

The Dominance of Military Power in Sudan: Ramifications of the Coup D'Etat

How the Sudanese military has worked to preserve power within the transitional government including its recent coup d'etat in October 2021, and what changes are needed in this status quo for plausible, concrete and longterm democratic change.

RETHINKING SECURITY IN THE 2020s SERIES – ANALYSIS

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 25 October 2021, Sudanese military forces, including their representatives within Sudan's transitional Sovereign Council headed by General Abdel Fattah Burhan, dissolved civilian rule, arrested prominent civilian political figures including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, and called a state of emergency in what observers called a coup d'etat. The events have been widely condemned internationally, and local pro-democracy protests have been taking place in Sudan since which have been met with military violence. While Hamdok was recently reinstated as Prime Minister, the ever-present influence of the military on Sudanese politics risks the promise of Sudan's 2019 revolution that overthrew former autocrat Omar al-Bashir.

2. SUDAN'S MILITARY IN THE TRANSITIONAL GOVERNMENT: CONSOLIDATING POWER TO COUP D'ETAT

2.1 The Military Domination of the 2019 Sovereign Council

To understand the coup is to understand the power-sharing agreement established between military and civilian leaders back in August 2019¹, including the crucial issue of government composition. The transitional authority, called the Sovereign Council (SC), would act as Sudan's Head of State and was to be composed of both civilian and military figures. The latter of these were the figures from the military junta, called the Transitional Military Council (TMC), that were the immediate successors to Bashir's rule, a notable member aside from Burhan being General Mohammed Hamadan 'Hemedti' Dagalo, the leader of the Rapid Support Forces implicated in atrocities in Darfur as well as brutal crackdowns against Khartoum's sit-in protesters during the events of 2019.

Most of the civilian figures came from the pro-democracy movement, the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change coalition (FFC). The agreement also provided for a Cabinet nominated by civilian leaders, except for defence and interior to be nominated by the military, and it is in this capacity that Hamdok was nominated Prime Minister. Notable members of the Cabinet include Asmaa Abdalla², who was the first woman to serve as foreign minister, not only in Sudan, but in the entire Arab world.

The agreement stated that the military would hold leadership of the SC under Burhan for the first 21 months, which would then pass to civilian leadership for the next 18 months, at which time elections were scheduled to be held. However, it has been apparent for some time that the military component of the SC has worked not to support transition to civilian rule, but instead to retain power.

2.2 Approaching the 2021 Coup D'Etat

Such warnings were present a mere six months into the SC's existence, when Khartoum took part in crucial peace negotiations in neighbouring South Sudan.

¹ [https://www.africanews.com/2019/08/21/inside-sudan-s-11-member-sovereign-council-all-you-need-to-know//](https://www.africanews.com/2019/08/21/inside-sudan-s-11-member-sovereign-council-all-you-need-to-know/)

² <https://english.aawsat.com//home/article/1888886/sudan-gets-1st-woman-fm-hamdok-names-cabinet>

During those discussions in Juba³, military figures used the opportunity to make deals with many armed groups unilaterally and without Cabinet consultation, and in doing so use those negotiations as a pretext to consider amending the constitutional declaration, such as the term length of the SC as well as its composition.

In May 2021, a civilian member of the SC, Aisha Musha Sayeed, resigned claiming that civilian voices within the SC were being increasingly side-lined and silenced. She told reporters:

“Overriding constitutional powers has become a trait that cannot be ignored to the extent that the civilian component within the Sovereign Council and all other levels of governance became just a logistical executive body only. They don’t participate in decision making but only accept what has been agreed upon earlier.”⁴

Meanwhile, civilian figures have been targeted by political violence. Hamdok has survived assassination attempts including a notable bomb attack on his convoy in Khartoum in March 2020⁵, while other, unsuccessful, coup attempts took place as recently as September 2021 by other military figures⁶. This latter event has been seen by many as the start of the most recent crisis that manifested on 25 October 2021. Military figures within the SC argued that Hamdok’s Cabinet needed to be replaced and demanded reforms to the FFC and civilian part of the SC.

By 25 October 2021, things escalated into a coup d’etat⁷. Burhan declared a State of Emergency, while military figures arrested and detained several civilian SC and cabinet members, including the Prime Minister, who were put under house arrest. There were also reports⁸ of a complete internet blackout and other compromised communication services. A day after the coup, Burhan delivered a speech⁹ in which he defended his actions not as a coup, but to “*rectify the path*” to democracy. He

³ https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_off_track_why_sudans_transition_is_in_danger/

⁴ https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_sudan-sovereign-council-member-resigns-accuses-military-leaders-interference/6206198.html

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-51800278>

⁶ <https://www.africanews.com/2021/09/22/sudan-s-sovereignty-council-calls-for-unity-after-failed-coup-attempt/>

⁷ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-military-seizes-power-arrests-pm-and-civilian-ministers-in-dawn-coup>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-coup-burhan-speech-strange-moments>

claimed that communication services were cut due to "*misinformation and racist behaviour online*", and that the detention of Hamdok was "*for his own good*". Burhan also purportedly claimed that he was still committed to a transition to civilian democracy, with elections planned for July 2023. For his part, Hamdok at the time was reportedly¹⁰ pressured to defend the coup but instead issued a statement to galvanise the Sudanese people to resist the coup peacefully.

2.3 Reactions: Domestic Protests and International Condemnation

Burhan pointed to potential civilian support for his action with reference to specific protests. For example, on 16 October 2021 a large protest manifested in Khartoum in support of the military, calling on Burhan to make a coup and implement a military government. Unlike other protests, observers noted¹¹ that for this rally protestors were allowed to reach the presidential palace gates with little police presence. The timing of such a protest given that the coup took place 9 days later, and the comparative laxness of security have led many to dismiss this protest as a military-led, to create a pretext excuse for the coup.

For added detail, the tens of thousands of pro-democracy protestors that rallied in response to this protest, as well as the coup itself, have vastly outnumbered this pro-military protest¹². Additionally, they have protested for much longer over many days, and have also been met with much more significant police repression and violence. For instance, on 26 October, a day after the coup, 10 pro-democracy protestors were reportedly¹³ killed by military forces in Khartoum. More recently, during the weekend of the 13-14 November, five people were killed on the Saturday while a sixth, a 15-year-old child, was killed by military bullet wounds on the Sunday¹⁴. There has also been illegal detainment of individuals opposed to the coup. For example, on 2 November the World Organisation against Torture said¹⁵ at least 36 civilians arrested in the coup were detained in unknown locations.

¹⁰ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-military-seizes-power-arrests-pm-and-civilian-ministers-in-dawn-coup>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58943013>

¹² <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20211030-sudan-braces-for-saturday-protests-against-bloody-military-coup>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-59045020>

¹⁴ <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/11/14/africa/sudan-coup-protests-intl/index.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/sudan-international-community-should-adopt-urgent-measures-against-military-putschists-to-stop-ongoing-human-rights-violations>

The international community has, generally, reacted with condemnation towards the ruling-military power in Sudan. The US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinkin, released a statement¹⁶ in response to the coup saying, "*these actions [by the Sudanese military] have the potential to derail the country's transition to democracy and are a betrayal of Sudan's peaceful revolution*". The US also paused \$700m in international aid payments to Sudan. Robert Fairweather, UK Special Envoy for Sudan and South Sudan said¹⁷, "*the security services and their leaders will bear responsibility for any violence towards any protesters*". Notable Gulf partner nations Saudi Arabia and the UAE joined the US and UK in issuing a joint statement¹⁸ on 3 November calling for a restoration of civilian-led government. The UN Secretary-General issued a statement¹⁹ that said, "*the Secretary-General strongly condemns the ongoing military coup d'état in Khartoum and all actions that could jeopardize Sudan's political transition and stability*". Meanwhile other partners such as the EU²⁰ have "*strongly condemn[ed] the military coup in Sudan*" and have threatened "*serious consequences for EU's engagement, including its financial support*".

2.4 Hamdok Reinstated as Prime Minister

Despite this pressure, on 11 November 2021 Burhan instead appointed²¹ a new SC with himself again at its head. While civilian representation is present, no members of the FFC coalition have been appointed which has been noted as a violation of the 2019 Constitutional Declaration as stated²² by international partners, the US, UK, Norway, EU, and Switzerland. Moreover, yet again Dagalo retains the same prominent role in the SC he had before. Many Sudanese protesters reacted with

¹⁶ <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-condemns-actions-against-sudans-civilian-led-transitional-government/>

¹⁷ <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20211030-sudan-braces-for-saturday-protests-against-bloody-military-coup>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/business/cop/sudans-ousted-pm-hamdok-agrees-return-lead-government-al-arabiya-tv-2021-11-03/>

¹⁹ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/260286>

²⁰ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/eu-decries-coup-as-attempt-to-undermine-sudan-s-transition-towards-democracy>

²¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-coup-protests-burhan-names-himself-head-new-sovereign-council>

²²

https://twitter.com/USEmbassyKRT/status/1459137870493622279?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1459137870493622279%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.middleeasteye.net%2Fnews%2Fsudan-coup-protests-burhan-names-himself-head-new-sovereign-council

scorn, including the Sudanese Professionals Association which said²³, "*Burhan and his council's decisions apply only to themselves, they have no legitimacy and will be met only with contempt and resistance*".

And more recently, in an apparent effort to appease protestors and the international community, on 21 November²⁴ Hamdok was reinstated as Prime Minister by Burhan under a new agreement that will enable Hamdok to lead a Cabinet of technocrats until elections are to be held before July 2023. However, it is unclear how much power said Cabinet will have, as it will again be subject to military oversight. Additionally, the FFC have still refused to acknowledge said agreement, and protestors have continued action on the ground in Khartoum demanding a complete withdrawal of the military from Sudanese politics.

3. KEEPING THE PROMISE OF THE 2019 REVOLUTION

For now, it appears that protests against the domination of military power in Sudan will continue. If the most recent reinstatement of Hamdok indicates anything, it is that the pro-democracy, civilian-led movement is not beholden to the position of one symbolic individual but instead represents the hopes for a large-scale political transformation in Sudan for all. With those powerful military individuals such as Burhan and Dagalo insulating themselves in positions of power, they are also insulating themselves from accountability. Unfortunately, without sufficient pressure nor an incentive for them to be subject to greater scrutiny, they will continue to maintain their grip on the executive power within Sudan.

But it is here where the international community could provide a key role. When news of the coup broke in October, one of the first questions for observers was 'who in the international community backed the coup-makers?'. And since then, we have seen how pressure, such as the suspension of millions of dollars of aid, from key players such as the US has been critical in applying pressure to the military authorities. On the domestic level, it appears that the pro-democracy protestors have also been effective not only at ensuring that the world has taken notice of Sudan, but also in a demonstration of widespread defiance of the military.

²³ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-coup-protests-burhan-names-himself-head-new-sovereign-council>

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-59364349>

The promise of the 2019 revolution was for Sudan to transition from autocracy to civilian-led democracy. This cannot be done with the constant oversight of military figures, some of who themselves have benefitted or been implicated in the crimes of Bashir's autocratic regime. To have a true transformative political transition, it will be critical for any relevant authorities, be it Hamdok's technocratic Cabinet or someone else, to enact reforms that move towards civilian ownership. This does not, of course, account for the executive SC, but maybe here the international community could do more to put pressure on these individuals to keep their promises and transfer power to civilians.

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