

No World Order: In Sudan, the Geopolitical Chessboard Unravels

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Four years after protests led to the fall of dictator Omar Al-Bashir, rival military forces have plunged Sudan into war over control of it. While democratic forces are the country's best hope, it is military factions and regional players that are shaping its immediate future.

Sudan is experiencing renewed conflict as tensions between the army and the paramilitary group, Rapid Support Forces (RSF), turned violent in April 2023. The power struggle centres around army leader General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and RSF leader General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), who together ousted President Omar al-Bashir in 2019.

The overthrow was enabled by popular protests, which played a key role in destabilising the regime. Starting in December 2018, people took to the streets to decry the cost of living crisis and Sudan's deteriorating economy. Soon afterwards, in January 2019, the demonstrations turned into calls for al-Bashir's resignation and a transition to a democratic government.

After al-Bashir's overthrow, a power-sharing agreement was established between the military and civilian opposition for a transitional phase towards full civilian rule. Disagreements between civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, Hemedti, and al-Burhan hindered progress, leading to a military coup in October 2021. Following international calls for civilian rule, Hamdok was reinstated. Lacking real power, he resigned in January 2022. Since the coup, protests against military rule were persistent, reaching their peak in October 2022, on the coup's first anniversary.

The Sudanese population's discontent contributed to the signing of a Framework Agreement in December 2022 to resolve the political crisis. It aimed to form a new national unity government with a civilian prime minister and hold elections within a year. The military conceded to only be represented on a security and defence council and establish a truth and reconciliation commission to address human rights abuses during the crisis.

The agreement was bound to unravel. It threatened both al-Burhan and Hemedti's wealth, by potentially stripping away their control over the country's resources and export trading companies, as well as their followers' safety, by focusing on justice and accountability.

The military leaders had no incentive or reason to accept a transition of power. The April 2023 escalation between al-Burhan and Hemedti reveals not only their unwillingness to share power with civilians, but even with each other.

A region on the edge

Sudan's location in a volatile but strategic region, bordering the Red Sea, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa, has rendered it a chessboard for regional and international actors to play out their interests. It has also made it a powder keg for vulnerable neighbouring countries that only need a slight push to plunge into political chaos.

A key regional tension currently playing out in Sudan is the battle for the Nile River between Egypt and Ethiopia. Egypt is deeply concerned about preserving access to the river, which covers around 90 per cent of its water needs. Ethiopia's construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) could disrupt Egypt's freshwater access, farming output, and power generation.

Ethiopia has consistently rejected demands from Egypt and Sudan for a binding agreement on the dam's filling and water distribution rules. A prolonged conflict in Sudan could complicate the Nile negotiations.

Ethiopia's manoeuvring in Sudan has also raised alarms. In July 2023, Ethiopia called for the deployment of an East African force in Sudan to protect civilians. This is a dangerous move that could escalate the internal conflict into a regional war, potentially drawing in more countries, including Egypt.

Even if it were to end soon, the Sudanese internal conflict has already destabilised the region, exacerbating tensions between and within countries.

Ethiopia itself has only recently emerged from its own violent internal conflict between the Ethiopian army and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a paramilitary group that controlled the Tigray region. The conflict came to a resolution at the end of 2022 with the signing of a ceasefire agreement.

In an effort to address the Sudanese crisis and the GERD tensions, Egypt organised a summit of Sudan's neighbouring countries in July 2023, where Egypt and Ethiopia agreed to expedite GERD negotiations over the next four months. Sudan was not present at the talks.

The potential spillover of conflict into neighbouring countries, particularly Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR), is another significant concern. Both countries are grappling with insurgent movements seeking to overthrow their governments.

In these fragile conditions, it would not take much for these countries to descend into full-blown internal conflicts. The influx of Sudanese refugees could strain resources, fuel popular discontent, and increase support for existing rebel movements or create new uprisings. Sudanese fighters infiltrating the two countries could also lead to a similar outcome, especially as the RSF often recruits fighters from both territories.

Further instability in Chad and CAR would transform the region into a breeding ground for terrorism and extremism, posing broader security implications. The porous borders between Sudan, Chad, and CAR could facilitate illegal arms trade, leading to new smuggling corridors, including through Libya.

Red Sea rivalries

The Red Sea region's strategic significance for Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Russia adds another layer of complexity to the Sudanese crisis. The Red Sea is crucial for Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, its [strategic framework](#) to reduce the country's dependence on oil and diversify its economy. A key Vision 2030 component is developing Red Sea tourism infrastructure to attract international tourists.

Raging conflicts and extremist actions across the Red Sea could jeopardise Saudi Arabia's ambitions, including its 500-billion-dollar NEOM project. NEOM aims to be a sustainable, car-free region, centred around a vertical city with a zero-carbon mass transit system. Having collaborated with both al-Burhan

and Hemedti in its Yemen coalition of Arab States, Saudi Arabia is cautiously navigating diplomatic waters, focusing on brokering peace.

When it comes to Russia, it recently obtained approval from the military leadership to establish anaval base in Port Sudan. This move would assert Russian presence in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, possibly impacting control over the Suez Canal. The deal can only enter into force when adopted by Sudan's still non-existing legislative body.

In exchange for supporting both al-Burhan and Hemedti, the Wagner Group, Russia's paramilitary force, gained access to gold worth billions of dollars. These resources could be used to fund other Russian initiatives, including the war in Ukraine. Russia's main interest is to ensure peace, rather than favouring either warring faction.

As suggested by these complex dynamics, even if it were to end soon, the Sudanese internal conflict has already destabilised the region, exacerbating tensions between and within countries. The crisis could have been averted in 2022 through a Framework Agreement that acknowledged the central role of Sudan's military forces, since the country's independence.

Completely depriving them of power is not a viable option: the fear of accountability and losing control over resources only embitters their struggle for power. This extends, beyond the forces under al-Burhan and Hemedti's command, to other armed rebel groups as well.

To navigate the country's history of armed factions and widespread abundance of weapons, a prudent approach could involve sharing power between the military and civilians in the initial and midterm stages. Tough discussions on immunity, resource control, and military reform must be tackled through painful compromise.

Integrating armed groups, like RSF, into the army may take a decade. The full transition to democracy could span several more.

Given the many interests at play in Sudan, the EU needs to assume a long-term role in the country that goes beyond humanitarian aid and peace mediation. The EU should support and be an ally to pro-democratic forces building Sudan's future, but there is no way around engaging with the country's crucially influential military leadership.

In a region plagued by failed revolutions and military-backed governments, this imperfect approach is the only way towards lasting peace.



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