WORLD PEACE FOUNDATION
CONFLICT RESEARCH PROGRAMME

OCCASIONAL PAPER #32 | April 2022

Hunger in Sudan's Political Marketplace

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Summary[1]

The Sudanese people are suffering a protracted nationwide crisis of food security, sharply exacerbated by a 'perfect storm' of adversities including hyperinflation and the disruption of wheat imports—80 percent of which were from Russia and Ukraine. The immediate crisis a shortage of food and a collapse in entitlement to food. The deeper crisis is that Sudan's political economy is structured in an unequal and exploitative manner that generates both widespread chronic hunger and intermittent humanitarian emergency and famine. The political marketplace framework (PMF) is an analytical tool that explains the working of 'real' politics, where political budgets are used to buy up political constituencies in accordance with the laws of supply and demand—subordinating political institutions to the demands of transactional politics, and tearing up social contracts when that logic requires it. In the case of Sudan, the logic of the political marketplace establishes a hierarchy of political priorities—a 'priority regime'—in which the rulers must first of all secure political finance and loyalty within the political elite, secondarily attend to the demands of the most influential constituencies, and only thirdly deal with public goods such as equitable and sustainable food policy. Under this system, impoverishment of part or even most of the population can be politically rational, especially for repressing insurgencies or civic resistance: this priority regime becomes especially evident in times of austerity or crisis. After 2011, when the Sudanese economy traumatically adjusted to the loss of its former southern provinces and their oil reserves, hunger once again acquired a political function. The government of President Omar al-Bashir failed to reconcile its need for a large political budget with its need for financing food security for its constituencies of supporters. The revolutionaries who toppled his regime in 2018-19 organized themselves against hunger, and against the kleptocracy and their political marketplace. The civilian-military transitional government which emerged from the revolution lasted for 26 months, but the civilian prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok, had neither the material means nor the coordinated political strategy to replace the logic of the political marketplace with the priorities of the revolution: 'freedom, peace, justice.' Hamdok's inability to dictate an alternative priority regime exposed his government to the forces of counter-revolution. These anti-democratic forces—the military, the remnants of the old regime, and some of the provincial insurgents—mustered up a coup in October 2021. The coup re-established al-Bashir's old priority regime, with its political marketplace and its hunger-making political economy. The suspension of key international assistance programs combined with a severe food price shock occasioned by the Russian invasion of Ukraine is pushing Sudan to the brink of famine.

The political marketplace framework (PMF) is an analytical tool that explains the working of 'real' politics, where political budgets are used to buy up political constituencies in accordance with the laws of supply and demand.

1 The authors thank Kholood Khair, Magdi el-Gizouli, Muzan Alneel, and Aditya Sarkar for their comments which improved this paper.

Starvation in the Breadbasket

The cruel paradoxes of starvation in a land of plenty have been grist to the analytical mills of Sudanese political scientists for fifty years, but never before have they been as devastating as today. The contours of deprivation and hunger trace the power hierarchies and relations of exploitation. This landscape has persisted under successive governments, varyingly positioned on the spectrum between outright military autocracy and civilian rule—in short, it is the normal state of affairs. According to geographical location and socio-economic status, Sudanese people have different entitlements to food (Sen 1981).[2] Historically, the most persistent feature of this inequality is that the political and economic claims of metropolitan Sudanese for a state-subsidized diet based on imported wheat has overridden the needs of rural people for locally-produced staples sufficient for their survival and dignity.

In a parallel and intersecting process, peripheral governance in Sudan has become a matter of mercenarized and militarized tribal administration. At crucial moments of crisis, which include the revolution and counter-revolution of 2018-22, the politics of affordable food have defined the limits of political accountability and social contract. Despite the intimate relationship between food and power (African Rights 1997), reducing hunger and preventing famine have not been priorities for Sudanese governments. At best, this agenda has been the focus of technocratic adjustments, such as humanitarian assistance or subsidy programs, constrained by the often pitiless politics of international assistance. More commonly, governments have made heartless choices about which citizens they can discard in order to sustain their ruling order. On occasions, starvation has brought military and economic benefit to those who inflict it (Keen 1994).

Paul Howe (2007) analyzes famines using the framework of 'priority regimes.' Governments and other actors (from international agencies to households) adopt formal and informal hierarchies of concern. These priority regimes may explicitly or implicitly promote food security, for example by formalizing policies to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals or seeking full employment. They may also do the reverse, through neglect of food security, adopting goals that may create famine as a by-product, creating a trade-off between famine prevention and other goals, or by actions that create famine in pursuit of another overriding goal. Examples of those overriding goals include military victory in a conflict, an ambitious program of social transformation or accelerated and disruptive economic development, impoverishing and demoralizing communities so that they can be ruled more efficiently, or genocide. At different times in Sudanese history, pursuit of such other goals has caused starvation (Keen 1994; African Rights 1997; Duffield 2001).

A political marketplace system is one in which transactional politics trumps institutional politics. It is not the only form that transactional political system can take. For example, patrimonialism or competitive authoritarianism can establish a political settlement based on relatively stable bargains between the ruler and members of the elite. In a political market, political power is traded as a commodity in accordance with the laws of supply and demand, making the political arena inherently turbulent. In a political market, the relationship between money and power is complicated. Political elites are driven by greed for both, but money is primarily an instrument for power, not the other way around (de Waal 2015). One consequence of this is that the immiseration of selected communities or even the entire population can

2 Here and below we use 'entitlement' in both the everyday sense of a moral and legal claim and in Amartya Sen's narrowly economic sense of being able to exercise real demand for food through production and market exchange.

be politically rational insofar as it reduces the price of loyalty, making it cheaper for the ruler to govern.[3]

The political marketplace framework (PMF) analyzes political loyalties and services using the diagnostics of supply and demand along with theories of the firm and the organization of markets. It is that logic that determines the position of any member of the political elite including whether that individual survives in the system or not. The core requirements for success in a political market system are control over discretionary funds (a political budget), control over sufficient means of violence, intelligence about how the market is functioning (preferential access to timely information), and networks and skills. In most countries, these transactions are the stuff of everyday political bargaining, corruption scandals, insider gossip and dramatizations such as the TV series *House of Cards*. But when a political system is stripped back to its bare bones, when the variables for governance are pushed beyond the limits that institutions can bear, what is revealed is the brutal skeleton of transactional politics. Sudan over the recent decades is a case study (de Waal 2019).

In a political marketplace, the necessary priority of the political elite is securing the material means for gaining power and staying in power, to which every other policy or decision is at best secondary. By contrast, a state that makes overcoming hunger an overriding political priority (in Howe's terminology, a 'response' priority regime) can be said to have established an 'anti-famine political contract' (de Waal 1997). These are rare, usually arising on account of the political mobilization of influential constituencies to stop starvation and call to account those responsible for it. Several times in modern Sudanese history, at moments of hope for democrats and progressives such as the triumph of the 1985 popular uprising which was in part spurred by the needless famine of that year, Sudanese governments have adopted policies aimed at food security. Unfortunately, the Sudanese political class has a recurrent preference of treating hunger as a technical malfunction rather than a political scandal, as a result of which these policies are vulnerable to neglect and reversal (African Rights 1997).

The civilian cabinet headed by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok between 2019 and 2021 set out a new priority regime: peace, an end to kleptocracy and economic crisis, sustainable development, and human rights (MOFEP 2020: 3). The cabinet's economic policy aimed at mobilizing the funds needed to rebuild the economy and invest in social services and safety nets, which had all but collapsed under al-Bashir's regime. But they shared power with the military, which controlled and dispensed much of the old regime's political funds. The civilians were barely able to make any reduction in the huge subvention paid to the military (Alneel 2021).

In February 2021, Hamdok reshuffled his cabinet, bringing in leaders from peripheral insurgencies who had signed the Juba Agreement on Peace in Sudan. His second cabinet continued the policies of his first: it sought to mobilize resources by cutting food and fuel subsidies and devaluing the currency. These were preconditions for attracting international grants, loans and investments, which could help the government stabilize the currency and manage import costs and inflation better. But not enough international money came through. Inflation soared, and the cost of reform fell largely on poor people (Diwan and Elbadawi 2021). Protests against the cost of living spread through 2021, and the security forces put them down with tear gas and (in May 2011) with killings. Hamdok described the killings as 'a crime against peaceful protestors' but his second cabinet was entrapped in the logic of the political marketplace (HRW 2021).

3 This points to an important distinction between the political marketplace framework and an analysis based on corruption. In the latter case, greed for material benefits would incentivize economic growth over holding power.

A Hungry Nation

Over the last few decades, hunger in Sudan was mostly a phenomenon of rural areas and camps for displaced people outside major cities. Not any more: it is also an urban phenomenon, afflicting wage earners and others who would in earlier days have considered themselves better off. Sudan is now a hungry nation, and getting hungrier.

In May 2021, 16 percent of the population were enduring crisis or worse-than-crisis levels of food insecurity, and 32 percent of the population were 'stressed.' Those figures were predicted to rise in the lean months before the main November harvest: 21 percent were predicted to be in 'crisis', and 36 percent were predicted to be 'stressed' (IPC May 2021).[4] Sudan has faced hunger before, but in the last century it has never faced levels of hunger as widespread, persistent and acute as today. The realities of household poverty and hunger are masked by food production figures that appear at face value to indicate an agricultural sector that, if not thriving, is at least getting by. The enduring problem is not whether there is enough food to eat in the country, it is whether people have entitlement to it. There's usually enough food but people are not able to grow it or buy it. Hunger was part of a bustling agrarian economy that for decades has been at odds with the nutritional needs of society.

Poverty surveys, nutrition surveys and food security surveys help to quantify the enormous pressure on household incomes in Sudan. The last major poverty survey was completed in 2009. It found that the incomes of 46.5 percent of the population of northern Sudan qualified as 'poor': poverty rates in rural areas and peripheral provinces were much higher. The survey used a money-metric poverty line of 113.8 Sudanese pounds per person per month (Castro 2010: 5). The Sudanese pound at the time was a relatively strong petrocurrency, and at the official rate of exchange, that came to about 48 US dollars per person per month, or 1.60 US dollars per person per day.[5] In 2009, the survey estimated that on average, households spent about two-thirds of their income on food and between a fifth and a third of their incomes on bread or grain (CBS 2010: 29). Wheat and sorghum prices across the country varied around 1 Sudanese pound per kilo (FEWS NET 2015, 16, 20).

One dollar sixty a day were the good days, and they came to an end after the collapse of Sudan's petro-economy, which began in 2011. The next poverty survey, in 2014-15, reduced the number of poor people by the trick of lowering the poverty line. Readjusting the 2014-15 results to the 2009 poverty line, 61.1 percent of the population were poor (MOFEP 2021: 25).

By 2019, Sudan had the fourth highest rate of child malnutrition in the world: almost three million children under five were acutely malnourished and half a million severely so. Food security surveys that year suggested that many households in agrarian provinces maintained minimum food consumption levels at home only by spending their savings, cutting down on health spending, selling their last cow, their land or other productive assets, and taking children out of school (WFP 2019: 7). The children of

4 In 2021, 'stressed' levels of food insecurity meant that households could afford minimally adequate food consumption, but their ability to afford non-food expenditures was under stress. 'Crisis' and 'emergency' levels of food insecurity meant households had high or very high acute malnutrition or were only able to meet minimum food needs by 'selling the farm' – depleting assets essential to their livelihoods. The next national survey was due in February 2022 and has not reported.

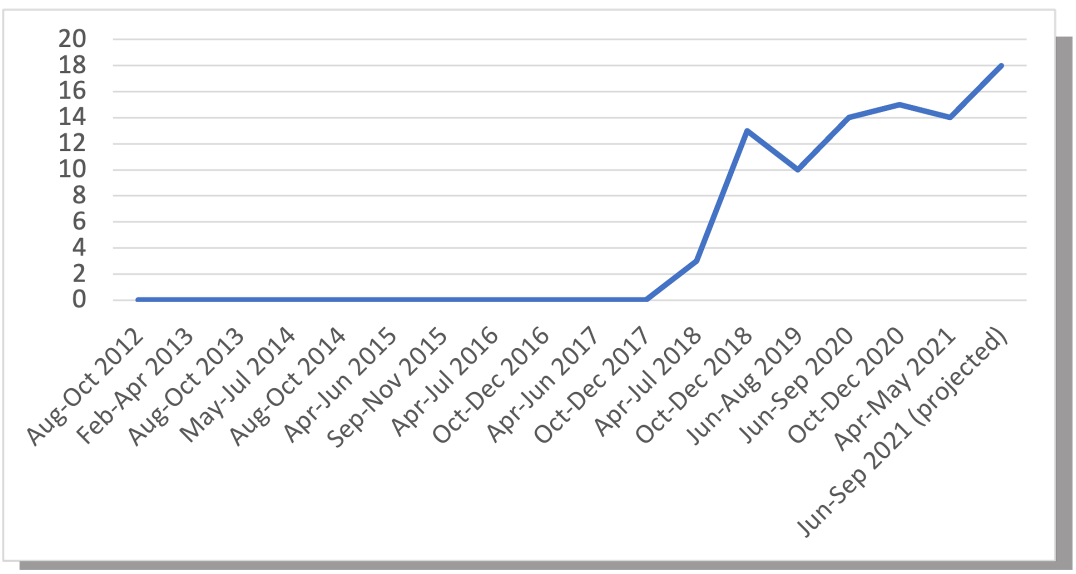
5 International poverty line comparisons sometimes use 'purchasing power parity' conversion rates. These rates retrospectively compare the cost of a basket of basic goods in rich countries with the cost of a similar basket in a poor country, and in the process, they sharply and controversially reduce rates of poverty prevalence.

displaced families were most at risk (FSIN 2019: 171).

Food security surveys indicated that hunger was spreading, its trajectory accelerated by the impacts of Covid-19. The May 2021 food security survey identified the hungriest of Sudan's 124 localities. Many were centers of rural production. In Jubayt al-Ma'adin, a mining settlement in the Red Sea hills, 40 percent of households endured crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. In Gereida, a millet and groundnuts zone in South Darfur, 45 percent of households endured crisis/emergency levels. In Central Gedaref—in the state which produces a fifth of the country's sorghum—a quarter of households endured crisis/emergency levels. Food insecurity in the capital was higher than the national average, and in the poorest parts of the national capital a fifth of the population were enduring crisis levels of food insecurity (IPC 2021: 16-19).

Urban hunger can topple governments (Hossain and Scott-Villiers 2017). The 2014-15 poverty survey revealed that urban poverty was sharply increasing. The proportion of the urban population below the poverty line almost doubled, from 25.3 percent to 48.8 percent, between 2009 and 2014-15 (MOFEP 2021: 25). Rural poverty rates were higher—but urban poverty was a bigger threat to the government. Crisis rates of hunger did not reach Khartoum until 2018, when the first revolutionary demonstrations began.

Figure 1: Percentage of Khartoum enduring crisis levels of food insecurity (IPC data)



Urban and rural Sudan have different diets. The cities eat imported wheat bread, and nearly all of the countryside eats millet and sorghum porridge and pancakes.[6] These different diets are more than just a matter of taste. Urban and rural food crises have different causes and different repercussions, which in turn determine different national and international responses. Urban food security is largely impervious to the climatic, environmental, social and military shocks that disrupt rural livelihoods. Conversely, a balance of payments crisis aggravates urban hunger but does not necessarily aggravate rural hunger. The government can manage rural food insecurity through its militias and displacement camps, along with international food aid. Urban hunger has a different repertoire of protest and can trigger a political crisis.

6 The principal exception is the far north, along the river Nile, where winter wheat is grown.

The Political Economy of Hunger: Five Drivers

The enduring drivers of the political economy food insecurity in Sudan can be grouped under five headings.

- ***Inefficient semi-mechanized commercial farms****:* Sudan has undergone a long and violent agrarian transition which is replacing household-based agricultural production with large semi-mechanized commercial farms, most of them based in the river-irrigated and rainfed lands in the center of the country. Commercial farms—apart from those on prized river-irrigated land—are less productive than household farms. These farms serve the interests of the well-connected traders and officials who license them from the government, but day-farmers are hungry. Gedaref, the state which produces a fifth of Sudan's sorghum, has higher than average rates of hunger (FAO 2021a: 24; IPC 2021: 27).

- ***Rural workers subsidize urban consumers****:* Until 2021, Sudan used its scarce foreign currency to subsidize wheat imports. Wheat is the preferred cereal of urban Sudan, but most of it is imported—about a quarter of the wheat consumed in 2021 was produced domestically, as a vanity-crop using up precious irrigated lands (FAO 2021b: 38). Sudan's imports are mostly financed by rural farmers, herders and miners, many of them living in hunger, and this food/hunger system sets the interests of rural producers and urban consumers at odds. In the decade to 2020, wheat accounted for about a tenth of total imports by US dollar value (CBOS FTSD). In the past year, the government has all but ended direct subsidies on the import and sale of wheat and fuel, increasing inflation and urban hunger in the process. This 'subsidy reform' does not address the big rural-to-urban subsidy.

- ***Wars of pillage and starvation****:* In Sudan's long wars, commanders used famine to force people off their lands, liquidate their assets, sell their labor for starvation wages, buy off the political leaders of their traumatized communities, and control food aid and displacement camps. Sudan's agrarian transition is enmeshed in these insurgencies and counter-insurgencies, which helped create a hungry, landless rural workforce for commercial agriculture, and a hungry, informal urban workforce dependent on subsidized wheat. These processes have set urban and rural food/hunger systems at odds, and shaped different urban and rural systems of repression. Urban security forces use public order laws to terrorize and extort wealth from informal workers; and rural militias manage surplus extraction and social control through armed violence in the rural peripheries.

- ***Drought, flood and pandemics****:* Sudan is subject to climatic and environmental shocks, some of them exogenous, some of them accentuated by anthropogenic degradation. Droughts contributed to famines in 1984 and 1990, and increasingly volatile rainfall patterns (associated with climate crisis) accentuate food availability shortages. Floods, also accentuated by climate crisis, have become more common and more severe. The Covid-19 pandemic caused far-reaching economic disruption and distress in Sudan, with the country unable to marshal the needed domestic and international resources to meet essential needs. The interplay between these external shocks and the entrenched hierarchies of status in the country's political economy, reinforced by the cruel logic of the political marketplace, decides who goes hungry and who does not.

- ***Macro-economic crises***: Sudan's brief oil boom punctuated a series of economic crises, each of which led to a calamitous collapse in the food entitlements of the poor while also subjecting the country to the logic of the political marketplace. These are the food security crises that afflict urban consumers. The marketization of politics began in the 1970s, when President Gaafar Nimeiri borrowed from Gulf states and western donors to finance development projects, and used the money to buy up and trade off political constituencies, leaving Sudan deeply exposed to both the Sahel drought and the African debt crisis of the 1980s. Next, in the 1990s, the Islamist government of President Omar al-Bashir adopted harsh austerity measures and instrumentalized the macroeconomic crisis to drive established businesses to bankruptcy. This smoothed the Islamist takeover of the economy, structuring the political marketplace and food entitlements around the Islamist movement. In 2011, Sudan's oil decade ended, the secession of the south led to the loss of most of its oil reserves, and GDP and government revenue contracted sharply—leading after several years to a multi-dimensional economic and food crisis (de Waal 2019: 4-5). The biggest macro-economic shock of all is the current crisis, combining the painful adjustments initiated by the Hamdok government, the collapse in international assistance occasioned by the October coup, and the global food crisis in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Sudan's macro-economic crises: post-oil traumatic adjustment and the new gold economy

When South Sudan seceded from Sudan in 2011, the country lost a third of its territory, a fifth of its population and most of its oil reserves. The trauma of adjustment brought war to both countries, and revolution and counter-revolution to Sudan.

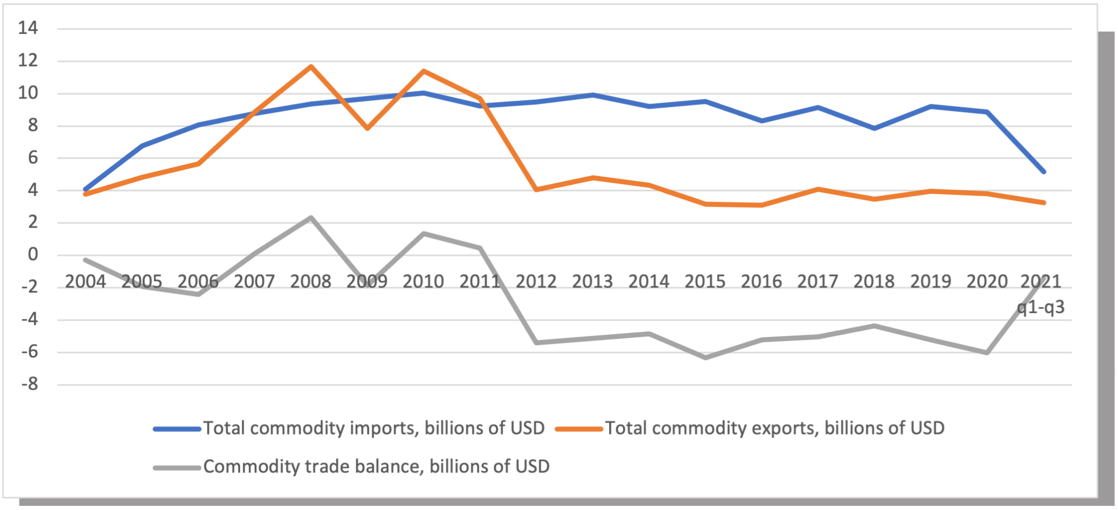
During the oil years before 2011, oil sales had provided 90 percent of Sudan's hard currency. The country's production function was turning oil, extracted mostly from southern Sudan, into the political budget for the regime (spent on patronage and the vast security sector) and on imports and subsidies for core constituencies around Khartoum and major cities. Prior to secession, the IMF estimated Sudan's short-term (three year) finance gap at just over US$10 billion. Sudan and South Sudan agreed to cover this shortfall in three ways: austerity measures, international assistance, and a transitional arrangement by which South Sudan paid about US$3 billion to Sudan for the loss of its oil revenues. None happened. The regime postponed any austerity measures for as long as it could because it anticipated (correctly) the explosive political ramifications.

International donors provided none of the promised new debt relief or assistance, partly because the US was not prepared to lift sanctions on Sudan. And the dispute over transitional financial arrangements with South Sudan soon led to war. South Sudan baulked at the payments, Sudan stole South Sudanese oil in response, and South Sudan shut down oil production and in 2012, after some provocations, started a war which shut down Sudan's main oilfield, a few miles from the border. Oil production restarted in 2013, but prices had fallen, and compensation payments tailed off (ICG 2021).

The end of oil meant that Sudan faced a serious balance of payments problem and to find a new production function. During the oil years, commodity imports had risen dramatically.[7] Those imports could not, however, be cut back to pre-oil levels without political pain.

7 Service imports and exports—mostly international transport services—are much smaller and not reported here

Figure 2: Commodity imports and exports and commodity trade balance in current US dollars, 2000-2021, Central Bank of Sudan Foreign Trade Statistical Digest, 2001-2020, Economic and Financial Statistics 2021, third quarter. Figures for 2020 are adjusted, for 2021 provisional.

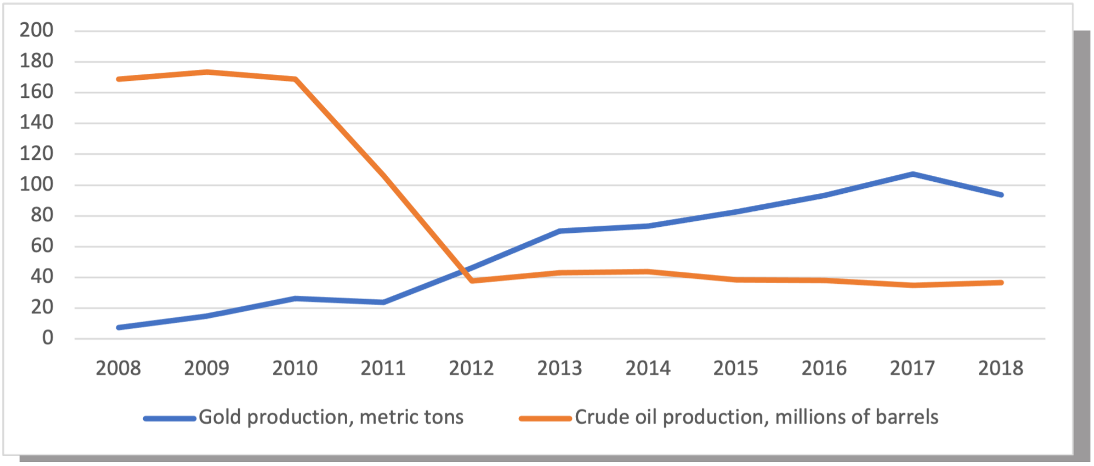


Sudan's territory, population and domestic production contracted massively in 2011. But the trade balance barely registered a change. In 2013, the government of al-Bashir shot hundreds of protestors in the streets, as part of an attempt to impose cutbacks on the national import bill for wheat and fuel—and imports increased slightly. Despite the subsidy reduction programs of the time, the imports bill stayed very close its plateau. Intractable interests were clustered around the import economy, and Sudan's commodity trade balance only began to narrow in 2020, as a result of economic reforms which brought unprecedented levels of inflation and hunger, and weakened the hand of civilians in the government in the run-up to the October 2021 coup.

The balance of payments crisis required a reworking of the relationship between Sudan's peripheries and its center. Although Sudan's GDP is dominated by the services sector—mostly the trade, transport and financial services which are centered on the capital, export earnings are dominated by a few commodities, nearly all of them produced by rural farmers, herders and miners (CBOS FTSD 2018: 126). Export earnings—foreign currency—are mostly spent on the security sector and the consumption needs of the capital and a handful of cities around it. Sudan's post-oil production was organized around taking gold, livestock, sesame and groundnuts from the outer and inner peripheries and exporting them, using the gains to fund urban consumption and to pay the political elites clustered around the crony system. Reorganizing Sudan's foreign exchange around the gold, crops and livestock of the periphery required new security systems and transformed the geography of hunger.

The government had to turn the country's military governance apparatus inside out to control gold rather than oil. In 2007, oil made up 90 percent of exports by dollar value, and the balance of payments was in the black for the first time. The government controlled the oil resources of the outer periphery by controlling a pipeline with a small force of oil police. In 2012, gold made up almost two thirds of exports, and the government needed a completely different security system to control gold flows.

Figure 3: Gold and oil production before and after the secession of South Sudan (US Geological Survey)



Rather than using regular security forces, the government repurposed rural counter-insurgency militias, which had emerged in the 1980s and 1990s to extract peripheral resources and control peripheral populations without any investment in social services or development. The old 'native administration' in the peripheries was a cheap system of local government, and so too the government's militia strategy was counter-insurgency on the cheap. Colonial states in Sudan based their control over rural Sudan on a kind of militarized tribalism—turning kinship or livelihood groups into practitioners of state violence. It updated this practice during the Darfur wars of the early twenty-first century, using the Janjaweed as a counter-insurgency force. Militarized tribalism is now mercenarized too: militia commanders are also businessmen, smugglers and guns for hire to whoever will pay. The most politically, commercially and militarily astute commander in Darfur was Mohamed Hamdan Dagolo, known as 'Hemedti', whose brigade was formalized as the Rapid Support Force (RSF) in 2013.

The RSF was tasked with both suppressing rebellion and controlling Darfur's gold fields. It rented out its forces to fight in Yemen and with shadowy support from European states, deployed along the Libyan border to terrify refugees. In 2019 Hemedti was powerful enough to join in the political assassination of his former patron, President al-Bashir.

Artisanal gold is easy to smuggle. That is especially the case for gold from mines near international borders, such as those in North Darfur. One way of minimizing smuggling is to employ the smugglers as border guards themselves, but this has obvious drawbacks in terms of loss of central control.

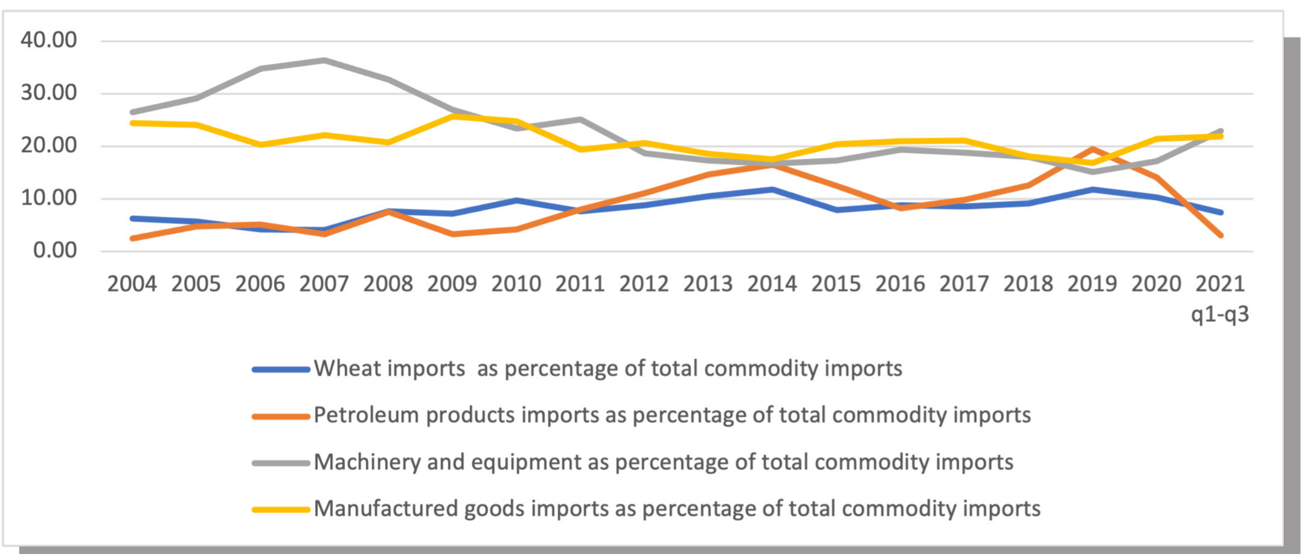
The government decided on another strategy: to pay above market rates in local currency, incentivizing sales to the official purchasing authority. This entails printing money, which is what Sudan did. The Central Bank of Sudan became the sole purchasing agent for gold which it exchanged for banknotes hot off the press. The predictable result was inflation (Elbadawi and Suliman 2018). The salariat and those dependent on Sudanese pounds for their wages saw their real incomes fall through the floor. The militiamen with gold in their pockets and the crony capitalists who had become accustomed to the shadow economy through decades of sanctions, and who therefore were adept at currency arbitrage and offshore dealings, prospered. Inflation was a massive forced transfer of wealth to this small group. It brought millions in the cities and the inner peripheries to the point where they simply couldn't afford to buy bread.

This is the macroeconomic dynamic that drove a crisis in the urban food supply in 2018-19. During the oil years the NCP had built up a constituency in the inner periphery based on material gains. The inflationary strategy impoverished this group: real wages were going down and employment was contracting. Meanwhile, the balance of payments crisis led to a reduction in wheat imports, so that urban bakeries were running short. These urban groups were not, on the whole, sufficiently impoverished to register as food insecure according to the criteria used by WFP and the IPC, but the political impact of their distress was more profound. The uprising began in towns such as Atbara, Damazin and Gedaref, spreading quickly to the capital (el Gizouli 2019a; 2019b). The immediate spark was a shortage of bread and continuing rises in prices of other essentials. From the start its slogans targeted kleptocracy and its symbol was bread (Guibert 2019).

Agrarian Capitalism Redux

Sudan's food/hunger system sets the interests of rural and urban Sudanese at odds with each other. Livestock, crops and gold are taken from the countryside and turned into dollars which are spent on commodities that are mostly consumed in the cities. Fuel and wheat imports are the most vital for the daily functioning of Sudanese cities, and in the run-up to the 2019 revolution, fuel and wheat imports amounted to almost a third of all commodity imports by value. Together with manufactured goods and machinery, they made up an average of 61.7 percent of total imports by value in the period from 2004 to 2020—when economic reforms began to change the structure of Sudanese trade (see below).

Figure 4: Major line items in Sudan's commodity import bill between 2004 and 2021 (quarters 1-3). Central Bank of Sudan, Foreign Trade Statistical Digest, 2004-2020, Economic and Financial Statistics 2021, third quarter)



In 2011, at the end of Sudan's oil decade, the government tried to make gold a substitute for oil. But the gold sector—which began to grow dramatically in the run-up to 2011—never matched the contribution of crops, livestock and forest goods (henceforward 'agriculture') to the trade balance.

Figure 5: Percentage contribution of different commodities to total commodity exports in current US dollars, 2012-19 average (Central Bank of Sudan, Foreign Trade Statistical Digest, 2012-2019)

Commodity categories	Percentage of total commodity exports, 2012-19
Gold and other minerals	31.4
Crude oil and petroleum products	22.8
Crops	20.4
Livestock and animal products	19.3
Forest goods (gum arabic)	2.7
Others	3.4

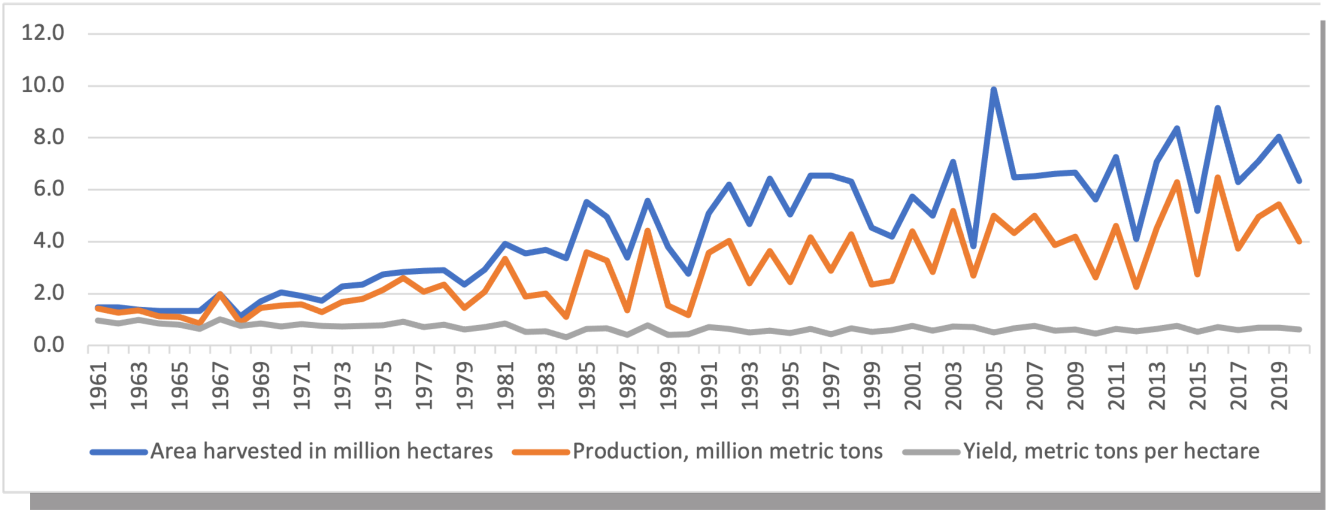
The increase in these exports was dizzying: the value of crop exports (in current US dollars) rose by almost six-fold in the decade to 2019, and the value of livestock exports rose more than three-fold (CBOS FTSD 2010-2019). Sudan's commercial agricultural sector responds with alacrity to signals from international markets. But much of Sudan's agriculture is inefficient, inequitable and ecologically unsustainable. It is this system which has been underwriting the financing and structure of the country's political marketplace.

Sudan's agrarian transition began in the colonial era and intensified in the first decades of independence. In the 1960s and '70s, successive governments allied with businessmen who wanted to grow grain for local consumption and export, part of a regional 'breadbasket' strategy that was intended to ensure a sustainable financial basis for the state. Throughout the rich rainlands between the Nile and the Ethiopian border, millions of hectares of rich clay soil were handed out to well-connected traders and officials who used them to produce sorghum commercially. In the 1980s, when commercial agriculture was no longer attracting foreign investment or generating tax revenue, Sudan's agro-capitalists and their bureaucratic allies oversaw a massive and largely unregulated expansion of mechanized farms across Eastern Sudan, Kordofan and Blue Nile. Sudan's second civil war, which began in 1983, facilitated the expropriation of land from the household farms and displaced farmers to squatter camps around cities or commercial farms (D'Silva and Elbadawi 1988; Simpson 1991; Abdelkarim 1992).

Expropriated land was leased out to commercial farmers: cheap land and cheapened labor brought windfall profits. Lease owners had privileged access to bank credit and foreign exchange, ostensibly for investing in agriculture (many commercial farmers divert this capital to more profitable trading activities). The market rewards brokers and intermediaries but punishes commercial farmers who do not exploit the land to the maximum for the few seasons in which large yields can be expected.

Commercial farming is inefficient as well as ecologically damaging. Big commercial farmers use tractors to plow the land, but weeding and harvesting is done by daily laborers, many of them former smallholders. When farmers are separated from their smallholdings and pushed to work on commercial farms, their productivity tends to decline . In the five years to 2020, average sorghum yields in the 'traditional' or smallholder sector (0.57 tons per hectare) outstripped average yields in the commercialized 'semi-mechanized' or commercial sector (0.51 tons per hectare). By international standards, these yields are low: the US produces 4 tons of sorghum per hectare; Mexico produces 3 tons per hectare, and Nigeria and India produce 1 ton per hectare. Over the past sixty years, sorghum yields have declined by almost a half. Commercial investment is not just disconnected from equity and ecological sustainability—it has contributed to a collapse in productivity. It has only managed to increase production by endlessly expanding the area under cultivation.

Figure 6: Sorghum in Sudan: area harvested, production and yield, 1961-2020 (FAO 2020a: 34; FAO 2020b



Sudan is among the world's top ten producers of sorghum and millet, and although it has an expensive wheat deficit, it produces about as much sorghum and millet as it consumes (FAO 2021b: 38). But cereal production is now dominated by 'traditional' or household farms. The inefficient commercial production system now provides less than half of the country's sorghum, and almost none of its millet. For the politicians who were trying to finance the post-2011 transition from an oil economy the country's vast grainlands offered little promise. Declining sorghum yields meant that the biggest part of the agriculture sector did not repay investment and would do little for the balance of payments crisis. There were a few lucrative crops: sesame, cotton and gum Arabic were the biggest earners in 2019, and sugar, although not a significant export earner, was a vital strategic crop in a country where sugar lies at the center of social gatherings, and people take four teaspoons in their tea.

Some companies made handsome profits from these crops. These companies included the big conglomerates with roots in the colonial era—when the system of hungry farm workers and easy profits began--as well as the new trading class with links to the Islamist movement and the security services. But although these merchants can generate big profits, they have not used their funds or influence to support a political system that might constrain arbitrary power and depredation. Their preference for cheap labor, land grabs and political connections has hindered Sudan's development and contributed to food insecurity.

Sudan's profit-making is still based on grabbing wealth where it can be found. So, when the government needed money fast, it leveraged its land assets. Its need was foreign currency, not Sudanese pounds. So, it desperately sought foreign investment. Many of the investors were sovereign funds from the Gulf and the Levant. Their investment took off during a huge spike in global food prices which began in 2007 and caused a stampede of investment from arid food-deficit countries like Jordan and Saudi Arabia to Africa in general and Sudan in particular (Cotula 2013: 57-60).

In some ways, it was a rerun of the Arab 'Breadbasket Strategy' of the 1970s, when Gulf cash surpluses were poured into agricultural development in Sudan. But there were key differences. Lands were leased directly to the investors, along with water supplies from the Nile and from desert aquifers. Many schemes grew fodder, which was then transported to the Gulf to feed cows (whose milk was sometimes reimported into Sudan). The leases brought some people easy money. But the results of this experiment in fossil-fuel agriculture were mixed: projects failed to execute budgets or mobilize workers. The strategy wasn't designed for food security—that was an occasionally-invoked cover—and it did not deliver food security.

The corruption and short cuts—the political market rationale for the strategy—were self-defeating. Qatar leased 250,000 hectares of agricultural land near Sennar on the Sudanese Blue Nile. But relatively little of the land was developed, partly because local officials demanded bribes, and partly because local resistance to the lease threatened disruption and reputational damage (McSparren et al. 2015: 120). An internal review by the Qatari government concluded 'land-based investments in food-insecure countries with weak governance and infrastructural deficits do little to manage supply side risks.' (quoted in Stoll 2015: 132). Sudan's agricultural model deters investors but keeps political resources circulating through its political marketplace. Sudan has the land and water resources to feed its entire population—but instead, its food/hunger system has become part of a deep and persistent macro-economic crisis that is a logical product of the strategy for regime survival under the rules of the political market.

Hunger and Revolution

Al-Bashir's government needed foreign currency to maintain his political budget—most of it spent on his security forces and their commercial partners, both linked to the Islamist movement. But he also needed foreign currency to pay for imports of food, fuel and other goods which are primarily consumed in the cities. In 2011, when Sudan lost its oil revenues, it could no longer afford al-Bashir's political spending and its import bill. By 2019, food and fuel imports outstripped other major imports, but the overall commodity import bill—US$ 9 billion—had hardly changed in a decade. Too many interests were clustered around the import trade, and the government could not readily reduce it.

Nor could the government access conventional sources of foreign exchange to finance its trade deficit. It was deep in debt, under sanctions and on terror lists. Instead of borrowing, it ramped up export production of crops, livestock, and gold. But the gold economy required the central bank to print local currency to pay above-market rates for gold, raising inflation, undermining the currency, and skewing monetary policy in favor of militiamen with gold in their pockets, and against urban consumers who depended on imports for food and fuel. When these urban consumers were benefiting from the oil boom, they acquiesced in al-Bashir's authoritarian system. But in the run-up to the 2019 revolution, al-Bashir had to choose between the greed of the elite and the needs of the street—he chose to secure the political budget, much of which went to the men running the security-commercial complex. In due course, the political bill came through: he was toppled by his alienated urban constituency in April 2019, and the security chiefs took over.

The transitional civilian-military government set up in August 2019 gave the security forces (and their commercial arms) the opportunity to hand responsibility for Sudan's economic predicament to a civilian-led cabinet whose legitimacy was tied to the street protests. But PM Hamdok had few financial resources with which to tackle inflation and currency devaluation. His policy options were constrained by politically-embedded commercial interests at home, the huge debts run up by previous regimes, and an inflexible and slow international assistance regime that punishes responsibly-minded governments for the sins of their reckless predecessors. Nonetheless, his government developed a package of reform and austerity measures aimed at reducing deficits and increasing the flow of foreign currency. The reforms had the enthusiastic support of the international financial institutions and their shareholders.

Eliminating Sudan's consumer subsidies was a key element of the reforms. On paper, wheat and fuel subsidies amounted to much of the government's budget deficit and the balance-of-trade deficit. In 2019, wheat subsidies were estimated to cost the government 1 percent of GDP, and fuel subsidies 11 percent—paid in scarce foreign currency (IMF 2021: 27). Getting rid of these subsidies was a condition of debt relief—and debt relief meant that the government could mobilize loans and grants from its creditors to finance its balance-of-trade and budget deficits. Loans and grants in foreign currency could, in turn, be used to 'stabilize' the exchange rate—adjusting the value of the Sudanese currency sharply downwards so that it traded at market rates. Currency devaluation and subsidy removal are highly inflationary—but the new loans and grants could be used to help pay for a one-off, six-fold public sector wage increase and a Family Support Program, which gave a cash transfer equivalent to US$ 5 per person to 80 percent of households in the country.

Targeted social interventions require a level of bureaucratic penetration of society that Sudan lacks—the very ferocity of Sudan's security apparatus is sign that the government has few other ways to exert its influence.

The cash transfer program had its roots in programs run by the Zakat Chamber, a key institution which emerged during Sudan's Islamist turn. Zakat is an alms-tax which is one of the five pillars of Islam, but in Sudan it became a way of outsourcing taxation and welfare to a body controlled by the Islamist ruling party. It was a mechanism for channeling very small transfers to social groups most devastated by Sudan's austerity decades. Initially, this aid was in-kind, but the government came to value cash transfers because they allowed for greater surveillance of the poorest groups in society, and they aligned the government with the international fashion for 'targeted' or means-tested welfare, and against the unfashionable principle of universal provision, which in countries like Sudan only existed in the form of food subsidies. The shift to cash transfers was a clumsy reworking of the social contract which required bureaucratic penetration of the poorest groups that was probably beyond the government's capacity.

The security-commercial complex probably costs Sudan a lot more than the fuel and wheat subsidies. But the civilian-led government never mustered the authority to reduce the huge transfer of resources to the military and security forces—which were in any case backed by security-minded regional powers with a preference for transactional politics, who played a significant role in Sudan's transition. However, the civilian leadership could use its international legitimacy and its appetite for economic reform to broker access to foreign exchange which Sudan's people—and its political marketplace—needed to survive. The civilians may have calculated that this brokerage role would be a counterweight to the enormous coercive and economic power of the military.

Two main factors undermined the macro-economic stabilization plan. First was the inflationary and social impact of subsidy removal. In the year to December 2019, the IMF estimated inflation at 57 percent; in December 2020, it was 269 percent, and in the course of 2021, annualized rates rose to over 400 percent. Second, the government's plans to reallocate social spending away from subsidies to public sector wage rises and cash transfers targeted at poorer households were over-ambitious. Targeted social interventions require a level of bureaucratic penetration of society that Sudan lacks—the very ferocity of Sudan's security apparatus is sign that the government has few other ways to exert its influence. By September 2021, only one million households in twelve of the wealthier states had received one or more payments from the Family Support Program. In conflict-affected areas of poorer states, about 4-6 million families received a few kilos of grain from aid agencies. The cash transfer program was largely funded by international donors, and it was all but abandoned after the October 2021 coup.

Most Sudanese people were managing the crisis with no help from the state and the reforms had a devastating effect on purchasing power. In December 2021, year-on-year inflation stood at 318 percent, down from a July peak of 423 percent. December is the harvest period, when food prices dip, and core inflation (excluding food prices) was still increasing: 443 percent in the year to December 2021 (Reuters 2021, 2022a). Wheat, the imported urban staple, trebled in price in the year to September 2021 (FEWS 2021b). Sorghum prices rose more slowly, because sorghum is not imported—but in the main sorghum-producing state, Gedaref, prices rose by 977 percent in August 2021, partly as a result of road closures which were probably part of a destabilization campaign organized by anti-civilian/pro-coup elements of the coalition government (Reuters 2021). The dip in inflation rates continued into 2022: in February, the inflation rate stood at 258 percent (CBOS ER February 2022: 4). It is not much of a decline: Sudan, along with Venezuela and Lebanon, have the highest rates in the world. Sudan's rate is moderating not because its currency is strengthening and its imports are getting cheaper, but because demand is collapsing and hunger is spreading.

The removal of subsidies led to inflation which was not adequately mitigated by the cash transfer program, and the whole program did not stabilize the currency. At the start of 2021, Sudanese pounds traded officially at 55 to the US dollar. In February that year, when the government adopted market rates, the pound traded at 375 to the dollar, and in February 2022, it reached 440 to the dollar at the bank and 495 to the dollar on parallel markets (IMF 2021: 8, Reuters 2022b). It is depreciating fast (Radio France International 2022). The gap between bank and parallel market rates is a sign that the government's currency stabilization goals have become harder to attain. Currency stabilization is at the heart of the reforms—it is supposed to allow Sudan to borrow money from local or international capital markets rather than printing it, which will make it easier in future to finance its budgetary and balance of payments deficits. Continuing devaluation of the currency will keep imported food, particularly wheat, at high prices, and may even turn people away from wheat. One of the key achievements of the reforms is to address the balance of payments deficit: figures 2 and 4 show that the deficit has decreased significantly, reducing Sudan's foreign exchange needs. But these reductions have been achieved by reducing wheat and fuel imports, increasing the pressure on urban consumers. Whether the country can manage with significantly less wheat and fuel is an open question.

Sudan's currency crisis was not supposed to be solved just by belt-tightening. Macroeconomic reforms were supposed to lead to debt forgiveness and more international loans, grants, investments and formal remittance transfers, giving the government a wider range of financial tools in a crisis, and enabling it to manage inflation and deficits better—and smooth food imports. But international loans and grants have not been forthcoming. The flow of grants and loans in 2020 was weak, and remittances also fell (MOFEP 2021: 10). In the first three quarters of 2021, the central bank reported that grants and loans fell to 80 million US dollars, about a quarter of the 2020 total (CBOS EFSR 2021q4: 14).

Donors were distracted by the global pandemic, and they also pushed responsibility for the crisis towards regional powers, who had their own agendas in Sudan. These powers –Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—see Sudan as a territory within their security perimeter that should not pose any threat to their political interests. Their natural allies and preferred clients are military leaders and their mode of operation is transactional politics with those military chiefs, using money and guns.

When the security elements of the transitional government organized a coup against the civilians, in October 2021, these regional powers kept silent or called for restraint.

October 2021: The counter-revolution culminates in a coup

Sudan's macroeconomic reforms were implemented by a fraught alliance of civilians, security men and former rebels, which was unstable from the start and fell apart at the end of 2021. Although the different elements of the coalition disagreed on many things, they all agreed on the imperative of currency and subsidy reform, the country's macroeconomic situation was unsustainable, and because other key reforms, like the nationalization of the military-owned enterprises and captive markets, were politically impossible.

In August 2019, the security forces had agreed to share power with the Forces of Freedom and Change, a group of professional associations and political parties broadly backed by the decentralized neighborhood resistance committees which led the 2018-19 revolution. Civilian technocrats with doctorates and careers in international development joined the cabinet along with security ministers nominated by the military. In February 2021, many of these civilians were dismissed a new cabinet was appointed, filled with faces from the armed groups which had signed the October 2020 Juba Agreement on Peace in Sudan, along with political parties that dominated Sudan's twentieth-century parliamentary regimes.

Hamdok remained the prime minister, but his cabinet now included representatives of the insurgent movements of the rural periphery. Al-Bashir's government had tribalized and militarized the interconnected societies of the periphery in order to extract resources and impose control cheaply. In the process, his government reshaped both rural governance and rural resistance around the command structures of 'tribal' militias –movements starkly differentiated from the decentralized, civil urban protesters risking their lives for bread and freedom.

It was the command structures of these militias which pushed through the most momentously painful economic reforms. The finance minister appointed in February 2021, Gibreil Ibrahim, came from a small but capable provincial armed group, the Justice and Equality Movement. He had enigmatic connections with Sudan's Islamist movement, and despite decades in opposition, he was an identifiable player in armed political marketplace which was the foundation of al-Bashir's Islamist regime. He and his party had little chance of winning a significant share of power in any electoral contest, and his limited constituency had not mobilized for the civic revolution. But they could become indispensable actors in Sudan's political arena under the normal routine of bargaining over power and position. Gibreil implemented the draconian austerity measures over which his technocratic predecessors had hesitated.

As the austerity measures hit the population, tensions between different components of the government increased. All agreed on currency stabilization and subsidy removal, but over the course of 2021, the military used differences between the cabinet members whose constituencies lay in rural militias, and those whose constituencies lay with urban protesters to prevent the transfer of military-owned enterprises which financed military patronage systems to the control of the civilian-led ministry of finance.

The costs of maintaining military patronage systems may come to burden the soldiers themselves. Under al-Bashir, the biggest political budgets were managed centrally, even that of the RSF. But in the aftermath of the revolution, the RSF may have gained greater control over its sources of finance. It has extended its influence over the gold trade in other parts of Sudan (Sawt al-Hamish 2020). It also deepened its relationship with Sudan's main gold importer: the United Arab Emirates. Since the fall of al-Bashir, this ability to conduct semi-autonomous trade and international relations has probably increased. The October 2021 coup has made the military more dependent on the RSF—but their fragmented patronage bases may shape future rivalry (Khair 2022).

In the run-up to the October 2021 coup, Gibriel, al-Burhan and Himedti may have calculated that the enormous burden of austerity would undermine the standing of the civilian cabinet in the eyes of the constituencies that had brought it to power. Nonetheless the military staged a series of disruptions in order to sharpen the crisis and to show off their capacity to resolve them. They fanned the flames of discontent in Eastern Sudan, encouraging protesters to block the road out of Port Sudan and generate scarcities of imported goods in Khartoum. They hoarded commodities, driving up the price. They staged a paltry but well-publicized demonstration in which protesters called for military rule. Gibreil and his fellow Darfurian specialist in armed political entrepreneurship, Minni Minawi, split from the Forces of Freedom and Change and made it clear that they were comfortable with the military leadership—and especially that they were uncomfortable with the diligent efforts of the Empowerment Elimination, Anti-Corruption, and Funds Recovery Committee ('Empowerment' here refers to the former government's practice of using state resources to build up its Islamist constituency). The committee was set up to uproot the Islamist-security cartels and their businesses, which was also unearthing the corruption of the security-commercial complex that had outlasted the 2019 revolution.

Al-Burhan sacked the cabinet on 25 October 2021. Gibreil Ibrahim backed the coup and kept his job as minister of finance. Wheat had been unavailable in urban supermarkets in the weeks beforehand, but within days of the coup a new brand called 'al Rotana' appeared on the shelves, The story was similar for sugar. It was transparently a stratagem by the generals to curry favor with urban dwellers.

However, the resistance committees that had rallied under the banner 'down with the rule of thieves' were adamant that civilian government was preferable to a return to the uniformed kleptocrats and their mafia-style state and took to the streets in peaceful protests which were met by snipers and tear gas. Hamdok briefly rejoined the government after signing a political deal with the military on 21 November 2021, which was resoundingly rejected by the protestors: Hamdok resigned within six weeks.

Macroeconomic reforms have historically been associated with high levels of violence: when al-Bashir undertook more hesitant steps to remove subsidies and adjust the currency in 2012-14 and again in 2018, he met the mass demonstrations with snipers. Hamdok avoided using snipers when he pushed the price of bread out of reach, but after his October 2021 dismissal, the government once again adopted lethal violence to manage street violence.

The resistance committees which are leading the protests in Khartoum and other cities continued their struggle after Hamdok's resignation. These urban demonstrations reflect public anger at the counter-revolution and the coup, and also the severity of the declines in urban living standards since the end of the oil years. After 2011, resources were scarcer and al-Bashir's regime allocated them to its political budget. In the process, they alienated those urban workers who had managed to acquire fridges or motorcycles in the boom years, and eat better food. As the dollars needed to buy wheat bread ran out, their aspirations withered and they were left as hungry as the poor of the far peripheries, the displacement camps and the rural precariat. Street demonstrations and strikes are driven by the escalating prices of bread and by business owners laying off employees whom they can no longer pay (Radio France International 2022, Dabanga News 2022).

But it remains difficult for hungry peoples in the peripheries and those in the center to synch resistance. The protesters from the urban resistance committees have expressed their solidarity with the long-suffering marginalized people, adopting the slogan ‘we are all Darfurians!’ Some people from the peripheries—including some whose leaders have joined the government—feel that expressions of solidarity are little more than tactical—that the metropolitan revolutionaries would see to their own interests first, rather than the interests of rural Sudan, which for so long had been set at odds with urban interests. The Juba Agreement on Peace in Sudan brought many political figures from the periphery into government, bringing rural radicals into the state elite and complicating their relationships with urban revolutionaries. But the nature and intensity of hunger and state violence in Khartoum may change that. It used to be a truism of Sudanese governance that cities had to be fed even when the countryside starved—and that urban resistance could be managed with surveillance and discreet torture centers, while rural resistance was routinely managed with massacres, militia rapes and starvation crimes. This dual social contract is breaking down: the snipers in Khartoum often come from the ‘tribal’ rural militias which ran the counter-insurgency campaigns in Darfur, and food insecurity in the capital is increasing towards the level of those in the far peripheries. Lethal state violence, and state-organized hunger is now at home in the capital city, and old center-periphery distinctions are breaking down.

For now, the government’s security apparatus appears more capable of working across Sudan’s rural-urban divide than do the resistance committees. But there is trouble ahead. The fragmented patronage networks of the different security forces may turn rivalrous, especially as the money runs low. International funds—vital to the government’s macroeconomic reforms—have been suspended. The government may have to finance its operations again by printing money to buy gold. It is likely to seek cash in hand from regional powers, its heartless patrons—and although these powers offered carefully-worded expressions of support for the coup leaders in October 2021, they do not seem to have transferred funds to the Central Bank, as they did in the past. These patrons are not likely to relieve Sudan of its historical debt burden. The agonies of austerity endured by Sudan’s hungry population were supposed to restore the country’s international creditworthiness, and attract grants, loans and investments in foreign currency, giving it a wider range of financial options to manage its deep, structural budget and trade deficits. The reward for debt relief is more debt, and in the best cases, less frequent and less devastating macroeconomic crises. As long as debt and international disfavor remains, the Khartoum government will be forced to hustle for loans conditional on political favors, or to offer discounted leases on its precious irrigated lands. This will perpetuate the macroeconomic crisis—reproducing an even sharper version of the tensions which led to the fall of al-Bashir.

The global wheat crisis in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has intensified this crisis. In 2020, the Central Bank reported that Sudan had spent USD 916 million on wheat and flour imports, 79 percent of which came from Russia and 2 percent from Ukraine (CBOS FTSD 2020q4). In February-March this year, international wheat prices almost doubled, from USD 6 per bushel to over USD 11 per bushel—a level not seen since the food crisis of 2010/11. Although prices have since subsided somewhat, countries such as Sudan locked into existing contracts that cannot now be fulfilled will find it difficult to secure new suppliers. This price shock will likely push wheat beyond the budgets of all but the most affluent consumers. In the longer term this may spell the end of urban Sudan’s addiction to imported wheat, but if so, that will come at a desperate human cost for the millions who have come to depend upon it.

Conclusions

Sudan's political marketplace is an entrenched system of transactional politics from which the country's rulers seem either unwilling or unable to escape. The logic of political survival in such a system compels the political elite to prioritize the operation of transactional politics over everything else, including the food security of tens of millions of citizens, macro-economic stability and indeed the institutional viability of the state itself. When there is a conflict between the functionality of the political market and the viability of the economy and state, the logic of the political market wins.

The Sudanese political market emerged historically from a hyper-extractive political economy based on the unsustainable exploitation of the country's soils, forests and people. Built on an imperial original sin of slavery and a colonial legacy of exploiting land and labor alongside using mercenarized tribalism as an instrument of peripheral governance, that system generated a socio-economic compact that provided a limited constituency of privileged consumers—urban dwellers, civil servants and soldiers—with subsidized commodities including wheat bread and fuel.

Successive governments have either had no interest in reforming either of these two features or have failed to do so, because of the failure to build a political coalition strong enough and backed by sufficient resources to enact radical reforms. The opportunities of Sudan's short-lived oil bonanza were squandered, serving principally to intensify the urban consumers' addiction to subsidized imports, fund some massive infrastructural projects that provided lucrative kickbacks for those in power, and allow a bloated political budget in which men with guns could demand inflated prices for their loyalty. This thorough-going marketization of politics means that the possibilities of structural reform with a view to social and ecological sustainability, including food security, are hostage to short-term political interests as calculated by the inexorable laws of supply and demand for quanta of political power.

Sudan is run by men who are comfortable with the logic of the political marketplace and whose goal is to make it work in their favor, and in accordance with the interests of their patrons in the Middle East.

Two linked pathologies in the political economy—rapacious agrarian capitalism and an unsustainable commitment to subsidized urban consumption—generate chronic and structural poverty and hunger. The demands on national leaders for political survival according to the political marketplace logic mean that they have been unable to escape from these traps.

Over the past five years, as the national economic crisis has inexorably deepened, successive governments have been forced to take measures that rework the geography of hunger and refashion the tools of lethal repression. Sudan is run by men who are comfortable with the logic of the political marketplace and whose goal is to make it work in their favor, and in accordance with the interests of their patrons in the Middle East. For now, they are succeeding in that modest goal, apparently unaware of or indifferent to the pyrrhic nature of that victory. For they have no plan for resolving Sudan's national crises, and indeed for them it is but a footnote that millions should face hunger.

The violent governance of the far peripheries, punctuated by large scale faminogenic counter-insurgencies, generates another pattern of food crises, marked by intermittent severe starvation crimes and a general pattern of destroying livelihoods for the purposes of punishing communities deemed to support rebellion and allowing militiamen to enrich themselves through pillage. Peripheral politics has become an arena for a subordinate form of the political marketplace to become entrenched, with government, militia and rebels all following the same rulebook. Counter-insurgency starvation also brings political benefit to the regime: by reducing resistant populations to beggary, political business managers can rent acquiescence more cheaply. A similar calculus whereby extreme austerity will undermine the democratic opposition more than it weakens the regime may be in play today.

These cruel tensions are unresolved. The logic of the political market came, in extremis, to contradict and undermine the socio-economic compact that underpinned the state itself. This brought down the al-Bashir regime without creating the material conditions that would make for a viable successor. In 2022, as Sudan's macroeconomic crisis deepens and food insecurity becomes the norm across both cities and rural areas, that conundrum remains unresolved.

The Sudanese civilian revolutionaries aspired to escape from the political marketplace and drew up their plans accordingly. But their escape route was strewn with obstacles. The August 2019 Constitutional Declaration allowed the civilians to take office but not to wield real power. The Juba Agreement on Peace in Sudan followed by the February 2021 cabinet reshuffle confirmed that transactional politics remained dominant even with civilians nominally in power. The politics of austerity distanced civilian leaders from their key urban constituencies. The October coup, followed by the modest concessions made by the army in November to create a pretense of continuity from the Constitutional Declaration, made it clear that political business was continuing as usual. As 2022 dawned even that flimsy façade fell away.

Almost three years after the 2019 revolution, the civilian revolutionaries' plan for a new kind of politics has not succeeded. Imprisoned by the short-term logic of the political market, both democratic transition and the kinds of structural transformations that could end chronic hunger and occasional famine, are again postponed. The urban protestors, many of them famished teenagers, have for now been pushed back towards a terrifying strategy of public self-sacrifice. Historical precedent suggests that they will find it very hard to link their struggles to those of the hungry countryside. Nonetheless, the resistance to repression and kleptocracy is learning a brutal lesson in what is and what is not possible under the diktat of the political market. As rural and urban experiences of hunger and violence align, the powerbrokers' political budgets run low, and imported wheat becomes wholly unaffordable, new forms of resistance to Sudan's kleptocratic politics will surely emerge.

We hope that this paper may be a modest contribution for Sudan's democrats to understand their predicament and thereby resolve it.

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