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War without winners

The Sudanese army has managed to retake Khartoum — but an end to the conflict with the militias of the Rapid Support Forces is still not in sight

The images at the end of March could hardly have been more contrasting: while General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan strode through the presidential palace in Khartoum with his fist raised, cheered on by his supporters from the Sudanese army (Sudanese Armed Forces, SAF), the last remaining fighters of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) fled westwards over the Nile, crossing the Jebel Aulia dam bridge on foot. Shortly before the second anniversary of the outbreak of war, the 'liberation' of Khartoum by the RSF occupation was sealed.

The consequences for the RSF are unmistakable. In addition to dampening the morale of their fighters, the SAF's latest military successes are changing the political arithmetic of this conflict. It was only in March that RSF representatives in Kenya proclaimed a Sudanese parallel government and sought recognition from neighbouring countries and international partners. In view of the withdrawal from Khartoum, the attempt to consolidate itself as a political force has now fizzled out.

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Regardless of the military situation, it is clear that the RSF have not emerged as a political winner from the project. During the two years they occupied large areas of Sudan, they made few attempts to establish a functioning local administration. Instead, their fighters committed the most horrific human rights violations: they looted, coerced, pillaged and raped. Despite the war crimes also committed by the SAF, General al-Burhan seems to be winning the race for the moral high ground among international partners at present. The deteriorating military situation of the RSF could cause its supporters to rethink their position — especially if access to the lucrative gold mines, which have so far secured the

maintenance of around 100 000 soldiers and their equipment, is lost.

However, the SAF has no time for prolonged celebrations. The RSF continues to hold territory the size of Spain in the west of the country. It is foreseeable that the fighting will now shift to Darfur and culminate, in particular, in the city of El Fasher. To legitimise a political claim in the west of the country, the RSF must take the city completely. For the SAF, on the other hand, the war can only end with the complete defeat of the RSF and the death of General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti). The fighting in Darfur will therefore continue with all its harshness.

A dangerous stalemate

The price for this is paid by the civilian population throughout the entire country. Raw statistics only hint at the scale of the specific need for humanitarian aid in Sudan: up to 150 000 dead, 15 million displaced persons, 25 million people are threatened by famine. The United Nations is right to describe the situation in Sudan as the world's greatest humanitarian crisis. The suspension of USAID, initiated by the US government, which is by far the largest bilateral donor of humanitarian aid, is further exacerbating the situation for many people. At present, it does not appear that other international donors will fill this gap.

Two years after the beginning of the war, large parts of Sudan have been destroyed. At the moment, it is completely unclear how the reconstruction could be financed if the war ends — at a time when, in addition to the United States, a number of European countries are fundamentally realigning their international commitments.

One year after the Paris Donors Conference, 20 foreign ministers are now coming together once more for a high-level dialogue in London at the invitation of the United Kingdom, Germany, France and the European Union. The date has already been criticised in advance. And, although countries indirectly involved, such as the United Arab Emirates, Kenya and Chad, have been invited, neither the SAF, which is currently in power, nor civil society organisations are sitting at the table in the decisive talks — despite the fact that they, above all, would have to play a decisive role in implementing any humanitarian aid in Sudan.

The endgame in Sudan is not primarily orientated towards the humanitarian needs of the civilian population. Rather, it is based on the interests of the actors involved — as well as those who actively support them. At present, there is little to suggest that a ceasefire or even a more

comprehensive peace process is likely to materialise in the foreseeable future.

Political planners are certainly not short of scenarios for peace and development in a civilian-led Sudan. However, there is currently no exit strategy for Generals al-Burhan and Hemedti. It seems out of the question that either of them would voluntarily withdraw from Sudan to exile in the Persian Gulf or a Swiss chalet. It also seems unlikely that one or both of them would become part of a political process in which questions of political responsibility and justice for war crimes would be discussed or a new government would emerge from it. Both are responsible for the most serious crimes committed against the people of Sudan. The only way they can get away with them is to win the military conflict.

The convenience of war

On top of that, dynamics at the international level are preventing an end to the fighting and a fresh start in Sudan. The argument that the international community is distracted by Ukraine and Gaza counts for little. The simple truth is that there is currently no international consensus on how to proceed in the country. To end the fighting, observers are not ruling out a new division of Sudan, although the example of South Sudan shows very clearly that this is not necessarily a panacea for stability.

Both neighbouring states and other countries have significant political, economic or religious interests in Sudan, which are more likely to be met in a state of war than in a peaceful, stable or even democratic Sudan. On this ground, the ostensible power struggle between two generals for control of the country is growing. The war is proving useful because it serves the overarching interests of important regional and international actors, who are doing everything they can to ensure its continuation. Previous peace initiatives have failed because of this, as have demands for ceasefires and calls for unhindered access for international aid organisations. In the meantime, Sudan remains an El Dorado for transnational players in the global war economy.

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This has little to do with the interests of the Sudanese population, who, after decades of dictatorship and crisis, want nothing more than peace and development opportunities in their own country. As long as Sudan remains at war, al-Burhan and the networks supporting him can avoid a discussion about the country's political

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future in which they might have to deal with activists that have already brought about the peaceful overthrow of Omar al-Bashir.

The immense wave of positive energy in 2018 and 2019 is still very present for the people of Sudan today. For the SAF generals, this is a horror scenario. The threats against Sudanese democracy and human rights activists at home and abroad are no coincidence. They are harbingers of an unavoidable confrontation over Sudan's political future. Today, the SAF may be at war with the RSF, but the endgame in Sudan is not military but ideological: autocrats against democrats. Although the SAF benefits from the global trend towards closed systems of government, it cannot defeat the continuing desire of the people of Sudan for democracy, freedom and development by military means.

Outsiders have no easy solutions to bring peace to Sudan, with the new German government also having its hands tied in some respects. Nevertheless, it must define how many compromises it can tolerate in the context of the desired values- and interest-based foreign and development policy in the case of Sudan. Conducting this discussion honestly and openly is in itself a positive signal of German engagement that Sudanese people around the world would appreciate.



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