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What comes after the revolution?

Two years after the overthrow of al-Bashir, Sudan's political transition is still extremely volatile — and needs more targeted international support

11 April 2019 was a day of great emotion in Khartoum. At noon, the then-Vice President Ibn Auf announced the arrest of President Omar al-Bashir. The residents of Khartoum celebrated the end of his 30-year rule by holding a sit-in in front of the military headquarters.

In the evening, however, the mood shifted when the putschist military council announced two years of military rule. The protests continued. The sit-in grew into a tent city until it was forcibly evicted on 3 June. Only then did the military and the representatives of the protest movement agree on a civilian-military transitional government.

Two years after the overthrow of al-Bashir, the question of Sudan's political system is still as acute as back then. So far, the interim government, led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, has undertaken reforms in three areas: economy, peace and democracy.

A world of no alternatives

Hamdok's first government after the revolution was dominated by technocrats from international financial institutions. Under their leadership, Sudan achieved some important preliminary successes.

The US removed Sudan from its list of states sponsoring terrorism. The World Bank organised a trust fund into which international donors could deposit aid payments to cut down government subsidies. The International Monetary Fund began a structured advisory programme. All of these were steps to reduce Sudan's extremely high debt, which Bashir had amassed to stay in power. Sudan was required to reduce its debt with international financial institutions before they could provide the government with new funds. Without this budget support, the Sudanese state would face bankruptcy.

However, in the short term the economic reforms have hit the people of Sudan hard. The government cut high subsidies for diesel and petrol and devalued the Sudanese pound against the US dollar by almost 700 per cent. The prices for everyday goods skyrocketed.

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Moreover, the economic reform process is taking place with little public participation. A national economic conference had to be postponed because of the impending Covid-19 pandemic. When it took place six months later, civil society participants were left with the feeling that their only choice was to consent to the reform programme agreed with the IMF. Protests were directed against the rapid removal of subsidies and demanded greater financial contributions from the security forces, which were heavily involved in the economy. Without external funding, however, the government had no alternative but to cut subsidies.

An ambiguous peace agreement

At the beginning of October 2020, a number of rebel groups and the government signed the Juba Peace Agreement, which has had an ambiguous effect on Sudan's transition process so far. On the one hand, with its implementation, representatives of long-standing rebel groups have now become part of the transitional government. The cabinet, newly appointed by Prime Minister Hamdok in February 2021, is now considered significantly more 'political', as it now also includes prominent representatives of political parties.

On the other hand, the price for the peace agreement can't be underestimanted, especially since it currently contributes little to make the peripheral regions in the west, east and south of Sudan more secure. The deal resets the clock of the 39-month transition process back to zero. It's now expected to end early 2024, when an elected government is supposed to take over. The government estimates the peace deal will cost $7.5bn over the next ten years. Because they no longer had their own troops in Sudan, groups of signatories recruited to such an extent that the responsible UN sanctions committee felt compelled to admonish them publicly.

At the same time, some key groups are not yet part of the peace agreement: the groups that are still involved in violence in Darfur, as well as the SPLM-North group led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu, which has the most

armed fighters any Sudanese rebel group. Al-Hilu signed a declaration of principles with the government in late March. However, a full peace agreement will continue to cost time and money.

An authoritarian backlash remains possible

Despite their shortcomings, international actors as well as the transitional government regard the reforms in the areas of economy and peace as contributions to democratic development. The reason lies in the history of Sudan.

Since its independence, Sudan has seen several cycles of democratic rule, military coup, and revolution. Clear parallels to the current transition period were seen in the last period of democratic rule in the late 1980s under the leadership of the Umma Party. The civilian government inherited a massive economic crisis from the military rule of Jafar an-Numairi, which was accompanied by import difficulties, productivity losses, food shortages and protests. Civil war raged in many parts of the country. Omer al-Bashir used the instability as a pretext for his coup on 30 June 1989.

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In other words, it is by no means a foregone conclusion that there will again be a democratic regime after the economic and peace reforms. In fact, from a regional perspective, this even appears to be unlikely.

In today's political discussions in Sudan, two models of authoritarian rule from its immediate neighbourhood are being repeatedly brought up. The rapid failure of the Egyptian revolution and the elected government of Mohammed Morsi serves as a chilling example of a renewed path to military dictatorship. Some politicians consider the Ethiopian model of a developmental state to be more attractive. The indeed impressive economic growth in Ethiopia over the past three decades has taken place with a de facto one-party government with little room for political opposition.

Both models – a military dictatorship and an authoritarian developmental state – are possible pathways in Sudan today. In the summer of 2020, the head of state, General Abdelrahman Burhan,

already threatened that the military could take over the business of governing altogether. After all, both Burhan and protesters blamed the continued economic crisis primarily on the Hamdok-led cabinet. However, the military would also be dependent on a successful debt relief process and access to international financial markets.

A developmental state, on the other hand, could be an attractive offer from the Sudanese elite to the starving population, but also the international donor community. It could be accompanied by political stability and economic growth as a result of good cooperation with the international financial institutions. Prime Minister Hamdok, who is familiar with the Ethiopian model from his time at the UN in Addis Ababa, has already brought a democratic developmental state into play.

The transformation needs an inclusive political process

Economic reforms and a peace process along will not move Sudan toward becoming a democratic developmental state. As Volker Perthes, the head of the UN political mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), repeatedly said, this will require an inclusive political process. The transitional government and its democratically minded international partners can provide incentives to facilitate it.

Participation, dialogue and political organisation cannot be limited to negotiating access to institutions within elites. Purely technical and financial support for elections, for which the EU has already reserved €350 million, is not enough. Elections have also taken place in Sudan before.

For a stable and legitimate government to emerge from the elections, there needs to be properly functioning competition among political parties. One lesson from Egypt was that a relatively short transition process privileges whichever political (opposition) force was best organised before the change in power. In Egypt, this was the Muslim Brotherhood; in Sudan it probably applies to the Umma Party and the Communist Party.

What the Sudanese social order should look like can and must only be determined by the Sudanese themselves.

The transitional government could set up a state-funded but independently controlled mechanism to strengthen the development of political parties. Funding for this mechanism could come, for example, from the profits of enterprises that the Ministry of Finance will

take over from the security forces during the transition, or from Sudan's established business families.

These subsidies for political parties could provide an incentive to strengthen intra-party democracy, empower hitherto underrepresented social groups (especially women), broaden the membership base, make party donations more transparent, and promote alliances among the roughly 100 small and micro parties. International actors could support training courses and projects for self-organisation and participation down to the constituency level. After the elections, the new government could transform the mechanism into a permanent form of democratically secured party funding.

Democratisation does not take place overnight

Despite all the justified enthusiasm for the innovative strength and perseverance of the revolutionary movement in Sudan, one should not harbour any illusions: the democratic development and the associated change in the political culture in Sudan will take at least a generation. The ethnic, tribal, religious and regional identity will remain an important political marker for the foreseeable future, especially for previously marginalised segments of the population.

In the short run, elections may even lead to patronage networks and identity politics becoming more important. Parties could degenerate into mere voting machines that help elites secure their power instead of enabling broad political participation. Therefore, a well-organised protest movement will continue to be necessary to fight for a progressive, egalitarian social order.

What the Sudanese social order should look like can and must only be determined by the Sudanese themselves. International support for the Sudanese-led and designed transition process should at least be complementary to a democratic transformation. Incentives for participation, dialogue and debate need to be essential components of international cooperation with Sudan.



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