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The Sudanese revolution lives on

Despite Prime Minister Hamdok's return to power, Sudan's military coup isn't fully defeated. But the people's spirit of resistance is unbroken

A mere four weeks after the military coup in Sudan, the deposed prime minister Abdalla Hamdok has been reinstated. Under the agreement Hamdok signed with the military on 21 November he will head, he claims, a cabinet of his own choosing. Elections are also on the table again, set to be held before July 2023.

These are positive developments, and certainly the result of tough internal negotiations and immense international pressure after the coup on 25 October. But the coup has not been defeated. Its leaders remain aren't facing any repercussions. They have not been prosecuted. On the contrary, a couple of weeks ago the military reshaped the Sovereignty Council, Sudan's governing body, in its own image, and replaced what it regards as troublesome civilians from political parties and civil society. This brought the power-sharing agreement to an end that was forged after the 2019 revolution between the armed forces and civil society. Politicians and civil society will not be represented in the cabinet that Hamdok is set to put together. Instead, it will be composed of technocrats.

All in all, the coup has only deepened the country's political rifts and made it more difficult to govern. International mediators had pressed for a return to the civilian-military power-sharing agreement from 2019. The UN and other actors thus welcomed Hamdok's return. It's undoubtedly a pragmatic solution, a first step. The agreement ended an impasse that the military has already taken advantage of to remake, but also dismantle the state. And it has brought civilian voices back into political decision-making. It is also likely to have salvaged the international financing that the country urgently needs.

The Sudanese people reject the deal

Among the Sudanese population, however, the agreement has bitterly

disappointed those who previously supported or at least respected Hamdok. They include influential civil society groups, such as trade unions and professional associations, but also political parties and above all 'the street'. That includes the young Sudanese in the powerful resistance and neighbourhood committees who organise most demonstrations. In their eyes, Hamdok has legitimised the coup and betrayed the revolution. They have published vehement condemnations rejecting the agreement. If this broad civil society front insists on rejecting the new government, the cabinet would be significantly weakened.

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A week or so after the military takeover the deal might still have worked. Since then, however, there have been mass demonstrations, in which security forces used rubber bullets, tear gas, and even live rounds on civilians. At least 41 people have been killed and several hundred injured. There have been raids, arrests, and internet shutdowns lasting weeks. Trade unions and professional associations, such as the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), who were central actors in the revolution, have been banned. Security forces have arrested dozens of SPA and resistance committee members all over the country. The boards of state-owned companies have also been replaced, governors dismissed, and journalists detained. Many demonstrators left prison with bruises on their backs and legs.

The security forces' approach has strengthened the voices of those calling for a purely civilian government. They are no longer prepared to accept power sharing with the military. This is the consensus in the streets. There were more mass demonstrations on 21 November as the agreement was being signed. Many of those who gathered called for justice for the victims of the coup. They complained that the agreement does nothing more than reinstate a system that has already failed.

The streets have not been defeated

Yet, there are some hopeful signs. Civil society has not given in. Despite the deaths, internet shutdowns, raids, and arrests, people have taken to the streets again. They haven't let themselves be ground down and they

are confident in the revolution's strength. In future, it will be more difficult to beat down this revived sense of strength and desire for change, especially if young actors from the resistance committees professionalise and develop a political consciousness and programme beyond mere resistance.

The civilian side has also not yielded to military encroachments and its efforts to stack a technocratic government with its own appointees. When sounding out suitable civilians for ministerial posts and above all that of prime minister, the military has encountered one rejection after another. Without this embargo, the political compromise would not have been possible.

The deep causes behind the coup

The coup has also laid bare the weak links in civilian-military cooperation. These must be tackled – including with the help of the international community – if Sudan does not want to end up with the same predicament within months.

First, the strength of military resistance to a possible loss of power had become evident. One trigger of the coup was surely the approaching handover of the Sovereignty Council chair from the military to the civilian side. At the same time, civilians in government and other groups were calling for reform of the security sector, which would curtail the resources and influence of the military and armed groups.

On top of that came efforts to achieve more transparency in the powerful military-owned firms, as well as the widening debate on holding the military and other armed groups to account for past atrocities. At least the attempt to involve the military in a socio-political reconciliation process can no longer be postponed, to achieve some sort of transitional justice. Hitherto, however, the international community has shown little interest in urgently needed security sector reform in Sudan.

A return to civilian-military power sharing is only superficially the solution to the political crisis.

Second, the debate in the civilian-military government has radicalised. One recent cause was an attempted coup inside the military in late September, put down by the military itself. Statements and objections, reproaches and demands escalated between civilians and military for days. Eventually, conciliatory voices calling for a return to the power-sharing agreement were drowned out.

The emotionalisation of Sudanese politics should not be underestimated. Rancour, perceived slights, and personal feuds all play a role. In some speeches, military chief Burhan more or less declared that people had wanted to push the military aside. It had been derided and provoked, he alleged. Any hope of future cooperation depends on overcoming a lot of distrust. A common language has to be found for parties that could hardly be more at odds.

Thirdly, the severe economic crisis had become even worse. Instead of the relief people are yearning for, tough reforms, sometimes dictated by the international community, as well as the abolition of many subsidies had only increased their burden. This offered the military a window of opportunity, arguing that the civilian side is incapable of solving the country's economic and social problems.

The international community must act

A return to civilian-military power sharing is only superficially the solution to the political crisis. It harbours the potential for further conflicts. What they turn out to be depends on a whole series of issues. Can Hamdok win over the street and fragmented civil society to the political compromise? The young resistance committees have already announced more demonstrations. Will the military let them march without raining down tear gas and bullets on them? Who will sit in the new cabinet? Will it be able to emancipate itself from the military-dominated Sovereignty Council? Will Hamdok be able to undo what the military has decreed over the past few weeks, such as the trade union ban?

The pressure from the international community must not let up. Because of its major financial and development policy commitment since the revolution, it has never enjoyed so much leverage. Its funding must continue to depend on reforms and progress in democratisation of the state.

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