DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 20.07.2023 | Christine-Felice Röhrs

A highly explosive situation

The conflict in Sudan continues, threatening to spill over to other parts of the region and creating one of the fastest-growing refugee crises

It's been only three months since fighting first broke out between the Sudanese military, commanded by General Abdelfattah Burhan, and the Rapid Support Force militia (RSF), led by General Hamdan Dagalo. The first shots were heard in the capital Khartoum around 9.30 a.m. on Saturday 15 April – an hour later, there was such intense gunfire that, in central districts, residents dived under their kitchen tables or beds for safety, or stuck tape across their window panes to avoid shrapnel injuries. A conflict that started as skirmishes in the capital has now escalated, encompassing other flashpoints around the country, and there are concerns that it might also impact the wider region, as well as create huge waves of cross-border refugees.

Far-reaching consequences

In Khartoum, one of Africa's largest urban centres, ground battles and air raids continue unchecked, while millions of civilians remain in the city. Many neighbourhoods have been reduced to rubble. The airport has been largely destroyed, as have the electricity grid, the water supply and large markets. RSF fighters are using civilians as human shields, embedding themselves in residential areas and hospitals. There are regular reports of rape. RSF militia forces, with gangs following in their wake, are also looting whatever they can: private residences, embassies, government facilities or even the camps of humanitarian organisations. At least 3,000 civilians are reported to have been killed and at least 6,000 injured, though the actual numbers are likely to be far higher, given that these figures are often based on information from hospitals – which many injured civilians are unable to access.

Estimates by the International Organisation for

At the same time, the mutual destruction being wrought as the two generals battle for military supremacy has spread to other areas, including the city of El Obeid in North Kordofan and the

Migration suggest that more than three million people have been displaced in just about 12 weeks.

Darfur states to the west. The latter are where the RSF has its roots, and where violence has historically also had a component of ethnic cleansing by Arab-descended militias against African civilian tribes. This pattern is now repeating itself. From places such as El Geneina and Misterei (West Darfur), Zalingei (Central Darfur) and Nyala (South Darfur), we are hearing horrifying reports of targeted killings and forced displacement. Satellite images show charred areas where villages used to be. Some believe that the RSF is laying the ground for a kind of alternative scenario in which it would retreat to its former stronghold should the battle for the capital become too costly. That would lead to a *de facto* fragmentation of the country into military- and RSF-dominated 'princedoms' and the break-up of the Sudanese state.

One consequence of all this is a regional refugee crisis that the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)'s country director for Sudan calls one of the biggest and fastest-growing he has ever seen. In total, the latest estimates by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) suggest that more than three million people have been displaced in just about 12 weeks. More than 2.4 million of them are internally displaced, while more than 730,000 people have fled across the border to neighbouring South Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia or Egypt.

Failed attempts at mediation

So far, there is no sign of either side in the conflict gaining the upper hand. The war is not going to end any time soon, says Volker Perthes, the German head of the UN political mission Unitams, recently declared *persona non grata* by the military and refused entry to the country. The many calls from the international community, including those from the Friends of Sudan Group cofounded by Germany, for an end to the violence have thus far been ignored by the warring parties. US and UK sanctions against the structures behind both armed groups seem to have had no impact either. None of the agreed ceasefires have held, including the terms brokered in the US- and Saudi Arabia-sponsored (but now abandoned) Jeddah talks being broken.

Overall, attempts at mediation have largely been neither broadly supported nor especially coherent. An initiative by South Sudan ended

without success. Another spearheaded by Kenya in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa was boycotted by the military, which doesn't consider Kenyan President William Ruto to be neutral. A new 'summit of neighbours' initiative led by Egypt has managed to attract a remarkable number of participants, though it too is yet to yield actual results and is likely to be met with scepticism by the RSF due to Egypt's close ties to the Sudanese military.

Given the dense tribal networks that even extend beyond national borders, the conflict could certainly spread to other countries.

It is indeed a situation in which mediation is extremely difficult. Sudan's central location, its geostrategic importance as the third-largest country in Africa, with borders to seven other countries, and the interests of neighbours and regional powers in Sudan's various assets (gold, huge swathes of agricultural land along the Nile, the eastern coast) – all this has created a complex web of competing and overlapping trade relationships and security interests that require good relations with either the military or the RSF – or both – and mean many of the relevant actors are cautiously tip-toeing around each other. This impedes mediation attempts and collaboration, blurs powerdynamicsand forces supporters to work clandestinely or via proxies, where they are harder to spot.

Up to now, both Sudan's direct neighbours and regional powers such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and even Russia have endeavoured, at least publicly, not to clearly back one side over the other, fearing this might unleash a cascade of regional violence. Everyone is aware that the Horn of Africa is highly combustible. At present, this is a conflict between the two largest armed Sudanese groups and not yet a full-blown civil war, never mind a regional conflagration. However, given the dense tribal networks that even extend beyond national borders, the conflict could certainly spread to other countries if other groups in this ethnically and politically fragmented state get drawn into it. There are already signs that this is happening. The leaders of groups in Darfur (which borders Chad) have been openly considering armed resistance to protect their territories and are apparently mobilising. In the states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile near the Ethiopian border, there has already been fighting between the military and the SPLM rebel group. Abroad, according to some observers, Islamist militias are said to be getting ready to join the RSF.

Given the two generals' resolute belligerence, it's unclear what levers

could be pulled in order to end the violence. Some are calling for further sanctions, though those imposed against Omar al-Bashir, the Sudanese autocrat deposed in the revolution of 2018/2019, failed to prevent army- and RSF-dominated industries from flourishing. There is thus a need to find new approaches and to push them far more forcefully.

One ray of hope is the many youth groups that, since the 2018/2019 revolution and the military coup, have become a new locus of political influence.

Civilian political groupings, meanwhile, have been confined to the sidelines and are paid little heed by the combatants. Many have fled the country and now meet in Egypt, Kenya or Uganda instead. Shortly before the outbreak of war, there had still been hopes that the military might return power to a civilian government after its coup in 2021. Some actors are still working to achieve such a scenario, but a civilian process only stands a chance of succeeding in the face of military force if political civil society manages to overcome the fragmentation that, even in this time of crisis, still seems to beset it. This is an area in which, in addition to organising humanitarian aid, German and European diplomacy could focus its efforts.

One ray of hope is the many youth groups that, since the 2018/2019 revolution and the military coup, have become a new locus of political influence. Many of their members have also fled, representing a tragic brain drain for Sudan. Others have stayed and continue to make positive contributions, be it as individuals, in youth forums or in what are known as resistance or neighbourhood committees. By assuming administrative responsibility, the latter have stepped up where the military regime has not only been failing in its duty of care but has also actively been creating victims; local committees have thus been arranging for treatments and medications for the injured and sick and ensuring families get food and water supplies. These young Sudanese activists need continued support.



Christine-Felice Röhrs

Christine-Felice Röhrs heads the Friedrich Ebert Foundation office in Bolivia. Previously, she was head of the FES office in Sudan.