

Political Transformations in Sudan (2019-2025): Impact on Regional Relations

التحولات السياسية في السودان (2019-2025) وتأثيرها على العلاقات الإقليمية

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Abstract: This paper argues that Sudan's political transition encourages normalization with Red Sea neighbors, particularly the Historical Arab League (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan) and a second circle (Turkey, Iran, Eritrea). It challenges the idea that the 2019 ousting of President Al-Bashir aligned Sudan with Western powers, using the 1958 Revolution to highlight how domestic events shape international relations. The 2018 uprising may benefit the second group, affecting Red Sea security. Sudan must balance internal reforms with foreign alliances, as its shift from isolation could enhance regional politics. Possible outcomes for the Red Sea region are discussed.

Keywords: Sudan; Salafi-Jihadism; Islamist Movements; Revolution ; Regional Relations.

ملخص: تناقش الورقة البحثية التحولات السياسية في السودان منذ الإطاحة بنظام عمر البشير عام 2019 وتأثيرها على العلاقات الإقليمية مع دول البحر الأحمر وأفريقيا. تشير الورقة إلى أن هذه التحولات تعزز فرص التطبيع مع مجموعتين رئيسيتين: المجموعة العربية التقليدية (مصر، السعودية، الأردن) ومجموعة أخرى تضم تركيا وإيران وإريتريا. كما تتحدى الفكرة القائلة بأن هذه التحولات وضعت السودان في صف القوى الغربية، مستندة إلى ثورة 1958 لتوضيح تأثير الأحداث الداخلية على العلاقات الدولية. وتتناول الورقة التحديات التي تواجه السودان في تحقيق توازن بين الإصلاحات الداخلية والتحالفات الخارجية، مع تحليل انعكاسات هذه التحولات على الأمن الإقليمي والسياسة الاقتصادية. كلمات مفتاحية: السودان؛ الجهاد السلفي؛ الحركات الإسلامية، الثورة، العلاقات الإقليمية.

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1. Introduction

Sudan is undergoing political transformations unprecedented in the country's recent history. Discontent with governance and a deteriorating economy were some of the major drivers of civil unrest and protests against President Omar al-Bashir in December 2018. Six years earlier, mass protests were quelled decisively. This time, however, there was no turning back. Within four months in 2019, protestors orchestrated a complex overthrow of al-Bashir's regime, Arab-African Islamist governance. The military junta that initially seized power in a coup declared it would not only oversee a transition period to civilian rule but become part of it through its political wing, the Transitional Sovereignty Council, signaling the extent of the political decomposition of Bashir's National Congress Party. In this respect, the analysis of Sudanese political expansion in the Horn of Africa raises several interconnected questions. First, how and why did Sudan embark on a reform trajectory between 2019 and 2025? Second, what are the domestic impacts of these political transformations? Third, this period has become more transformative than a 'revolutionary period' as it is not just removing al-Bashir's regime from power but seeking to usher in a new political settlement underpinned by a comprehensive public and economic reform agenda. Finally, how did these domestic changes affect Sudan's regional relations? Moreover, the departure of al-Bashir and his entourage from power brought along several decades of personalized and repressive rule. In short, this essay seeks to discuss the domestic and regional policy implications of the major political changes that have taken place in Sudan since 2019, especially as mediation paved the way for a political breakthrough. It also briefly discusses Sudan's position in the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa to shed light on the importance of Sudanese politics for developments in this strategic region of the African continent. This background will also point to the high degree of uncertainty and change affecting regional dynamics, from Red Sea politics to conflict and change in the Red Sea. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative analysis. Additionally, it utilizes a historical approach to understand the historical context of political relations in Sudan and their impact on the current transformations. Moreover This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ongoing political transformations in Sudan and their impact on the region's dynamics. It also provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges and opportunities facing Sudan in its pursuit of stability and development within a changing regional environment, This research paper aims to answer the following research question : "How have the political transformations in Sudan since the ousting of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 influenced regional relations with Red Sea

countries and Africa, and what are the implications of these transformations for internal stability and the country's political and economic reforms?"

2. Background of Political Transformations in Sudan

In late 2019, some political transformations in Sudan started. The outcomes of these transformations were shaped by domestic and regional factors. Significant changes initiated in the country are a matter of concern due to their potential effects on regional relations. This paper discusses the nature of these changes. In addition, Ethiopia and the regional implications of these changes for Ethiopian interests are explored (Verjee, 2021).

Major socio-political transformations in Sudan began in late 2019. At least five distinct phases have been observed in this transformational process. The first two sets of events in this regard are:

(1) a popular act of protest that subsequently escalated to (2) a nationwide political metamorphosis. As will be discussed in the next section, these events are not new; they are deeply entrenched in the country's history of contested negotiation and political renegotiation. (Imam, 2023).

Omar al-Bashir's regime had, for months prior to the revolt, been contending with hard times that involved an assortment of socio-economic, political, and international challenges and crises; it faced competition that gradually transformed into existential threats. Domestic factors, especially political, were central to inspiring the Sudanese people to believe in change. They also inspired protest and brought about the political transformations that unfolded in the end. Indeed, the Sudanese people were motivated to rise up in opposition against the al-Bashir regime because of their economic situation, which they described in public rallies and times of civil protest as 'hardship' and 'suffocation.' Suffocation is a local metaphor used in Sudan to express a sense of extreme hardship (Richlen, 2023).

2.1 Historical Context of Sudanese Politics

Sudanese politics, comprising governance, contention for the state, violent conflicts, and societal rearrangements, are diverse in many dimensions: chronologies of political changes, territorial expanse, and historical endowments. Generally, one can discern some main political phases that shaped Sudanese politics. The present political transformations fit into this longer-term view on Sudanese mal-governance that the paper ultimately wants to debate (kueigwong, 2022).

Yet in the last century, the close neighbors intervened during colonial times. Political control is central to understanding governance in the first component of

the Khartoum regimes' governance during the first part of the time period under study. It was inherited independence in 1956. Under the rule of Ibrahim Abboud and General Gaafar Numeiri, politico-military autocrats were in power for nearly 40 years. Emerging from regions on the fringes of the Nile Valley, this military pluralist social base is historically oriented towards trades and to the liberal-democratic politics of the Nile Valley. Abboud's military coup in 1958 appointed the military to power, and three years later called into being a transitional governance system, which further resulted in some political pluralism. In 1969, Numeiri became the military general commander. His long reign of 16 years ended in a revival of political autocracy and military control, and was terminated again by a military coup d'état. This second phase successfully nested within politics a political movement of the civilians, the Ansar.

Historically active in the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium power, the Islamic-oriented Ansar political elites portrayed themselves as a Khartoum-based political movement under the name of "Umma." They purported to engage in power struggles at the center and participated consequently since with all political and military regimes. The political elite failed to maintain a broadly unified nationalistic front, and movements aimed at kin-state formation or secession also did not succeed. This historically rooted elite accommodation strategy, however, morphed over nearly six decades into a political mode of governance that was based on and run by military autocracies (Jordaan, 2019).

2.2 Pre-2019 Political Landscape

The political transformations that occurred in Sudan between 2019 and 2025 have their sources in the structures of the political regime of Omar al-Bashir. This regime was authoritarian, with the president in a position to dictate laws and rule by decree. Omar al-Bashir destabilized the state by instituting militias and paramilitary forces to ensure the longevity of his regime. Specialized security measures as well as oppressive laws were directed at keeping an iron fist over the population. This authoritarian regime knowingly employed privatization of state-owned enterprises and utilized substantial profit to arm militias who were responsible for ethnic cleansing to stay in power. The regime used repressive measures as well as rigging elections to perpetuate itself. Judicial power was in the hands of patronage and cronyism. Suppression of all forms of dissent was the norm. Extrajudicial killings went rampant (Leung & Mohd Roslan, 2021).

The economy in Sudan before 2019 functioned very poorly. With the independence of the South in 2011, almost three-quarters of oil reserves of Sudan were lost. Endemic levels of poverty plagued the country. Many regions were completely left out of government attention and services. Widespread and deep

corruption was rampant in society. The focus has been on securing the survival and integrity of handlers and their networks. External economic sanctions were important levers on the regime. The politics in Sudan after the division of the country in 2011 submitted to contentious politics, with the formation of a new opposition movement. Discontent turned into defiance when in January 2018, an opposition social media campaign agitated the Sudanese to come out and protest the country's dire economic situation.

The protests eventually turned into a general call on the president to abdicate, which forced al-Bashir to visit several cities where he tried to mobilize support for his regime. The so-called 'Rebel Letter' initiated a writing campaign demanding al-Bashir to stand down in July 2018. The Sudanese media landscape consists of print, photographic, and broadcast media – namely press, television, radio, and social media. Discussions on governance and other issues engaged the Sudanese oral medium in Sudan as well. Judging by the content of these media platforms, it becomes clear that they are not the channel by which historical facts or opinions are exchanged but a means of controlling and directing the political discourse that would shape the country's administration. In particular, radio, the most common media platform in the country, is sedentary, widening political understanding and knowledge. It easily connects sources of intelligence and sustains government ideology (Gallopini, Eddie , Sarah , & Alex , 2021).

3. Key Political Events in Sudan (2019-2025)

Sudan has seen significant political transformations since mass protests erupted in December 2018. On the surface, these were set off by the economic hardships Sudanese have had to endure for the last three decades, but this mass movement for change was quickly characterized by the aspiration of many for a more inclusive and democratic system of governance. One of the first victims of the protests was Omar al-Bashir, deposed by the military on 11 April 2019. This sparked a political process that involves a great number of internal and external actors. Since then, the country has been governed by a transitional government with civilian and military memberships. This interim period is supposed to come to an end with democratic elections in 2023 or 2024.

Since the fall of al-Bashir, there have been numerous further steps in the political transition. The role of international and regional actors in Sudan has always been an important factor. Countries close to Sudan played an active part in the fight against the previous regime, despite being considered important allies for al-Bashir. Some of these countries have strongly supported the transformative

process in Sudan, including regional financial aid to support the transitional government. Yet, international engagement in Sudan came at a price: the expectation that Sudan would make peace with the state of Israel and the effort to overcome the economic and diplomatic isolation that started with the sanctions in 1993. Sudan started the transformation process (Bereketeab, 2022).

3.1 Transition from Omar al-Bashir's Regime

The overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 represented a critical juncture in Sudanese politics. While a number of factors were involved, protests first broke out in December against the fall in food and fuel subsidies and later spread across the country calling for the removal of the president. However, the political transition that ensued in the aftermath of Bashir's fall is ill-suited to formal investigation. Its scope is transient and highly relevant to the context in which it was concluded. It therefore appears critical to examine it in considerable detail, with an eye to chronicling developments in Sudan. This is the focus of this sub-section (Kostelyanets, 2022).

After months of political struggle, in August 2019 Sudan's opposition coalition Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), which includes professionals – such as doctors, lawyers, and journalists – and the Sudanese Professionals Association, became an umbrella for all other civilian opposition movements, reaching a power-sharing agreement with the Transitional Military Council (TMC), which was then ruling the country after the ousting of Bashir. This deal between the TMC and the FFC was witnessed by the African Union and Ethiopia, and it was seen as the only way to prevent a complete collapse of the state and instead pave the way for a transition towards a more civil government. This agreement led to the subsequent issuance of a so-called constitutional declaration, which in turn provided for a formula of power sharing and a roadmap towards a series of political and institutional changes. A new government, presided over by a sovereign council and composed of civilians and military leaders in a balanced number, and a transitional parliament, were installed on 21 August 2019 (Kurtz, 2024).

The main challenge of the political transition in Sudan stems from the diversity of the social actors and the multiplicity of political views involved. Political unity in terms of demands may have been the epitome of a "weapons of the weak moment." However, after 30 years of conflict, that unity by the FFC and its supporters has given way to a period that will be dominated by the multiple micropolitics of everyday life of different societal actors that form the diverse opposition bloc. This is evident when one looks at the fragmentation that emerged within the FFC just months after the ousting of Bashir, one that boiled down to the

power play of the country's elite. For Sudan's political crisis to be truly addressed, it is pivotal that policymakers and academics alike take this complexity into consideration, and the factors I have mentioned and unpacked in this sub-section provide a slight glimpse into that complexity. That the international community has understood the complexities and the nature of Sudan's present politics as fragile demonstrates the country's uncertain future. This crisis of the politics of the proper is coined as the "crises of depoliticization" – and since this repoliticization remains minimal within Sudan, Sudan remains on the brink of intercalating into the abyss, which makes it challenging to draw the trajectory of the country in the forthcoming future (Ali & Laura , 2023).

4. Regional Relations Prior to 2019

Throughout the conflict in South Sudan, Sudan has been a key mediator and broker in the negotiations between Sudan and the Southern Sudanese government, interested in securing its borders and safeguarding its oil pipelines. Sudan contributes an astonishing 40% of the budget of the UN Mission in South Sudan, reflecting its strategic interest. However, Sudan is accused of supporting the SPLM-In-Opposition, supplying them with ammunition and logistics. Nonetheless, Omer Al Bashir has personally hosted the president of Southern Sudan, Salva Kiir, and other senior IO figures at the Shambat residence; hosted military and political meetings; and facilitated cessation negotiations and peace-making efforts. This is despite the fact that the IO and the president of Southern Sudan represent two different positions, thereby abandoning its traditional attitude of supporting the latter. No less significant are the numerous public acknowledgments by the government of the existence of proof substantiating the Sudanese army's support of the SPLM-In-Opposition (Opiyo, Crispinous , & Kennedy , 2024).

It is increasingly difficult for Sudan to feign joint, bilateral, and balanced relations with Juba in order to avoid the perception of siding with the Dinka as it continues to regard defense and the military option as essential to relations with South Sudan. This, coupled with military action by Khartoum, in line with the track policy, has led to furious international condemnations; a cut in diplomatic relations by African and Middle Eastern powers; restrictions on the possibility of the Sudanese president moving outside Africa; and an international arrest warrant issued by the ICC have all contributed to rising isolation and diplomatic pressure that carry the risk of constraining and influencing the future strategic, regional, and commercial transformation. Peace, security, reconciliation, and trust between the Sudans are essential in reducing the finance and operational requirements of

the Foreign Policy Strategy Framework adopted in 2015 and to stop the flow of negative forces in the region. These factors are also widely recognized by the Sudanese leadership, which in December 2014 embarked upon the roadmap drawn up by IGAD to stabilize South Sudan. Sudanese mediation leading to the re-adhesion by rebel groups to the peace treaty signed in August 2015, which the United Nations was obliged to regularize and transform into a new peace mission (VERHOEVEN, 2023).

4.1 Sudan's Relations with Neighboring Countries

Sudan's relations with its Arab fellow states have been deeply debated both in the literature and in practice. There has been an ongoing question regarding the loyalty of the country to its Arab heritage and the Arab world. Over the years, Sudan has had several leaderships switching its vision gradually from being part of the Arab world to being African, Arab-African, and finally being Arab-African. This endless loop by the leadership made Sudan, at some point, confusing to Sudanese themselves and then to the outside world. Following this confusion, a popular revolution erupted once more in Sudan in 2019. Since its peaceful transition from a military regime to a civilian cabinet, there have been many debates regarding the relations that Sudan would form with its neighboring countries. Most of these discussions were with respect to its relations with the Arab neighboring countries (Mquirmi, 2021).

The fundamental concerns here were regarding whether Sudan will return after years of isolation only to again join the Arab world following its new policy of naming the state as just Sudan, abolishing the Islamic penal code, and upholding secularism, or will it join the economic opportunities brought by Africa. The vast majority of writings about Sudan since 2019 highlighted the clash of interest between Sudan and Egypt over the Nile River water, Ethiopia's dam construction, the lack of unity between Sudan and South Sudan, or the disputes with Eritrea and Chad. Then, the involvement in the Yemen war, the presence of the Sudan Defense Forces in the Libya war, and even the potential of militarizing the ports on the Eritrean coast along the Red Sea as competing with the increasing Eritrean ambitions were brought to the agenda to scrutinize the future policies of Sudan (Gibson, 2023).

5. Impact of Sudanese Political Transformations on Regional Relations

Recent political transformations in Sudan have opened up substantial opportunities for the improvement of Khartoum's relations with neighbors and the regional environment in general. In 2019, the revolution in Sudan was crowned with the establishment of a power-sharing agreement between the civilian

government and the military. Still, the situation remains very delicate and complex, but the transitional political dispensation appears to be consolidating. External actors, and particularly those within Sudan's East African and Arab immediate neighborhood, are evidently recognizing these domestic shifts and responding to them in numerous ways. The civilian administration's foreign engagements largely symbolize change in Khartoum's outlook on regional relations since the reformist leadership took over.

During the recent and ongoing period of sanctions relief for Sudan, various diplomatic initiatives and high-level visits from various corners of Africa and the Arab world underscore not just an enduring interest in Khartoum as the political and administrative capital city of the Sudanese state, but also efforts to deepen and redefine engagements and alternative kinds of partnerships. In a similar respect is the growing energies and the operative designs, albeit involving various levels of risk, between some key Sudanese neighbor states including Egypt, Ethiopia, and South Sudan as Khartoum, Addis Ababa, Juba, and Cairo engage in investment projects in trade, development, energy, and infrastructure against the background of the Arab-African and African-Arab contestations. In the realm of diplomacy, defense, and security matters, this new reality plays directly into the old rivalries of the Eastern African region, which could appeal to states in the Gulf and elsewhere, who are adjusting their policies based on Yemeni and the Eastern African maritime dimensions (Verjee, 2021).

5.1 Economic and Security Implications

Sudan's transformation will impact regional relations, above all, in the economic and security realms. On one side, Sudan's current administration and potentially following governments' several officials' discourses take optimism from their new political conduct vis-à-vis the dictatorial rule. This might be used to argue that the regional powers can look favorably at possible economic partnerships and investments since the political order is gone. On the other hand, typical issues requiring security cooperation and common regional solutions exist. The political and social shocks of those two developments can worry foreign investors and pose general challenges, including the possible increase of delusional immigrant shocks, especially from impoverished Sudan (BELMADI & Hichem, 2024).

First, we analyze the economic implications of a newly engaged and democratic government. Secondly, we discuss the security problems. One must add, however, that the analysis is even more complicated. Neither the violent political struggles with the current authority nor clan fights would affect expatriate

investors. The expansion of political internal disputes in Sudan can equally, however, affect the surrounding countries and set off emigration to their coasts. For this, we have to broaden our view and also look at regional policies. Some of the states could be instinctively sympathetic to Sudan's transformation. In particular, states with wide economic ambitions could like to be the first allies of the transforming government, to promote the values of trade, investments, and cooperation. Other actors will likely develop aligned alliances or wait and see to choose the best. Some actors will be instinctively worried about the possible impact on their security and may have cooperation policies. All of the above were captured as potential regional actors in a second argument to explore the regional policies (Seid, Haile , & Ali Issa , 2021).

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, despite much enthusiasm and hope, the political future of Sudan is still uncertain. However, whether it is the military or the civilian authorities who take over and run the country, both face a variety of the same challenges, including building a welfare state, transforming the radical Islamism of the previous regime into a socially oriented one, solving the long-standing armed conflicts, and so forth. It has been suggested that a successful and quick power transfer from the military to the civilians will economically benefit everybody and will likely lead to a soft military involvement in politics for a considerable period of time. A prolonged military occupation of the civilian duties will likely draw a negative response from the populace and will economically hurt the military itself.

It is tempting to suggest that the path to a civilian-led state should be guided by the very strong international actors supporting the current regime. Some of them indeed might be interested in a quick and peaceful transition to civilian rule because it would quell the unrest in the country, support global international politics, and last but not least, attract support from the future responsible African Union, but others might be guided solely by the very same business interests that hold the military on its own.

Ultimately, while internal dynamics drove Sudan's recent transformations, achieving lasting stability necessitates addressing the impact of external actors who actively shape the regional landscape. As this analysis has demonstrated, Sudan's relationships with Red Sea neighbors who are often influenced by competing foreign agendas. Therefore, official and unofficial, covert and overt foreign interventions are the main reason for the deterioration of the situation, and there is no way to rebuild Sudan except by cutting off all ways to what comes

from outside, regardless of its source, and for Sudanese to be convinced that they must seek a Sudanese solution and not rely on foreign powers.

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