

10 | Understanding the Roots, Dynamics, and Potential of an “Impossible” Revolution

The Prospects and Challenges of Democratization in Sudan

Khalid Mustafa Medani

In 2021, the Sudan witnessed a military coup that has threatened to reverse the country’s post-2019 path toward a transition to democracy. In April 2019, popular protests successfully toppled Omar al-Bashir from power. The popular uprising was a culmination of over six months of protests that included Sudanese across the social and regional divide. This chapter examines the underlying causes and consequences of this historic popular uprising, shedding light on the prospects for the resumption of a democratic transition considering the ongoing wide-scale pro-democracy protests. In empirical terms, the significance of this chapter lies in the fact that conventional analysis of authoritarianism, particularly in the Arab context, has generally argued that autocratic regimes are “durable” and generally immune to regime change even in the context of popular protests (Bellin 2004; Heydemann 2007).

Recent scholarship on democracy has centered on the increasing pattern of democratic reversals, decay, and deconsolidation (Foa and Yascha 2017), or the turn toward hybrid-regimes characterized by a form of “competitive authoritarianism” (Gyimah-Boadi 2015; Levitsky and Way 2010). This in turn has led many analysts to contend that the only way to promote democratization in authoritarian contexts is to encourage a negotiated “pact” between military and civilian elites to promote a transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Wahman 2014). While this line of argument represents a great measure of truth

in light of the negotiated pact between military and civilian leaders in Sudan, this chapter delves further to examine the extent to which Sudan's political transition will lead to a process of democratization that results in yet another example of a hybrid authoritarian regime (Bogaards 2009), or whether it may signify a relatively exceptional case in the region of a transition leading to the consolidation of democracy (Cheeseman 2015; Svobik 2008). My central premise is that the ongoing and tenuous transition from autocracy to civilian democracy in Sudan will be greatly influenced by three overarching factors that will drive political developments in the future: the level of cohesion and coordination of actors in civil society, the coercive and institutional capacity of the military and security apparatus of the state, and the evolving role of regional actors, vis-à-vis the current interim coalition government composed of a transitional military council (TMC) and civilian leaders. Taken together, these factors represent the core analytical framework of this chapter. I argue that these factors are presently playing a key role in the transition to civilian government and, potentially, multi-party democracy in Sudan.

In broader terms, this chapter draws upon recent scholarship on popular mobilization to explain the causes and potential lessons of Sudan's popular uprising for other countries in the region. As the editors of this volume note in the Introduction, all the cases of opposition mobilization, including that of Sudan, share important common elements. These include the extent to which activists learned from the legacy of the Arab Uprisings, the ways in which horizontal modes of mobilization superseded a previous reliance on hierarchical networks and formal political parties as primary avenues of opposition, and the degree to which elite fragmentation in combination with the onset of deep economic crises provided the context for protest. Taken together, these factors not only influenced the mobilization strategies utilized by youth activists; they also determined variations in cross-sectional participation across countries, influenced the course and divergence of opposition mobilization, and crucially influenced both the obstacles and prospects for reform.

This chapter builds on these important insights as well as on previous publications (Medani 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2019), which examined the factors associated with the weakening of Omar al-Bashir's authoritarian regime and the emergence of a cross-sectional protest movement that ultimately ousted him from power in April 2019. These included the role of South Sudan's secession and the loss of oil revenue,

divisions between the Islamist ruling elite, and the changing dynamics of protests in Sudan over the last decade. In these studies, I argued that the roots of the unraveling of authoritarian rule in Sudan was already in evidence as early as 2011. By that year, deep divisions had already emerged within the state security forces and the then-ruling National Congress Party (NCP) over the potential pitfalls for Khartoum associated with South Sudan’s secession, the ongoing negotiations with the insurgent South Sudan’s Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) over the oil-rich border regions, and on the conduct of the ongoing military campaigns in South Kordofan and Darfur. Far from representing a unified front as in the early years of the Bashir regime, there was increasing dissent within the ranks of the security establishment. That led Bashir to sack several high-ranking officials for the sake of his self-preservation.

Beyond tackling the roots of Sudan’s uprising and the causes behind the fall of Sudan’s authoritarian regime, this chapter also addresses another equally important question, namely the prospects for a democratic transition. In the case of Sudan, while the 2018 intifada clearly demonstrated that after 30 years in power the Bashir regime’s capacity of coercion was weaker than most had assumed, in the aftermath of the fall of his regime, the issue of the role of the military and security forces remains an open empirical question requiring further research. Consequently, to evaluate the prospects for a democratic transition, another important premise of this chapter is that it is vital to evaluate the relative strength of the current regime’s capacity for coercion vis-à-vis what is a resurgent civil society opposition in the country. Moreover, what the examples of popular protests in other Arab autocratic contexts have demonstrated is that the answer to this question also depends on the state’s fiscal health, the degree to which the state security sector (that is, the “deep state”) is entrenched in civil society, and the level of international support to military leaders. These factors will determine whether the levels of popular mobilization, civil society cohesion, and political party autonomy and legitimacy will outweigh the capacity of the coercive apparatus of the current hybrid regime forged out of a tenuous alliance between military and civilian leaders.

Thus, in addition to unpacking the key factors explaining the fall of autocracy in Sudan, this chapter evaluates the prospects of two divergent outcomes: Democratic transition or democratic reversal. I will address this question by focusing on four factors likely to determine political developments: The fiscal capacity of the state which is a key

element in generating legitimacy for civilian politicians vis-à-vis groups in civil society, the level of cohesion and coordination between youth and other groups in civil society, the institutional capacity (that is, autonomy) of the security forces with respect to shaping military-civil society dynamics, and the nature of external support on the part of regional actors. Taken together, changes along these dimensions have played a key role in the ongoing democratization process. But these same developments, if not closely linked to governance and certain pro-democracy policies in the future, may lead to disillusionment and popular disaffection, and further divisions in society and the major political parties. Such an outcome may yield a reversal of democratic gains for a country and region which has yet to witness a robust democratic transition.

The Fiscal Crisis of the State and the Roots of Revolution (*thawra*)

One of the least addressed issues influencing the prospects of popular opposition mobilization has to do with the extent to which deep economic grievances and social discontent is addressed by state elites, and how these grievances are understood more generally by activist leaders in ways that, as Serres notes in his study of Algeria in this volume, influence the level of cross-sectional mobilization and hence play an important role in determining the success (or failure) of protest movements. In the case of Sudan, the key factors that came to play in the Sudan's 2018–19 popular protests and the fall of Omar al-Bashir's authoritarian regime stemmed from the economic and social consequences of the secession of South Sudan in 2011. This resulted in a deep fiscal crisis of the state after over a decade of relative economic growth. Ultimately, it was the end of the oil boom era which served as a critical juncture in the country's history, directly resulting in the unraveling of al-Bashir's authoritarian regime. The decline in oil revenue resulting from the secession of South Sudan on July 9, 2011, led to a deepening of the economic crisis in the country and eroded the authority of the state over the economy. This, in turn, eroded the patronage networks of the former regime, strengthened the rivalries among the ruling National Congress Party's (NCP) leadership, and exacerbated social and economic grievances across a wide spectrum of Sudanese in both urban and rural areas, laying the background for the popular uprising of December 2019. Between 2003 and 2011, during the pre-partition period, oil accounted for 50 percent of

domestic revenue and 95 percent of export earnings (NPC 2012, 1–2). The South’s secession led to the loss of 75 percent of oil revenue for Khartoum since two-thirds of the oil resources are in the South, and consequently are the source of approximately 60 percent of Sudan’s foreign currency earnings.

If the national economic crisis in the post-oil boom era points to the general context of grievances leading to the December 2018 uprising, the unprecedented regional spread of the uprising can be explained by long-held grievances in the rural areas. Indeed, the legacy of these developments is that worsened poverty and unemployment in rural areas, because upwards of 50 percent of the rural labor force is engaged in agricultural activities. As of 2009 (a decade before the uprising), the incidence of poverty among the urban and rural population stood at 26 percent and 57.6 percent respectively. Moreover, figures in this period indicate that poverty levels were far higher in Darfur and in the East in comparison with Khartoum and the central states (NPC 2012, 13). This deepening inequality across regions and between the center and the peripheries of the country explain why the initial protests that led to the popular uprising of December 2018 first erupted, for the first time in Sudan’s history, in the periphery of the country rather than in the capital of Khartoum.

Regime Response and the Failure of Upgrading Authoritarianism

Nevertheless, despite the deep fiscal crisis of the state, when wide-scale protests erupted in December 2018 and continued unabated, calling for President Omar al-Bashir to step down, few scholars of authoritarianism in the Arab world predicted that this latest iteration of a popular uprising in Sudan would pave the way for a transition interim period ushering in the possibility of a multi-party democracy. This is because, not surprisingly, as with similar protests in the past, the Bashir regime sought a military solution to quell the protests, deploying the police and para-military security forces against peaceful protestors in Khartoum and throughout the country.

Significantly, and despite the government’s frequent pronouncements that the protests were relatively small and would therefore have little impact on the regime, or that the demonstrations were essentially sponsored by saboteurs, thugs, or “foreign elements,” the popular intifada not only produced significant policy changes on the part of the regime; it clearly undermined the rule of al-Bashir in ways that ulti-

mately led to the overthrow of his 30-year authoritarian rule. By April 11, 2019, in the wake of continued and sustained demonstrations, strikes, and sit-ins across Sudanese civil society, Bashir was compelled to put in place policies to upgrade his authoritarian rule. He was forced to postpone a constitutional amendment that would have allowed him to run for a third term in office, declare a state of emergency in Khartoum, disband the federal structure of the government, and replace local governors with senior army officers to maintain his power. However, these policies of both appeasement and repression emboldened anti-government protestors further. The measures were essentially designed to give *carte blanche* to the security forces to use greater violence against the protestors, and to further restrict political and civil liberties, as well as to crack down on activists and opposition political parties. However, immediately following Bashir's announcement of a state of emergency, protestors went back on the streets in over 50 neighborhoods throughout the country, and particularly in Khartoum and Omdurman, calling once again for Bashir's removal and chanting, among other slogans, one of the most uncompromising and popular refrains of the uprising: "*Tasqut Bas*" ("Just fall, that is all").

To be sure, when the uprising began in December of 2018, there was scant evidence that it would lead to the fall of authoritarianism in Sudan. There was, indeed, little indication that the full range of policies utilized by autocratic leaders in Sudan to "upgrade authoritarianism" would not once again stamp out anti-government protests as has occurred in other countries in the region. However, as the protests continued unabated, they highlighted deep divisions within the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) as well as the ruling NCP. These developments compelled Bashir to implement policies designed to safeguard against a scenario in which segments of the military establishment would take the side of the protestors and essentially wage an internal coup against his rule. At the time, this was clearly evidenced in several ways. Most notably, by Bashir's attempts to quell the protests through the imposition of a state of emergency, the dissolution of the federal and provincial civilian governments, and the appointment of loyal military and security officers as governors of the country's 18 provinces. But despite these strategies—so effective in quelling protests in the past—this time the balance of power had shifted markedly toward the street (*al-shari*). The first signal of the significant unraveling of authoritarianism was when, as a direct result of the protests, Bashir resigned from the ruling party. He appointed a close ally, Ahmad Harun, as deputy head of the

NCP in a thinly veiled attempt to suggest he was intent on implementing political reform even as Bashir’s emergency courts imposed over 800 sentences of imprisonment and fines against anti-regime activists. Harun, like Bashir himself, was indicted for war crimes in Darfur, but this time he announced a national dialogue with the opposition in a bid to both maintain and consolidate the NCP’s rule in the country by coopting segments of the opposition. The hope was that he would ultimately preside over managed elections where he, or Bashir himself, would stand for election.

This was a formula designed to upgrade authoritarianism through the deployment of a combination of repression, dividing the opposition, and coopting some key leaders of the traditional political parties into yet another *hiwar watani* (national dialogue). More specifically, the vision was not only to stem the tide and popularity of the uprising, but also to safeguard against the potential, and more threatening, scenario, in which middle-ranking segments of the military would ultimately take the side of the protestors, oust Bashir and the NCP, and oversee a transition to a multi-party democracy. This would be a process that would have been supported by the majority of those in the opposition, but one in which Islamist supporters of the regime would be sidelined. Moreover, not surprisingly, the regime continued to emphasize that the grievances behind the protests were economic and not political and was in fact banking on curbing soaring inflation, but particularly, attracting investment and foreign financial assistance from the Arab Gulf countries with the view that this would quell the protests. In addition to seeking support from his Gulf benefactors, Bashir was counting on rebuilding relations with South Sudan. His objective was to restart production of oil in South Sudan to halt the deterioration of the Sudanese pound and refinance the regime’s patronage networks by generating revenue from transit and pipeline fees under stipulated financial arrangement between Khartoum and Juba.

Popular Mobilization and the General Determinants of its Success

At a general level, the mobilization strategies of Sudan’s opposition to the Bashir regime mirrored those of other Arab countries in two important ways, namely the mode of organization, and the ways in which activists learned from past uprisings in devising new dynamics of popular mobilization. Specifically, and as Sean Yom shows in his study of

Jordan in this volume, like their Jordanian counterparts, Sudanese activists, disillusioned with the role of formal political parties, chose to organize via informal and horizontal structures for two important reasons. These were to encourage more inclusive channels of participation, and to adapt new strategies aimed toward evading state repression which had been effective in stifling protest movements in the past. Moreover, another common element, and one noted by Lina Khatib in her study of opposition mobilization in Lebanon, is the extent to which Sudanese activists learned from previous cycles of protests. In the case of Sudan, these previous protests threatened the durability of Omar al-Bashir's regime throughout the 2010s, yet failed to dismantle his regime.

Nevertheless, the Bashir regime's measures to reconsolidate power, while effective in the past, did not halt the December 2018 protests. This was because the protestors, having learned from previous failed protests, clearly articulated political demands, and disseminated a clear message to the protestors warning them against the regime's efforts at what they perceived as *ikhtitaf al-dawla* (state capture) by a minority of military and security officers that must be ousted from power. But most importantly, the leaders of the uprising showed remarkable ingenuity in sustaining the demonstrations against the regime. For example, in response to Bashir's decrees and pronouncements, the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) advanced its mobilization and coordination capacity across the professional, socioeconomic, and regional divide. The SPA called on protestors and anti-regime activists throughout the country to combine street protests and acts of civil disobedience with a one-day national general strike which was led by doctors, lawyers, engineers, and pharmacists, as well as civil servants in coordination with *lijan al-muqawwama* (resistance committees), that organized the extremely vital *muthaharat al-ahyah* (neighborhood protests) throughout Khartoum and outlying regions of the country.

Another general determinant of the success of the uprising had to do with the utilization of both informal and horizontal networks of mobilization. However, it is important to note that the successful coordination of highly effective oppositional networks and organizations in civil society would not have been successful were it not conducted in the context of elite fragmentation and the grave weakening of the regime's cohesion and coercive apparatus. Importantly, as anti-government protests continued through 2019, they highlighted the

deepening disintegration of the ruling party itself and Sudan’s relatively “weak state.” This was clearly evidenced by strategies underpinned by divisions and subdivisions between individuals belonging to the NCP and the fact that the regime’s Islamist political discourse had lost its legitimacy among the population. In late February 2019, in a last-ditch effort to maintain his power, Omar al-Bashir imposed a year-long state of emergency and dissolved the federal and provincial governments, appointing 16 officers from the army and two from the feared National Intelligence and Security Service as governors of the country’s 18 provinces. The emergency courts established by President Bashir continued to impose various sentences of imprisonment and fines on people who participated in anti-government protests which, this time, only served to sustain the protests.

Coordinating the Uprising: New Networks of Protest and Popular Mobilization

As with previous uprisings, the 2018 demonstrations began in protest of a deep economic crisis compounded by the implementation of economic austerity measures that resulted in the rise in the prices of bread and fuel, and a severe liquidity crisis. But these demands quickly evolved into calls for the ousting of Bashir from power. Importantly, the SPA, which took the lead in organizing and scheduling the protests, initially marched to the Parliament in Khartoum in late December 2018 demanding that the government raise wages for public sector workers and for the legalization of informally organized professional and trade unions. However, after security forces used violence against the peaceful protestors, these demands quickly escalated into the call for the removal of the ruling NCP, the structural transformation of governance in Sudan, and a transition to democracy.

Even though political grievances were at the forefront of the 2018 uprising, there is little question that the protests were first sparked by economic grievances that date back to the consequences of the secession of South Sudan in 2011. However, the protests were not only rooted in opposition to economic reforms. They were primarily a result of a wide opposition to decades of rampant corruption that transferred assets and wealth to the regime’s supporters, and the theft of billions of dollars of profits from the period of the oil boom. What is noteworthy, however, is that these economic crises and the general state of endemic

corruption date back to the very onset of the Bashir regime's assumption to power, yet none of the previous protests in Sudan enjoyed success in toppling autocracy in the country. In addition to the fiscal crisis of the state and deep divisions within the ruling NCP's leadership, the most important element this time was the remarkable cohesion of pro-democracy groups in civil society and a new vision and new strategies of resistance—what is best termed as an upgrading of new informal and largely horizontal modes and networks of popular mobilization.

If the demands of the protestors in 2018 were similar to those associated with previous protest cycles against the regime, the 2018–19 protests differed in three crucial ways that, taken together, explain their success. First, they were unprecedented in terms of their length and sustainability. Second, they spanned a large geographical terrain that included the entire country. Third, and most significantly, they united a remarkable coalition of horizontal networks of youth activists, informal associations, and organizations with long-standing opposition political parties. In this respect, it is not surprising that after six months of persistent mobilization, the Bashir regime fell, paving the way for a power-sharing agreement between a transitional military council and the main opposition coalition, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). Equally important was that the coordination of these demonstrations followed a remarkably new, innovative, and sustained process. This point is crucial, because it shows that demonstrators learned from the unsuccessful anti-regime protests of the past. This is despite the fact that the Bashir regime had historically implemented policies designed to weaken the opposition by dismantling labor and trade unions, establishing a wide range of paramilitary militias linked to the state, and putting down armed opposition as well as anti-government activists in civil society. Led by the newly established SPA, a network of parallel (that is, informal) trade and professional unions—composed of doctors, engineers, and lawyers, among other unions—the demonstrations were coordinated, scheduled, and essentially designed to emphasize sustainability over time rather than sheer numbers, spread the protests throughout middle-, working-class, and poor neighborhoods, and coordinate with protestors in regions far afield from Khartoum, including the Eastern State on the Red Sea to the east, and Darfur to the far west of the country. In addition, the slogans promoted and utilized by the protestors were purposefully framed to incorporate the grievances of the wider spectrum of Sudanese, including workers in the informal sector, and not just those of the middle class and ethnic and

political elites centered in Khartoum and the northern regions of the country. These slogans were essentially framed in ways designed to resonate and mobilize support across socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, and ideological categories. In great part, this was achieved by emphasizing that the only way forward is to oust Omar al-Bashir and the ruling regime from power, and by highlighting the endemic and unprecedented level of corruption of the regime and its allies and decades of human rights violations against civilians in the country by a wide range of security forces, in Darfur, the Blue Nile State on the border of South Sudan, and the Nuba Mountains in South Kordofan.

Indeed, perhaps one of the most notable aspect of these protests, which distinguished them greatly from previous uprisings, was not only the sheer regional scale of the demonstrations but the hitherto unprecedented high level of solidarity across class, ethnic, and regional lines in the country. Youth activists and members of the professional associations not only challenged the political discourse of the state. They played a significant role in engineering cross-class alliances made possible by the implementation of a wider array of mobilization strategies. Over the course of six months protests, strikes, work stoppages, and sit-ins were held not only on university campuses and secondary schools, but also among private sector and public sector employees and workers. Among the most important examples were the strikes by workers of Port Sudan on the Red Sea, demanding the nullification of the sale of the Port to a foreign company, and several work stoppages and protests led by employees of some of the most important telecom providers and other private firms in the country.

Ultimately, the success of the 2018 uprising rested on the very structure of the protest movement in three important ways that reflected the forging of new networks of protest and mobilization. First, whereas previous protests were primarily organized horizontally and led by youth activists mainly in the urban areas of greater Khartoum, the most recent uprising was organized in a hierarchical structure which combined horizontal networks of mobilization with the informal, albeit vertically organized associations and unions, led by the SPA. The SPA took the lead in organizing daily protests, disseminating key information to protestors, and scheduling the protests in ways that would both encourage protestors but also safeguard their security as much as possible. Second, where as much focus is usually placed on the central role of the street protestors and the SPA, Sudanese opposition parties were also an important component of not only organizing the protests,

but also providing the ideational support for the protestors' demands. To be sure, as in other countries, Sudanese activists routinely questioned the credibility of the "old" politicians. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the political parties took the lead in drafting the Declaration of the Forces of Freedom and Change (DFFC) in January 2019 at the most critical juncture of the intifada. Along with the SPA, Sudan's main political party coalitions, most notably the National Consensus Forces and Sudan Call (*Nida al-Sudan*), were the main groups behind the Declaration; they were the ones who led the drive toward the formation of the wide network of opposition under the banner of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). It was the FFC that was primarily responsible for coordinating upper-, middle-, and lower-class Sudanese as well as those under-employed and the large segment of the population working in the informal sector of the country. Indeed, and most importantly, the FFC included not only middle-class youth associations and groups, but also resistance committees in the poorer urban quarters. These are the committees that served as the "foot soldiers" of the protests. They took the lead in redirecting protestors away from the security forces, thus playing a central role in sustaining the protests despite the great violence utilized by the security forces and militias designed to quell the intifada. Ultimately, the relative strength and legitimacy of the main opposition parties, in combination with their alliance and coordination with horizontal networks of street protestors and the informal unions organized under the umbrella of the SPA, played the most crucial role in sustaining the protests and articulating their demands in ways that resonated with most of the population in rural as well as urban areas.

Finally, and most crucially, protestors learned from the mistakes of previous protests which had been highly centralized, mostly limited to middle-class Sudanese, and did not consider new strategies of confronting and evading the ubiquitous security forces in the country. In this regard, there were four essential elements that played a crucial role in the success of the 2018–19 protests, lessons generated not only from the Arab protests of 2011–12, but also the persistent protests in Sudan throughout the 2010s. Taken together, these lessons from the Arab Uprisings as well as the Sudanese experience generated four important strategies utilized by the protests which ultimately laid the groundwork for success. First, protestors, led by youth, carefully devised new methods to combat the coercive apparatus of the state and the regime's security services. Second, they promulgated and commu-

nicated a carefully crafted counter-hegemonic anti-Islamist discourse that resonated with widely shared political, ideational, and economic grievances, and relayed pertinent information about the regime’s litany of failures and corruption to the public through the duration of the uprising. Third, led by the coordinating body of the SPA, civil society actors worked tirelessly to forge a hierarchical but legitimate organizational form that brought a wide range of horizontal networks under a vertical coordinating body made up of opposition across the political and ideological spectrum. And finally, having learned from the foreign interventions during the Tahrir revolution in Egypt and similar experiences in other Arab countries (as explained more fully in Toby Matthiesen’s chapter in this volume), the leaders of the uprising ensured that Gulf Arab support for the regime was delegitimized among the local population in the context of the uprising. The leaders of the protestors argued repeatedly that regional actors were more invested in the natural resources and strategic role of Sudan than in the prosperity of the Sudanese people.

Military-Civil Society Relations and the Challenge of a Hybrid Regime

Yet for all the notable success of the 2018 intifada, and as the October 2021 coup has shown, there is little question that the prospect of a transition to civilian democracy, the key demand of the protestors, remains a daunting challenge. Following the fall of Omar al-Bashir’s regime, Sudan emerged as a quintessential hybrid-authoritarian regime. Military members of the now-dissolved sovereign council had the right to reject items in the sovereign council, had immunity from investigation of past crimes, and had veto over ministerial civilian appointments, including such important posts as the chief justice and attorney general, in addition to representatives of the proposed legislative council. Importantly, there was no clear separation of the main branches of power, which was obvious evidence of an imbalance between the authority of the military and civilian leadership. The military, and the leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Hamdan Dagalo “Hemedti,” assumed vague and undefined powers, allowing them great control over the transition interim period before promised elections originally scheduled for 2022. The concern in Sudanese civil society was that in the years that follow, the military would have authority over designing

the “rules of the democratic game.” Specifically, they would be able to wield influence over the drafting of the interim constitution, design and oversee the electoral laws in the run-up to elections, delimit the political space of the political parties by instituting new laws on political parties, and, of course, utilize coercive strategies to limit political participation among the citizenry in ways that would undermine the prospects for the convening of free and fair elections in the near future.

The fact that the military and security establishment eventually gained greater political leverage over civil society forces was a result of both the increasing divisions within the civilian block and the transitional government’s failure to satisfy the key demands of the protestors that led the uprising. Before the coup, the prospect for a democratic transition hinged on the overarching dynamics of Sudan’s transitional government, which involved three sets of diverse civilian and military actors. On one side, there was the transitional government’s civilian wing headed by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Hamdok was partially supported by a tenuous coalition of parties that participated in the anti-Bashir uprising. These included the Unionist Association, the Community Party, the Ba’ath Party, and the SPA, and the most prominent youth groups (Girifna and Sudan Change Now), and until just prior to the coup, the Umma party.

Hamdok’s primary power base was derived from his relationship to this civilian coalition organized under the umbrella of the FFC. However, Hamdok lost support and legitimacy among the youth organizations that led the protests, as well as prominent women’s organizations, and the secular-Left oriented parties. Initially, grassroots organizations perceived Hamdok as a technocrat not affiliated with the corrupt political practices associated with the former regime and the traditional opposition parties. He was also supported by those groups well known to have the strongest and longest record of opposition to the Islamist movement. He enjoyed strong support from the SPA members, who perceived him as a like-minded technocrat and activist, and the Unionist Association, which is composed of the parties that stood unwavering in opposition to Bashir.

The strongest opposition in civil society, the FFC, continued to push for four important priorities that, even after the coup, continue to represent the opposition’s demands. These include the implementation of a peace agreement signed with the insurgent militias organized under the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF); constitutional reform to prepare for a constitutional conference that would oversee future elections; accountability for those involved in the June 3, 2019, massacre; and the establish-

ment of a legislative council so as to undercut the veto power of the military wing of the now dissolved sovereign council. The network of civil society organizations includes the SPA, the youth organizations Girifna and Sudan Change Now, and the grassroots resistance committees that played a key role in mobilizing the 2018–19 demonstrations. Ultimately, the failure of Hamdok to make progress on the aforementioned demands undermined his legitimacy (and that of political parties more generally) among the grassroots pro-democracy forces. This strengthened the power of the military leadership, which exploited divisions in civil society, thereby paving the way for the October 25 coup.

Outsourcing War: Coercive Power and the Role of Regional Actors

As students of authoritarianism have long observed, if the strength of civil society forces relative to the military is a crucial variable in influencing the probability of authoritarian persistence as well as democratic reversal, then the role and nature of external patronage is of equal importance in these processes. Since the overthrow of Bashir in April 2019, along with the Sudanese Army’s General Abdul Fattah al-Burhan, it is Mohamed Hemedti Hamdan Dagolo, the leader of the powerful Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and vice president of the Military Council, who has wielded disproportionate influence over the country’s transition. Like Burhan and his allies, Hemedti and his militia, the RSF, are supported and financed by the Arab Gulf countries and, as Toby Matthiesen discusses in this volume, pose a direct threat to a democratic transition in Sudan.

At the root of this threat is Hemedti’s great influence over the country’s security apparatus and his links to the Arab Gulf countries. Specifically, Hemedti has built a paramilitary force, numbering an estimated 40,000, that is acting as a dangerous anti-democracy spoiler to the tenuous military-civilian coalition in power. This threat is directly related to Hemedti’s personal wealth, which he amassed in two important ways. The first was from revenue generated from his participation in the illicit trade in gold, and the second is wealth accrued from outsourcing his militias to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to fight the war in Yemen. In 2017 alone, Sudan produced 107 tons of gold, 70 percent of which was smuggled abroad, mainly to markets in the UAE (Michaelson 2020). It has been estimated that Sudan’s gold production at its current accounting is contributing to approxi-

mately 11–13 percent of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) although it is likely far higher. Moreover, until recently, Hemedti controlled the country’s most lucrative gold mine of Jebel Amer in northern Darfur.¹ Consequently, there is little question that Hemedti’s ascendance, from his humble beginnings as a camel trader in northern Darfur to a powerful national-level militia leader, was made possible by his access to riches, generated primarily from gold smuggling (Abdelaziz, Gregory, and El Dahan 2019). In 2015, another report released by the United Nations Security Council found that his forces were generating \$54 million a year from control of the Jebel Amer goldmine. Importantly, this revenue enabled the militia leader to recruit poor and unemployed youths to the RSF, from across the Sahel, including from Chad, Mali, and Niger (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, there are several reasons that suggest that Hemedti’s strength has been vastly overestimated by analysts. First, Hemedti’s influence is largely built on patronage received from external patrons. This suggests that since his strength is rooted in the complex dynamics of regional politics, it is very likely that his power and influence would be greatly weakened once geopolitical and regional strategic calculations change on the part of his benefactors in the Gulf. Second, as is the case with Burhan and former NCP businessmen, Hemedti’s financial power is largely a result of weak central authority, and the less than robust regulatory environment that has enabled him to build his financial wealth from illicit and informal channels. Consequently, advances in improving regulatory, accountable, and more participatory institutions, currently pursued by the civilian leadership, would undercut the way he—and many rentier-oriented military officers and civilian businessmen—are able to generate rents from illicit economic activities, smuggling and trade. Finally, the rise of Hemedti and other paramilitary forces has been due to an important factor worth emphasizing: The fact that they have been able to deftly exploit a national army

1. Hemedti’s rise to power dates to the latter years of the Bashir regime. In 2003, he was recruited by Bashir into the Janjaweed militia that was waging the anti-insurgency campaign against rebels in Darfur; in 2014, fearful of a military coup against his rule, Omar al-Bashir put Hemedti in charge of the Rapid Support Forces, essentially an offshoot of the Janjaweed. However, in contrast to the Janjaweed, Bashir essentially gave the RSF the status of a “regular force” as a bulwark against the military and to protect his own personal security. But if political largesse led to his political prominence, it was financial power, generated via illicit means, that ensured the consolidation of his power into the present.

gravely weakened by the concerted efforts of the previous regime and the related emergence of various paramilitary forces over the last three decades. This strongly suggests that, in addition to dismantling the remnants of the institutions of the “deep state,” prioritizing the building of a strong, legitimate, and autonomous national military would reduce the power of Hemedti and his militia.

The Challenge of Dismantling the “Deep State”

As in other Arab countries where the entrenchment of the “deep state” has stood in the path of democratic transitions, perhaps the biggest threat in Sudan is the fact that the civilian wing of the hybrid government has been unable to dismantle the vestiges of the vast financial empire wielded by the security apparatus and the military. The financial power of the military poses a significant threat to the democratic transition. Taken together, the military and the security apparatuses control companies involved in oil, gum Arabic, sesame, weapons, fuel, wheat, telecommunications, banking, and real estate, as well as gold. The military’s defense companies produce a vast array of consumer goods, and they retain a large share of the country’s banking institutions. Moreover, since the military controls large sectors of the economy, the SRF also benefits from subsidies which allow for the RSF as well as the SAF to hoard commodities and profit from their sale in the black market at inflated prices to consumers. While specific data is difficult to come by, there is some evidence to suggest that the military-controlled companies such as al-Fakher and as-Sobat dominate the market in fuel and wheat. According to one report, the SAF reportedly controls 60 percent of the market in wheat, although Sudanese sources have noted that former NCP businessmen continue to wield the greatest influence in these markets. To be sure, these rents, generated from military-state predation, are used by Burhan to disburse patronage to the same loyal clients Bashir patronized and supported prior to his ouster in 2019. Nevertheless, while a focus on the power of the military and security apparatus over civil society is warranted, what is missing in this analysis of Sudan’s version of the “deep state” is an examination of the political and economic factors that have worked to sustain the patronage system in the first place—a system forged under Bashir and now exploited by the October 2021 coup leaders, including Burhan and senior members of the security establishment.

It is also important to emphasize that the military and security forces have also long been divided, with important consequences for the balance of power in state-civilian society relations and for the prospects for democracy. The three most important actors in this regard are the SAF, the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS), and the RSF. Historically, the SAF was constituted of officers recruited from the elite classes and as such they continue to enjoy the support of most Sudanese; many mid- and lower-ranking military officers of the SAF participated in the uprising. In contrast, the NISS, the real stumbling block to the democratic transition, was forged in clandestine fashion by the Islamist radical coalition that overthrew the former democratic regime in 1989 and then went on to dominate the political and economic landscape of the country for three decades, primarily through coercion and the patronage of mercenary forces. This organization, which has been going through some significant, albeit insufficient, restructuring under the leadership of Burhan, enjoyed the patronage of the former regime more than any other sector of Sudanese society. Significant remnants of Islamist and NISS business networks continue to dominate large swaths of the economy, particularly in the private sector. The extent to which Hamdok and Burhan eventually find common cause and cooperate to dismantle these institutions that financed multiple paramilitary militias will crucially determine the success or failure of the current transition. However, given the fact that the NISS undermined the power of the SAF under NCP rule suggests that many in the senior military establishment have a strong interest in dismantling the power and financial base of the NISS.

Sudan's Protracted Conflicts and the Threat to Democracy

Finally, in addition to the rivalries between (and among) the civil-military coalition making up the transitional government and the interventions of regional actors (see Toby Matthiesen's chapter in this volume), another key challenge for democracy in Sudan is an issue that is often neglected in the analysis of authoritarian persistence and democratic transitions in the Arab region: The protracted conflicts in the marginalized regions far afield from the capital. As April Longley Alley argues in her study of Yemen in this volume, countries undergoing civil conflicts have the additional challenge of nation-building, even as they pursue the difficult path toward political reform and more participa-

tory forms of governance. These challenges include resolving long-standing civil conflicts, addressing the grievances of insurgent militias within a national framework, securing funding for state-building and reconstruction, and minimizing the adverse effects of external intervention by regional powers. In Sudan, as in Yemen, the combination of civil conflicts, deep economic crises, and failures at state- and nation-building have stood in the way of both peace-making as well as successive efforts at democratization.

It is important to highlight that on the eve of the Sudan’s 2018–19 popular uprising Sudan was experiencing significant protracted conflicts which continue to pose a great risk to the prospects for a peaceful democratic transition. Embedded within the conflict at the center between civilian and military leaders are the conflicts along the periphery, each with its own history and dynamic that continue to pose risks for the country. Darfur in particular has historically been unevenly integrated into the central Sudanese state and saw massive violence in the mid-2000s as Khartoum unleashed its allied militias known as the “Janjaweed” in response to growing insurgent movements led by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Even after the fall of Bashir, areas that are on what is now the international border between South Sudan and Sudan continue to see high levels of conflict and instability, and Darfurians have protested the inaction of Hamdok and the FFC in addressing their major political and economic grievances.

In the recent past, the SPLM-N (Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North) fought tenaciously in the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan and in Blue Nile. The SPLM-N consequently created the SRF (Sudan Revolutionary Front), a coalition with the armed factions in Darfur which signed an historic peace agreement in October 2020. Despite this peace agreement, however, at the time of writing, in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, patterns of economic and social marginalization among residents in the Nuba Mountains continue and there is little evidence that the region has witnessed a cessation of violence. Moreover, while the SPLM-N controls significant territory in South Kordofan, notably a considerable portion of the border between Sudan and South Sudan, local communities are rarely consulted by its leadership. This is evidenced by the fact that local communities have worked to build autonomous political and civilian organizations to match the military capacity of the SPLM-N, and local resistance committees are often viewed as more legitimate representative institutions than the

SPLM-N. There is also a clear division among those in the Nuba Mountains, with some supporting the peace agreement with Khartoum, and a significant, more radical, group of Nuba that are demanding greater autonomy from the center if not self-determination. Finally, regions that have been historically marginalized, but were relatively quiet in recent years until the popular uprisings, continue to show signs of increasing tension, particularly in the East where some younger members of Beja ethnic group have organized a new armed group in opposition to the regime in Khartoum.

While the dynamics outlined above have the greatest potential to result in a risk of large-scale violence and political instability, everyday conflicts are also a grave threat to a democratic transition. The proliferation of weapons and the distortions of social networks due to displacement continue to create a new context for endemic conflicts over land, water, pasture, and, of course, political power. Local conflict resolution mechanisms, often linked to traditional forms of justice in the countryside, are weak and fragmented. In post-uprising Sudan, they have the potential to play a more meaningful role in mitigating conflict. However, central authorities often exploit local conflicts as part of their system of divide and rule and fermenting ethnic divisions and enmities. Consequently, absent a comprehensive peace agreement that addresses inter-communal conflicts in these regions, the prospect for a peaceful transition to a consolidated multi-party democracy in Sudan will remain a daunting challenge.

Conclusion

The historic Sudanese intifada of 2018 was both similar and distinct from the Arab Uprisings of 2011 and the more recent uprisings in Lebanon and Algeria. On the one hand, the mobilization strategies of Sudan's youth-led uprising mirrored those other cases in at least two important respects: The development of new modes of organization adapted from the lessons of earlier uprisings, and a concerted strategy of relying on horizontal networks of opposition mobilization. However, what made a difference in the case of Sudan is that activists, however begrudgingly, did ally with formal political parties. To be sure, from the perspective of Sudanese youth activists, formal political parties have been discredited to some degree. Nevertheless, these parties retain no small measure of legitimacy primarily because of their long-

standing opposition to the Bashir regime. As early as November 2011, Sudan Call (*Nida al-Sudan*) emerged as an oppositional coalition to the Omar al-Bashir regime. *Nida al-Sudan* not only included the insurgent leaders in war-torn Darfur, Blue Nile, and Southern Kordofan organized under the umbrella of the SRF; it also included the newly formed youth organization Girifna which played a lead role in organizing the first wide-scale protests following the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011. Thus, while on the one hand Sudanese youth activists followed the pattern of mobilization in other countries in that they organized around horizontal networks and eschewed the promotion of any specific ideology, on the other hand, and owing to the relatively strength of the formal political party opposition in Sudan relative to other countries, they did form an effective coalition with long standing opposition parties at a critical juncture of the revolution—namely, in January 2019, which saw the emergence of the FFC. The FFC included youth activists and grassroots resistance committees, as well as the major *kutlas* (blocs) of the formal opposition.

Moreover, while protestors did indeed eschew any “grand ideology” during the revolution, they managed to effectively undermine the legitimating ideology of the state, namely, Islamism. Indeed, whereas the secular-Islamist divide has played a key role in dividing the opposition in other countries in the region, in Sudan, youth worked diligently to generate a counter-hegemonic discourse—disseminated through social media—which contained a coherent and popular critique against the Islamist edifice upon which the Bashir regime had built its ideological legitimacy. That discourse, in turn, gravely undermined the regime’s legitimacy as evidenced by the cross-ideological as well as cross-sectional character of the 2018 revolution.

Indeed, there is little question that Sudan’s 2018 intifada registered remarkable success in reinvigorating civil society in Sudan, despite decades of authoritarian rule and a policy of division across ethnic, racial, and class lines. In Sudan, as in much of the Arab world, the Bashir regime exerted great effort in either dissolving or coopting previously strong and independent unions and by the late 1990s, had effectively replaced all unions with those that were directly linked to the state. In response, informal trade and labor unions emerged in the wake of the 2011 protests in parallel to those established by the NCP leadership. Consequently, in the context of the uprising, the chief strength of Sudanese civil society emerged not in a vague sense but rather because of the reinvigoration of *parallel* trade, labor, and profes-

sional unions (*naqabat muaziyyah*), which came to be unified under the umbrella of the SPA at a time when most would have predicted the demise of any strong union life in society. Another strength of civil society that made a difference is rooted in the remarkable empowerment of youth activism and their utilization of social media to assist in the coordination of demonstrations across class, regional, and racial lines, rather than to simply express a particularly middle-class and elite and narrow political sensibility which characterized all the previous protests in Sudan and in many Arab countries. In Sudan, in addition to the close coordination among activists across middle- and working-class neighborhoods, repeated campaigns to support the *reef*, or rural areas, and remarkable cooperation across the gender divide underpinned the political and cultural shift that made the uprising a success. Indeed, the wide scope and sustainability of Sudan's December 2018 uprising rested primarily on the coordination and linkages forged between formal professional associations, informal trade and labor unions, and civil society organizations, as well as horizontal networks of youth activists. Ultimately, it was the success in organizing across the formal-informal social spectrum that sustained the protests.

The idea that informal (or parallel) networks of professional and trade unions should engage more closely with street activists and workers in the informal economy was not one that had been vigorously envisioned by leaders of previous protests and one that has rarely been accomplished in the region. This development played a key role in sustaining the protests and in undermining the Bashir regime. But it is also the precarious level of unity and cohesion among diverse groups in civil society following the historic uprising of 2018 that will determine the fortunes of what is still a tenuous path toward a democratic transition. Indeed, and in broader analytical terms, what the coup of October 25, 2021, has demonstrated is that the question of whether Sudan will witness the *consolidation* of yet another authoritarian regime or re-embark on a democratic transition, however fragile, will be determined by the evolving balance of power and conflicts between the security establishment and forces in civil society predicated on key factors highlighted throughout this chapter. These include the levels (and nature) of popular mobilization, civil society cohesion, political party autonomy and legitimacy, and the capacity of the coercive apparatus of the current military regime of General Abdul-Fattah Burhan itself crucially influenced by the support and interventions of regional and international actors.

REFERENCES

- Abdelaziz, Khalid, Michael Gregory, and Maha El Dahan. 2019. “Exclusive: Sudan Militia Leader Grew Rich by Selling Gold.” *Reuters*, November 26.
- Bellin, Eva. 2004. “The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective.” *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2: 139–57.
- Bogaards, Matthijs. 2009. “How to Classify Hybrid Regimes? Defective democracy and Electoral Authoritarianism.” *Democratization* 16, no. 2: 399–423.
- Cheeseman, Nic. 2015. *Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures, and the Struggle for Political Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foa, Robert Stefan, and Yascha Mounk. 2017. “The Signs of Deconsolidation.” *Journal of Democracy* 28 no. 1: 5–16.
- Gyimah-Boadi, E. 2015. “Africa’s Waning Democratic Commitment.” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1: 101–13.
- Heydemann, Steven. 2007. “Upgrading Authoritarianism.” *The Saban Center for Middle East Policy Analysis Paper Series* 13 (October).
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. 2010. *Competitive Authoritarianism Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Medani, Khalid. 2012. “Understanding the Challenges and Prospects of Another Intifada in Sudan.” *Jadaliyya*. June 27. <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6189/understanding-the-prospects-and-challenges-for-ano>
- Medani, Khalid. 2013a. “Sudan in the Context of the Arab Spring.” In *Dispatches from the Arab Spring: Understanding the New Middle East*, edited by Paul Amar and Vijay Prashad, 99–137. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Medani, Khalid. 2013b. “Between Grievances and State Violence: Sudan’s Youth Movement and Islamist Activism: Beyond the Arab Spring.” *Middle East Report* 267 (Summer).
- Medani, Khalid. 2019. “The New Mobilization Dynamics of Sudan’s Popular Uprising: The Virtue of Learning from the Past.” *Jadaliyya*. February 23. <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38376/Quick-Thoughts-The-Sudanese-Protests-with-Khalid-Medani>
- Michaelson, Ruth. 2020. “Militia Strike Gold to Cast a Shadow Over Sudan’s Hopes of Prosperity.” *Guardian*, February 10. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/10/militia-strike-gold-to-cast-a-shadow-over-sudans-hopes-of-prosperity>
- NPC—National Population Council: Ministry of Social Welfare and Security. 2012. “Draft Report: The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): Status, Challenges and Prospects for Sudan.” Khartoum, Sudan (March): 1–2.
- Svolik, Milan W. 2008. “Authoritarian Reversals and Democratic Consolidation.” *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 2: 153–68.
- Wahman, Michael. 2014. “Democratization and Electoral Turnovers in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.” *Democratization* 21, no. 2: 220–43.