

# Sudan: Prospects for Democracy

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## Overview

1. This memo examines the prospects for a democratic transition in Sudan. On the evening that President Omar al-Bashir was finally removed from power, it covers both domestic and regional political dynamics.
2. A coalition of military officers and security/paramilitary commanders took power. All were Pres. Bashir's most senior lieutenants. Their intent is clearly to keep the existing system intact—with all the power and privilege that they enjoy. They have clamped down on the organized Islamists, partly to weaken potential opposition and partly to send a message to their sponsors in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
3. The power struggle within the security cabal is just beginning. Bashir had kept their rivalries and ambitions in check; his removal brings in its wake an unregulated uncertainty. The deal among the security cabal members has staved off the immediate danger of armed conflict between different elements of the military/ security services. However, and ironically, the prospects for democratic transition may be more remote than when Bashir was in power.
4. Sudan is deeply entangled in the politics of the Middle East. The senior members of the cabal each have personal, political and financial connections to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They have removed those with close connections to Qatar and Turkey. Sudan's African neighbours and the African Union have been spectators in this drama. The AU Commission's procedurally correct condemnation of the coup contrasts with Egypt's unconditional endorsement.
5. A political marketplace analysis indicates that Sudan has shifted from being a centralized, functional kleptocracy to an oligopoly, marked both by rivalry and collusion. The constraints on large-scale violence are fragile. The political business manager with the

best connections, highest level of political finance and most skills is NISS Director Salah Abdalla Gosh, but his capacities are—for now—well short of those of Bashir.

## **What Just Happened?**

6. Former president Bashir was a master of tactical maneuver. He had built an elaborate political-security structure, of which he was the exact centre. His major political failing over the last four months was to underestimate the scale and determination of the democracy protests, and their resonance among the children of the ruling elite. Bashir erroneously assumed that he could ride out the protests and that the ever-loyal security apparatus would be able to use sufficient coercion to quell them. This miscalculation may have been a generational factor, insofar as the children (and the friends of the children) of the leading members of the regime were among the protesters. The well-established norm against killing members of the elite, and the social pressures on the army command for restraint, militated against the kind of repression that was possible in 1989-91 or even 2013.

7. Pres. Bashir was unable to negotiate his own exit. Until February, he appears to have been contemplating postponing the evitable, planning on keeping his options open for staying on in power after his constitutional limit was up in April 2020. He had two options for engineering a departure on his own terms. One was to appoint successors who could maintain the existing system and protect him after he left office. Under pressure, he chose to take this path, when he declared the state of emergency on 22 February. But it was clear to all that this decision was forced on him: his power was slipping away.

8. The other option was to negotiate a true opening up, departing with a negotiated democratization. Despite many promises and much encouragement over the last ten years, Bashir did not take this option. Possibly there was a missed opportunity for international pressure for him to take this path over the last six weeks. More probably he would have brushed off such entreaties, trusting his own undeniable skills of managing disorder and political escapism.

9. What happened on 10-11 April was that Bashir's own lieutenants accelerated option one, on their terms rather than his. Their hand was forced by the refusal of army commanders to fire on young people including their sons and daughters. Evidently, however, the coup had neither a single leader nor a well-worked out plan of action. Even while army spokesmen were promising a statement, raising popular hopes of a successful Khartoum Spring, the chiefs of staff, the NISS chief and commanders of the paramilitaries were still wrangling over the deal. Their inconclusive bargaining revealed the enduring reality that everyone trusted Pres. Bashir more than they trusted one another.

10. The one consensual course of action among the putchists was to remove the veteran Muslim Brothers from the political scene (including reportedly Ali Osman Taha and Nafie Ali Nafie) and dissolve the NCP. Whether the Islamists presented a real political threat, or whether this was designed to curry favour among the coup's Middle Eastern backers, is not clear.

## **Prospects for Stability**

11. Amid the chaos that followed the Arab Spring uprisings in Libya, Syria and Yemen, Pres. Bashir traded on 'stability': he knew the rules of the region, would not spring any disagreeable surprises, and could deliver some tangible benefits to neighbouring countries and the international community on issues such as counter-terrorism, migration, and engineering a workable peace bargain in South Sudan. The successor cabal is sending the same messages: continuity and stability.

12. In some important respects, the new military council can at least avoid the worst of instability. During the last week, the dangerous prospect arose that different security units might come into armed conflict with one another. The Sudan Armed Forces, NISS, the Popular Defence Forces, the Rapid Support Forces, the Central Reserve Police, the Federal Police, and various militia, all have separate command and control structures. Some also have their own separate sources of finance and their own external links. This hydra-headed security structure raises the real fear of a Libya or Yemen-style conflict. They might fight on the streets of Khartoum and other major cities, or some might take over provincial cities and set up their own fiefdoms. For now, at least, that prospect has been averted.

13. Doubtless, the envoys of the new regime will be assuring their Middle Eastern allies/patrons, and western powers, that they are a force for stability insofar as they will continue cooperation on all the international priority issues. They will also emphasize their anti-Islamist credentials by playing up the crackdown on the NCP and reporting on Islamist plots (real or invented) that they have discovered and thwarted.

14. However, the prospects for stability are jeopardized by two things. The first is that the power settlement among the cabal is not resolved. The group is inherently unstable. The Sudan Armed Forces are the biggest group, but their leadership is divided and appears to be indecisive. The NISS is smaller but led by a more able and ambitious operator, Salah Gosh, who may not be content to play a secondary role. The various paramilitary forces, which are stronger in the provinces than in Khartoum, may see an opportunity to obtain a better stake in the dispensation by taking control of provincial cities. Those dissatisfied with the dispensation have plentiful options for destabilization, both overt and deniable.

## Prospects for Democracy

15. The second threat to stability is the thwarting of the democratization agenda. The demonstrators have an amply proven capacity for mass mobilization and they will not relinquish their campaign without major concessions, of which so far there have been none. This means that there is a danger that one of the many branches of the security apparatus could use lethal force at scale against protesters, either deliberately or in an unplanned manner. This could be for one of many rationales. It could be to intimidate the opposition so as to consolidate the power of the military council as a whole; it could be to raise the spectre of chaos in the streets as in Libya or Syria, so as to make people turn to the army as the protector of law and order; or lastly it could be in order to deliberately provoke unrest so that one particular faction (e.g. NISS) could seize power in the name of saving the country.

16. The democracy movement's slogan of 'step down, period', was useful for mobilizing support but has the downside that its leaders should have been more careful what they wished for.

17. The opposition is facing its biggest test in re-energizing its supporters after the high hopes of this week and the complications and disappointments of the military takeover. The opposition alliance is regrouping and preparing for the next, more difficult phase of its campaign. It will face a relentless media barrage, proclaiming the triumphs and promises of the new regime, accusing the opposition leaders of being opportunists and Islamists. The military council will hope that material benefits (cheap bread and fuel) and payoffs will diminish the vigour of the protests.

18. The prospects that the military council will deliver Pres. Bashir to the ICC are zero. They will publicly criticize him for economic mismanagement and corruption but will not venture into criticizing his human rights record, because every one of the military-security cabal are no less responsible for violations. Moreover, they are well aware of one of the key assets that Pres. Bashir possessed that kept him in power for so long, which was his hard-earned reputation for standing by his subordinates. They will want to keep hold of that legacy, and would lose it by surrendering Pres. Bashir. Most probably they will allow him to stay in Sudan, as a gesture of that commitment. Any international brownie points they may gain from handing him to the ICC are insignificant compared to these domestic political calculations.

19. Ironically, the prospects for democratic transition were probably greater under Pres. Bashir, who had at least the capacity for deliberate, directional political change, than in the short term under the new regime, which will be preoccupied with infighting and

consolidation. If the current instability is to be an opportunity for democratization, it will need external facilitation.

## **Regional and International Dynamics**

20. Pres. Bashir had personal links with every Arab country and was able to manage a delicate balancing act. The men who seized power have, individually, close links to different powers in the Arab world. Many in the army leadership including Gen. Abu Ouf have close ties to Egypt. The RSF is deployed in Yemen on the Saudi Arabian payroll. The NISS chief has become closely aligned with the UAE. Some of the NCP leaders who have been dismissed or imprisoned are Muslim Brothers who are close to Qatar and Turkey, and even Iran.

21. Insofar as Sudan is going to maintain its long-standing balancing act among these different Middle Eastern powerbrokers, it is going to need an extraordinarily delicate set of negotiations among the members of the military council. It is hard to see them achieving this. It follows that Middle Eastern rivalries will probably be played out within the higher ranks of the regime, accentuating the power struggles and potential instability. It is unlikely that Qatar and Turkey will accept their setback without responding: Sudan was the last place in the Arab world in which Muslim Brothers were in government. It is likely that Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE will vie for the dominant position in terms of their sponsorship of their respective candidates.

22. Over the last few years the Gulf States have kept Sudan on a financial drip feed, not trusting Pres. Bashir but also not wanting to see state collapse. There is no clear indication of whether Saudi Arabia and the UAE will launch the large-scale financial bailout that is needed to rescue the Sudanese economy. It is more likely that they will make some short-term gestures (supplying fuel, bread and foreign exchange) while also topping up the political budgets of their favoured clients. This will not be sufficient to stabilize the economy.

23. The African Union and IGAD have not been relevant in the unfolding events. The AU Commission issued a statement, correctly noting that the takeover is an unconstitutional change of government, and indicating therefore that Sudan will be suspended from participating in the activities of the AU. This creates a significant contradiction with the position of Egypt, which is the AU Chair, and which unconditionally welcomed the takeover.

24. The Troika (U.S., U.K. and Norway) issued a statement earlier in the week calling for a transition to democracy. This was principally rhetoric, not backed by any substantive

engagement. The Arab sponsors of the military council will lobby the western powers to accept the new regime in the name of stability.

25. Pres. Bashir and Gen. Gosh were both architects of South Sudan's R-ARCISS. The continuity of the military-security players in Khartoum means that it is unlikely that the R-ARCISS will be jeopardized. However, Riek Machar may find himself less relevant, insofar as his patron's attention is elsewhere.

## **A Political Marketplace Analysis**

26. The 11 April coup represents a shift from a centralized functional kleptocracy to an oligopoly. The key players in the oligopoly are rivals; colluding on certain issues but prepared to move ruthlessly against one another. The biggest actor is the Sudan Armed Forces, but it lacks a clear strategy and unified leadership. NISS under the control of Gen. Gosh has plentiful political finance and the most skilled leadership. Others will likely claim their stake in power through violent signaling.

27. If the fragile pact that keeps the oligopoly together were to collapse, conditions would be suitable for a rapid shift towards an open, deregulated marketplace with low barriers to entry—i.e. a free for all. This would be manifest in regional powers offering sponsorship to diverse political-military actors, including start-up provincial militia, and the different groups that control small towns or even provincial cities declaring zones of control.

28. The removal of Pres. Bashir was possible because one of the most important rules in the Sudanese political marketplace is that there should not be elite killing. This norm may be tested in the coming days. International pressure will be helpful in maintaining respect for this norm.

29. From a strictly political market framework analysis, the best scenario is a rapid consolidation of power with a single strongman, who can then be pressed for a regulated liberalization of the political sphere. The strongest candidate for such a position is Gen. Gosh. However, despite his formidable intelligence capability, he does not possess the reputation and skills comparable to Pres. Bashir, and his elevation would not be popular among many army officers.

## **Conclusion**

30. The most positive element in the current situation in Sudan is the extraordinary discipline and determination of large numbers of ordinary Sudanese. They have forced the

downfall of a long-standing military ruler, and demonstrated that they cannot be governed against their will. Any member of the Sudanese political elite who is able to capitalize on this remarkable demonstration of civic courage should be able to thrive.

31. The current dispensation has all the hallmarks of being temporary and unstable. Unfortunately, the structural conditions are in place for another period of turmoil and uncertainty, with serious risks of bloodshed. The decisions of the newly-ruling military council are likely to be determined mostly by their own narrow and short-term power calculations, most of which are inscrutable to outsiders. The unresolved power dynamics within the ruling group do not provide auspicious circumstances for the kinds of bold moves towards democratization that are needed.

32. The international actors who have been most influential thus far are the Middle Eastern states focused on transactional politics and consolidation of their security agendas. Those more focused on democratic norms and principles have been slow to respond and are running behind the pace of events.



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