

Sudan

Liv Tønnessen

Sudan, officially the Republic of the Sudan, has had a complex and conflictual political history. Sudan has seen multiple armed conflicts. These have been between the North and South which culminated in South Sudan's independence in 2011, but also within the North, as political and economic marginalization of some regions led to armed rebellion. Indeed, competition for economic resources (both oil and land) as well as ethnic, cultural, and religious divisions are basic ingredients of Sudan's conflictual history.

This chapter provides an overview of how Sudan's political economy has shaped, and been shaped by, these conflicts. It outlines Sudan's historical development, highlighting how Sudan fluctuated between military dictatorships and "democratic" or civil multiparty rule before the Islamist-Military regime of Omar al-Bashir, which ruled the country with with suppressive measures for three decades from 1989 until 2019. It explores Sudanese resistance. Unlike many of its neighbours in the Middle East and North African region, Sudan has a rich history of nonviolent popular uprisings. These included the October Revolution in 1964, the April uprisings in 1985, and the uprisings in 2019 that brought an end to the al-Bashir regime. Finally, it considers the current governance and challenges facing Sudan. Until general elections in 2024, Sudan is set to have a hybrid transitional government, led Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok and with the Sovereign Council, made up of both civilian and military actors, including some of Bashir's old supporters from the military, as the official head of state. Economic crisis, counter-revolutionary movements, the COVID-19 pandemic, deep wounds from decades of armed conflict, and the strong political and economic position of military actors, makes transition to democracy demanding.

History of State-Building/Formation

Sudan's history of state formation is the story of two inter-related struggles. The first is the attempt to create a unified nation from socially diverse, distinct communities. The second, and related, has been the attempt to extend state control over vast territory.

Forging a National Identity

Before independence in 1956, Sudanese territory was home to a series of small political communities, some of which developed into sultanates and kingdoms. The country's early history is intertwined with the history of ancient Egypt. Ottoman-Egyptian rule was established through conquest in 1820–21, following a pattern of economic marginalization and exploitation until 1824.¹ During that time, the south was subject to slave raids on the command of the Khedive of Egypt, Muhammed Ali, who needed slaves for his army to conquer new territory.² Sudanese resisted: In 1885, a Sudanese Islamic revolutionary army led by Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Abd Allah, known as the Mahdi, entered Khartoum and beheaded British officer General Charles Gordon. In 1899, however, Egyptian rule in Sudan was restored but as part of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium. Darfur was only included into the Anglo-Egyptian condominium in 1916 as it remained a sultanate under the Mahdi.³

The central state has had limited capacity to dominate the Sudan's vast territory. Thus, patron-client relationships as a means of statebuilding have been a dominant feature from the onset of British rule.) Sudan was ruled as two Sudans during the Anglo-Egyptian condominium.⁴ The British created an indirect rule which is known as Native Administration, where they governed through village sheikhs and tribal paramount chiefs.⁵ This separation has been seen as an important root of recurring civil wars between the North and the South.⁶

The British recognized the importance of Sudanese involvement in government during the decolonization process through the Advisory Council for the Northern Sudan (ACNS). The ACNS consisted exclusively of northern Sudanese elites and was made up mainly of representatives from the two main Islamic sects in Sudan, the Khatmiya and the Ansar which would later become the bases for the two largest political parties in independent Sudan, namely the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the Umma Party (UP). The ACNS participated in the Sudan Administration Conference, which defined the steps toward national independence and self-government and resulted in the creation of a legislative assembly in 1948. Agreements signed in 1952–53 defined the process that would bring Anglo-Egyptian rule to an end. Britain granted Sudan independence in 1956, and handed over political power to northern Muslim elites.⁷

From independence in 1956 until 2019, a small northern political elite dominated the state. This elite has been made up of mainly three Muslim Arab ethnic groups concentrated in the north along the Nile River; the Shayqiyya, Ja'aliin and Danagla.⁸ (Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok (2019–October 2021), a member of the Kenani from North Kordofan, is the first Sudanese leader from outside these ethnic groups.) Other ethnic groups, in the West of Darfur, East and in the Nuba mountains have been as politically, economically and culturally marginalized as the ethnic groups in South Sudan.⁹ Thus, armed opposition to Khartoum has been a national issue and not fighting between north and south. Two civil wars between the North and the South have taken place; the first from 1955 to 1972 and the second from 1983 until 2005; However, armed conflict also erupted in Darfur in 2003 and in the East from 1994 to 2006. All armed groups in Sudan have framed their struggles as a result of pervasive marginalization.¹⁰

Post-independence governments have sought to create a Sudanese national identity on the basis of Arab culture and Islam.¹¹ This nationbuilding built on the wrongful assumption that Arab culture and language in combination with the Islamic religion were in tune with local interest and demands.¹² Since independence, the state thus used education to propagate an Arab-Islamic identity,¹³ and during Sudan's longest authoritarian regime, Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019) implemented the 'Civilization Project.' This was a violent, ideological

venture aimed at top-down Arabization and Islamization of the country. Imposing a conservative understanding of Islam on state and society, the al-Bashir's regime centralized political authority at the expense of Sudan's marginalized regions, dominated the economy and state bureaucracy through nepotism, created security and military organizations to suppress political opposition to the regime, .¹⁴ The Arabization policies accompanied the emergence of an ideology which dictated Arab racial supremacy, which manifested itself most clearly in the Darfur conflict .¹⁵ When Hassan al-Turabi, which is regarded as the main ideologue of the Islamist movement and mastermind behind the 1989 *coup d'état*, was frozen out of the regime in 1999, the policies became less ideologically founded and more pragmatic in its orientation especially with regards to its economic policies and with regards to negotiating peace.¹⁶ In general, however, these attempts failed to build a sense of nationalism among the diverse ethnic, cultural and regional groups.¹⁷

Territorial Control, Civil Wars and Countless Peace Agreements

Sudan's state-building history has also been characterized by complex armed conflict, or 'interlocking civil wars.'¹⁸ The causes are multiple and often interlinked especially by the center's continuous economic, political and cultural marginalization of the peripheries. They range from being resource-based (oil, gold, land), to religion, ethnicity and culture. Regional actors as well as the international dimension also play a role.¹⁹

Already on the eve of its independence from Britain, Sudan was plunged into prolonged violent conflict that is still raging. The British deprived South Sudan its share of power, which led to the first civil war, named "Anyanya".²⁰ Underdevelopment and political, economic and cultural marginalization of the South sparked a demand for regional autonomy among southern rebel groups. The Addis Ababa peace agreement was signed in 1973 and ended the first civil war and furthermore, granted South Sudan regional autonomy.

Sudan's second civil war erupted when Jafaar Nimeiri abrogated the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1983, declaring that revenues from oil recently discovered in the South were to accrue to the central government, rather than to the South. Nimeiri had come to power in 1969 as a socialist, but later recast himself as an Islamist. Thus, in 1983, Nimeiri also imposed sharia law, further marginalizing Sudanese in the south. In response, southerners launched their own state-building project, opposing the central government's Islamization and Arabization policies. Southern grievances resulted in the establishment of the Sudan People's Liberation Army and the related Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM/A), a rebel group led by Dr. John Garang until his death in 2005. Repeated peace initiatives during the 1990s were gridlocked over the relationship between religion and the state. During these years, Islamic terminology such as *jihad* and martyrdom became essential features of the government's official discourse on the war against the South.²¹

But the East also witnessed war, often termed the forgotten conflict of Sudan. In 1993 the Beja Congress (BC), which had formed in 1958, joined the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) based in Asmara, Ethiopia. This was umbrella organization that brought together parties committed to ending the hegemony of Arab, Muslim and northern elites in Khartoum. They rallied around the slogan of a 'New Sudan' which would bring an end to decades of marginalization. In 1994, it began an armed rebellion against Bashir. In 2005 the BC joined the Rashaida Free Lions and together they established what is known as the Eastern Front.²² This conflict, similar to Sudan's other civil wars, was the result of a political and economic

marginalization (described in more detail below). Political tensions between Sudan and Eritrea also played a role.²³

In 2005, the Bashir regime and SPLM/A signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Peace talks had started in the early 2000s under the auspice of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development under Kenyan leadership, supported by a ‘Troika’ of the U.S, U.K, and Norway.²⁴ The CPA established a one-state, two-system rule, in which the North imposed sharia law while the South remained secular, and it eventually led to South Sudan’s independence in 2011. A year later, the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) was signed.²⁵ Although the peace agreement ended the armed violence, it did not successfully bring an end to the historical marginalization of the east.

Although in the short-term, the CPA resolved the war between the North and the South, and the ESPA the conflict in the East, but these were not comprehensive solutions.²⁶ The piecemeal approach to peacemaking failed to address the fundamental issue of the center’s marginalization of the periphery.²⁷ Framing the CPA as between a unified North and a unified South excluded the voices of other marginalized peripheries which eventually drove some of them towards armed rebellion. For example, these frustrations contributed to the outbreak of war in Darfur in 2003 between the government and the two rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement and the Justice and Equality Movement .

The Darfuri armed groups rebelled against what they regarded as the Sudanese government’s continuous marginalization of the region and its non-Arab population. They published the *Black Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in Sudan*.²⁸ The book provides statistical evidence of how the riverine elite centered in Greater Khartoum had divided the north along racial lines. The book provided an explanation and rationale for political conflict both within Darfur and against the central government. Nationally, the roots of this conflict, as in the case of the long conflict between north and south, lie in the the domination of a small Muslim, arab and northern political elite who have concentrated resources in Khartoum, at the expense of the country’s peripheral and marginalized areas. The government used the Arab militia called Janjaweed, which has later been institutionalized under the Sudanese Army as the RSF, to target civilians in notorious operations of ethnic cleansing, including widespread and systematic rape against women of African decent to make “Arab” babies. A Darfur Peace Agreement was signed in 2006.²⁹ In 2009, the International Criminal Court (ICC) charged several individuals, including ex-president Bashir, for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Darfur. Another attempt at peace was made with the Doha Agreement in 2011, but it was ultimately unsuccessful.

After South Sudan’s secession in 2011, Africa’s youngest nation-state descended into a civil war of its own. Although the North acknowledged South Sudan as an independent nation, unresolved issues concerning the border where oil resources are located led to the outbreak of violence almost immediately after the split in 2012. The loss of oil revenues combined with the large spending on military and police to sustain repression and armed conflicts in many parts of Sudan, eventually led to economic crisis. The popular uprising, sparked by rising prices of basic commodities, led to the downfall of the Islamist arm of the regime in April 2019. However, the military is still in position of power in Sudan’s transitional government (2019-2024). A major concern of the transitional government has been to secure peace. In 2020, it negotiated peace s with 10 rebel groups known as the Juba Peace Agreement,. This included a roadmap to end the armed conflict in Darfur and to cooperation with the ICC.³⁰ The five geographic regions or “tracks” are Northern, Eastern, Darfur, Central and Two

Areas which refer to two border areas between Sudan and South Sudan.³¹ However, there are major rebel groups who have refused to sign the peace deal. There have also been protests, especially in east Sudan, that the agreement fails to address the root causes of marginalization and conflict.

Key Facts about Sudan (we will pull the relevant key facts)

Area: 718,723 sq mi; 1,861,484 sq km

Capital: Khartoum

Population: 46,751,152 (2021 est.)

Percentage of Population under 25: 62.95% (2020 est.)

Religious Groups: Sunni Muslim, small Christian minority

Ethnic Groups (percentage): Unspecified Sudanese Arab, approx. 70%; other, 30% (including Fur, Beja, Nuba, Fallata)

Official Language: Arabic and English

Type of Government: Presidential republic¹

Date of Unification: 1 January 1956 (from the Anglo-Egyptian condominium)

GDP (PPP): \$176.63 Billion (2017 est.)

GDP (Nominal): \$40.53 Billion (2017 est.)

GDP (per capita): \$3,958 (2019 est.)

Percentage of GDP by Sector: Agriculture: 39.6% (2017 est.), industry: 2.6% (2017 est.), services: 57.8% (2017 est.)

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Total Rents (Percentage of GDP) from Natural Resources: 5.842% (2019 est. Worldbank)

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Fertility Rate: 4.66 children per woman (2021 est.)

Source – *CIA World Factbook*

Political Economy

Sudan's political economy is based on agriculture and oil. Historically, agriculture is the main source of income and employment; it currently provides for more than 60% of the population. Oil is Sudan's main export, represented around 90% of Sudan's total exports from 2004 to 2008.³² Oil wealth in Sudan has neither been used to invest into other sectors of the economy such as agriculture nor been invested wisely to develop the country, however.³³ Rather, it has been a driver of armed conflict, nurtured patronage networks and corruption, and economically empowered elites with close ties to the Military-Islamist dictatorship of Bashir.

¹ The 2019 constitutional charter establishes Sudan as a parliamentary democracy. However, until 2024 it will be headed by a military-civilian sovereignty council of Sudan.

Oil , Conflict and Secession of South Sudan

Oil has been intricately connected to the conflict in Sudan. First oil has shaped the conflict. The oil fields are located primarily in South Sudan, and during the civil war, armed groups targeted oil pipelines, since they helped keep the regime in power. Oil has fed into practices of militarization under the Bashir regime.³⁴ Government spending kept increasing during “the oil decade” between 1999 and 2011, but defense, security and the police received the bulk of the budget.

Oil also has motivated the regime to genuinely engage in peace negotiations in the hope of reaping economic benefits.³⁵ Sudan’s oil adventure started with the American oil company Chevron soon after the first civil war between the North and the South that ended with the Addis Ababa peace accord in 1972. This was during the regime of Jafaar Nimeri (1969-1985) who welcomed stronger diplomatic relations with the U.S. However, Chevron pulled out when the civil war resumed in 1983. With worsening diplomatic relations after the Islamist coup d’etat in 1989 and American economic sanctions since the 1990s, Sudan was forced to look elsewhere for partners in oil production. When new peace talks between the North and the South were initiated, China emerged as a significant partner. Economic sanctions on Sudan did little to deter Chinese companies hoping to benefit from Sudanese oil.³⁶

Peace agreements have also had a direct impact on oil. Oil has been connected to the North-South conflict, and thus the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the SPLM/A and the Government of Sudan in 2005 included an agreement on wealth sharing that had ramifications for the country’s soil revenues. The South’s separation from the North in 2011 had an even greater impact on oil. The secession meant that Sudan immediately lost 75% of its oil revenues, initiating a dramatic economic decline. As a result, Sudan saw depreciation of the Sudanese pound and the need to resort to the lifting on subsidies on basic commodities. These, in turn, sparked anti-regime protests in 2012 and 2013.

With South Sudan in control of most of the oil production, but Sudan in control of essential export routes and processing facilities, the two countries have strong economic reasons to collaborate. Although in 2012 renewed conflict between the two countries broke out based in the fair division of oil revenues,³⁷ an agreement was negotiated between the two countries. At the time, oil prices were high, granting Sudan a set price for exporting oil through its pipelines at 25 USD per oil barrel. Since then, oil prices fell internationally, and at the time of this writing, South Sudan is receiving the lowest price ever for its oil. Oil production has further fallen due to the outbreak of a civil war in South Sudan in 2013. All of this has had negative impacts on the economies of both Sudan and South Sudan.³⁸

Khartoum’s Overexploitation of Sudan’s Regions

Although the Sudanese economy was booming in the years before South Sudan’s secession in 2011, it failed to convert oil revenues into robust investment in public education, health, and infrastructure. Indeed, Sudan’s 2019 HDI is below the average for countries in the low human development group. Yet, there is also great variation in development across regions.

The states along the Nile, including the capital of Khartoum, rank considerably higher on key indicators of human development compared to the marginalized conflict prone areas of Darfur, Eastern Sudan and Southern Sudan before secession which rank among the

lowest globally.³⁹ Major parts of the country are marginalized, impoverished and suffer repeated emergencies including famines. An estimated 7.3 million people in the Sudan are food insecure,⁴⁰ with levels of children malnourishment in Sudan among the highest in the world. International aid has contributed to the post-colonial state's exclusionary development processes as it has continued to provide food to Sudan's impoverished regions. Meanwhile, the state has done nothing to get Sudan onto a new path and redistribute its resources so that food security becomes a reality.⁴¹

The overexploitation of Sudan's regions is not new to the Bashir regime. In fact, it has a long trajectory and can be traced back to Sudan's colonial economy.⁴² British colonists initiated projects in and around Khartoum, including setting up the Gezeira irrigation scheme, the world's largest at that time, to cultivate cotton for export. Little was done elsewhere, resulting in gross economic disparities between Sudan's regions.

Not much changed during the postcolonial period. State's policies have exploited and displaced people. For example, the Unregistered Land Act of 1970 abolished customary land use and ownership, by stipulating that land slots which are not privately owned would automatically be the property of the state. This practice has been continuously used by political rulers in their mission to modernize agriculture. This led to land dispossession, impoverishment and displacement of large populations that in turn gave rise to conflict in several parts of the country.⁴³ The disparities in economic development accelerated during the regime of Bashir.⁴⁴ This was illustrated by the emergence of the Hamdi triangle. Named after a minister of Finance and Economic Abdel Rahim Hamdi, who proposed that economic investment should be concentrated in places within a day's drive of the capital, it refers to the development within the triangular region bordered by Dongola, el Obeid and Sennar

Neotism, Corruption and the Economic Position of the Security and Military

The Islamists initiated a comprehensive *tamkeen policy*, Arabic for "consolidation of power," which entailed the penetration of the military, civil service and the economy. This entailed mass dismissals of civil servants following the appointment of Islamist loyalists, as well as the president's family members and ethnic group, to positions of power.⁴⁵ It also led to a downgrading of skills in the civil service whereby regime loyalists were put in place regardless of their skills, qualifications and experience, and those with skills, edged out of their positions, emigrated, primarily to the Gulf. A merit-based civil service was thereby replaced with regime loyalists and also other government institutions were affected by nepotism. With an increasingly educated youth, about 65% of the total population, there was growing dissatisfaction with a regime in which loyalty triumphed merit.⁴⁶

The economic *tamkeen* policy basically entailed a process of privatizing state-owned companies to regime loyalists and their kin at bargain prices. Islamist businesses enjoyed privileges such as exemptions from taxes. Instead of distributing state contracts through public procurement, regime loyalists were prioritized. This negatively affected the market economy. Companies owned by the regime and its loyalists controlled the economy and used the wealth to buy political support. This included a systematic and increasing involvement of both Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) in economic and business activities.⁴⁷

Paramilitary forces also gained important economic power during the Bashir era. In 2012, large gold reserves were discovered in Darfur, but 90% of the gold was located in conflict

areas largely controlled by the paramilitary group Janjaweed. After the loss of oil revenues alongside South Sudan's secession, it became Sudan's primary source of hard currency. It constitutes 40% of the country's exports. The Janjaweed militia, were instrumental in the Darfur genocide, and then formally incorporated into the Sudanese army in 2013 under the name Rapid Support Forces (RSF).⁴⁸

As a consequence of three decades of neopatrimonialism and kleptocracy, Sudan is considered one of the world's most corrupt countries.⁴⁹ Sudan ranks 173 out of 180 in Transparency International's 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index Sudan. Infographics can be accessed here: [After Bashir's removal from office, he was prosecuted for corruption and sentenced to two years in a social reform facility.](#)⁵⁰

Despite Bashir's removal from office, the military and security still control Sudan's economy. The RSF has monopolized the gold mining industry, and they and other military actors have stakes in a number of businesses involved in the export and import of a number of goods such as oil, gold, gum arabic, sesame, weapons; fuel, wheat, and cars. They are also involved in a range of other businesses, such as telecommunications, banking, water distribution, and real estate. The security sector even controls the firm that produces Sudan's banknotes. There is little public information about these companies and their corrupt practices...⁵¹

Moreover, they are firmly entrenched in power. Currently half of the members of the Sovereign Council acting as the head of state during the transition are from SAF and RSF, with commander in-chief of SAF Abdel fattah El Burhan and RSF Mohamed Hamdan Daglo at the forefront. Their strong economic position, and the entanglement of economic interests, state nepotism and corrupt practices, means they have vested interests in maintaining political power. What is described as the deep state may pose serious obstacles to Sudan's transition to civilian rule.

Changes and Challenges in Society

Demographic Changes

Sudan's society is ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse. The census of 1955, conducted when Sudan was the largest African country,² representing more than 8 percent of the African continent, showed that Sudan was home to at least 570 ethnic groups. In broad terms, these ethnic groups could be regrouped into six categories: those of Arab descent (40 percent); southerners (30 percent); westerners, including mainly non-arab parts of Darfur and South Kordofan (13 percent), Nubaians from the Nuba mountains in Southern Kordofan (6 percent); the Beja of eastern Sudan (6 percent), and Nubians of northern Sudan. (3 percent).⁵² In terms of regional concentration, the Arabs formed the majority in central and northern parts of Sudan, while other groups were concentrated in the marginalized, impoverished and conflict prone regions.⁵³ The overwhelming majority of Sudanese are Muslim, but non-Muslim southerners still reside in the north and some have assumed citizenship. In addition, there are Coptic Orthodox and Greek Orthodox Christians, albeit small, in Khartoum, El Obeid in North Kordofan, River Nile, Gezira, and parts of eastern Sudan.

² Sudan now ranks as Africa's third largest country.

The political elites who dominated post-independence Sudan have never considered this ethnic diversity to be a strength. As discussed above, the largely Arab Muslim elites institutionalized racial hierarchies, where those of African descent were placed at the very bottom. Racial slurs have been commonplace, including the word slave for southerners and other ethnic groups of African descent. There is a strong societal preference for light skin rather than dark skin, because dark skin is associated with the legacy of slavery and Africaness. (Skin bleaching is a common practice in the country.) Thus, due to these forms of marginalization, diversity has led to onflict and strife.

Sudan's population has been growing steadily despite reoccurring wars in different parts of the country. The population is growing fastest in urban centers, and Sudan is globally among one of the fastest urbanizing countries. The country was 40% urbanized in 2005, however, this number excludes a large portion of the displaced populations. Urbanization has been driven by collapse of rural economy coupled with conflict and natural disasters like floods and famines. Sudan is among the countries notorious for having the largest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) However, internal displacement has decreased especially after the secession of South Sudan.⁵⁴ At one point, however, Sudan hosted the largest number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the world. In 2009, the country hosted almost five million IDPs.⁵⁵ (Currently, there are about 2.5 million IDPs in Sudan.)

Khartoum is growing the most. At independence the population in Khartoum was estimated at 250,000 to an estimated 2,831,000 in 1993 to between 4.5 million to million by 2005 depending whether you rely on official or unofficial estimates. Historically migration to Khartoum was seasonal, something which meant that migrants often returned to their areas of origin. But the reasons for migration have changed and now it is mainly a response to war, natural disasters and economic despair.. Just as economic resources are increasingly concentrated at the center (at the expense of the regions of course), people move to Khartoum ith a hope of a better life.

Institutions and Governance

Sudan has witnessed alternation between civilian and military regimes. The country saw multiparty parliamentary rule (1953–58, 1964–69, and 1985–89) and military dictatorships (1958–64, 1969–85, and 1989–2019),⁵⁶ and is currently in a military-civilian transitional government after the 2019 popular uprising which ousted the military dictator Omar al-Bashir.⁵⁷ To date, however, neither the civilian or military regimes able to resolve the fundamental problems of political stability

Given its democratic periods, Sudan has held many elections since independence, and the right to vote for women was introduced in 1965. However, these elections had serious shortcomings. In particular, they excluded large parts of the Southern Sudanese population..⁵⁸ Until 2008, a plurality voting system was utilized whereby candidates were elected in single member districts on the first-past-the-post basis. After that a new electoral law introduced elements of proportional representation and a reserved seats quota for women. Against the backdrop of perpetual armed conflict, it comes as no surprise that the establishment of democratic institutions has met obstacles.⁵⁹

The common element across the regimes, and obstacle to governance in Sudan, has been that both parliamentary and military regimes have been based on a minority of urban-based elites in Khartoum.⁶⁰ This rivalry among Khartoum's northern, Muslim and Arab elites has been

described as a game of musical chairs in competing for state office.⁶¹ Weak political institutions combined with sectarian politics dominated the post-independence era until the military coup d'état in 1969. For most of Sudan's history, military dictatorships have ruled the country: first under Nimeiri and later under Bashir. A common feature between them was the attempt to destroy the traditional sectarian political parties and their support base and instead impose socialism and Islamism as ideologies through which Sudan will build a united nation and state.⁶²

The first era of civilian rule began in 1953 through a parliamentary election. However, at this point in time the political parties can be described as loose alliances based in the religious sects and its leaders were motivated largely by personal interests. At that time Sudan was moving toward independence which was later proclaimed by the parliament in 1956. From the 1953 elections until July 1956, Ismail al-Azhari became Sudan's first prime minister and was, thus, instrumental in achieving Sudan's independence. The National Unionist Party (later renamed into the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP) of which al-Azhari was the secretary general, won the elections with the support base in the Khatmiyya sect. From July 1956 until November 1958 a new government was headed by Abdallah Khalil, secretary general of the Umma Party (UP), enjoying the support of the Ansar sect.

Late in 1958, a bloodless military coup d'état by General Ibrahim Abbud dissolved major political institutions. The first period of military rule lasted from 1958 until 1964. At first, General Abboud seemed to bring needed stability to Sudan. However, he became increasingly dictatorial as his policies. Abboud attempted to bring an end to the civil war by military victory and only escalated the conflict.

In 1964, a popular uprising led to the fall of the Abboud regime and the restoration of a civilian parliamentary system. The outcome of the elections was a foregone conclusion. Of the 173 seats in parliament, the UP gained 76 and the DUP 54; thus, neither could rule without the other's support. At the same time, none of the so-called ideological parties - the communists or the Muslim Brothers, who gained eleven and five seats, respectively - were strong enough to have a meaningful effect on policy. The UP and DUP were no more effective than they had been in the 1950s in finding solutions to Sudan's social or economic problems, or in bringing an end to the civil war. As before, parliamentary government was characterized by factional disputes. As a result, another group of soldiers promised to end the chaos created by the politicians and took over the government in May 1969.

The new military regime was led by Jaafar Nimeiri, who remained in power until 1985. At various times during the second era of military rule, the old patterns seemed to have been broken. In 1972, Nimeiri was able to negotiate peace by recognizing special autonomy for the south. In the mid-1970s, there was much discussion that Sudan might become the "breadbasket of the Arab world," and large amounts of capital began to flow into economic development. Nimeiri was committed to a relatively radical program, defined in terms of Arab socialism. Through the Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU), he attempted to create a new style of political organization that would replace the traditional sectarian parties, and he hoped that the new ideology of Socialism would provide the basis for a national identity. However, at the beginning of the 1980s, Nimeiri reignited the civil war when he began a program of Islamization referred to as the "September Laws." Active opposition was organized in the south by SPLM/A, and it subsequently grew in the north as the growing costs of the civil war created a major economic crisis.

Mass civil demonstrations undermined the military regime, as they had in 1964. Military autocracy and the inability to resolve the basic issues of national unity and the economy opened the way for another restoration of parliamentary rule. The transition to parliamentary rule was handled by a Transitional Military Council (TMC) led by General Abdul Rahman Siwar Dhahab. The TMC was a group of high-ranking officers that overthrew Nimeiri in April 1985, promising elections and the restoration of civilian rule in a year. The pledge was kept, and elections in the spring of 1986 returned the old political parties to control of Sudan. The SPLM did not participate in the transition, charging that the new government was only continuing Nimeiri's policies in a new format.⁶³

However, the restored parliamentary government was more a repetition of the 1960s than a continuation of Nimeiri's regime. The major parties, and even many of the leaders, were those who had been active in the earlier era. The Prime Minister was Sadiq Mahdi, the leader of the UP. Unfortunately, the new government was ineffective and unable to reform the economy. A continually shifting coalition of parties, it provided little political stability.⁶⁴ Some negotiations had taken place with the SPLM/A, but the civil war continued. In this context, a group of officers again declared that Sudan had to be saved from the politicians, and on June 30, 1989, Sudan returned to military rule. This regime built on an Islamist ideology and stayed in power for 30 years until a new popular uprising started in December 2018.⁶⁵

The uprising led to the fall of Bashir and the declaration of a new order. The 2019 constitutional charter presents a roadmap for Sudan's transition to democracy.. According to this roadmap, the military-civilian transitional government is to be replaced by an elected government in 2024. Although hopes are high for a successful transition to democracy, Sudan continues to be one of the worlds most fragile states.⁶⁶

Political Parties

Political parties in Sudan are closely related to sectarian bases. Most Sudanese Muslims had traditionally belonged to one of the major Sufi sects in the country. The two largest are the Ansar sect which was led by the al-Mahdi family and the Khatmiyya sect led by the al-Mirghani family. Historically, the Ansar has had its constituencies in the West and the Khatmiyya in the East. It was upon this Islamic sectarian basis that state-society relations took shape and political parties are built.⁶⁷ The Ansar and the Khatmiyya founded the two most dominant parties, the Umma Party (UP) and the National Union Party (which later became the Democratic Union Party, DUP). Each of the parties had and still has a strong Islamic sectarian base.

The UP was established in 1945, more than a decade before independence. The party is currently led by Miraim al-Sadiq al-Mahdi, the daughter of the long term leader of the party and imam of the Ansar Sadiq al-Mahdi, who had served as prime minister from 1966-1967 and again from 1986-1989. Although the Ansar were found throughout Sudan, the group's main support base was found in western Darfur and Kordofan.⁶⁸ Since Sudan's independence, the UP has experienced political success during the short periods of civilian rule and political persecution during the periods of military reign. The political party is not secular: it has a support basis in the Ansar and roots going back to Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi, known as the Mahdi, who is the great-grandfather of Sadiq al-Mahdi. Under the banner of Sharia, the Mahdi led a successful revolution against Turco-Egyptian rule in Sudan from 1881 to 1885. Muhammad Ahmad Abdullah proclaimed himself to be the Mahdi, or leader, sent by God to establish justice and God's will on earth.⁶⁹

The DUP, the other major political party, has a similar tie to a religious organization, the Khatmiyyah Order. A Muslim organization led by the Mirghani family, the Khatmiyyah Order had roots in popular Muslim devotional revivalism in the early nineteenth century. It has never been so directly political as its rival, the Mahdist movement, but when party politics began during the Anglo-Egyptian condominium, the Mirghanis gave their support to a nationalist party that advocated unity with Egypt.

The UP and the DUP are northern Sudanese political parties that have dominated civilian politics. However, their mass support is not directly related to the performance of these parties; rather, it depends on the prior loyalty of Islamic sect. As a result, civilian politics after long periods of military rule has typically resulted in the recreation of sectarian politics. However, the 2010 general elections showed that the DUP – like UP – suffered both from internal factionalism and from an erosion of its traditional base.⁷⁰

Deep sectarian rivalry between the Ansar and the Khatmiyya has historically characterized Islam in Sudan's political process, but the emergence of communism and Islamism at the political scene challenged the sectarian nature of Muslim politics in Sudan. These include, most notably, the Sudanese Communist Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. Both, however, are dominated by riverine elites based in Khartoum, particularly at the University of Khartoum.⁷¹

The Sudanese Communist party (SCP) was established in 1946. It built important ties to the developing trade union movement and had significant support among educated Sudanese. During the 1960s, the SCP was the largest communist party in Africa, although it never became a mass party. Adhering to Marxist ideology, the party did not reject a role played by religion.⁷² Women members of the communist party organized the League of Sudanese Women in 1946, the same year the SCP was established and made women's emancipation part of its main goals. The SCP became Sudan's first political party to allow women members, doing so in 1946 before its traditional sectarian counterparts even considered it.⁷³ The gender ideology of the party did not address women's subordination and issues like violence against women and equality within family law, however.⁷⁴ Communists played an important role in the early years of the Nimeiri regime, but the party was harshly suppressed after a group of leftist officers with communist connections attempted to overthrow Nimeiri in the summer of 1971. The SCP joined the other civilian parties in opposition and was then active in the parliamentary politics of the 1980s. However, during the regime of Bashir the SCP was severely suppressed, and many of its cadres went into exile.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) became another "non-sectarian" political force in Sudanese politics. Like the SCP, the MB emerged as a political grouping of educated Sudanese in Khartoum, but advocated a program of strict adherence to Islam and the implementation of the sharia in Sudan. The Sudanese MB was founded in the end of the 1940s as an independent student organization at the University of Khartoum. In 1964, Hasan al- Turabi who emerged as the main ideologue and mastermind behind the coup d'état in 1989, was pivotal in establishing the first Islamist political party in Sudan. The Islamic Charter Front (ICF) was founded in October 1964 with Turabi as secretary general. The most important item on the agenda for the ICF was comprehensive Islamization of Sudan's laws and lobbying for an Islamic constitution guided by Sharia.⁷⁵ The fiercest competitor in advocating a viable alternative to the status quo was the SCP, and thus, Turabi increasingly emphasized women's rights, partly in an effort to compete with the communists.⁷⁶ In the process of

developing into a political party, the Islamists spearheaded by Turabi gradually became stronger as they interacted with the political system.⁷⁷

The May 1969 coup d'état of Nimeiri began as a left-oriented affair, but his regime ended up veering in the opposite direction and adopting sharia. After a process of national reconciliation, Turabi and the Islamists were included into the government, and the Islamization of the legal system in Sudan was initiated in 1983 with the September Laws.⁷⁸ The ICF was renamed the National Islamic Front (NIF) and, under the leadership of Turabi, cooperated with the Nimeiri dictatorship from 1977 until 1985 and afterwards with the civilian government until the Islamists seized power through a military coup d'état (against a government in which they themselves participated) in 1989.

This coup marked a radical ideological shift. The initial goal of the MB during the 1940s and 1950s had been to Islamize from below; now, the strategy was one of Islamization from above through the capture of state power. From 1999, the NCP was established and became the ruling party, meanwhile the Popular National Congress joined the opposition. The Bashir regime's response to the 2013 protests, internal calls for reform coupled with Bashir's decision to run for election in 2015, further fragmented Islamists. A group of core Islamists led by Gazi Salaheldin deserted the ruling party and formed the Reform Now Party.⁷⁹ The NCP has been banned by the transitional government and other Islamist forces isolated. The Islamist political parties that were in opposition to Bashir are likely to be allowed to run for elections again in 2024.

SPLM emerged as the only political party with an explicit secular agenda and with leadership and member base outside of the Arab and Muslim constituencies. Southern political groups have emerged in the context of civil war. The SPLM, under the leadership of the late John Garang, was the strongest organization speaking for the formal recognition of the religious and ethnic diversity of the peoples of Sudan. Officially, the SPLM has called for the establishment of a secular democratic state and the end of what it sees as Arab and Muslim hegemony.⁸⁰ After the secession of South Sudan in 2011, SPLM under the leadership of Salwa Kiir became the ruling political party and the SPLA transformed into the country's armed forces. The Sudan branch of the movement established itself as SPLM-North and was based in the states bordering the new Southern neighbor, still working for a secular Sudan in which ethnic and religious diversity is recognized.⁸¹

During the transitional period (2019-2024), several new political parties have emerged. Bashir was to a large extent successful in destroying the traditional political parties in Sudan, but added to that there is a new generation of youth who have been completely disillusioned with these old traditional political parties and demand a new vision for building Sudan as a nation going forward. The death of two major political figures, Hasan al-Turabi in 2016 and Sadiq al-Mahdi in 2020, might signal a new political era in Sudan. If Sudan goes back to politics as usual, then at least it will be without them.

Actors, Opinion, and Political Participation

As noted above, Sudanese are no strangers to political engagement. They have engaged in political parties and elections, but also have a long history of participation through civil society movements and uprisings.

Civil Society

The beginning of the civil society in Sudan can be traced back to groups that resisted British colonial rule. These included trade unions, which have been instrumental in Sudan's many successful popular uprisings. The Graduates' Congress, established in 1938, led the resistance against the colonial authorities until 1956 when Sudan became independent.⁸² The Sudanese Women's Union (SWU) was established already in 1952 as one of the main civil society organizations of its time, calling for women's political empowerment. In 1965, it had branches throughout the country and considerable gains in women's rights had been gained in terms of women's right to vote and stand for election, equal pay for equal work and the right to maternity leave. Its president, Fatima Ibrahim, was the first woman elected to parliament in Sudan and in the Arab world more generally.⁸³ Trade unions have also historically been influential in Sudan, beginning during the country's anti-colonial struggle.⁸⁴ After independence, trade unions have been instrumental in overthrowing the military dictatorships of Ibrahim Aboud in 1964, Nimeiri in 1985 and Bashir in 2019.⁸⁵

For the most part, northern civil society organizations and NGOs have operated in Khartoum, whereas their southern counterparts remained mostly Nairobi-based and affiliated with SPLM/A. Many civil society organizations emerged in the context drought, famine, and civil war. In addition, large numbers of international NGOs and relief agencies arrived, directing their efforts to serving the victims.⁸⁶

Civil society organizations have also been subject to periods of repression. Following the 1989 coup, all trade unions and NGOs were dissolved. This disrupted and destroyed the vibrant civil society that was starting to emerge in Sudan from 1985 to 1989 and effectively silenced opposition to Bashir's rule, including the media.⁸⁷ With the peace process, civil society gradually re-emerged. In addition to the opportunities that the peace process presented to organize freely, receiving funding from international donors made a huge difference.⁸⁸ However, Sudanese civil society was largely excluded from the peace process that led to the signing of the CPA, which was made into an internal affair between the Bashir regime and SPLM/A only.⁸⁹ The 2005 CPA allocated some political space to civil society, resulting in an explosion of NGOs, including human rights groups and women's groups were particularly vocal in demanding legal reform of a series of discriminatory laws codified in the name of sharia by Bashir's regime.⁹⁰ Yet, while the CPA allocated some space for political opposition, a series of laws have been enacted to severely restricted civil society's room for maneuver. The Voluntary and Humanitarian Work Act of 2006 imposes severe restrictions on both international and national NGOs, and has resulted in the expulsion of several international organizations and the shutting down of national ones. Moreover, after the ICC issued a warrant for the arrest of President Bashir, the regime viewed independent civil society as collaborators with the ICC.⁹¹ In 2009, the regime expelled 13 international NGOs and revoked the registration of three national NGOs, including the Amal Centre for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence; the Khartoum Centre for Human Rights Development and Environment; the Sudan Social Development Organization.⁹²

In spite of these restrictions, there was an emerging landscape of human rights and youth movements in the country during the Bashir era. A new generation of activists emerged with an appetite for change, and few believed in the old political party ideologies based on a narrow vision of the Sudanese nation-state as Arab and Muslim. One of these youth movements was a non-violent resistance group, Girifna, which worked to topple the Bashir regime. Girifna, which means "we are fed up" in Arabic, was established in 2009 in

preparation for the elections in 2010, and was quickly branded as a terrorist organization. Also several LGBT organizations were established (although not officially registered as NGOs) in a context where homosexuality is criminalized. Some organizations were shut down, and members were forced into exile or put under arrest, but many continued to operate in informal networks that pushed for regime change and fundamental human rights.

During the transitional period after the toppling of Omar al-Bashir and the dissolution of the NCP, several new civil society groups emerged. Counter-revolutionary actors are equally likely however. Despite promises of a new era, the transitional government has repeated the Bashir regime's repressive tactics, albeit with less violent force. Sudan is still considered by Freedom House as "not free" in terms of political rights and civil liberties.⁹³

Popular Uprisings

Sudan has experienced three popular uprisings which have successfully taken down military dictatorships. As such it is unique in the Middle East and Northern Africa, a region in which non-violence protest ousted authoritarian leaders for the first time in 2011.

The October Revolution in 1964 brought an end to Ibrahim Abbud's military regime. It all began with a symposium on the civil war at the University of Khartoum. The police clamped down on the symposium and killed the student Ahmad al-Qurashi. This resulted in a massive, yet non-violent, protest. The funeral procession of the student activist was used to call for demonstrations throughout the capital. Three days into the popular uprising, several trade unions announced a general strike. As a consequence, the economy suffered greatly. In addition, the general strike made it more difficult for the government to wage war by disrupting communications networks and furthermore interrupting supply chains to the armed forces located in the war zones of the south.

The symposium on the civil war between the north and the south initially sparked the popular uprising, but it is seen as first and foremost representing the northern intelligentsia's fight for political freedom rather than a serious attempt at tackling the question of marginalization and exploitation of the south. The fact that no southerners were invited to the symposium speaks for itself. One of the great achievements of the revolution noted in Sudanese history books was the extensive participation of women in the protests, among other things demanding universal suffrage and the right to be elected to office; both granted by the new civilian government. The participation in the revolution was mainly limited to the capital and its leadership to the Khartoum based urban professionals (trade unions in particular) and political leaders of the main political parties.⁹⁴

The April uprising or *intifada*, as it is labeled in Sudanese history books, led to the downfall of the military regime of Nimeiri in 1985. Growing economic problems, closer political alliances with the United States, combined with Nimeiri's Islamist turn in 1983 and the reigniting of the north-south civil war the same year were all factors contributing to the popular protests. Anti-government demonstrations began in March 1985 demanding a return to liberal democracy, but was met with live ammunition. Doctors of Khartoum hospital organized a strike to showcase their strong objection against the shooting of protestors. Other professional groups joined and in April 1985 a general strike was announced in Khartoum and also other major cities. The strike was led by the National Alliance, which composed of a group of opposition parties and professional and student unions, and it

effectively paralysed economic life throughout the country. Meanwhile Nimeiri was on a visit to the United States.

The economic crisis played a major role in the outbreak of the protests, but Nimeiri had become increasingly unpopular because of his domestic and international political maneuvers, which had led some even describe him as mentally unstable.⁹⁵ Sudan had cut all ties with the U.S in the wake of the Arab–Israeli war in 1967. But Nimeiri re-established diplomatic ties with the Americans in 1972, despite widespread public resentment. Further, in 1983 Nimeiri went from a socialist ideology to introduce sharia law in Sudan. In 1985 before protests erupted, one of Sudan's most liberal Islamic thinkers, Mahmoud Muhammed Taha, was executed.⁹⁶ Taha, a modernist Islamic thinker and the leader of the Republican Brothers, opposed the sharia laws of Nimeiri. He was prosecuted and executed for apostasy, opposing Islamic law, disturbing public order, and inciting anti-government sentiments. Nimeiri's Islamist turn also re-ignited a return to civil war in the south.⁹⁷

The next attempts at popular uprisings came in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, first in 2011 and later in 2012 and 2013. Demonstrators were unsuccessful in bringing down Omar al-Bashir's dictatorship, however. The regime suppressed protesters with gunfire, and thousands of protesters were arrested and tortured. As a response to national pressure and anti-regime demonstrations, Omar al-Bashir has strengthened his authoritarian grip. The NCP's grip of political power, therefore, was strengthened as South Sudan's independence entailed the end of a power sharing government where NCP had to share political power with the SPLM/A.

The 2019 revolution toppled Bashir. In doing so, it presents an historical trajectory opposite to elsewhere in the region, where the Arab Spring saw the toppling of secular authoritarian regimes and the emergence of Islamists into formal politics. In Sudan, the people ousted an Islamist authoritarian regime which had ruled for three decades. As such it differs significantly from previous popular uprisings which were mainly Khartoum-based and Khartoum-led.

The revolution began in mid-December 2018, when non-violent protests broke out in towns in the Sudanese provinces (Damazin, Atbara and Dongola) and rapidly spread throughout the country, including to the capital. For the months that followed, millions of Sudanese took to the streets. In a country where 61% of the population is under the age of twenty-five, this was a revolution of youth and especially young women. Women had participated in previous revolutions, but they were in majority in many locations in the 2019 revolution. Grass-roots groups, and particularly neighbourhood resistance committees, also played a key role in the social movement and the revolution. The neighbourhood resistance committees are mostly youth led and have been instrumental in the organization of demonstrations and have also played a vital role within local neighbourhoods in political awareness. They emerged partly in protest to the mainstream political parties which have failed to attract the youth and largely has lost legitimacy and trust.⁹⁸

Although the popular uprising was sparked by economic despair, protesters were quick to blame it on political mismanagement and corruption and demand the ousting of the Bashir regime. Demonstrations, strikes and other forms of civil disobedience took place for months despite harsh repression, arrests, tortures and killings by the security forces and other armed forces defending the regime. At the beginning of April 2019 succeeded in ousting Bashir and his Islamist cadres from power. But the protest continued after the Transitional Military Council seized control of the state as the council was considered supporters of Bashir. A sit-

in was formed outside the location of the Army Headquarters in Khartoum. The massacre by the security and military forces at the “sit-in” area on 3 June 2019, with more than a hundred deaths, injuries, rapes and missing persons, represents the most tragic event in the popular uprising. Negotiations between the Forces for Freedom and Change coalition (FFC) and the Transitional Military Council culminated in the constitutional charter and the formation of a transitional government headed by the economist Abdallah Hamdok. It entailed the inclusion of military actors, including those responsible for the massacre, within the Sovereign Council, a transitional period of three years ending with free and fair elections and a transition to democracy.⁹⁹

Regional and International Politics

Islamic Foreign Policy and State Sponsor of Terrorism

Arab nationalism has been an enduring theme, central to Sudanese governments' foreign policy. Islam became an important element after the Islamist-military takeover in 1989, whereas Africanism has remained distinctly secondary.¹⁰⁰ Islamization under Bashir entailed a pan-Islamic foreign policy, something which entailed alienation of western powers and closer alliances with Islamic states like Iran. Sudan has also kept its doors wide open for Hamas.¹⁰¹

For such reasons, Sudan has been branded as harboring terrorists. U.S. President Clinton added Sudan to the State Sponsor of Terrorism (SST) in 1993, after the first attack on the World Trade Center in New York the same year. Sudan was also notorious for hosting Islamist militant groups, including the al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden after Saudi Arabia revoked his citizenship. The SST listing, together with economic sanctions, made Sudan an international pariah. It has blocked Sudan's international financial relations by making the country ineligible for seeking debt relief, by preventing the country from seeking much needed loans from the World Bank and the IMF.¹⁰² Because of the SST and American economic sanctions, China emerged as the main partner in Sudan's oil adventure from 1995 onwards,¹⁰³ although this relationship changed when South Sudan became an independent nation in 2011.

Sudan was removed from the SST list in December 2020, but only after it agreed with the Trump administration to pay economic dispensation to US victims of terror attacks after al-Qaeda's 1998 bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Additionally, and as part of this deal, Sudan signed the “Abraham Accords” paving the way to normalizing diplomatic ties with Israel. This entailed repealing a 1958 law stipulating the boycott of Israel. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) was also a strong advocate for Sudan's move to normalize relations with Israel, and together with Saudi Arabia, the UAE has significantly contributed with aid to Sudan, especially after 2011. They also have vested economic interests. Sudan today exports a substantial amount of gold to the UAE; an industry controlled by military actors. These countries have backed the military actors within the transitional government.¹⁰⁴

The Abraham Accords are necessary for economic reform, but they also have potential negative political implications for the transitional government of Hamdok. The Accords strengthen the position of military actors at the expense of the civilian component.¹⁰⁵ Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, the head of the Sovereign Council, was key in paving the way for

the Abraham Accords. Moreover, he independently met with Israel's Prime Minister without even consulting the Abdallah Hamdok and the FFC, which is the political incubator of the civilian component of the transitional government. This created rifts in the fragile ruling coalition. The UP and the SCP rejected any step towards normalization considering Sudan's historical position supporting Palestine, while others accepted because of Sudan's desperate economic situation.¹⁰⁶

South Sudan's Secession and Sudan's Changing Regional Loyalties

South Sudan's secession had negative economic consequences for Sudan, and it made it difficult for Bashir to maintain his extensive and expensive patronage system. This increased his dependence on external patrons such as the oil-rich Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, China and Russia in order to secure financial support, something which is essential for his own political survival.¹⁰⁷ In order to secure such support, Bashir had to give something back. Among other things this included the leasing of the RSF to the Saudi-led military campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen.¹⁰⁸ Bashir also had to cut diplomatic ties with the Iranian regime.¹⁰⁹

The 2017 diplomatic crisis within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also affected Sudan. With Egypt's support, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain broke relations with and imposed a land, sea and air blockade of Qatar. The GCC crisis added another layer of complexity to a regime under growing pressure. For a number of years, Qatar had provided both financial and political support to Sudan, including hosting Darfur peace negotiations in Doha. Sudan under Bashir tried hard, together with other Gulf countries such as Kuwait and Oman, to adopt a neutral position during the GCC crisis. Ultimately, Sudan was forced to pick sides, favoring Saudi Arabia over the UAE.¹¹⁰

Relations between Sudan and South Sudan during the regime of Bashir were hostile, at best.¹¹¹ During the South Sudanese civil war, Bashir supported the rebellion against Salva Kiir and the South Sudanese government. Thus South Sudan wholeheartedly welcomed the fall of the Bashir regime. However, the two countries have yet to agree on the definite borders between Sudan and South Sudan.

Porous Borders and Increasing Migration Control

Sudan shares borders with Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Libya and South Sudan. Before secession of the South in 2011, it also shared borders with Congo, Kenya and Uganda. All of these borders were arbitrarily created during colonialism and lack geographical logic. The Beja live both in Sudan and Eritrea, al-Zaghawa in Chad as well as Darfur, and the people of Nuba mountains have more in common in terms of culture and language with the South Sudan rather than Sudan. These ethnic groups, many of which are pastoralists and nomads, have historically converged peacefully across borders. However, the porosity of borders has made Sudan vulnerable to refugees when famine and war occur in neighbouring countries. Sudan is both a destination and transit country for refugees and migrants from its neighbours. In some instances these refugees have used Sudan as a base to attack their homelands. For example, the Sudanese government aided Eritrean and Ethiopian militias (based in refugee camps in the east of the country) to overthrow the Ethiopian government in 1991.¹¹²

Sudan has a long history of generous refugee policy, especially towards Arabs.¹¹³ A peaceful and humanitarian refugee policy, which abides by non-refoulement, and pushes the goal of self-sustaining livelihoods for the refugees. However, with the Khartoum Process, Sudan took steps to control its borders, especially to stop illegal migration towards Europe. Moreover, although some European countries mirrored the US position towards Sudan under Bashir, this changed with the refugee crisis. In 2014, the EU launched the Khartoum Process or EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative aimed at combatting illegal migration from the Horn of Africa region, including Sudan. EUR 160 million has been allocated to Sudan, including funds for anti-immigration patrols onlong Sudan's borders. This gave Bashir some legitimacy in Europe as well as much needed aid after the economy plumpederted in 2011 with the loss of oil revenues. EU completely ignored the fact that Sudan is not only a transit country for refugees, but because of its three decades of authoriatian politics under Bashir and multiple armed conflicts is also a major country of origin for refugees en route to Europe.¹¹⁴

Of course, much of the EU-funded training and equipment given to bashir's regime has been used to control the borders, but also for surveillance of those opposing the regime and numerous human rights violations.¹¹⁵ The RSF was tasked with patrolling Sudanese borders which it has strategically used for its economic benefit by engaging in human trafficking and smuggling of weapons.¹¹⁶

Water, Ports and Geopolitics

The Nile River, which originates in Uganda (white Nile) and Ethiopia (blue Nile) and passes through Sudan and Egypt to the Mediterranean sea, is an important resource. Egypt and Ethiopia have competing interests and Sudan has been trying to navigate meanwhile keeping good relations with both neighbouring countries. For Egypt, the Nile is in fact the sole source of water and its access to it is secured through the 1959 Nile Water Agreement. However, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), under construction since 2011, has become a major threat to Sudan's and Egypt's access to the Nile waters.¹¹⁷ In 2012, however, Bashir announced that Sudan supported GERD as he feared being isolated from the Nile basin countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Burundi which all rejected the 1959¹¹⁸. As such he seemed to have reasoned that Sudan benefitted more from keeping good relations with Ethiopia rather than with Egypt.¹¹⁹ Bashir started a process of reconciliation with Ethiopia after decades of turbulence between the two countries, which may have been Bashir's major foreign policy achievement.¹²⁰ As a consequence the relationship with Egypt became even more strained. The relationship between the two states has been tense during the Bashir regime as Egypt under Mubarak feared the influence of Islamism.

GERD remains contested. As Sudan can easily get caught in a military or proxy conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt, the country has been active in promoting mediation from AU. Both Egypt and Ethiopia have put pressure on Sudan, something which has been a source of conflict between different fractions of the transitional government in Khartoum. In 2021, the UN Security Council held a session to discuss the dispute over GERD.

The Red Sea, including Sudan's port, has great geopolitical interest historically and contemporarily. The sea separates the coasts of Egypt, Sudan and Eritrea to the west from those of Saudi Arabia and Yemen in the east. It links the Suez Canal to the Gulf of Aden, which makes it it is one of the most traveled waterways globally. A number of countries in

Europe, North Africa, and Asia depend on access to Sudan's port. It is also a vital navigation route for military forces, including U.S, Turkey and Russia. In March 2019, just before the ousting of Bashir from office, Sudan signed a draft military agreement with Russia that involved a fleet logistics center in the vicinity of Port Sudan. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have also established military bases in Sudan and take great interest in the port for their own national security concerns.¹²¹ But it has also had military importance historically. The British took control over the Sudanese port city of Suakin in 1884 and 1885 in an effort to prevent French takeover. This seizing of all Egyptian ports in the Red Sea in the late nineteenth century was essential for the British Empire to secure sea lanes to support its colonial status superpower.¹²²

Regional powers thus have vested interests but also major disagreements. This was exemplified most recently by the Saudi Arabian-led armed intervention in Yemen (2015-) in which Sudanese RSF soldiers have participated on behalf of the Saudi government. Central to the tension among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan is also a wider regional conflict between several Arab countries against Turkey. The same year the Bashir regime gave Turkey, which backed Qatar in during the GCC crisis in 2017, the rights to restore Suakin, which is an old Ottoman port, and construct a dock for civilian and military vessels, something which escalated these tensions.¹²³

Religion and Politics

The majority of Sudan's Muslims are Sufis. The Qadiriyyah is the oldest of the Sufi orders or *tariqahs* in Arabic and it entered Sudan from the Middle East as early as the 16th century. This is probably the oldest of the Muslim mystic (Sufi) orders on the continent. Other major tariqahs formed important support bases for the traditional sectarian political parties. But whereas Islam had a latent presence through the sectarian political parties, throughout Sudan's post-independence history, the Islamists called for a comprehensive Islamization and an Islamic Constitution.

After the revolution for national salvation, as the Islamist-Military regime of Bashir called itself during the early 1990s, sharia became the guiding principle of state policy.¹²⁴ Shortly after the *coup d'état*, a decree was announced and it stipulated that sharia should be the main source of law and reference of the Sudanese state.¹²⁵ This involved Islamization of the country's legal, political, and economic system from above by force and is unparalleled by any other attempts to introduce sharia in Sudan. However, the Islamization of the legal system started before the Islamists colluded with the military and took power in 1989. In September 1983, Nimeiri issued several decrees, known as the September Laws, which involved the enforcement of *hudud*. *Hudud*, which is plural of *hadd* and translates into limit, restriction, or prohibition, are regarded as crimes against God, and they have fixed punishments which are derived from the Islamic sources. Turabi, the attorney-general at the time, headed a commission with the mandate to revise all of Sudan's laws in accordance with Islamic law.

Successive regimes since independence in 1956 have attempted to unite culturally, linguistically and religiously disparate peoples and regions of the country around Islamic and Arab nation building projects.¹²⁶ A question that has haunted the country since 1956 is the role of Islam in the country's permanent constitution. The question of an Islamic constitution dominated the political debates.¹²⁷ As early as 1956, Sheikh Hassan Muddathir, the last Egyptian Grand Qadi appointed to Sudan, advocated (much in line with the Islamists) for

Sudan be guided by an Islamic constitution. In 1957 the UP and Democratic Unionist Party issued a statement where they announced the call for Sudan to become an Islamic Parliamentary Republic with Islam as the main source of law, which makes clear the Islamic base of these political parties.¹²⁸ All Sudanese constitutions since independence have proclaimed Sharia as a main source of law. However, the 1998 Constitution featured the most Islamic elements. These included that state supremacy is to God, that Islam is the religion of the majority, and Arabic the official language, and that sharia remained unchallenged as source of legislation; the ultimate signal of an Islamic state.¹²⁹

Sharia, Decolonialization and Women's rights

Sharia has been a source of law since before Sudan's independence. Sudanese sharia courts were mandated by the British to apply Hanafi doctrine in the 1916 Mohammedan Law Courts Procedures. Whether by ignorance or design, they did not recognize the Maliki traditions of most Sudanese. British rule also continued the Ottoman separation of the civil law and the sharia with the latter being confined to personal and family matters. The Islamists' call for Islamization was seen as decolonialization. In practical terms, it included among other things a 1985 merger of civil and sharia courts, thereby reversing the British system.¹³⁰

The Islamist-Military state of Bashir initiated comprehensive Islamization of Sudan's legal system. This entailed Sudan's first codification of a Muslim family law in 1991. Until that point in time, family law (regulating marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, and custody of children) were dealt with according to the sharia developed through judicial circulars throughout most of the twentieth century.¹³¹ For Sudanese Islamists, the codification symbolized a Sudanization of the gender arrangements under the law. By many women's rights activists historically and contemporarily, the 1991 law has been described as a backlash against women's rights because it legalized child marriage, stipulated male guardianship, called for a wife's obedience to her husband, and denied women the possibility of working outside of the home without the permission of male guardians.¹³² As such, it is the most conservative Muslim family law in the region.¹³³

Women's rights under sharia, including the family law, served as a symbolic political signifier of political projects in Sudan.¹³⁴ Civilian and military regimes in Sudan throughout the independent era have equally failed to guarantee gender equality and introduce policies to better women's condition.¹³⁵ However, the civilization project launched by Islamists in 1989 interpreted Islamic law in a particularly fundamentalist way, and political leaders introduced new sharia laws that significantly changed women's citizenship rights to the worse.¹³⁶ Islamization of law also cemented ethnic and class hierarchies in important ways.¹³⁷ For example, the Labor Act of 1997 restricts women's working hours but differentiates between women of different class positions. *Unskilled* women are not allowed to work during evenings and nights, but *skilled* women like doctors are allowed to do so.¹³⁸ The law which Bashir's regime became most renowned for was what popularly known as the public order laws. These laws severely restricted women's movement and dress in public spaces and have been resisted since its inception. By Islamists they were regarded as women's entry ticket into public spaces, including education, politics and economy. In their view, it was a symbol of what they saw as modern Islam where women's public participation was coupled with piety and modesty. These laws formed an important backdrop to their wide participation in the 2019 revolution. One of the first acts of Abdallah Hamdok's cabinet was to abolish them.¹³⁹

Islamism and the Emergence of Salafism

Ansar al-Sunna is the main Salafi group in Sudan and it can be traced back to Abd al-Rahman Hajr, who was an Algerian religious scholar residing in Sudan from 1870 to 1939. However, the Salafi ideology has radicalized over time. The first salafis in the country found for Sudan's independence along side other Islamic groups, including both the Sufis and Muslim Brothers. This is a rather distinct feature of Sudanese Salafism focused on fostering peaceful relations with Sufi brotherhoods. However, this history of peaceful relations changed during the reign of Bashir.¹⁴⁰

The Islamist-Military regime of Bashir delineated the boundaries of what it considered authentic and correct Islamic views and practices, distinguishing them both from what it viewed as "traditional" Islam (Sufism) or what they referred to as "backward" Islam (Salafism). The Islamists' political project aimed to homogenize Sudanese Islam under the auspices of political authority, calling for an end to differences and divisions between religious schools of law and sectarian affiliations in the country. This process of homogenizing Islam involved political suppression of both Sufism and Salafism, especially in the early 1990s, despite the fact that many of these movements did not have political ambition at the time. Ansar al-Sunna has primarily engaged in Islamic missionary and preaching activities and has never developed into a political party.¹⁴¹

However, this strategy widened the opposition to Bashir's rule to include Salafi Islamic clergy (*ulema*) in the country. The principal shaykhs of Ansar al-Sunna, Abu Zayd Muhammad Hamza and Muhammad al-Hadiyya, were detained after declaring the regime un-Islamic in 1994. The same year five men killed 26 worshippers inside an Ansar al-Sunna mosque; orchestrated by the Bashir regime.¹⁴² However, relations gradually became more friendly and some Ansar al-Sunna's members joined the government and decided to participate in elections, either under the National Congress Party umbrella or as independent candidates. The increasing political pragmatism of the Islamists after 1999 have continued to be the cause of relentless critique by Salafi movements, including its stance on women's public participation.¹⁴³ This marriage of convenience that Bashir offered allowed Salafi groups to preach freely without much interference from the state. The increasingly lenient policy towards Salafi groups, included militant Salafism, increasingly caused violent clashes with the dominant Sufi brotherhoods towards the end of Bashir's rule. This stands in deep contrast to the history of fostering peaceful cohabitation among opposing Islamic groups.¹⁴⁴

Conclusion

Sudan is as a country of perpetual conflict and violence. Instability and rivalry among Khartoum's riverine elites – combined with marginalization of the peripheries – have been constant features of Sudanese politics and perhaps the most important cause of political instability and armed rebellion. The gap between Sudan's linguistically, culturally and religiously diverse population and the north's relentless attempts to build a national identity based on Islam and Arabism have been major obstacles to peace and democracy in the country.

Despite periods of civilian rule and three successful popular uprisings in 1964, 1985 and 2019, democracy remains a distant vision. During most of Sudan's independence, military dictatorships have been the rule. The regime of Omar al-Bashir has been the worst of the worst that Sudan has seen in terms of violating human rights, war crimes, corruption, and overexploitation of Sudan's regions. Yet, if Sudan follows its troubled historical trajectory,

then the civil-military transitional government headed by Abdallah Hamdok will be replaced by an authoritarian military regime.

There are reasons to believe this will materialize. The military actors within the transitional coalition have an upperhand, especially considering its control of the economy. Added to that, there are strong regional actors that want to see Sudan under military rule. Sudan's strategic location, its natural resources, makes the country geopolitical important, but also vulnerable to outside interference. Even the EU, in its search for a partner in crime to stop migration to Europe, has benefitted from these military actors, especially the Rapid Support Forces. The increasing rivalry within the civilian component of the transitional government are disturbingly familiar as it has a constant feature of Sudanese politics since before independence, and something that unfortunately strengthens the military. However, the Juba Peace Agreement gives a glimpse of hope for a new future for Sudan in which diversity might be respected, a reversal of a historical marginalization of Sudan's regions is put center stage and transitional justice. The delisting of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism in 2020 makes economic recovery more possible than ever before.

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