



# SUDAN: RELATING IDENTITY POLITICS & CYCLICAL VIOLENCE

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UNDERSTANDING  
**CONFLICT** IN AFRICA  
SERIES

## INTRODUCTION

Following months of protests since al-Bashir's removal from power, there has been some semblance of hope in Sudan following the signing of a power-sharing agreement in July 2019 between the leaders of the pro-democracy movement and the transitional military council, the latter running the country in the absence of a new President. However, a key missing element of the agreement was how to account for the violence that marred the protest period. According to doctors close to the movement<sup>1</sup>, 246 people have been killed across Sudan since the beginnings of the protests back in December 2018, though official figures are smaller.

Unfortunately, there is a sense of resignation and expectation that the political movements in Sudan are to be accompanied by violence, especially given the history of conflict in Darfur, South Sudan and the various historical uprisings and coups in the country. This paper suggests that there is one particular factor that has exacerbated tensions and divisions within Sudan, and has

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *Sudan's history shows a dangerous pattern of hierarchy of importance in terms of ethnicity, language and religion, including precedent for violence to be utilized to force and consolidate this hierarchy in the future.*
- *It will be imperative for the new transitional government begin to take steps for greater representation and inclusivity in government administrations and other positions of power.*
- *Steps for national reform, with international supervision, will be necessary in order for Sudan to avoid a reversion to the structures of division and separation implemented by previous regimes, and used to justify violent repression by military means.*

Consequently allowed violence to continue to be expressed during political events in Sudan, and that is the issue of identity politics. Rather than exploring the difficulties and misconceptions with this particular

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/sudan-murals-](https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/sudan-murals-commemorate-protest-martyrs-11748552)

[commemorate-protest-martyrs--11748552](https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/sudan-murals-commemorate-protest-martyrs-11748552)

conceptual apparatus, this paper will focus on particular aspects relevant to this context; state-run ethnically-driven militias and Special Forces, historical marginalization of specific linguistic and religious groups along ethnic lines, and the prospects for prolonged peace in Sudan, given the deep divisions fostered between the Sudanese people.

## FROM JANJAWEEED TO RAPID SUPPORT FORCES

Beginning with the former, some of the most serious allegations of violence against protestors has been against the same military representative that signed the July agreement, Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as “Hemedti”. Dagalo is directly in charge of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Sudanese special forces that have been used as a key instrument of the military in suppressing protestors, with often deadly and brutal force. For example, Human Rights Watch<sup>2</sup> stated the following in regards to the actions of the RSF in June:

*“In June [2019] alone, government forces including the [RSF] killed over 130 protesters. The single deadliest day was June 3, when government forces led by RSF opened fire on protesters and burned down their sit-in camp... Local monitors reported that 128 people were killed in that attack... Local monitors reported that troops raped many protesters or threatened them with rape.”*

The RSF are also implicated in historical war crimes and atrocities in Darfur during the early 2000s. Then, paramilitary militias called Janjaweed fought on behalf of the Sudanese government in Darfur. These groups were directly referenced in UN Security Resolution 1556 (2004)<sup>3</sup> as causing violence and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including “indiscriminate attacks on civilians, rapes, forced displacements, and acts of violence especially those with an ethnic dimension”. This reference to ethnicity

was due to the general composition of the militias being Sudanese Arabs, while the civilians suffering in Darfur were mostly black, and was cause for the atrocities in Darfur to be labelled as a genocide by some<sup>4</sup>. Others<sup>5</sup> have suggested that often the narrative tended to conflate Darfuri Arabs, often neutral in the conflict, with the Janjaweed and that the picture was more complex. Regardless, there was certainly an element to the crimes in Darfur that was ethnically driven, and served to deepen those divisions.

Dagalo, was himself a senior commander of the Janjaweed during the Darfur conflict. And, despite international outcry about the violence, the International Criminal Court did not bring charges against Dagalo for such crimes, unlike other figures such as al-Bashir himself. Dagalo was actually promoted when the Janjaweed were brought into the military-proper, when the RSF were founded in August 2013. And with the formation of the RSF from the Janjaweed foundation, there continues to be that ethnic dimension to the military group.

## HISTORICAL MARGINALIZATION OF LANGUAGES & RELIGIONS

Firstly, a simple background. During the period of colonization, Sudan was jointly ruled by Britain and Egypt as the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. At this period in its history, the country was divided into particular districts, and the colonial powers passed the Closed Districts Ordinances. This particular act required a passport for access between the northern and southern zones of Sudan, and for a particular permit for conducting business between the zones. This also meant that each of the distinct Sudanese districts were administered in different ways. On the basis of language, the official languages of the north were English and Arabic. Whereas in the south, they were English and other languages such as Dinka, Bari and Nuer. Also, while the north was primarily Islamic, Islam was discouraged in

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/09/sudan-put-justice-front>

<sup>3</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 1556 (2004).

<sup>4</sup> <http://worldwithoutgenocide.org/genocides-and-conflicts/darfur->

[genocide](#)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP-17-Beyond-Janjaweed.pdf>

the south, where instead there were Christian missionaries. In effect, the template for eventual cessation between north and south was set at during these colonial times.

Heather Sharkey<sup>6</sup> made a critical analysis of the development of Arab identity and ideology in Sudan. She argued that colonial policies enacted by Britain in preserving the status quo of social hierarchy in Sudan effectively reinforced the placement of “Arab identity” in Sudan as more elite than other identities, that she calls “self-consciously African (implying culturally-pluralistic) identities”. With such a reinforcement of an elite identity, it is no surprise that the most significant drivers of independence in Sudan were by these elites, mainly congregated in the north, and mainly identifying with this “Arab identity”. When independence did occur in 1956, these same groups were the best placed to lead the newly independent Sudanese nation.

Thus, partially in efforts to distinguish themselves from their colonial past, and partially as part of this reinforcement of an elite ideology, the new administration set about to enact reforms to encourage a new national identity. One of the first of these actions was to remove English as a national language, and instead have Arabic as a national language for the entire nation<sup>7</sup>. This was problematic for a number of reasons. Prior to this English was the only language widely spoken across the entire nation, north and south. Officially discouraging this form of communication, instead, meant that those Sudanese non-Arabic speakers would quickly have to learn the language to be able to engage in public life, creating an instant practical problem. Another factor was that of religion<sup>8</sup>, as while speaking Arabic does not implicitly mean Islam, there is an undeniable relation between the two. Sudan’s north was primarily Islamic, and with their spread of influence post-independence the tensions between the religious groups did manifest. Even discounting the predominantly Christian south, there are other groups of Christians in Sudan such as the Nubian Christians that have been marginalized during this post-independence period.

Post-independent Sudan was marred by violence along these lines from almost day one. The new Khartoum-administration reneged on promises to members of the south that the new government would be federal. Instead, it became incredibly centralized, and dogmatic, attempting to impose a new national identity upon all marginal regions in the country. These were some of the prevailing factors exacerbating the insurgency and war in the south, a fact noted early by analysts such as George Shepherd<sup>9</sup> in 1966, who analyzed the “national integration problem in Sudan” as a by-product of what he called the “Afro-Arab schism”. Arguably these factors led to South Sudanese independence in 2011. It also was a precursor to violence against other marginalized groups, such as the Nubian Christians, and the Darfurians. As rather than looking to resolve and compromise on identity politics in Sudan, the administration institutionalized it. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan, that outlined the terms of South Sudan’s cessation, was heavily dependent on both Arab and African elites in its construction and implementation, as discussed extensively by Elke Grawert<sup>10</sup>. Economic factors suggest a similar theme, for example land ownership in Sudan is concentrated in the same groups<sup>11</sup>.

Political representation in successive Sudanese administrations is also favorable to particular ethnic groups, although the motivations for such demographic compositions are disputable. For instance, the political composition may in fact reflect efforts to ensure regime loyalty across positions of power, which in turn preserved al-Bashir’s administration for a number of years<sup>12</sup>. Even still, on the international level, a Sudanese pivot towards Arabism coincided with its strengthened relationship to its Arab neighbors, where it became a key player in disputes and conflicts there such as in Yemen.

Yet, present-day Sudan paints a different picture to post-independence Sudan. The policies of promoting Arabic and the dominance the Islamic faith have largely succeeded insofar as the demographics of Sudan show

<sup>6</sup> Heather J. Sharkey. (2007) “Arab Identity and Ideology in Sudan: The Politics of Language, Ethnicity and Race”. *African Affairs*. 107/426. 21-43.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> George W. Shepherd Jn. (1966) “National Integration and the Southern Sudan”. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 4/2. 193-212.

<sup>10</sup> Elke Grawert. (2010) *After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan*. Woolbridge: James Curry.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.c-r.org/accord/sudan/land-and-conflict-sudan>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/africa/2019/04/sudan-president-bashir-gone-shadow-his-government-remains>

both factors to be in the majority across the country. Thus, this aspect of unification of a national identity did in some ways succeed. However, the history of violence that accompanied these policies set a precedent. That in Sudan, there is a hierarchy of importance in terms of ethnicity, language and religion, and that violence can be utilized to force and consolidate this hierarchy in the future. Not to mention, the rhetorical devices employed by those in positions of power to alienate and blame other marginalized groups.

## PROSPECTS FOR NEW SUDANESE POLITICS

What does this mean for the prospects of a new politics in Sudan? Unfortunately, the precedent of consolidating power through rhetorical and literal division between groups has continued to persist in an institutionalized form. The military in Sudan, themselves implicated in crimes against marginalized groups, are part of this problem due to a long history of institutionalized practice based upon this divisiveness. Protestors in Sudan called for a fairer and more representative politics, and yet this appeared to be at risk in the first weeks of the post al-Bashir political landscape. The military took control of the government institutions, and Dagalo took a position of significant influence as Deputy- Head of the Military Transitional Council that took control of the country in the immediate aftermath of al-Bashir's ousting.

However, after weeks of repression, the military and opposition came to an agreement to oversee a transition period whereby a government of six civilians and five generals will take control of a transitional government for a period of three years. The constitutional declaration for this period was signed 4 August 2019 in Khartoum by Dagalo and protest leader Ahmed Rabie.

But in an indication of the difficult road ahead, the RSF again proves to be a key agitator in the process. In late July, five protestors, including four schoolchildren,

were killed by the RSF, which prompted yet another massive public outcry. The Military Council, for their part, announced that nine RSF soldiers have been dismissed and remanded in custody in connection with the killings. The constitutional declaration also provides that the RSF are to be moved into the general armed forces for the future according to some reports<sup>13</sup>. The fear is that these measures are merely superficial, as the culture of violence and acceptance of such actions by armed personnel may continue to persist.

Consequently, it will be imperative for the new transitional government to address some of these issues. They will need to begin to take steps for greater representation and inclusivity in government administrations and other positions of power. There will also come a time for accountability and transitional justice for those affected by historical crimes and abuses, including those perpetuated by the RSF and their commanders. In this regard, the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council will continue to play a key role as an international instrument for government accountability.

A significant first step in this regard was the suspension of Sudan's membership of the AU due to the ongoing violence. This was accompanied by demands for a cessation of hostilities, respect for human rights, and a complete transition to a civilian-led authority<sup>14</sup>. As Sudan tentatively moves towards a new phase in its transition, the AU's vigilance to these factors will be imperative, insofar as further measures such as economic sanctions could be implemented should the situation deteriorate. These steps for national reform, with international supervision, will be necessary in order for Sudan to avoid a reversion to the structures of division and separation implemented by previous regimes, and used to justify violent repression by their military instruments.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49226130>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/the-854th-meeting-of-the-peace-](http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/the-854th-meeting-of-the-peace-and-security-council-on-the-situation-in-the-sudan)

[and-security-council-on-the-situation-in-the-sudan](http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/the-854th-meeting-of-the-peace-and-security-council-on-the-situation-in-the-sudan)

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