan at the heart of this unfolding crisis. Most notably, the focus is on how historical ethnic tensions, political rivalries, and socio-economic factors have been dominant in generating widespread violence and instability. The root of the crisis is the overall struggle for power between President Salva Kiir and former Vice President Riek Machar, whose rivalry has sharpened ethnic divisions, particularly between the Dinka and Nuer communities. This conflict was supported less frequently by an organized uniform national defense force known as the Sudan People's Liberation Army. Failure to integrate warring militias into its ranks has translated to a fragmented military structure, therefore compromising national security and perpetuating violence. It emphasizes that the unaddressed grievances of these two wars, besides the total impunity for wartime atrocities, have inculcated a culture of impunity that perpetuates revenge. For its part, the institutional weaknesses within the SPLA—a nationally united command and ethos especially—have further deepened the crisis. Equally, socio-economic issues like poverty, unemployment, and marginalization of rural communities have also fanned discontent and engendered hostility in this conflict. It clearly identifies the role of different regional and international actors, especially the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, in the mediation of peace talks. It insists upon a holistic approach toward peacebuilding, embracing the political as well as socio-economic causes of conflict. Reforms are to be furthered in governance, accountability, and social cohesion. It is also worth noting that the actual incorporation of peripheral groups—primarily youth and civil society—into the peace process remains a key ingredient toward nurturing reconciliation and a national identity based on overcoming ethnicity-based polarization. This paper thus contributes greatly to ascertaining what avenue might be explored toward finding lasting peace and stability in Sudan by considering historical, political, and socioeconomic contexts of the crisis. The conclusions stress the importance of the root cause approach of such a conflict through structural reforms and inclusive dialogue, with continuous international engagement for laying the ground for sustainable development.*

KEY WORDS: *military conflicts, political chaos, coup d'etat, economic collapse, separatist movements, international mediation, humanitarian crisis.*

Historical background

The roots of Sudan's present crisis are buried in its colonial past and complex sociopolitical landscape, not to mention resultant legacies of conflict that came about following its independence. Since its founding, Sudan's colonial history has simply set the stage for divisions to this day that continue fueling civil strife within the nation. It is a fact that when Sudan finally attained its independence in 1956, it inherited not only a new identity but also a set of challenges left behind by colonial rulers who had exacerbated the regional, ethnic, and religious divide in their governance strategy.[1]

The North-South divide would become the major point of friction. While northern Sudan was more Arabized and influenced by the Islamic culture, the southern part was predominantly African, made up of many ethnic groups with widely disparate religious practices. Highly geographical, this divide was deeply cultural—with the policies of the centralized government frequently alienating southern populations and planting the seeds for what would later evolve into two brutal civil wars. The first Sudanese civil war broke out shortly after independence and took place between 1955 and 1972. It was actually a struggle of the South against a central government considered unrepresentative and oppressive. This was followed by a short peace before a second outbreak of civil war began in 1983, continuing into 2005 with devastating casualties and displacement. This eventually led to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement that opened a path for the secession of South Sudan in 2011. That partition ended one source of conflict but also deprived Sudan of much of its oil wealth and threw its economy into further instability, stoking grievances that endure to this day.[2]

The Sudanese military has held tremendous power since the post-colonial era and has often intervened to upset any form of democratic governance through coups. For example, the first democratically led government installed in 1986 was quickly overrun by Omar al-Bashir, who seized power through military intervention in 1989 and went on to rule with a dictatorial regime for thirty years, marked by human rights abuses and state-perpetrated violence. Bashir leaned heavily on military and paramilitary forces, including the Janjaweed militias he organized during the conflict in Darfur in the early 2000s, as an active avenue toward suppressing that resistance. That campaign was marked by accusations of genocide, and it further isolated Sudan internationally. Today's crisis reflects these layers of historical trauma, economic strain, and militarized governance. The fall of Bashir in 2019 gave way to a fragile transitional government, but the military remains deeply ingrained within Sudan's political DNA. Quick rises by paramilitary groups such as the Rapid Support Forces show just how entrenched military factions currently are as primary players in power, which can impede transitions toward civilian rule. It is, therefore, against the background of this colonial exploitation, the failure of peace agreements, and the experience of an authoritarian rule that military conflicts and political chaos facing Sudan today have their roots.[3]

Military dominance

The political life of Sudan since its independence in 1956 has been truly characterized by a pattern of military preeminence deeply engraved in its governance, often at the expense of democratic development. The dominance of the military in Sudan has translated into periodic coups, authoritarian rule, and silencing of civilian voices still ringing loud in the country today. The Sudanese military from the very beginning posed itself as a central force that would provide stability in the context of widespread ethnic and regional tensions. As time went on, however, the buckle of military control turned from a loose grip to a fully repressive control that stifled civilian movements, entrenching Sudan as a state characterized by an authoritarian government and limited political freedoms.

The military influence attained an all-time high with the rise of Omar al-Bashir to power through a coup in 1989. That which makes Bashir's rule so remarkable is when his government reshaped the role of the military in Sudanese society: he established an utterly militarized state that would depend on the use of force to repress any kind of dissent and opposition that would destabilize his regime. The regime of Bashir heavily relied on the Sudanese Armed Forces, besides the paramilitary elements, in its rule at the cost of civil governance. This was the beginning of the notorious Janjaweed militias later transformed into the Rapid Support Forces. These groups were responsible for the enforcement of Bashir's policies, especially in the Darfur conflict, accused of genocide due to the systematic persecution of non-Arab populations.[2]

Another strategy that Bashir used is what is called "coup-proofing." The goal was to make his regime secure by building several security-related factions loyal to him but sufficiently different from one another so as not to allow any one of them to become powerful enough to pose a threat to his regime. Against this backdrop, the various military and paramilitary outfits that he established effectively ruled out unified opposition within the security forces. As long as this strategy kept him firmly in control, at the same time or later it implanted deep divisions into the military structure of Sudan, sowing the seeds for future conflicts among military factions—a factor seen in the clashes between the SAF and RSF following his ouster.

Bashir also implemented a so-called "coup-proofing" strategy, whereby, with the goal of protecting his regime, he established a few security factions loyal exclusively to him and yet were different from one another to such an extent that no one faction could amass enough strength to pose a threat to his regime. Thus, by developing rival military and paramilitary groups, Bashir effectively prevented consolidated resistance in the ranks of security forces. While this approach ensured his control, it greatly entrenched acute division within the country's military structure—a situation that would be a recipe for discord among various military factions at a later stage, as is proved in the ongoing SAF and RSF conflicts following his ouster.[3]

Even with the fall of Bashir himself in 2019, the military retained very strong control in the transitional government afterward, continuous in the long history of military intervention in politics. But the agreement on power sharing in 2019 that was to put in place a civilian-led government continued to be resisted by the country's military leadership anxious to maintain their influence. This unresolved tension eventually reached its boiling point, as manifested by the outbreak of violence this April between the SAF, which is led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, popularly known as Hemedti. This internal conflict underlines a militarized legacy that Bashir's policies of coup-proofing have left behind and how competing military interests continue to drive Sudan's political instability.

Military dominance in Sudan is, therefore, not a pure product of the recent conflict but an inbuilt characteristic of Sudan's political history. A pattern of authoritarianism, military intervention, and coup-proofing has definitely suppressed Sudan's abilities in the development of civilian governance. This tradition of military pre-eminence lived on, and Sudan remained mired in a sequence of conflict and political turmoil that consistently undermined any hopes of peace and democratic progress.

Economic factor and secession

This was one of the flourishing economies in the world, but the 2011 secession of South Sudan brought severe long-term effects on fiscal stability and social development. In this respect, Sudan lost about 75% of its oil fields to the south. This has been quite extreme in the Sudanese economy, since oil comprised about 50% of its government revenue and 95% of its exports. Accordingly, Sudan's GDP drastically plummeted, and things became worse as its foreign reserves began to dwindle and it struggled to balance its budget. The decline in oil revenue also forced the government to pursue fiscal austerity measures in the forms of subsidy cuts and tax increases that were grievous to Sudan's poor and vulnerable populations.[4]

Meanwhile, in response to the unexpected drop in income, Sudan took the lead from a three-year economic plan that would take the country off its reliance on oil onto other sectors, such as agriculture and manufacturing. Included were some hard measures that tended to stabilize the economy, restructure subsidies on basic goods, such as fuel, and reduce inflation. However, these increased the misery of ordinary Sudanese through their contribution to inflation and high living costs. By 2012, it had surged to almost 50%, driven largely by high import prices along with weakened purchasing power. The government also opted to raise taxes on telecommunications and consumer goods, in hopes of partly bridging the revenue gap, but this has done little to cut the expanding fiscal deficit.

Moreover, internal clashes and the political turmoil that have grown worse since secession continued to increase Sudan's economic vulnerability. Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile continued violence and movements of resistance drew off

government resources and further stressed the economy. The very high level of debt in Sudan, plus international sanctions against Sudan by the United States, greatly limited its access to international financial aid in its struggle to recover. All these factors put together have left Sudan to struggle for the stabilization of its economy, which by 2013 had degraded considerably, accompanied by high rates of poverty and food insecurity that further heightened the crisis in socioeconomic perspectives.[5]

While many attempts have been tried to diversify and stay supportive of sectors like agriculture, Sudan's economic reforms were circumscribed in their effectiveness because of corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and inadequate infrastructure. This resulted in heavy dependence on international donors in 2014 with limited external financial support and an overburdened public sector. There was a massive challenge to debt management and sustaining growth within the Sudanese economy.

Global attention and response

The response of the world community to Sudan's crisis, but particularly after the escalation of the war in 2023, underscores the dire need and the sometimes-weak effectiveness of intervention on different international levels. Multilateral organizations and key states have engaged with peace mediation, humanitarian aid, and holding accountable, yet such actions have often been hindered by logistical obstacles and political entanglements. Agencies such as the UN, AU, and IGAD have engaged in providing peace and humanitarian support to Sudan since April 2023. For instance, IGAD has attempted to facilitate direct talks between the leader of SAF General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the leader of RSF General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. However, tensions remain elevated, and ceasefire deals have been reached only to be scuttled, which adds complexity to the mission to reach millions of victims in need of assistance.[6]

Though highly influential in terms of African input into the talks, the AU has significantly less clout than it would had it not suspended Sudan from its ranks following its coup in 2021. That move reinforced the AU's dedication to democratic leadership but left Sudan at risk of being shut out from AU-sponsored dialogues entirely. Meanwhile, the ground implementation of the mission by UNITAMS has documented human rights violations and overseen humanitarian affairs, which suffer from the bureaucratic and security constraints on the ground. For instance, both SAF and RSF forces have been seen to hinder the delivery of relief by looting and blocking provisions, which has exacerbated the humanitarian situation.[7]

It is also called upon, by Western powers and the international rights groups, that more stringent measures of accountability be adopted. This finally happened recently when France, Germany, and the EU were able to host the conference to raise international sensitization and funding for the humanitarian catastrophe that has engulfed the country, under which circumstance both SAF and RSF have committed war crimes against various people. Even after that much-publicized diplomatic meeting, big gaps still appear in regard to humanitarian funding, from which millions

are vulnerable, at the hands of various leaders of SAF and RSF, who continue destroying the distribution of key resources.[8]

In sum, while the international response to Sudan's crisis represents a recognition of the scale of the conflict, the disconnection of this international response underscores the complexity of coordination between political and humanitarian priorities in an essentially fractured environment. So far, the international community has relied on short-term fixes through aid and diplomatic channels. It might take sustained pressure and coherent strategies to get the crisis in Sudan resolved and ensure long-term stability for Sudan.

Conclusion

Sudan's crisis embodies a complex mix of historical grievances, ethnic conflicts, political rivalries, and socio-economic struggles that have entrenched violence and instability. At the heart of the conflict lies the power struggle between political leaders, which has deepened ethnic divides and weakened the national military structure, leaving Sudan vulnerable to internal fragmentation and incapable of ensuring security. This prolonged instability has also fostered a culture of impunity, where wartime atrocities go unpunished, perpetuating cycles of violence and retaliation.

The humanitarian impact is profound, with millions facing displacement, food insecurity, and a deteriorating healthcare system. Despite numerous efforts from international and regional actors to mediate peace and provide aid, these initiatives are frequently hindered by logistical barriers, limited resources, and the political interests of foreign stakeholders. The international community's response, though critical, has often been fragmented, underscoring the need for a more coordinated and sustained approach to address Sudan's multi-dimensional challenges.

Looking forward, a holistic approach to peace is essential. Political reforms must be accompanied by social and economic interventions that address issues like poverty and marginalization, which fuel resentment and unrest. Furthermore, engaging youth and civil society in the peace process is critical for fostering unity and a national identity that transcends ethnic lines.

Accountability for past atrocities is also essential to break the cycle of impunity and rebuild trust within the nation. In sum, by addressing these root causes and fostering inclusive dialogue, Sudan can lay the foundation for sustainable peace and development, with continuous international support to reinforce these efforts.

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