



The Struggle to Transform Sudan

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Abstract

On October 25, 2021, the military in Sudan staged a coup that reversed and continues to stall the revolutionary process launched by the Sudanese people in 2019. As daily demonstrations against the coup and military rule continue across Sudan, the military's position in Sudan is simultaneously reinforced by its control over the economic sectors and the support it receives from foreign capital and diplomacy. Unlike the previous uprisings in Sudan, the 2019 uprising has been followed by a mass refusal to *negotiate, partner, or compromise* with the military. As the people continue to demonstrate this refusal, the military sustains itself through its grip on the economy, and the explicit and implicit support it receives from its international allies, including the 'Friends of Sudan'.

Introduction

After four months of coordinated demonstrations began in Sudan, in April 2019, 30-year-incumbent Omar al-Bashir was removed from power, and within eight months the military conceded to negotiate with civilian forces. The military's effort to hold on to power after Bashir's removal was short lived as popular demands and organization led to a transitional government made up of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and a coalition of civilian groups, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). On October 25, 2021, however, the military staged a coup that reversed and continues to stall the revolutionary process launched by the Sudanese people. As daily demonstrations against the coup and military rule continue across Sudan, the military's position in Sudan is simultaneously reinforced by its control over the economic sectors and the support it receives from foreign capital and diplomacy.

The October coup has created a stalemate between forces that want to transform the politics and economy of Sudan and those that seek to maintain the status quo. The 2018/19 uprising resulted in substantial changes including the removal of a 30-year incumbent military regime, establishment of a transitional constitution and government, and the repeal of oppressive² laws. After the removal of the previous regime (2019) and before October 25, 2021 at least two important structural changes affecting the politics and economy of Sudan were taking place: 1) there were bottom-up local elections happening

²Laws penalizing apostasy and legalizing Female Genital Cutting (FTC) were abolished.

in localities³, and 2) the Regime Dismantlement Committee⁴ (RDC) – “a domestic anti-corruption and asset recovery group composed of representatives from civilian political parties, the military, and intelligence services” (Cartier, Kahan, and Zuki, 2022). The latter had seized about 126 companies owned by the military regime and its allies. With the upcoming turnover of the leadership of the interim Sovereignty Council to civilians in February 2022, the March 17 military divestment agreement (Sayigh, 2021), and the overdue formation of the Transitional Legislative Council, the military’s role in politics was coming to an end.⁵

The October 25 coup demonstrated the unwillingness of the military to relinquish power to civilians who sought to transform politics and the economy. Additionally, the various forms of support the coup regime received from different foreign actors exhibited the interest of these actors to preserve the political and economic system in Sudan as is. The coup resulted in the removal of most of the civilians in the Transitional Sovereign Council, the abolishment of new institutions (including the Committee to Dismantle the Former Regime), and ensured assets owned by SAF and RSF were not threatened. In its attempts to rollback political and economic transformations, the security apparatus in Sudan remains a counterrevolutionary force threatening democratic changes. To illustrate this point, this paper will reflect on the role of the security apparatus (with a focus on the military) in Sudan, why it is being contested, and who is contesting it over who is supporting it. Sudan has a remarkable history of organizing and 2019 was the third time (since independence in 1956) the Sudanese people mobilized to remove an oppressive military regime. But unlike the previous uprisings⁶, since 2019, the people⁷ have also clearly refused military rule or a military-led transition. As the people continue to demonstrate this refusal, the military sustains itself through its grip on the economy, and the explicit and implicit support it receives from its international allies, including the Quad⁸ and the Friends of Sudan.⁹

Brief Overview of Security Apparatus

Militarism in Sudan intensified under the previous regime and continues to do so under military rule. In Sudan, political Islam (Amin, 2007) has often been used as a justification for increased militarism. Increased militarism serves as a precondition to reproduce the status quo in Sudan, and in the process, it has led to the proliferation of violence, militias,

3 Beginning in each block, neighborhood, and administrative unit (which then make up localities) there were neighborhood- mobilized and informed elections happening in parts of Greater Khartoum to get representatives from the popular uprising into localities. This process was interrupted by 1) the FFC wanting to assign handpicked people to the positions, 2) the Ministry of Local Government passing a law giving the Mayor authority to assign locality executives, and 3) the October 25 Coup.

4 “The RDC issued more than five hundred decisions while it was active, seizing corporate and real estate assets from Bashir affiliates, removing individuals from public employment, and dissolving state-run non-profit organizations” (Cartier, Kahan, & Zuki, 2022: 7).

5 The agreement between the TMC and FFC, which was renegotiated multiple times since its signing, was a road map to a transition period of 3 years and 3 months. It would be led by a military member for the first 21 months and a civilian member for the following 18 months.

6 In 1964 and 1985, Sudan’s democratic leaps and demands were cut short due to military intervention and role in politics after popular uprisings.

7 Reference to “the people” in this work, is a reference to the multicultural, multilingual, and multigendered working people and youth in Sudan that remain involved in the struggle for a better Sudan. The demonstrations since 2019 have been maintained through grassroots organization, coalition building, the role of the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA), and the coordination of public and private sectors under informal networks. Various forces including professionals, civil/political society, armed groups, political parties, and youth and women’s groups, individually and collectively, exerted pressure on the 30-year-old regime. Over the last three years, some groups have dealt with internally and externally caused rifts, with some leading to splits in organizations. This has meant there is a faction of civilians close to power, which are willing to negotiate with the military. Nonetheless, the grassroots and majority elements of the uprising, organized under labor groups, Resistance Committees, and locally-embedded organizations, continue to refuse military role in politics.

8 The ‘quad’ is reference to the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, whereas the ‘troika’ represents Norway, United States, and United Kingdom.

9 Members of the group that refer to themselves as ‘Friends of Sudan’ include Canada, France, Germany, Italy, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States of America.

and military units, and the encroachment, if not domination, of the military in Sudan's political, social, and economic sectors. After Jafaar Nimeri's regime's (1969 - 1985) alliance with Islamists, the role¹⁰ of political Islam in the military increased, but the Islamization of the security apparatus increased in unprecedented ways after Omar al-Bashir's¹¹ Inqaz¹² regime took power in 1989. El-Battahani's (2016b) analysis shows how the 1980s and 1990s class alliance of elites in the Muslim Brotherhood¹³ and military officers informed the evolution of the security apparatus (142-145).

The rise of a patriarchal Islamist military elite¹⁴ (the status quo) alongside Islamization and Arabization policies not only provides insight into what is being challenged in 21st century Sudan¹⁵, but also explains why women are at the forefront of this challenge. Between 1991 and 2000, the regime passed laws and decrees, collectively referred to as the public order regime. The three sets of laws (Muslim family law, public order laws, and labor laws) have been related to the oppressive and exploitative experiences of women in the Middle East and North Africa region (Tønnessen, 2019). In Sudan, scholars have argued these laws were directed at controlling women and enforcing the regime's ideology (Abbas, 2015). The regime established police departments and judicial courts to enforce public order laws and police women's "moral corruption." In Khartoum, the Public Order Police (POP) were created to enforce the laws, and in each neighborhood, the POP had their own police force and court system (ARC, 2018: 55).

Multiple reports have shown how the Public Order Police arrested and penalized women for arbitrary violations of Islamic law (ARC, 2018: 62). Women working in precarious and/or labor-intensive jobs suffered the most from the public order regime (SIHA Network, 2020). In addition, to gendering space and labor, the laws prohibited alcohol consumption and criminalized certain forms of trade. Because of the nature of their work, laws restricting women's mobility, public presence, and labor, affected most the women whose livelihood depended on their ability to work late and in various public settings, including the streets (SIHA Network, 2015). These women not only lost their family incomes and means of sustenance, as a result of the public order regime, but they suffered most from the systems and structures built to uphold them. Ali (2015) writes how "[l]iquor brewers and sex workers suffered flogging, fines, or imprisonment" (Ali, 2015: 57). The state and its security apparatus, thus, deployed political Islam to define morality and womanhood, and become its violent enforcers.

Similarly, the concept of *al-sha'b al-muqātil* (fighting people) and *jihad* were used as the bedrock for the military doctrine and as justification of organizing "tribal militias" (*marahil*)¹⁶ and paramilitary forces like the Popular Defense Forces (PDF). The Popular Defense Forces (PDF) were officially legitimized by the state during the democratic transitional period (1985 - 1989) but were better organized after 1989. The PDF have been implicated in modern day slavery, ethnic genocides, and mass displacements supported by

10 Islamization of the military under Nimeri increased with the Special Organization, which supervised and managed military training of civilians among the Ikhwan (Muslim Brothers) in schools, universities, and neighborhoods.

11 Similar to the colonial governance system that blatantly placed political and military force at the head of the governance structure, Omar al-Bashir had "appointed himself head of state, prime minister, defense minister, and commander-in-chief of the armed forces" (Salmon, 2007: 14). Bashir's position exemplifies the convergence of politics and economy under military rule.

12 Islamization of the military also occurred through the termination of middle and top-ranking officers that were not part of the Islamist core.

13 The 1989 military coup brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power under the National Islamic Front (NIF), which would be re-founded as the National Congress Party (NCP). With Omar al-Bashir at the helm, the NCP stayed in power for 30 years until the 2019 uprising.

14 After the October 2021 coup, the military brought back Islamist elites associated to the previous regime. See Hoffmann, 2022. Amgad Fareid Eltayeb writes that "Islamist influence is once again visible throughout the public administration, especially in the prosecutor's office, the foreign service, the police and, above all, the judiciary. Since the coup, court decisions have handed over many previously confiscated assets to the Islamists."

15 The chants in the streets since the 2019 protests opposed patriarchy, Islamization, and Arabization, and instead embraced Sudan's diverse, matriarchal, and African realities: "the discourse of this generation is generally embracing diversity, equal citizenship, anti-racism, and the other demands of the revolution" (Arman, 2019: 1).

16 Spelled *murahileen* in plural form (Lobban, 2001).

the state (Lobban, 2001). As easily mobile and ‘informal’ units, the PDF became forces central to the reproduction of violence in peripheral regions:

[D]escribed as a force of mujahideen (fighters of the holy war), the PDF [had] continued to exist as a military and civilian network to mobilize militia auxiliaries throughout Sudan; it currently has active units in Darfur and the Transitional Areas. The PDF has been a primary instrument militarizing local grievances in the government’s policies of divide and rule (Salmon, 2007: 8).

Another “tribal militia,” the Janjaweed, would not only work in the same vein, but they were upgraded to Border Guards, before becoming the now famed¹⁷, Rapid Support Forces (RSF) (El-Battahani, 2016a). The Janjaweed officially became the RSF in 2013, to become a ‘regular force,’ with some units stationed in Khartoum to quell ongoing popular protests in the city (Langlois, 2022). The RSF was initially under the command of the National Intelligence Security Services (NISS)¹⁸, whose leaders were appointed by the president, to which the body was accountable (Elhashmi, 2017).

Currently, the Sudanese military is said to be made up of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), with General Abdelfatah al-Burhan¹⁹ as commander-in-chief, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), commanded by General Mohammed Hamdan Daglo (aka Hemeti)²⁰. General al-Burhan also serves as the chair of Sudan’s Transitional Sovereign Council, whereas General Dagalo²¹ serves as the vice chair of Sudan’s Transitional Sovereign Council. The security apparatus implicated in this work, however, includes the Central Reserve Forces, the Police, and the Riot Police, which make up a militia-military-paramilitary force that continues to suppress resistance in Sudan. To illuminate the risks of militarism in Sudan, this paper will focus on the collective and primary role of these institutions: accumulation of capital and suppression of resistance.

Patterns of Accumulation

The military, i.e., the colonial British army²², emerged in Sudan as a force organized to create the necessary conditions to integrate Sudan in the imperialist chain of production. Since independence, the evolution and role of this force has had to contend with the working peoples of Sudan²³. To talk security sector reform or professionalization without interrogating the current role of the military and its impact on the lives of Sudanese people would then be futile. The endogenous evolution of colonialism, neocolonialism, and the military in Sudan (Kalpakian, 2019; Mohammed, 1980; Mohammed, 1993), the intra-class struggles shaping the security apparatus (Mahé, 2019), and the use of military units to reproduce and maintain the power structure (de Waal, 2017; Kamrava, 2013; Salmon, 2007) have been discussed elsewhere. To map militarism and understand the current

17 The title of this article “Arab Militias...” shows the shallow analysis reproduced by mainstream media, but the article here is used to show the evolution of the Janjaweed and the continued violence, which emanates from the nature of their formation (Walsh, 2022)

18 The NISS was dissolved after the 2019 uprising.

19 General Burhan is also the chair of Sudan’s Transitional Sovereign Council and leader of the October 25, 2021, coup.

20 Hemeti is also the vice chair of Sudan’s Transitional Sovereign Council.

21 Used interchangeably with Hemeti.

22 The first battalion made up of Sudanese people was raised in Egypt in 1884. After Egypt became a British protectorate in 1882, the British dismantled the army and created a new military organized across vertical class, ethnic, and regional lines: British officers would command and recruit Egyptian and Sudanese peasants (Mohammed, 1980). Due to the slave trade, which peaked during the Turco-Egyptian period, and British solicitation of the Southern Sudanese (specifically the Dinka, Shilluk and Galla), there was a large of population of Sudanese in Egypt to which the laws of conscription applied. Between 1886 and 1889 six more battalions populated by Sudanese soldiers were raised (9th to the 15th), leaving the new Egyptian army with 18 battalions. See Mohammed, (1980)

23 “Since independence in 1956, periods of military rule ran from 1958 to 1964, 1969 to 1985, and from 1989 to 2015. The SAF took over power in 1958, 1969, 1985, and 1989, and twice—in 1964 and 1985—the army took a neutral stand toward popular uprisings against the governments of the day and tipped the balance of power. The SAF have been involved in protracted civil war since the independence of Sudan in 1956, except for a short period of eleven years following the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement of 1972. Radical Islamist military officers took over in 1989 and have been in power ever since” (El-Battahani, 2016b: 135).

contestation of military power in Sudan, this section will focus on the role of the military in the economy.

In 2020, then PM Abdallah Hamdok said the military's asset ownership and control over commercial businesses and sectors from mining to agriculture is "unacceptable," as "only 18 percent of the state's resources are in the hands of the government" (as quoted in AFP, 2020). The patriarchal military Islamist elite consolidated after 1989 made profound changes to the military, and simultaneously "expanded the economic corporate business of the military" (El-Battahani, 2016b: 135). The privatization and liberalization policies of the regime, often negotiated and encouraged by international finance institutions like the IMF, were coupled with nepotistic and military patronage networks that left private and public companies under the ownership or micro-management of the state, security apparatus, and/or regime leaders and their families. Increased privatization in the 1990s and 2000s resulted in the selling of State Controlled Enterprises (SCEs), such as Sudan Airways, but often these enterprises were sold to funds and charitable organizations (non-profits) linked to or owned by the regime.

Collectively, the SAF and the RSF own a range of enterprises from flour mills and transportation hubs, to import and export companies dealing with some of Sudan's top commodities (in terms of revenue and/or quantity), such as meat, gold, and sesame. Over the last few decades, the SAF expanded its role in the economy beyond military industries²⁴ and trade, to include businesses, such as "Danfoudio (engaged in all sorts of business ventures ranging from furniture to construction); Al-Hiloul al-Mutakamila (in the business of restaurants, cafes, media); and Alaia Pharmacology (medicine and other related pharmaceutical businesses)" (El-Battahani, 2016a: 4). A recent investigative report regarding the role of the military (SAF and RSF) in the economy of Sudan identifies at least 408 State Controlled Enterprises (SCEs) directly and indirectly controlled by a network of military men, their families, and related entities (Cartier et al., 2022).

To insulate ownership and role of the military in the economy, SAF²⁵ and RSF use charitable investment funds and/or shell companies. The number of new companies registered between 1989 and 1994, allegedly equaled the number of companies registered between 1925 and 1989 (Cross, 2021). Leaked documents have shown that the RSF has been using front companies based in the UAE and Sudan to circulate capital (Dabanga, 2019b). Following the oil boom (2000 to 2011), virtual companies were created by men like Fadul Mohamed Khair²⁶ (a local shareholder in the Bank of Sudan), without tax file numbers or registration numbers. Such companies (referred to as shell companies) received funds from the Central Bank of Sudan (CBOS), which contributed to the banking crisis after 2011 (SDFG, 2018). The first few years of the oil boom saw increased foreign funds entering Sudan, which allowed the regime to consolidate power within an inner circle: "opportunities, goods and services, became virtually inaccessible to the public without the support or approval of a state official at some level" (Sidahmed, 2011: 181).

An investigative paper by the Sudan Democracy First Group (SDFG) (2018) reveals the regime consistently intervened in the banking sector to determine who gets credit and foreign currency resources, for agricultural and other investments. The newly established structures, along with the patronage system of employment and ownership, functioned to serve the interests of the regime. For instance, Omar al-Bashir's brother, Abdallah Hassan Al-Bashir, had "access to the CBOS foreign exchange department at any time, to obtain permission to transfer foreign exchange resources from the CBOS to Omdurman National Bank (ONB), in order to allow the ONB to execute/implement ministry of defense imports

24 "The Defense Industries System (DIS), which comes under the authority of the Defense Ministry, had over 200 companies in May 2020, with annual revenues of 110 billion Sudanese pounds (\$2 billion at the official exchange rate at that time). RSF companies bring the total to some 250 companies, but the RSF has also earned significant sums from hiring out troops to fight alongside Emirati- and Saudi-backed forces in Yemen (as has the SAF) and Libya. Its contribution of just over \$1 billion to the Central Bank of Sudan to support essential imports in 2019 gave a sense of the volume of the RSF's reserves." (Sayigh, 2021: 2-3).

25 Despite the earlier refusal of General Burhan to transfer commercial companies to the public (AFP, 2020), the current Finance Minister, Gibril Ibrahim, claims the transitional regime is on track to shut down or privatize numerous companies owned by the military (Wahba, 2022).

26 In 2018, the NISS arrested him, which led to senior officials, mostly foreigners, in the Bank of Sudan leaving the country.

from abroad by issuing letters of credit” (SDFG, 2018: 26-27). Today, Omdurman National Bank (ONB) is the largest financial institution in Sudan, and more than 80 percent of its shares is currently owned by several corporations that can be traced to the SAF. Similarly, 20 to 50 percent ownership of the companies that are shareholders of the Al-Khaleej bank, founded in 2013, can also be traced to Hemeti and his family (Cartier et al., 2022).

The dominant involvement of the security apparatus in the Sudanese economy creates varied pathways for accumulation and capital outflow as it creates the necessary conditions for foreign capital. Ownership of companies by SAF and RSF provide the security apparatus with a level of control over basic necessities and services (e.g., flour and transportation), high-value commodities (e.g., gold and sesame), and capital influx and circulation (e.g., banking and financial sector). Press reports also indicate that companies owned by the military are “exempt from paying tax and operate in total opacity” (AFP, 2020). In 2019, the RSF was known to have an account in the National Bank of Abu Dhabi (now part of First Abu Dhabi Bank).

Ownership of banks and correspondent international banking relationships, such as Al-Khaleej’s relations in the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United States, U.K., Turkey, and Italy²⁷, means that SAF and RSF can access foreign currency and conduct illicit transfers²⁸ with minimal oversight. The unaccounted circulation of capital and access to foreign currency is not facilitated just by banks, but other military owned companies and their relations abroad. For instance, Zadna International Company for Investment Ltd., “an agricultural and construction conglomerate” owned by SAF, has import-export relations with US company Valmont Industries (Cartier et al., 2022). In 2020, Valmont representatives met with coup leader General al-Burhan. Despite continued and at times simultaneous workers strikes of different sectors across Sudan (Dabanga, 2022c), the military’s foreign contacts keep them afloat.

After the independence of South Sudan, in 2011, the state lost much of its revenue as most of the oil fields were in South Sudan. The security apparatus, particularly SAF and its rank and file, felt the loss as salaries, other provisions, and constructions projects were highly affected (El-Battahani, 2016b). The loss of oil revenue was also felt by foreign allies whose role²⁹ in Sudan’s oil economy was central. This turned the state’s attention to exploring oil in the North, intensifying gold mining, and leasing out more land to international investors. Highlighting the cruciality of Sudan in the international market, in 2012, Sudan accounted for nearly 2 per cent of the world’s gold production. The fact that 85 to 90 percent of gold output in Sudan comes from artisanal mines – with an estimated 50,000 artisanal workers just in River Nile and Red Sea states (Elhashmi, 2017) – illuminates how underdevelopment and accumulation on a world scale are integral to the global capitalist supply chains, with global capital being, at best, indifferent to desires for more meaningful social development.

Reports from the Central Bank of Sudan (CBOS) show that in 2016 and 2017, gold occupied the largest share of export commodities and was the most valuable export (in dollars). Attempts to gain control of regions endowed with gold, such as the struggle between militias commanded by Hemeti and Musa Hilal³⁰ in Jebel Amir, North Darfur, has led to the arming of militias and cycles of violence (Global Witness, 2019; Perry, 2018). A report by the Sudan Democracy First Group shows how the NISS, in cooperation with

27 “About Al Khaleej Bank: Shareholders.” Al Khaleej Bank website, accessed 30 May 2022, <https://alkhaleejbank.com/alkhaleej/about/#Shareholders>.

28 “According to Sudanese newspaper Al Rakoba, SFSSAF issued a circular contesting allegations by Salah Manaa, a member of RDC leadership, that Zadna was a vehicle for military money-laundering.” (Cartier, Kahan, & Zukin, 2021: 21)

29 Sudan’s oil production was aided by and profited numerous foreign private and state investments: “Britain’s Rolls Royce supplied diesel engines and technical support to the GNPOC, both vital to oil operations... Weir Pumps Ltd. Of Glasgow, Scotland... supplied pumps and drivers vital for the pipeline... [and] also provided operational support for the pipeline and trained Malaysian and Sudanese mechanical engineers in Scotland. One-third of the pipeline was supplied by European consortium, Europipie, which is owned by British, French, and German firms” (Beny, 2015: 240).

30 Musa Hilal was also a leader of militia groups in Darfur that were often used by the state. Unlike Hemeti, Hilal was imprisoned before getting pardoned two years ago. The extent of exploitation by Hilal’s forces was also intense: “it is estimated that Hilal and his armed followers make \$54 million a year from their control of the gold mines” and the territories around the gold mines. “It remains to be seen how many health facilities the state, as a tax collector, has established in Jebel Amir.” (Elhashmi, 2017: 5, 26)

the RSF and other militia forces, controlled the gold sector in Sudan, as opposed to the Ministry of Minerals or the Central Bank of Sudan (CBOS). After armed conflicts, Eljunaid³¹ Co., owned by Hemeti and his family, took full control of the gold mines in Jebel Amir (North Darfur). Eljunaid is now reported to be working in mining areas outside Darfur, including South Kordofan and northern Sudan. A Reuters report found that by 2017 Hemeti and his militia forces smuggled millions of dollars' worth of gold to the UAE: “[t]he documents, covering a four-week period from the end of last year [2018], show Al Gunade sent around \$30 million of gold bars to Dubai, around a ton in weight” (Abdelaziz et al., 2019). Much of the gold from Sudan goes through the UAE³², but many actors, including Russian capitalists and the Wagner group have been implicated in gold mining and illegal exports (Rickett, 2022).

Gold and other goods are not the only source of revenue for the military and their allies. The use of Sudanese soldiers in wars beyond their borders, is not a new phenomenon³³, but has strengthened the current military's autonomous relation with foreign powers. In 2015, a Saudi-Emirati coalition made a deal with the SAF to supply troops for their war in Yemen. A few months later, the UAE made another deal with the RSF to supply even more troops (de Waal, 2019; BBC, 2019). The military of Sudan has been supplying migrant military labor by sending Sudanese soldiers to fight wars in Chad in 2008, in General Khalifa Haftar's war in Libya (Radio Dabanga, 2020d) and for the ongoing war in Yemen (Achcar, 2019). It has been reported that RSF soldiers constitute the majority of ground troops fighting on the side of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (Tubiana, 2019). Hemeti himself has admitted³⁴ that “people ask where do we [the RSF] bring this money from? We have the salaries of our troops fighting outside [abroad] and our gold investments, money from gold, and other investments.” (as quoted in Dabanga, 2019b). Qatar, UAE, and Saudi Arabia have been subcontracting Sudanese soldiers to fight their wars and join their lower-rank military personnel (Barany, 2020). By 2017, over 500 Sudanese soldiers had already been reported as dead, and reports regarding Sudanese soldiers being refused backpay and being sent into “suicide missions” were released (Perry, 2018). Additional source of funds for the military include the millions of euros allocated by the European Union to Sudan (to curb migration to Europe), which has made its way to the RSF (Trew, 2019; Ramani, 2020).

Military revenue and state budgeting³⁵ for the military, at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of the Sudanese people, is in turn used to repress the people. The appropriation of land, looting of resources, and destruction of environments, necessary to accumulate capital (Ayers, 2010; Beny, 2015; HRW, 2012), alongside the Islamization and Arabization policies designed by the state and enforced by the security apparatus (Poggo, 2002; Salmon, 2007), have often been met with resistance and led to cycles of violence.³⁶ More recently, an investigation into the RSF found that the institution purchased a “fleet of almost one thousand Toyota pick-up trucks – easily converted into highly mobile

31 Also spelled Al Gunade.

32 Unofficial data from the UAE apparently suggests 1.7 billion worth of gold went from Sudan to the UAE in 2021 (Africa Confidential, 2022).

33 During WWII, the British raised Sudanese Defense Forces (SDF) played an important role for imperialism in Eastern and Northern Africa, and Palestine.

34 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=622192814921019>

35 The depression of the social wages of the people is furthered by exuberant military budgets funded through direct and indirect taxation. In other words, taxes and government revenue disproportionately fund the military over necessary social services. During the oil boom, military spending of SAF was the third largest amongst armies in Africa (El-Battahani, 2016b). Despite it contributing a 10 to 15 percent to the gross national product, SAF received the largest share of government expenditure (60 to 70 percent), thus “military spending [was] a drain on the economy” (El-Battahani, 2016b: 145). In 2016, 70 % of government expenditure went to the military and intelligence, as compared to 2.3 % for education and 1 % for health (Elhashmi, 2017). Areas in Darfur and Kordofan have historically been some of the least serviced regions, albeit being sources of some of Sudan's top exports, such as livestock and Gum Arabic. In 2016 alone, the RSF's budget was 3.2 billion Sudanese pounds, “32 times the budget for education and 6 times the budget for health services” (Elhashmi, 2017: 13). As Mohammed Hussein Sharfi (2014) explained, “[i]n every budget before and after secession [of South Sudan] the government allocated the largest share of oil revenues, to the security and defense sectors. These huge allocations were effectively used to maintain the current regime's political and security control” (317).

36 Recent reports show the “RSF forces also guard gold mines in Darfur and South Kordofan and have preserved control over Darfur's economic resources by destroying forty-five villages and perpetrating extra-judicial killings” (Ramani, 2020).

‘technicals’ with mounted machine guns – which have been used by the militia to suppress popular uprisings around the country for over a decade” (Dabanga, 2019b). In South Kordofan, trucks with the same descriptions were used by the RSF and other militias to suppress anti-mining protests (Dabanga, 2019a). Video footage³⁷ also shows these trucks pulling up to the sit-in in Khartoum before the Ramadan Massacre and throughout the protests in 2019 (HRW, 2019a). On June 3, 2019 – what is now remembered as the Khartoum or Ramadan Massacre – the RSF, SAF, and the Riot police, raided the sit-in in front of the military headquarters in Khartoum (El-Gizouli and Thomas, 2020). The sit-in was erected to demand the removal of Omar al-Bashir but outlived his deposition to demand civilian role in political transition. More than a hundred twenty people were killed, and many hundreds injured when the sit-in was violently disbursed. More than 70 women were also raped, and at least three committed suicide after the incident (Ali, 2019; Hassan and Kadouda, 2019; Salih and Burke, 2019). This event garnered international and regional condemnation, including the suspension of Sudan from the African Union.

The sit-in provided a glimpse of the democratic political possibilities in Sudan. Erected for 58 days, stretching for an estimated 108 hectares, the sit-in attracted people from at least nine cities across Sudan (Bahreldin, 2020). Youth, women, students, the unemployed and the professionals, and others with different religions, races, ages, ethnic groups, and genders, came together to form the sit-in. The sit-in drew so many people that security forces had to barricade roads and bridges entering Khartoum. The sit-in was transformed into a space where culture, art, and politics, by and for the people, was observed and/or practiced. There were medical facilities, public toilets, and food and drink service points organized with barricades, and security check points. There were also educational facilities, and a safe zone for women, where legal and psychological support was provided. The space was used to disseminate information and update the people on the ongoing negotiations and contestation between the people’s representatives and military groups. In this sense, the sit-in became a space to practice a mode of politics built on popular participation, shared accountability, and collective contribution. Some have referred to the sit-in as “governing without a government,” (Elnaiem, 2019: 141) which indicates why it was brutally disbursed.

After four months of nationally coordinated street protests, worker strikes, a few days of the sit-in in Khartoum, and the deaths and injuries of the young, old, [un]employed, women, and men in different regions of Sudan, the power of the political society was realized on April 11, when Bashir’s Vice President and [then] Defense Minister, General Awad Ibn Auf, announced the security forces had removed Bashir. The army also announced it would hold power until democratic elections could be held in two years. The TMC was supported by external powers, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (Jacinto, 2019); and its military men already had strong relations with countries like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States, which had been implicated in attempts to overthrow Omar al-Bashir since 2012 (Lynch, 2019). Nonetheless, demonstrators continued to organize across Sudan, because in the words of Yousef Mohamed, a banker from Omdurman, “we tried a military government, but it didn’t work for us in Sudan” (France 24, 2019).

Role of the Security Apparatus Today

Since the 2019 uprising, and particularly since the October 25 coup, the people of Sudan have been demonstrating their refusal to military rule daily. The Sudanese people’s demands, which began with *Freedom, Peace, and Justice* are now *no negotiation, no partnership, [and] no compromise* with the military. The Riot Police, Central Reserve Forces, regular Police, and officers in civilian clothing, alongside RSF and SAF, have been witnessed attacking and brutalizing demonstrators in coordinated and uncoordinated manners. These forces have been conducting arbitrary arrests and using crowd control methods (e.g. tear gas) and excessive force on often young and unarmed demonstrators. Since the October 25, 2021 coup alone, 119 people have been killed and thousands have been injured for demonstrating against the military. Despite extreme repression, and the demonstrated

37 <https://twitter.com/BBCAfrica/status/1149611779225296896?s=20>

inability of the military to lead a democratic process, external forces continue to facilitate power-sharing agreements and reinforce the role of the military in Sudan.

Beginning with the refusal of a democratic transition, the military men in Khartoum have shown they are incapable of delivering *Freedom, Peace, or Justice* in a myriad of ways. First, violence in different regions, especially West Darfur, have increased, with the military and militias being implicated in causing the violence itself (Dabanga, 2022d). Second, the military continues to release convicted officers or refuses to hold them accountable (Dabanga, 2022b). Thirdly, anti-coup and anti-military demonstrators calling for democratic political process are continuously met with brutal force. There have been multiple reports from teenage demonstrators being arbitrarily arrested and tortured (Amnesty International, 2022), and young women facing rape and abuse (Human Rights Watch, 2022a), to extreme use of violence (Human Rights Watch, 2020) and indiscriminate killings (Resistance Committee, n.d.; Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2019c). In August, the Central Committee for Sudan Doctors³⁸ denounced the decision to bury thousands of unidentified bodies without recording forensic details (Dabanga, 2022a). Despite gruesome violations of human life and dignity, external forces like the United Nations continue to legitimize the military, by not only treating it as a legal-political entity capable of democratic transition, but making incompatible political gestures, such as admitting the re-election of Sudan to serve on the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) for the period 2023-2025.

A young organizer and then spokesperson for a Resistance Committee, Dania Atbani, called the UN's effort to negotiate with the military as “extremely disrespectful” of the democratic struggle in Sudan (Kulkarni, 2022). Atbani further highlighted the double standard under which Sudanese people are being coerced to accept the political legitimacy of and negotiate with their violators:

This is something the Western countries know and understand well when it comes to their countries. But they seem to think that in Sudan, and in the Global South in general, we are not worthy of a government held accountable to the people and shall always be ruled by the power of weapons and militaries (as quoted in Kulkarni, 2022).

And despite the clear refusal of young and working people against military rule (Kulkarni, 2022), the “Friends of Sudan” call on “Sudanese authorities” to lead a democratic political process. The power-sharing agreement being brokered by Western countries and the UN, which seems to have culminated in the December 2, 2022 agreement, not only goes against the chants in the streets and among civilian groups, but also bought the coup regime time to work with Islamists in the former regime and external actors, to consolidate its power (Hoffmann, 2022). The members of the “Friends of Sudan,” and the Quad, have very different interests in Sudan, from geopolitical to trade interests³⁹, but they seem to agree on legitimizing the military's role in politics. The previous section attempted to show why the presence of force in politics is necessary to sustain the flow of capital beneficial to the elite in Sudan and their foreign allies. With the military (TMC) in power since 2019, Western states and creditors have been able to ensure the flow of capital and form of accumulation in Sudan is not interrupted through “continued implementation of IMF diktats, notably withdrawing fuel subsidies, the resurrection of junk bonds defaulted on by Sudan in the 1990s and earlier, a privatization programme of state assets, and ‘compensation’ payments for US victims of Islamic terrorism in the 1990s – without parallel compensation for Sudanese civilian victims of separate aerial strikes by the United States and Israel in the intervening period” (Cross, 2021: 68). Therefore, some members of the Friends of Sudan, such as the US and U.K., legitimize the military through public diplomacy and indirect business relations, whereas other members, such as Saudi Arabi and the UAE, do so through “military aid, as well as fresh cash, fuel and wheat injections” (Gallopín, 2020: 20).

³⁸ “In their statement, the Doctors Committee said that “the revolution, since the start in December 2018, has continuously witnessed attempts to obscure justice, and protect the perpetrators of violence and extrajudicial killings.” It demands that “in order to preserve the rights of the unidentified dead to dignity and justice, a number of measures and procedures must be taken” (as quoted in Dabanga, 2022).

³⁹ Aside from providing migrant military and low-skilled labor, the Middle East has been historically dependent on Sudan's export of livestock and grain. Sudan's exports to the UAE in 2020 amounted to \$1.86 billion (Escanollina, 2022).

The role of international forces not only legitimizes and strengthens the military, but it simultaneously undermines civilian roles in politics and the transition. This is not lost to the Sudanese people who have been rejecting foreign intervention in the political process (Bearak and Fahim, 2019). In 2020, the UAE facilitated a secret meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and General al-Burhan, without awareness of the civilian cabinet (Amin, 2020). Despite its unconstitutionality, and the undermining of civilian power with an exclusive engagement with the military, the meeting was applauded by Washington, and was followed by an invitation for General al-Burhan to visit Washington by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (Gallopín, 2020). In 2021, the UAE attempted to co-opt opposition groups [to the military], by paying money to members of Sudan Call40 (Gallopín, 2020). In 2022, countries like the U.S., on the one hand, designated the Central Police Force41 as an organization using force to suppress protest (Ramani, 2020), and on the other hand, called for civilians to negotiate with the RSF and SAF, which have been implicated in worse offenses.

Despite numerous statements condemning the violence unleashed by the security apparatus, Western countries and their collective statements42 since the 2021 coup, neither acknowledge the “coup” or the rollback it has created in democratic transition, nor used to punitive or effective measures that support the people of Sudan (Hoffmann, 2022). In a discussion of a viable political process, Amgad Fareid Eltayeb (2022), former deputy chief of staff to former civilian prime minister Abdalla Hamdok, writes,

It is not possible to reach a solution to a problem by coexisting with it. What happened on October 25, 2021, is a military coup, in which power was illegitimately seized, and without clearly defining this as the basis for the crisis, any attempt at a solution becomes just an attempt to legalize this coup, nothing more.

The support of the most recent Framework Agreement – signed by the military and one faction of the FFC43 on December 5, 2022 – by the Friends of Sudan continues to show the double speak of foreign actors that claim to support the Sudanese people. The new Framework was not only rejected by the Resistance Committees and numerous civilian actors (Amin, 2022; Dabanga, 2022e), and upheld by Hemeti and other military men, but it also abstracted reforming of security apparatus44 (Eltayeb, 2022) and differed transitional justice processes (Human Rights Watch, 2022b)45 necessary to make the military accountable. Despite the participatory process that led to transitional charters46 without the military (Alneel, 2022; Khalafallah, 2022), the Framework Agreement, was based on secret meetings and a Constitutional Charter privately drafted by the Sudan Bar Association in August.

Despite the opportunity to respect the self-organization and articulation of the Sudanese people, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and its allies, supported the latter proposal that would keep the military in politics. Despite multiple analysis of the impending failures of the agreement (Al-Karib, 2023; Eltayeb, 2022; Young, 2023), there have been some claims framing the agreement as a “victory” for Sudanese people (Bashir, 2022). Extending the transitional period under the military’s leadership has bought the military time to reconsolidate their power (Hoffmann, 2022) and create unstable conditions to claim their

40 Sudan Call made up an umbrella of political and armed opposition groups that were included in the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC).

41 “In March 2022, the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control designated the Central Police Force, a police organization that violently suppressed pro-democracy protests in late 2021 and early 2022” (Ramani, 2020).

42 <https://www.state.gov/troika-statement-on-military-takeover-in-sudan/>

43 The FFC split in 2022 into the FFC-Central Committee, which are willing to negotiate with the government, and the FFC-Radical Change, which continue to stand with Resistance Committees in refusing any partnership with the military. The new agreement was facilitated by the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and led by Western countries, despite the disagreement of many of the civilian groups that continue to demonstrate against the coup regime.

44 Amgad Fareid Eltayeb (2022), former deputy chief of staff to former civilian prime minister Abdalla Hamdok, writes that the “framework Agreement resorted to linguistic manipulation and talked about agreed-upon schedules for merging, without mentioning where these schedules are or how they will be reached and agreed upon... The agreement reduced all talk about Rapid Support to two clauses confirming its existence, independence and separate subordination to the head of state. While the agreement was detailed in the provisions related to the army and the police, and clearly stipulated that they were prevented from doing business and investment, this was ignored or even referenced in the text about rapid support force.”

45 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/13/sudan-pact-omits-key-justice-reforms>

46 The Charter for the Establishment of the People’s Authority (CEPA), as written and rewritten by the RCs in Khartoum State, and the Revolutionary Charter for People’s Power (RCPP), as written and rewritten by RCs outside of Khartoum emerged even before the Sudanese Bar Association (SBA) constitutional draft that was endorsed by Embassies of France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The RCs have outlined (and continue to work on a joint draft of) the structural and transformative forms of change necessary in Sudan.

necessary role in politics (Gavin, 2023). As this paper attempted to show the military role in politics has only been beneficial to elite men in uniform, their allies, and foreign supporters. In fact, substantial changes to the lives and livelihoods of Sudanese people, require not just an autonomous, representative, and profound democratic political process, but also a sovereign economic model (Cross, 2021), built, not on the exploitation of Sudanese people, but on delinked⁴⁷ and alternative (non-coercive) trading networks, financial systems, and payment agreements.

Conclusion

There have been discussions of how democratization can come after military rule (Geddes et al., 2014), and older discussions of whether military rule can bring stability and order in particular societies (Huntington, 1968). However, this paper shows the only stability the military has brought is regarding the brand of accumulation that unequally integrates Sudan in the global capitalist chain of production. Additionally, despite claims to support ‘civilian-led rule’ and the Sudanese people, foreign actors continue to undermine democratic transformations through explicit and tacit support for the military. The refusal of military rule and militarism by the Sudanese people is a call to restructure politics and the economy in Sudan, which has been organized to benefit foreign capital and their soldiers on the ground. The prominent role of women in rejecting the coup regime is a rejection of patriarchal oppressions manifest in the unequal organizing of politics and the economy. Above all, the refusal of military rule in Sudan, is best understood as a struggle to respect the humanity and dignity of Sudanese people, by creating an accountable governance structure and a security sector that protects the people (not subjects them to repression). Ultimately, the military in Sudan would not stand a chance against the organized Sudanese people, if not for their foreign alliances that legitimize, reinforce, and depend on its role.

⁴⁷ On delinking, see Amin, S. (1987).



Photo by author, during a protest in Al Sahafa, Khartoum, June 3, 2022. The woman is holding up a flag of a martyr (a common act during demonstrations) named Abdelsalam Keshsha who was killed by the security forces. While text is somewhat illegible, the first line appears to be "politics or politicians", the second line reads "blood"; under the picture, it reads "martyr Abdelsalam Keshsha" (Thus, we could assume the general point is that "politicians have the martyr's blood on their hands").

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