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The Military-Civilian Relationship and Challenges to Democratic Transition in Sudan

Unit for Political Studies

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Tensions between the civilian and military members of the Sovereignty Council governing Sudan are at an all-time high since the overthrow of the al-Bashir regime in April 2019. An armed rebellion, which the authorities described as a coup attempt on 21 September 2021, has contributed to the discord between the two parties. This has alarmed the public, amid fears that the military might attempt to overthrow the government of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and monopolize power, as the deadline for electing civilian government approaches. Under the 2019 agreement, the current conditions for managing the transitional phase are in place until general elections are held and a government is elected.

The 2019 Agreement and the Complex Civilian-Military Relationship

Four months after the deposal of President Omar al-Bashir, the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change, which led the revolutionary movement, reached an agreement with the Transitional Military Council, which had assumed responsibility for governance after the overthrow of al-Bashir, on the “Draft Constitutional Declaration” to manage the transitional period. Accordingly, the Sovereignty Council was formed in August 2019 and was assigned the responsibility of running the country for thirty-nine months, in a partnership between civilians and military personnel, each represented by five members, in addition to a national figure to be agreed upon. It was agreed that a military figure would chair the council in the first period, for a period of twenty-one months, while civilians would lead for the remaining eighteen months (the transitional period was extended to end in January 2024, with the civilian leader taking over in April 2022).

The Draft Constitutional Declaration also stipulated the formation of a cabinet, the leader of which would be appointed by the Forces of Freedom and Change (who named Abdullah Hamdok for the position). He would appoint a ministerial cabinet not exceeding twenty ministers, approved by the Sovereignty Council. The functions of the Cabinet include all executive powers and shared powers (including legislative) with the Sovereignty Council. The Declaration also stipulated the formation of a Legislative Council, with 67% of its members selected by the Forces of Freedom and Change and the remaining 33% selected by other forces who did not sign the Freedom and Change Declaration.

The comprehensive agreement, which covered all the details of the transitional period, should have led to a smooth transition, but doubts have characterized the relationship between the civil and military council members from the beginning. The military appears to be clinging to power, especially given that the August 2019 agreement on the transitional period would not have occurred without pressure from the street. The sit-in at the Army General Command was violently dispersed on 3 June 2019, resulting in the deaths of more than one hundred demonstrators and more than five hundred casualties by security forces’ bullets. At the time, the Transitional Military Council believed that dispersing the sit-in would strip the Forces of Freedom and Change of their main pressure tool. And then it is easy to dictate its terms regarding the management of the transitional phase. However, the African Union, which had given the military council sixty days to hand over power to civilians



and threatened to suspend Sudan's membership if this was not done, responded to the events at the General Command by announcing the suspension of Sudan's membership. This was a major blow to the military council.

Suspicion in the relationship between the civil and military parties emerged during the first weeks of the formation of the government, stemming from two important events. The first was that on 27 January 2020, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok sent a letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, without coordination with the military council members, requesting a peace-keeping mission be dispatched under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, to assist the transitional authority in Sudan in promoting the peace process, rebuilding police capability, resettling the displaced, and disarming, after signing the peace agreement, the armed groups, provided that their mandate includes the entire territory of Sudan.¹ This step was interpreted at the time as a circumvention of the Sovereignty Council. Subsequently, the Security and Defense Council held an emergency meeting to discuss Hamdok's request, which resulted in the Prime Minister being instructed to write a new letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, sent on 27 February 2020. The amended request focused on the UN mission to keep peace, support the economy, resettle the displaced and preparations for the upcoming elections.² In April 2020, the UN Security Council approved the second letter submitted by Hamdok, stressing the need to protect democratic gains and avoid a return to war.³

Representing another source of suspicion, the US Congress passed the "Sudan Democratic Transition, Accountability, and Fiscal Transparency Act of 2020" in January 2021. The law, which was supported by Sudanese activists, came in support of civilians, threatening the imposition of sanctions if the military did not hand over the presidency of the Sovereignty Council to civilians by the deadline stipulated in the Draft Constitutional Declaration.⁴

The sharp dispute that emerged between the civilian government and the military members of the Sovereignty Council after overcoming the rebellion, which was considered a failed coup attempt, did not come as a big surprise. As soon as the "coup attempt" was announced, Mohamed al-Faki Suleiman, a member of the Sovereignty Council, called on the masses to come out to protect the revolution. General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al-Burhan responded on behalf of the military by asking about whom they were "protecting" the revolution from, considering it an attempt to undermine the leadership and role of the armed forces in maintaining security in the country.⁵

This tension prompted the Ministerial Cabinet to issue a statement condemning the coup attempt, stressing the importance of fortifying the transitional period by evaluating the past period with

1 "Hamdok Asked for International Support... That is Why Sudanese Accused Him of High Treason," *Al-Istiklal*, 18/9/2020, accessed on 18/10/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3j7RCxO>.

2 "Sudan Requests a UN Peacekeeping Mission and Assigns Hamdok to Follow Up," *Al-Ain News*, 24/3/2020, accessed on 18/10/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3AM9dBj>.

3 "The United Nations Approves a Sudanese Request to Send a Peace Mission under Chapter VI," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 26/4/2020, accessed on 18/10/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2XmUWgR>.

4 "Sudan Democratic Transition, Accountability, and Fiscal Transparency Act of 2020," Congress.Gov, accessed on 18/10/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3lUGGFK>.

5 "Al-Burhan: The Army is the Guardian of Sudan, and No Party Can Remove it from the Scene," YouTube, 22/9/2021, accessed 18/10/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3peazmb>.

transparency and clarity, and exerting more effort to unify the forces of the revolution and strengthen the partnership between the military and civilians.⁶ On 22 September 2021, one day after the “coup attempt” was thwarted, Al-Burhan criticized civilian politicians in a speech during the graduation of a batch of officers, saying: “The political forces were preoccupied with the struggle for power and positions,” which contributed to the coup attempt. He added that the military will not let one party control the fate of the country.⁷ Lieutenant-General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemetti), Vice President of the Sovereignty Council and Commander of the Rapid Support Forces, followed al-Burhan’s approach in blaming civilian government for the failure.

In response to Al-Burhan and Dagalo’s statements, Sovereignty Council member al-Faki Suleiman stated in an interview with national TV on 24 September 2021, that the debates taking place in the political arena between the military and political council members are a military attempt to change the political equation, noting that the acts of the chairman and deputy of the Sovereignty Council, in the political arena are more dangerous than the failed coup attempts themselves.⁸

Political Responses

Of all the reactions of the forces of Freedom and Change to the statements of the chairman and deputy of the Sovereignty Council, none were more severe than the statements of Khaled Omar Youssef, Minister of Cabinet Affairs and member of the Sudanese Congress Party. He said that Al-Burhan and Dagalo were forgetting that the security situation is the responsibility of the military, and that their statements are a threat to the democratic transition, asserting that his side were ready for any confrontation if the military does not want the partnership.

The National Umma Party had a softer response. On 4 October 2021, the party’s Secretary-General issued a statement condemning the failed coup attempt and affirming support for the transitional period, cooperation and dialogue between the partners of the political process. The Secretary-General also called on all parties to “shoulder national responsibility and work to overcome differences and avoid harmful tactics that contradict the spirit of partnership.” The party formed a committee to communicate with the various parties. However, the party’s position developed later. The acting chairperson, Fadlallah Barama Nasser, stated that the party has no objection to dissolving the government, which has become a major demand for the military, nor any objection to its reformation and expansion of the base of participation, but before that all sides must gather to discuss the reasons that prompt its dissolution.

The Central Council of the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change rejected the statements by the military members of the Sovereignty Council. The press statement issued after the third meeting

⁶ “Al-Burhan and Hemetti Accuse Political Forces of being Responsible for the Attempted Coup in Sudan,” *BBC Arabic*, 22/9/2021, accessed on 18/10/2021 at: <https://bbc.in/3BVLf8e>.

⁷ “A ‘failed coup attempt’ in Sudan,” *The New Arab*, 21/9/2021, accessed on 18/10/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3pdBFu2>.

⁸ “Mohamed Al-Faki: The debate taking place in the arena aims to change the political equation,” Sudan News Agency, 24/9/2021, accessed on 18/10/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3G0tPtI>.



of the Council on the crisis stated the importance of adhering to the constitutional declaration, the Juba Peace Agreement, handing over the presidency of the Sovereignty Council to civilians, ensuring the civilian government is responsible for overseeing the police and the General Intelligence Service, supporting the Empowerment Removal Committee, and handing over wanted persons to the International Criminal Court. But the situation was complicated by a meeting held on 2 October 2021, which included a group of political parties and forces splintered from the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change, including forces and organizations that signed the Juba Peace Agreement. These include the Sudan Liberation Movement led by the governor of Darfur region, Minni Minnawi, and the Justice and Equality Movement led by Minister of Finance Gebriel Ibrahim, along with other parties such as the Sudanese Ba'ath Party and the Democratic Alliance for Social Justice. In a letter addressed to the Chairman of the Sovereignty Council, Lieutenant-General Al-Burhan, on 4 October 2021, the group demanded he stop dealing with the Central Council of the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change until all the political forces that established the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change and together drove the change are united.⁹

The Communist Party issued a statement on 9 October 2021, contending that the nature of the conflict between the military and civilian council members has nothing to do with the demands of the masses of the Sudanese people. Therefore, the party is not siding with any party in this conflict that has little to do with the interests of the people and the revolution and is calling for the overthrow of the government.¹⁰

International Responses

The US envoy to the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, visited Khartoum days after the coup attempt was announced to express the US administration's support for the civilian government in Sudan. Feltman met with Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok and relayed US condemnation of the coup attempt on behalf of both the administration and Congress, and urged the partners of the transitional period to move forward with the democratic transition. The US State Department spokesman, Ned Price, had hinted at the use of sanctions in the event of a setback in the transition process in Sudan; He said, "Deviation from this path and failure to meet key benchmarks will place at risk Sudan's bilateral relationship with the United States, including significant U.S. assistance." Most importantly, what Feltman noted on his visit was the need "to develop a new vision for Sudan's national security to guide the security sector reform agenda under civilian authority while recognizing the integral role that the armed forces will have in a democratic Sudan."¹¹ Another US delegation, on a visit to the country during the same period, headed by Acting US Assistant Secretary of State Bryan Hunt, met

⁹ Abdel Hamid Awad, "Differences of the Ruling Partners in Sudan are Growing: Accusations of the Military Undermining the Transitional Period," *The New Arab*, 4/10/2021, accessed on 18/10/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3FXoovl>.

¹⁰ "Sudanese Communist Party Political Office Press Release," Facebook, 9/10/2021, accessed on 18/10/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/2YXoaUz>

¹¹ "Visit of Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Jeffrey Feltman to Sudan," Media Note, Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, 2/10/2021, accessed on 19/10/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3lXsLlG>.

with members of the Sovereignty Council, Mohamed al-Faki Suleiman and Mohamed al-Hassan al-Taishi. The American official confirmed the continuation of the partnership and the United States' support for the democratic transition process.

Meanwhile, Egypt and South Sudan expressed their support for Al-Burhan, evident in the press conference held by the President of Egypt and the President of South Sudan when South Sudanese President, Salva Kiir, visited Egypt on 11 October 2021. The latter indicated that Sudan is facing unrest, and that Egypt and South Sudan should help Sudan and support al-Burhan to circumvent a return to war.¹²

The Future of the Civilian Military Relationship

The military have taken an escalatory tone in relation to the crisis during the past week. In his meetings with the military units, Al-Burhan affirmed his unequivocal position on the necessity of dissolving the government and expanding the base of participation in it. On 12 October 2021, he issued several decisions to consolidate the authority of the military members of the Sovereignty Council, revealing that it is the de facto ruler of the country. The measures included a travel ban for officials of the Empowerment Removal Committee, including, Mohamad al-Faki Suleiman. Other reports suggest that Khaled Omar Youssef, Minister of Cabinet Affairs, was denied entry to the General Command of the Armed Forces when he was accompanied by Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok. On 13 October 2021, Sudanese television channels and state channels were placed under the guard of the armed forces.

It seems clear that this is a major turning point for the civilian military relationship. The partnership that began more than two years ago is facing a serious impasse as the military seeks to monopolize the rule of the country and marginalize the civilian members of the Transitional Sovereignty Council. However, the military would be required to take full responsibility for managing the country's crises; including eastern Sudan, the economy, civil resistance, and external (especially US) pressures, which may push in the direction of a settlement in which the civilian government is re-formed on the basis of broadening the base of participation but keeping Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok in place. This is a demand supported by forces within the Central Council for Freedom and Change. Changing this dynamic would bring about unnecessary external pressure and internal instability. However, this would be futile unless it comes as part of the transition process and the military actually hand over power to an elected government when the time comes.

¹² "South Sudan President Salva Kiir Calls for Support for al-Burhan to Prevent the Return of War in Sudan," Taiba Channel, 11/10/2021, accessed on 19/10/2021 at: <https://bit.ly/3jdCvmu>.