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RA Reviews' Editorial Voice: Opinions on Sudan

Why Sudan's Fourth Democratic Transition Is Doomed to Failure?

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To understand the current military conflict that has been erupting in Sudan since April 15, 2023, we must first understand why Sudan's fourth democratic transition is doomed to failure. Sudan gained its independence from the British government on January 1, 1956, with a vibrant democratic transition that had lasted for two years until General Ibrahim Abboud decided, with his military junta, to seize power in a bloodless coup in November 1958. Sudan had adopted, in its first short-lived democratic transition, a multi-party system with political debates that mirrored Westminster democracy. Indeed, Sudan was then the envy of many developing nations that were neither democratic nor independent. Sudan had then also a prosperous agricultural economy with a strong local currency.

The second Sudanese democratic transition came when students at the University of Khartoum took to the streets protesting General Abboud's unpopular policy toward the civil war in South Sudan. However, the second Sudanese democratic transition was shaped by political tensions between the Sudanese communist party and traditional Muslim political parties resulting in sacking communist parliament members out of the legislative body. As a result of this, General Jaafar Nimeiry succeeded in ending Sudan's second democratic transition through a military coup on May 25, 1969, where he was initially backed by elements within the Sudanese communist party. The third democratic transition came during deteriorating economic conditions when popular uprisings swept most parts of Sudan, demanding an end to General Jaafar Nimeiry's regime on April 6, 1985.

In all these democratic transitions, the key Sudanese political parties, regardless of their ideological leanings, were somehow resilient under highly influential political leaderships. They competently managed the transfer of power from a caretaker administration to a democratically elected government within one year period. In the third democratic transition, the caretaker administration was led by the secretary-general of Sudanese Medical Association, Al-Jazuli Daf'allah, who opposed for many years the authoritarian rule of General Jaafar Nimeiry. The Transitional Military Council, under the leadership of General Abdel Rahman Swar

al-Dahab, had worked closely with Daf'allah's government to ensure that the parliamentary elections of 1986 would be held smoothly and peacefully. Unlike previous experiences, the Sudanese fourth democratic transition has occurred during a critical time when Sudanese political parties are politically weak, fragmented, and without charismatic political leaderships. A few political elites from Sudanese diaspora, without popular support, have mysteriously stolen the revolutionary spotlight after overthrowing President Al-Bashir's regime. Unlike the caretaker government of 1985, which came with a key political mandate to oversee the parliamentary elections of 1986, the caretaker government of Abdallah Hamdok did not have clear political objectives, nor agreed schedule for holding elections and transferring political power. Unlike Al-Jazuli Daf'allah, Abdallah Hamdok has been a way from Sudanese politics for more than two decades before the 2019 uprising and did not have the support of Sudanese professional associations nor the necessary political skills to navigate Sudan's complicated path toward democracy. Unfortunately, Al-Bashir's regime had undermined greatly Sudanese professional associations because of the fear that they were controlled by communist political activists. The weakness of these associations, together with the presence of fragmented political parties, opened the door for new political forces such as Sudanese elites from diaspora and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), to exert more political influence during this democratic transition. They lack strong popular support and, thus, holding earlier elections will not serve well their political interests. They have embarked on dismantling key Sudanese political and security institutions believing that such institutions still harbor elements from former Al-Bashir's regime. They have deliberately extended the duration of the caretaker government to accomplish this objective and to remain in power.

Furthermore, Al-Bashir's regime had severely weakened Sudan's military, like no other military regime in the country's modern history. Al-Bashir established RSF, under the leadership of General Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, widely known as General Hemedti, to protect himself from his own armed forces. It was a militia established along ethnic lines where its leadership is also the *de facto* head of Mehriya, an Arab tribe in Darfur. However, General Hemedti joined Sudanese army to oust Al-Bashir in 2019 when he realized that supporting the dictator was a lost cause. His appointment as vice president to General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the head of Sudanese army, has helped enhance his sweeping ambitions to restructure Sudanese political power.

Unlike RSF, the Sudanese army is certainly a modern professional institution that has always transcended the existing ethnic and regional cleavages in the country. It disagreed with Al-Bashir's decision to establish RSF and refused to include it within the structure of Sudanese armed forces. Thus, RSF has remained outside Sudanese army's control. It used to have a direct link to Al-Bashir's Republican

Palace. Although the support of the Sudanese army was always crucial to the political survival of military regimes; it has sided with protesters in all Sudanese democratic transitions when realizing that the alternative is civil war. The support of the Sudanese army, therefore, was essential not only in ending authoritarian regimes in the country, but also in maintaining peaceful democratic transition. What makes this time different is simply the presence of the RSF that does not share this political goal with the Sudanese army, making the current conflict in Khartoum, the center of Sudan's political power, inevitable. General Hemedti has enriched himself and his loyal ethnic forces, RSF, through his tight control over goldmines in the mountain of Amer in Darfur and through his participation in the Yemeni war, which has also helped connect him with such regional forces as the United Arab Emirates.

The United States is currently backing a Saudi political intervention to host representatives from the two Sudanese fighting forces with the hope to establish enduring ceasefire. It is very unlikely, however, that General Hemedti will genuinely agree to stop fighting and engage in meaningful political dialogue to bring lasting peace to Sudan. General Hemedti's external ties seem to embolden his political and military moves regardless to the death of hundreds of civilians in the country. The conflict will continue either resulting in the defeat of RSF in Khartoum or the disintegration of Sudan as we know it. In either case, the Sudanese fourth democratic transition is likely doomed to a miserable failure.

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