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RA Reviews' Editorial Voice: Opinions on Sudan

***Sudan's Unending Predicament:
Background to the Outbreak of a New War***

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Since its independence in 1956, Sudan has experienced a long history of civil wars in different regions of the country. One of them, between the northern government and the Southern People's Liberation Army, led to the division of the country in 2011. However, none of those wars was fought in the capital city, Khartoum. A new, devastating war broke out on 15th of April 2023; it pitched the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) that is led by general Abdel Fatah Al-Burhan against the so-called Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that is commanded by general Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti). The latter grew out of the infamous Janjaweed militias formed during the Darfur civil war that started 20 years ago. Other than previous wars that were fought along the periphery of the vast country, this war erupted in Khartoum and spread to other Sudanese cities and towns .

The conflicting parties have thus far used heavy weapons and tanks, and the SAF even took recourse to their air force in the city—causing a catastrophic humanitarian situation due to the destruction of service infrastructures such as water supply, electricity, food, and hospitals. According to the latest estimate of the Sudanese Medical Doctors Association, at least 500 people have died and more than 4.000 were injured during the fighting during the war's first three weeks. Moreover, thousands have fled the city in search of refuge.

This situation in Western Sudan's Darfur region, which has gone through a catastrophic civil war since 2003, is even more tragic due to RSF's brutality; this paramilitary group's acts have further exacerbated the situation due to previous grievances between them and the social fabric of Darfur society. For instance, in El Geneina near the border with Chad, RSF fighters burned down the camps of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) at the outskirts of the town, looted the marketplace in the city center, destroyed water and electricity infrastructures as well as the main hospital of the town and local ministries. They even tore down residential houses using artillery and other heavy weapons. Due to the chaos resulting from these barbaric attacks, about hundred civilians have lost their lives and thousands have fled to other places in Sudan or crossed the border to Chad.

For the past 18 months, the two generals who are leading the war, have been the de facto rulers of Sudan. After the military coup of October 2021, al-Burhan acted as the head of the Sovereign Council, which is the highest ruling political authority in the country, while Hemedti held the position of deputy head. Until January 2023 the two were military and political allies. They fought against the revolutionary armed struggle in Darfur for two decades, worked collaboratively in ousting the former president Umar al-Bashir from power in 2019, and were subsequently involved in forming the Sovereign Council that led the country's interim government and the process of political transition to a civilian rule.

Between February and March 2023, the two commanders were engaged in peace negotiations in South Sudan's capital Juba with the aim to incorporate the opposition parties, activists of the December 2018 revolution, and the various armed movements into the Transitional Sovereign Council (TSC) and other institutions in order to expand political participation in the framework of the interim government led by them.

What made these two forces fall out and start fighting one another? What is the historical relationship between the SAF and RSF? How did the RSF emerge and develop militarily to the extent that it was able to attack the SAF? Who are the members of this paramilitary group? In what follows, I will highlight the genealogy of the RSF and the matrix of local, regional, and global geopolitics in which the RSF evolved through time and space.

The RSF are the immediate successors of the Janjaweed militias who were mobilised in the 2000s to suppress the revolutionary armed struggle in Darfur. The westernmost region of Sudan had long suffered from underdevelopment, political and economic marginalization, insecurity, robbery of livestock, and recurrent attacks on villages by Arab militias. The two main armed movements that fought for the cause of Darfur were the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). They started their revolt against the Islamist regime of Umar al-Bashir in 2003 and pursued military operations to bring about political transformation, justice, and proper representation for the marginalized groups of Sudan in both regional and national politics.

The regime responded by waging a counter-insurgency using historical grievances within the region's ethnic groups to weaken the socio-political support of the Darfurian movements. In this tactic of divide and rule, the Islamist regime created the Janjaweed militias from the self-identified Arab nomadic groups to assist the army in their attempt to defeat the SLA and the JEM. Beside the ethnic dimension, there is also a regional element in the composition of these militias, as their leaders also recruited fighters from self-identified Arab nomadic groups in neighbouring countries such as Chad and the Central African Republic. The regime entrusted the task of recruitment and provision of arms, vehicles and other military equipment to the SAF. In 2003, president Umar al-Bashir appointed a group of army officers under the leadership of general Abdel Fatah al-Burhan to supervise the provision of weapons to the Janjaweed militias as well as their recruitment. In the following years, the army bombardment from the air and the

Janjaweed militias' attacks and atrocities on the ground led to the destruction of vast parts of Darfur and the uprooting of the local population. According to UN estimations, about 500,000 civilians were killed and another 2.5 million were displaced to either IDP camps at the outskirts of Sudanese cities or refugee camps in the neighbouring countries .

In April 2007, the International Criminal Court and the United Nations accused leaders of the Janjaweed militias as well as influential leaders of the regime including Umar al-Bashir of committing genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity in Darfur. The genocide accusations were based on the fact that those targeted by the Janjaweed were mainly from non-Arab ethnic groups, such as the Fur, the Zaghawa, and the Masalit, which also formed the basis of the armed resistance movements. In response to the rising international criticism, the government adjusted the organization and leadership of the militias to keep them under control and reduce the intensity of their barbarism. Thus, the regime formed the Border Guard Forces (BGF) incorporating the militias and putting their military operations under the supervision of the SAF. The army also provided additional military training and official uniforms, offered regular salary, organized members of the groups into different military ranks, and grouped them into bases in Darfur to introduce discipline and order.

However, the joint army and militias' military operations were unable to defeat the armed movements due to their guerrilla warfare tactics. The SLA and the JEM even expanded the insurgency to the neighbouring Kordofan region. This development provided an opportunity for the militias to deploy their forces in Kordofan as well and recruit new members. As the number of militias and their influence in the military institutions continued to grow, the Islamist regime proceeded to make another organizational rearrangement of BGF in 2013 by providing extra military training and creating the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). After this (re)creation, the regime mandated more officers from the army as well as the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) to supervise and regulate the paramilitary's operations against the armed groups.

When gold was discovered in the Darfur region during the war years, the militias quickly took control of the mining activities, and their members became heavily involved in the gold business, thus emerging as an economic power in addition to its increasing paramilitary force. The gold gave the RSF a means to buy more weapons and vehicles with the help of the SAF and provide better living conditions to its members.

Between 2013 and 2014, the European Union approached Al-Bashir's regime and other governments of North African countries to close their borders against immigrants trying to cross the Sahara Desert to the Mediterranean Sea and to Europe thereafter. Al-Bashir received millions of Euros and advanced border-controlling technologies to put an end to the immigration movement of African youth through the Sudanese border to the North. He assigned the task of border control to the RSF and provided them with European technologies and money. Thus, the RSF established military bases at the Chadian and Libyan

borders to arrest immigrants trying to cross the border and bring them back to their countries or dump them into the desert. The border patrolling process allowed the paramilitary group to establish collaborative relationships with other military organizations from the neighbouring countries, especially Chad and Libya. Thus, during the war in Libya, RSF sent its forces to assist General Khalifa Haftar of Libya in the fight against his political rivals. Patrolling also assisted the group in smuggling gold to Egypt and other countries to expand its business activities.

In 2015, Sudan's army joined the Saudi-led coalition forces who were fighting against the Iran-backed Houthi Movement in Yemen. The Sudanese infantry troops, who fought in Yemen as part of the coalition forces, were mainly from the RSF with only some commanders from the SAF whose task was to provide logistics and organize troops' movement on the ground. Due to his close relation with the RSF and his expertise in dealing with guerrilla warfare, general Abdel Fatah al-Burhan was appointed as a leading commander to the Sudanese troops in Yemen. The participation in the Yemen war enabled the Islamist regime to ease a tensioned-diplomatic-relationship with US and Israel who were part of the Saudi-led coalition.

The beginning of the end of Umar al-Bashir's government came in December 2018, when a revolution broke out demanding the fall of the Islamist regime and the restoration of democratic governance in the country. Apart from other grievances, the immediate reason for the revolution was the dire economic situation that resulted from the secession of South Sudan in 2011. The loss of this new country's oil revenue was a fatal blow to the Sudanese economy, causing high inflation and a hike in the cost of living and thus instigating a revolutionary uprising driven by the urge for political change and societal transformation. When the regime realized that they were unable to contain the revolution using brutal authoritarian measures, al-Bashir appointed general al-Burhan as Inspector General of the SAF and decided to bring the RSF to Khartoum to consolidate his power and assist other forces in cracking down on the protestors. However, eventually al-Burhan and Hemedti, the RSF commander, took sides with the revolution, allowing protestors to form a sit-in at the vicinity of the army headquarter in Khartoum in April 2019. The sit-in continued to grow as the army and RSF provided protection from police attacks culminating shortly thereafter to the ousting of al-Bashir's regime from power in the same month.

Soon after al-Bashir's fall, the two generals formed the Transitional Military Council (TMC) to serve as federal government ruling the country during a transitional period. Al-Burhan became head of the council while Hemedti became his deputy. However, demonstrations in the sit-in continued since the protestors were not content with the fall of al-Bashir but also demanded the transition to a democratic civilian government. Thus, clashes broke out between protestors in the sit-in space who demanded civilian rule and the TMC who wanted to maintain its grip on power. The RSF fighters used a brute force to attack

and disperse the demonstrators at the sit-in in Khartoum. The attack left approximately 130 civilians dead and hundreds more wounded or missing.

It was during this period that Hemedti brought many of his troops to Khartoum and other cities across Sudan. He also undertook an extensive mobilization of new recruits all over the country and tried to build his reputation as a revolutionary leader because of his role in the ousting of al-Bashir. More importantly, his forces took over all headquarters of the former ruling party, that is, the National Congress Party (NCP), and expropriated Islamist business companies and gold-mining fields to his advantage. He also took over all the bases of paramilitary groups such the Popular Defence Forces (PDF) and the Popular Security Forces (PSF), which the al-Bashir government had been using in its wars against the SPLA in southern Sudan before the separation, as well as in the Blue Nile area, the Nuba Mountains, and Darfur. The expropriation of business and properties created a conducive environment for the RSF to enhance its economic, military, and political power within a short period. Thus, his fighters received higher salaries than the regular army, which made some soldiers and officers from the SAF quit their jobs and join the RSF to augment their monthly income.

By virtue of his position as the deputy chairperson of the TMC, Hemedti was able to travel to many countries as a high-ranking Sudanese diplomat representing and setting relations with new allies. The position also allowed him to further expand his gold business and to become one of the main exporters of gold in the country. In this regard, he set gold trading relations with countries such as the United Arab Emirates. He also allegedly became involved with the Russian mercenaries known as the Wagner Group when he paid an official visit to Russia after assuming his post in the TMC. There were also allegations about Russian plans to build a military base at the Red Sea, an important strategic location in the region.

As mentioned above, the two generals, al-Burhan and Hemedti, acted as de-facto president and vice president after the ousting of al-Bashir in 2019, engaging in peace negotiations with protestors, opposition parties, and the armed movements. The negotiations eventually culminated in the formation of the Transitional Sovereign Council (TSC). As a multi-party coalitional body composed of military leaders and civil political groups such as the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change (FDFC) and activists of the December 2018 revolution, the TSC was supposed to act as Sudan's interim government. General al-Burhan served as the head of the TSC, and Hemedti acted as deputy head of the council, while its members were drawn from civilians. Furthermore, the council appointed Abdallah Hamdok to serve as prime minister during the interim period that was supposed to lead the country back to democracy. During this transitional period, civilians in the TSC began to restructure state institutions, uproot Islamists from power positions, confiscate their properties attained through corruption, and reduce the military's influence in decision-making and politics. The military members of the TSC, on the other hand, worked to become key players in Sudanese politics by negotiating with opposition parties, getting

involved in foreign conflicts such as Libya and Yemen, and setting diplomatic relations with other nations.

Due to differences in political visions, conflicts arose in the transitional government between civilians and military leaders. Whereas the civilians wanted fundamental change in governance and transition to a democratic civilian rule, the military leaders were only interested in superficial political change and mainly out to expand their power bases. As the tensions escalated, al-Burhan and Hemedti carried out a coup in October 2021 and ended the power-sharing agreement between civilians and the military factions. They deposed and detained prime minister Hamdok; the civilian members of the TSC, revolutionary activists, and leaders of the opposition parties were arrested and a state of emergency declared. After the coup, al-Burhan and Hemedti continued to hold their positions as the head and deputy head of the TSC, and they took steps towards building a new authoritarian political landscape. Al-Burhan initiated the reinstatement of members and sympathizers of the former Islamist regime, who were previously dismissed by civilian partners before the coup, and he revoked judicial orders to confiscate Islamists' properties. Hemedti, on the other hand, was sceptical about the (re)association with the Islamists, fearing that they would take revenge against him and others who sided with the revolution during the ousting of al-Bashir's regime.

This situation of mutual distrust and scepticism gave rise to tensions between the two generals. The tension further increased when the TSC initiated a peace process in Juba in early 2023 to bring civilian leaders back into the government. Participants in these negotiations proposed to integrate all paramilitary forces in the country, including the RSF, under the umbrella of the SAF to form a unified national force under one military leadership. This leadership would have a monopoly on weapons and pursue one military philosophy and objective. As neither al-Burhan nor Hemedti were willing to be subordinated and give up their vie for power and political domination, the tensions eventually came to a height in early April 2023. Faced with the question of what would happen to their political and economic empires if they were to concede to the other side, each of the two generals mobilized their respective forces until fighting erupted on the streets of Khartoum.

It is in this state of political unrest, mismanagement of governance, regional and global geo-politics that the new war erupted in Sudan. Under the camouflage of war, al-Bashir and other Islamists imprisoned for war crimes and crimes against humanity have been released from prisons. This development made opposition groups feel that the former regime is attempting to recreate itself by instrumentalizing the army. The opposition substantiates this scenario with Ahmed Harun's statement on behalf of the prisoners that the Islamists will fight with the army against the RSF.

In this burgeoning political situation, the RSF attempts rhetorically to reposition itself as pro-democracy in order to mobilize popular support to win the

war and maintain power. However, the Sudanese people do not expect a transition to democracy from neither the RSF nor the army because each tries various mechanisms to remain in power. I hope that the conflicting parties will not embark on a protracted fighting on the streets at the expense of civilians and further deteriorate the humanitarian situation.

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