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# SUDAN'S FATE

Revolution, Coup & Civil War



Hirak Jyoti Das

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3, San Martin Marg | Chanakyapuri | New Delhi - 110021  
Tel: 011-24121764 | Fax: 011-66173415  
E-mail: [info@vifindia.org](mailto:info@vifindia.org)

Website: [www.vifindia.org](http://www.vifindia.org)

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Cover Image Courtesy: New Sudanese refugee arrivals from Sudan. Many are women with small children. (UNHCR/ Colin Delfosse)

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Hirak Jyoti Das is a Senior Research Associate at Vivekananda International Foundation and a doctoral candidate in Centre for West Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. His doctoral research is titled, “Israel’s Security Predicaments since the fall of Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt”. His research interests are India’s relations with Persian Gulf states, Domestic and foreign policies of Qatar and Kuwait, Israel’s security and arms policy, Israel’s domestic politics, Post-Arab Spring domestic and foreign policy of Egypt and the role of Islamic movements i.e. Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Movement in Israel.

## ***Abstract***

*Sudan since the last few decades has witnessed civil wars, terrorism, mass killings, state tyranny, street protests, partition and coups. The April 2019 protest that toppled the autocratic rule of General Omar Al-Bashir opened the path towards democratisation. The post-Al-Bashir transition process is marked by power contest between civilian groups and military as well as tussle among multiple political parties, armed rebel groups and paramilitary attempting to position itself within the new politico-military order. The political transition process was disrupted after General Abdel Fattah Burhan dismissed the civilian government under Abdalla Hamdok on 25 October 2021. It dismantled the fragile democratic experiment pushing the state towards further fragmentation and economic collapse.*

*The public mobilisation to re-instate the democratic process along with international pressure has forced the military and the paramilitary to sign the political framework agreement in December 2022 paving the path for formation of a civilian led government. However, the realisation of a truly operational democracy is contingent on military and paramilitary's real willingness to accept limited political role; implementing security sector reforms; ensuring transitional justice; unity among the pro-democracy forces and peace with armed rebel groups. The progress towards democratisation has been severely affected by the power struggle between the military i.e. Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary i.e. Rapid Support Force (RSF). The paper briefly delves into the Omar Al-Bashir regime in Sudan until 2018–2019 protests and evaluates the civil-military relations in terms of transitional government's performance and its challenges until October 2021 military coup. It assesses the post-2021 coup political dynamics overshadowed by deep tensions between the military and the paramilitary forces. The paper lastly examines India's bilateral engagement with Sudan.*

## **Omar Al-Bashir Regime and the Revolution**

The December 2028 – April 2019 protest in Sudan ousted the regime of the long-time autocrat, Omar Al-Bashir on 11 April 2019 opening the prospect of a functioning democratic political system. The democratisation process has however been marred by the power rivalries among the key stakeholders especially the military, i.e., Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) as well as the splits among the pro-democracy forces. The post-2019 revolution politico-economic order in Sudan is intrinsically linked to the policies under General Omar Al-Bashir ruling the state since 1989.

Al-Bashir came to power in a military coup on 30 June 1989 by overthrowing the democratically elected government under Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi and President Ahmed al-Mirghani. He declared himself as the head of the state, Prime Minister, Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces (Al Taher 2022; CNN 2022). Al-Bashir government was engaged in the long civil war between government and rebels from the Darfur region and southern Sudan. The mass atrocities committed under the Al-Bashir regime had invited sanctions and arms embargoes by the European Union (EU) since 1994 and United Nations Security Council (UNSC) since 2004 (SIPRI 2012 a; SIPRI 2012 b). It effectively prevented Sudan to seek debt relief and prohibited World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other financial institutions to provide loans. In 1993, the US designated Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism for sheltering Osama Bin Laden between 1991 and 1996 and supporting international terrorist groups (US Department of State 2022). Sudanese government was also involved in the 1998 twin bombings on U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya and attack on USS Cole in 2000 (FBI 2023; Hansler 2021). Notably, Al-Bashir is the first sitting head of state indicted by International Criminal Court (ICC) on five counts of crimes

against humanity, two counts of war crimes and three counts of genocide on 4 March 2009 and again on 12 July 2010 for his role in mass killings in the Darfur region between 2003 and 2008 (ICC 2023). According to the UN, at least 300,000 people were killed and 2.5 million people were displaced in Darfur due to actions by Sudanese military and Janjaweed Arab militias that renamed itself as, Rapid Support Forces (RSF) (Salih 2022).

On domestic level, Al-Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP) formed in 1992 promoted the imposition of orthodox interpretation of Islamic law allowing harsh treatment of women through legal means. The government curbed political and civil rights by banning associations, censoring media, imprisoning journalists and political opposition (Assal 2019; USCIRF 2015). Al-Bashir government under international pressure entered into negotiations to end the civil war between north and south. On 9 January 2005, Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed between Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the government (UN 2005). Al-Bashir in order to prolong his political survival in midst of sanctions and charges of war crimes, accepted the verdict of the referendum facilitating the formation of South Sudan in July 2011 (Rice 2011). The partition directly impacted the fragile Sudanese economy after 75 percent of the oil refineries came under South Sudanese control (IMF 2020). The depleting share in oil trade and continuing international sanctions forced the government to impose austerity measures and reduction in subsidies causing price rise of basic goods leading to wave of protests. The protests were met with harsh response including shootings, detaining protestors, arresting opposition politicians and censoring the media. Al-Bashir in midst of the growing public uproar managed to consolidate power. He was re-elected with 94.5 percent vote in 2015 election that was widely boycotted by opposition parties and questioned by international community for lacking transparency (The East African 2015).

The sanctions relief by US in 2017 failed to overcome the chronic economic crisis facing the state. The inflation surged to 72 percent in December 2018 and the value of Sudanese currency plummeted from 6.7 Sudanese Pounds per US\$ to 47.5 pounds per US\$ (UN 2019; Aly 2018; Batmanghelidj & Mulder 2019). The government further cut down subsidies on fuel and bread. The public anger against Al-Bashir regime's inability to resolve the economic crisis prompted protest in the northeast region of Atbara since December 2018 that spread throughout the state. The agitation that began on economic issues such as price rise, poverty, commodity shortages, corruption and unemployment transformed into popular call for resignation of Al-Bashir. The Sudanese public came out to the streets in large numbers in early 2019 (Dabanga Sudan).

The security forces during the course of the protests were divided over the course of action and how to respond to the demonstrations. In some instances, violent methods were used by security forces to disperse the protestors (Dabanga Sudan 2019; Human Rights Watch 2019). General Al-Bashir in order to preserve his political survival maintained a defiant attitude declaring state of emergency; dismissed the federal government and replaced all state governors' with security officials. He attempted to convince the protestors to allow him to finish his term in April 2020 after which he would not seek re-election (Younis 2019). The protest however continued and the military or the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under General Abdel Fattah Burhan sensing the anti-regime public sentiments eventually arrested Al-Bashir on 11 April 2019 opening the path for a new military-civilian political setup in Sudan (Dabanga Sudan 2019). The subsequent section evaluates the functioning of the transitional government from August 2019 and until the military coup in October 2021 and identifies the hurdles to the transitional government.



## **Transitional Government**

The Sudanese military saw Al-Bashir's ouster as an opportunity to monopolise political power. The military or the SAF after removing Al-Bashir suspended the constitution; shut borders and airspace; imposed three month state of emergency and instituted transitional military government. It failed to placate the protestors' demand for civilian rule and thousands of protestors continued to demonstrate outside the military headquarters (Al Jazeera 2019; Anadolu Agency 2019).

The SAF collaborated with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to remove Al-Bashir. The interest-based engagement between the military i.e., SAF and paramilitary, RSF was carried out to preserve their political legitimacy and economic control. The RSF created in 2013 is Sudan's largest paramilitary group. It emerged from the "Janjaweed" militias which were accused of mass atrocities during Darfur conflict that killed 300,000 and displaced 2.5 million people in early 2000s (Peltier & Dahir 2023). Besides Darfur, the RSF was accused of human rights abuses in South Kordofan and Blue Nile regions. In 2015, RSF was granted the status of a regular force. The paramilitary force through legislation in 2017 was recognised as an independent security force. The RSF forces since 2015 were deployed in Yemen to supplement Saudi and Emirati forces. The head of RSF, Mohamad Hamdan Dagalo also known as Hemedti expanded his business interests including holdings in gold mining, livestock and infrastructure (Al Jazeera 2023 a; Middle East Eye 2023). The RSF was closely operated by Al-Bashir and it was provided with high degree of autonomy to check on the political and economic ambitions of the military. In the aftermath of Al-Bashir's ouster in April 2019, Sudanese people stayed on the streets demanding swift democratic transition. On 3 June 2019, the RSF stormed the protest site killing at least 120 protestors (Matfess 2019).

The military leadership, after intervention by the African Union, held discussion in July and August 2019 with the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), an alliance of civilian and rebel coalitions including Sudanese Professionals Association, Sudan Revolutionary Front, Sudan Call, Unionist Association, Sudanese Resistance Committees, National Consensus Forces, No to Oppression Against Women Initiative and Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups (BBC News 2019 a; Abbas 2019). The military agreed to power sharing with civilian government in a three year transition period with election scheduled in 2023. The eventual goal of the transitional government was to prepare for democratically elected civilian led government with limited role for the military. The agreement facilitated the formation of a technocratic government led by economist and former UN official Abdalla Hamdok. On 17 August 2019, constitutional declaration was signed allowing the formation of the 11 member Sovereign Council headed by General Abdel Fattah Burhan consisting of five military and six civilians (Reuters 2019). The RSF head, Dagalo assumed the Vice Chairman position in the Sovereign Council. The transitional government despite its shortcomings managed to make peace with rebel groups, expand civil liberties and religious freedoms, place Al-Bashir on trial and normalise relations with Israel.

### **Peace with Rebel Groups**

The transitional government, after assuming power, prioritised ending Sudan's internal conflicts and conducted year long negotiations with the rebel groups. Abdalla Hamdok government supported by the military signed peace deal on 3 October 2020 in Juba, South Sudan with South Kordofan and Blue Nile based rebel groups i.e. Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N)-Malik Agar as well as Darfur based armed groups such as Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi (SLA-MM) Sudan Liberation Movement-Transitional

Council, Sudanese Alliance Movement, Sudan Liberation Forces Alliance, and Sudan Liberation Movement. The government also signed agreement with Masar al-Sharq (Eastern Path); Masar al-Shamal (Northern Path); Masar al-Wasat (Central Path) and Al-Jabaha al-Thalitha-Tamazaj (Third Front) (Constitution Net 2020; Al-Ali 2021). However, two prominent groups i.e. Darfur based Sudan Liberation Army-Abdel Wahed (SLA-AW) led by Abdelwahid Mohamed al-Nour and South Kordofan based Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu<sup>1</sup> did not sign the deal reflecting the challenges to the peace process. Both groups have significant military capacity and public support. The final agreement in the absence of the two groups remained incomplete (Al-Ali 2021; Al Jazeera 2020 b).

The peace deal nonetheless paved the way for integration of the rebel leadership into the transitional government. The deal emphasised on co-opting rebel fighters into the security forces, equal citizenship rights, permanent ceasefire, guarantee economic, land rights, political representation, power sharing, revenue sharing, transitional justice and transitional security arrangements. The 300 seat Transitional Legislative Council was restructured by allocating 165 seats from the FFC; 60 from the military and 75 seats from the signatory rebel groups (Middle East Monitor 2020; Sudan Tribune 2021 b). A new fund was created that would provide US\$ 750 million per year for 10 years to the southern and western regions and facilitate the return of displaced people. The transitional government also allowed humanitarian aid under the World Food Programme to Yabous in Blue Nile and Kouda in South Kordofan state (Al Jazeera 2020 b).

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1 Abdelaziz Al Hilu announced truce with the government and demanded change in the constitution that includes separation of religion and government; secular state; disbanding al-Bashir's militias and restructuring the military (Constitution Net 2020; Al Jazeera 2020 b).

## **Widening Space for Civil Liberties and Religious Freedoms**

The transitional constitution signed by the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) and the Transitional Military Council on 17 August 2019 allowed the right to form political parties and espoused to guarantee freedom of the press, right to privacy, freedom of assembly, freedom for non-governmental organisations, freedom of movement and right to travel, right to own property and protection of citizens from expropriation by the state without compensation and freedom to exercise rights without discrimination based on race, religion, gender, regional affiliation etc. (Constitute Project 2019).

The transitional government in November 2019, fulfilling one of the key demands of protestors, repealed the Public Order Act that prohibited vendors from selling on the streets and curbed women's rights. The law was a blend of legal and moral prohibitions to exclude and intimidate women's participation in public life (Amnesty International 2019). It imposed conservative Islamic rules restricting women's freedom of dress, movement, association, employment, education etc. and led to arbitrary arrest for wearing trousers, uncovered hair in public; socialising with men and allowed punishment by flogging by "public order police" for alleged crimes of solicitation and prostitution during Al-Bashir regime (Oppenheim BBC News 2019 b; Dabanga Sudan 2017). Several social activists called for immediate enforcement as well as repealing certain acts in the penal code about dressing to overcome continued exploitation of women on the ground level (Dabanga Sudan 2017).

The government, fulfilling another major demand, dismantled Al-Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP) allowing seizure off all assets and dissolving any partnership or association with business firms. The government also prohibited ex-politicians and officials serving during Al-Bashir's regime from practising politics and re-assuming public office (Al Jazeera 2020 a). In higher education, NCP groups were disbanded and 28

university chancellors and 35 vice chancellors who were linked with NCP were dismissed. Hamdok dismissed that the dissolution of NCP as an act of revenge but an effort for retrieving the 'stolen' wealth and preserving the dignity of the Sudanese people (Sudan Tribune 2019).

### **Trial of Al-Bashir**

By carrying out trial procedure against Omar Al-Bashir, the transitional government attempted to pacify public sentiments and to ensure justice for his crimes. In December 2019, Al-Bashir was convicted of corruption and sentenced to only two years in a correctional centre. Sudanese public dissatisfied with the punishment carried out street demonstrations demanding justice for people killed during Al-Bashir's tenure as well as deaths by security forces during the recent protests (Burke & Salih 2019). The court under public pressure upheld the separate charges of killing of protestors and orchestrating the 1989 coup that brought him to power. The trial over Al-Bashir's role in the 1989 coup was initiated in July 2020 (BBC News 2020). The Sudanese Foreign Minister Mariam al-Mahdi in August announced that the government would hand over Al-Bashir and two others to the International Criminal Court without providing a time frame. It was also unclear whether the ousted leader would be extradited or stay within Sudan during the trial. The military concurred with the decision stating its willingness to cooperate with the ICC (Al Jazeera 2021 b). The transitional government after years of diplomatic isolation prioritised efforts to re-integrate with the international community and adopt international norms. In order to facilitate the trial, the cabinet on 3 August 2021 approved a law to accede and rectify to the 1998 Rome Statute of the ICC (Sudan Tribune 2021 c).

### **Normalisation with Israel and Associated Benefits from the US**

After assuming office, the transitional government was keen to re-integrate with global economy that effectively required US' consent to lift

economic sanctions. For the US under Donald Trump, normalisation with Israel was one of the key pre-conditions. Earlier during Al-Bashir regime, the US on 24 September 2017 partially lifted few sanctions including travel restrictions and economic embargo due to increasing cooperation on national security and information sharing as well as Sudan's efforts to address concerns about terrorism and human rights abuses (OHCHR 2017). Donald Trump administration changed its policy towards Sudan by encouraging political change through aid and push for normalisation with Israel instead of only relying on sanctions. The US during the Sudan Partnership Conference in June 2020 also pledged US\$ 356 million in development and humanitarian assistance (US Department of State 2022). Eventually, the transitional government backed by the military announced its decision to normalise relations with Israel in October 2020 and formal agreement between Sudan and Israel was signed on 6 January 2021 (Lis 2023; El-Gizouli 2021).

The transitional government, in its efforts to persuade the US to remove Sudan from the list of states sponsoring terrorism, paid out settlements worth US\$ 70 million to families of victims of the 2000 USS Cole bombing incident in Yemen in February 2020 (Dabanga Sudan 2020). It also paid US\$ 335 million to US terror victims and families in April 2021 as part of deal to finally remove Sudan for the States Sponsoring Terrorism list in December 2020 (US Department of State 2022).

### **Hurdles in Transition Process**

The national priorities for the transitional government were addressing socioeconomic situation; implementing Juba Peace Agreement and resuming negotiations with the two non-signatories; initiating military and sector reforms; protection of civilians; advancing democratic transition and re-integrating with global economy. However, economic stagnancy, military's self-interests, coercive laws, harsh security measures and

competing political interests among political actors, protest groups and armed rebel groups jeopardised the path to democratisation.

## **Economic Stagnancy and COVID-19**

The transitional government inherited a debt worth US\$ 60 billion and around 13.4 million including 2.5 million internally displaced persons remain in need of humanitarian assistance (Sudan Tribune 2021 a; UNICEF 2021). The new economic reforms proposed by the transitional government include devaluing currency; cutting fuel subsidies over the course of 18 months; providing direct cash payments to the poor to ease the shock of reforms and cooperating with the international community to re-integrate Sudan with the international economy. The subsidies take up around 36 percent of the national budget (The New Arab 2019; Abdelaziz 2021; Reuters 2020 a). The government facing public pressure was forced to include subsidies on bread and fuel in the 2020 budget (Amin 2019). These harsh reforms led to 400 percent hike in inflation and growing public frustration for failing to afford essential items. Moreover, large trade and fiscal deficits, unemployment and poverty continued. The transitional government therefore failed to provide short term relief contributing to growing dissatisfaction against the transitional government (The Arab Weekly 2021).

The economic situation was further worsened by the COVID-19 crisis. It aggravated labour income loss due to illness or employment shocks; reduction in remittances and private transfers; health costs; shortages of essential goods; disruptions in trade and labour market; low productive capacity in small and medium level enterprises; limited access to education etc. (World Bank 2021). The floods in 2020 and 2021 also added to the acute food shortage facing the state. The floods between July and September 2020 affected more than 3 million people; destroyed one-third of cultivated land and killed around 100 people (Reuters 2020 b). In September 2021

floods, more than 314,000 people were affected in 14 provinces (Africa News 2022 a).

### **Growing Public Frustration**

The transitional government faced criticism over failure to tackle with the economic problems, lack of accountability, delay in reforming political institutions, and delay in ensuring justice for abuse conducted by security forces including killing of peaceful protestors in 2019. In a controversial move, the Sovereign Council issued a decree on 14 December 2019 to dissolve all labour unions and professional associations. The security forces seized all properties and assets of all trade unions. It sought to formulate a committee to revise trade union laws and prepare for fresh elections under new labour laws. The transitional government justified that the move was necessary to disempower NCP loyalists that had infiltrated in the trade unions (ITUC 2023). The decision was heavily criticised domestically and regionally that violates UN Charter on Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights guaranteeing freedom of association and ILO Convention 87 on freedom of association (ITUC 2019). It jeopardised the path to democratic transition and added to the frustration among Sudanese people.

### **Political and Security Instability**

Political and security instability during the transition period continued in different parts of the state. In January 2020, renegade military and intelligence officers conducted a short-lived mutiny which was crushed down by the military (Sudan Tribune 2020). Two months later in March 2020, Prime Minister Hamdok survived an assassination attempt by a little known outfit known as Sudanese Youth Islamic Movement also called Sudanese Taliban. Several commentators indicated the complicity of pro-NCP loyalists as well as members of the military unhappy with



the civilian-military political setup (Al Arabiya 2020). In Darfur, violence between Arab Rizeigat and the Masalit tribes erupted in April 2021 killing at least 87 and injuring around 200 people including UN healthcare workers (OHCHR 2021).

Domestically, in February 2021, the Hamdok government announced a new cabinet that included seven members from former rebel groups. The addition of new factions with competing interests fractured the civilian alliance. The cracks within the civilian alliance became visible weakening its credibility among Sudanese public (Arab News 2021; Al Jazeera 2021 a). With regard to Israel, political blocs were torn between their traditional support for Palestine that sees normalisation as betrayal and economic incentives promised by the US. Sudanese politicians and media expressed disappointment with the outcome of normalisation agreement due to insufficient investment in agriculture and technology projects by the US (The Times of Israel 2021). Moreover, urban as well as rural elites that benefitted from Al-Bashir's system of mercenary patronage were worried that the political and economic resetting by a democratically elected government could disrupt their traditional stronghold.

### **Military's Self Interests**

The relationship between the civilian and military leadership had been tense throughout the transition period. The military displayed uneasiness with the civilian takeover process. The civilian members insisted that the chair of the Sovereign Council should be under their control rather than the military. Both sides reached an impasse over the deadline (Reuters 2021 a).

The military was integral part of the deep state controlling large number of enterprises, trade networks. During the political transition period, it controlled the Central Bank and Ministry of Finance. For the military, it

was worried about losing political power after handing over power in 2023. The military feared that the civilian government conceding to protestors' demand would push for oversight of its business interests and restructure the military (BT1 2022; Sayigh 2021).

The military and RSF officials were also worried about investigations initiated by the civilian government into the role of security forces in killing of Sudanese people during Al-Bashir regime as well as protestors since 2019 revolution. The military in the event of civilian takeover was worried about losing control over the investigations. With regard to trial of Al-Bashir, the cabinet had approved handing the ex-President and other suspects; however, the Sovereign Council headed by General Burhan delayed the decision (Reuters 2021 a). The tension between the security forces and civilian government was simmering during the transitional period that subsequently led to the October 2021 military coup. The next section will provide a brief context of the October 2021 coup and underline the political developments during the direct military rule period.

### **October 2021 Coup and Direct Military Rule**

The economic troubles continued to aggravate in 2021 which was further worsened after protests in eastern Sudan blocked the trade route to Port Sudan in September and October 2021 (The New Arab 2021). One section from within the military capitalising on the public apathy towards the transitional government attempted a premature coup on 21 September. The civilian government however managed to overturn the coup attempt allegedly by Al-Bashir loyalists leading to arrest of 40 officers. The military utilised this opportunity to criticise the Hamdok government for creating conditions for coup by ignoring the needs of the people and failing to solve the economic situation (Ibrahim 2021; Reuters 2021 b).

The military tactfully attempted to distance itself from criticism for slow progress on the economic front and placed the blame on civilian politicians.

There were sections of the public disillusioned with the transitional government's failure to solve the economic problems that called for military rule. On 16 October 2021, pro-military sympathisers including few civilian leaders and rebel leaders backed by the army held demonstrations calling for military takeover to take swift actions to tackle the political and economic troubles facing the state. In response, pro-democracy protestors came to streets to express support for the civilian government in Khartoum putting pressure on the military to undertake drastic action (Africa News 2021 a; Al Jazeera 2021 c).

The nation-wide public demonstrations 'for' and 'against' military rule created major unrest in different parts of the state. A splinter group from the FFC including two former rebel factions and a political party joined the pro-military bloc splitting the civilian umbrella group. It openly reflected the political splits and power struggles among different factions. In fact, ministers within the Hamdok's cabinet expressed support for rival camps. The negotiations between the army and the political coalition of civilian groups also reached a dead end due to differences over security reforms; army's commercial activities; formation of constitutional court; appointment of an attorney general and chief justice and transfer of the chair of the Sovereignty Council to a civilian official (Reuters 2021 b).

Eventually on 25 October 2021, the military chief and chair of the Sovereignty Council, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan again collaborated with the RSF and dismissed the civilian government placing Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and majority of the cabinet under house arrest. The military chief claimed the dissolution of the transitional government and the Sovereign Council was necessary to overcome the rising political crisis that could risk another civil war (Sudan Tribune 2021 d; Daily Sabah 2021). The military tried to dispel fear that the sudden action was in fact a coup and rather called it a 'correction to Sudan's transition to democracy'. The military leaders accused the civilian politicians of seeking personal

gains and forgetting the aims of the revolution. Burhan complained that the entire state is 'deadlocked' due to political rivalries and the experience of the last two years only reflected that the participation of the political forces in the transitional period is flawed. Sudanese people took to the streets to protest against the coup and around 50 people were killed by security forces (PBS 2021; Al Jazeera 2021 d).

On 21 November 2021, General Burhan facing internal and external pressure<sup>2</sup> conceded and he was forced to re-instate Hamdok as the Prime Minister. The 14-point deal led to release of all political prisoners detained during the coup. The political arrangement however continued to work under military oversight (Africa News 2021 d). The coup broke the trust in military's willingness to embrace the democratic path. The FFC rejected the agreement calling it massive compromise that only allowed release of Hamdok and other political prisoners without solving the core issues i.e. military's efforts to control the political process. The protests continued demanding full civilian rule (Al Jazeera 2021 e). The protestors claimed that Hamdok's reinstatement was made only for legitimising the military takeover. The public pressure eventually led to Prime Minister Hamdok's resignation on 3 January 2022 (Sudan Tribune 2022). Hamdok's resignation led to direct military control that has continued until the present. The military also did not appoint a new prime minister after Hamdok's resignation.

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2 The African Union in response to the 2021 military coup suspended Sudan's membership (Africa News 2021 b). The US, European Union and other western states condemned the coup and asserted that it would maintain its diplomatic engagement with the civilian government (European Council 2021; US Congress 2021). The US suspended US\$ 700 million in emergency economic aid that was allocated to help Sudan during the transition process (Africa News 2021 c). The U.S. special envoy to the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman interacted with Sudanese military officials and requested to go back to the agreed political arrangement. The military under pressure had indicated its willingness for dialogue, however political groups and citizens coalitions demanded restoration of the pre-coup political order and constitutional process (CNBC 2021).

Throughout 2022 and early 2023, Sudanese citizens held street protests demanding ouster of military dictatorship and re-introducing democratic transition. These demands have been brutally suppressed by security forces. In order to mark the first anniversary of the military coup, demonstrations were held in prominent areas including Khartoum, South Kordofan, Port Sudan etc. chanting, “No negotiations, no dialogue, no partnership” and demanding a fully civilian government without involvement from the military or armed groups on 26 October 2022 (Filseth 2022; Africa News 2022 b). The public anger against Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamad Hamdan Dagalo has grown calling for their trial for death of protestors on 3 June 2019 as well as protest deaths following the coup on 25 October 2021.

The military led government, maintaining a defiant attitude, released a statement claiming that some people in the protests posed threat to security officers. The Ministry of Justice was provided exceptional powers to confront “organised rebel groups” and sleeper cells among the protestors and refer them to courts for summary trials. The security forces used tear gas, rubber bullets and sound bombs to disperse the protestors (Nashed 2022). The military authorities also shut down internet access. Reportedly, more than 125 people have been killed in anti-coup protests between October 2021 and March 2023 (UN 2023). The government vacuum caused by the coup has deeply affected the economy. The lack of an effective Commerce Ministry; weak banking system; shortage of foreign currency; increase in import of complementary goods; loss of traditional markets; decline in petroleum production; suspension of financial assistance by the World Bank and the US and cancellation of debt relief by the Paris Club following the coup contributed in economic decline. According to the annual report of the Central Bank of Sudan, the trade balance deficit had grown to US\$ 6.7 billion in 2022 (Dabanga Sudan 2023). Sudan’s external debt in 2022 accounted for more than 160 percent of total GDP at US\$

60 billion (Espanol 2022).

The military leadership at the same time continued to engage with international actors in order to deflect criticisms; salvage the economic situation and consolidate political power in case of democratic transition. Due to combined efforts of the Trilateral Mechanism consisting of the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the United Nations (UN), the key stakeholders i.e., SAF, RSF and the pro-democracy groups under the banner of Forces of Freedom and Change- Central Council (FFC-CC) signed the framework agreement on 5 December 2022 (UN 2022). The subsequent section will evaluate the framework agreement and identify the drawbacks that continue to impede the democratisation process.

### **Dissecting the Framework Agreement**

The framework agreement signed by SAF, RSF and FFC-CC on 5 December 2022 calls for a two-year, “civilian-led” transition towards elections and full civilian control over all aspects of society with a security and defence council headed by the Prime Minister. According to the agreement, the military is prohibited from non-military business activities. The agreement emphasised on the Trilateral Mechanism consisting of the African Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and United Nations to address on five contentious issues i.e., dismantling the old regime, the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, Eastern Sudan, Transitional Justice and Security Sector Reform. The recommendations will be incorporated in a final political agreement. The international actors however have broadly engaged with the military leaders and overlooked the aspirations of those responsible for toppling of the al-Bashir regime such as pro-democracy activists, especially women and youth groups (Al-Karib 2023; Dabanga Sudan 2022 a; Sudan In The News 2023).

The framework agreement signing ceremony on 5 December was marked by protest outside the Republican Palace, Khartoum. The pro-democracy movement immediately expressed their apprehension about the promise of ‘civilian-led’ government that implies continued control of the military in the leadership and the policy-making process. Critics have argued that the agreement provided another lifeline to the military to delay the transition process; retain power; divide the pro-democracy forces and absolve themselves of the political and economic situation including suppression and killing of protestors following the October 2021 coup (Al Jazeera 2022; Africa News 2023 b). It only provides legitimacy to the SAF, RSF and their allies in the armed movements that will hinder building a truly civilian led democracy. The framework agreement does not help the pro-democracy movement to develop political leadership capabilities. The agreement ignores crucial issues such as selection of Prime Minister and cabinet, transitional justice, accountability, security sector reform (Al-Karib 2023; Whiteman 2022). The agreement essentially offered the Sudanese people the option of accepting military rule or some form of hybrid military-civilian political structure in exchange of “stability” and “security”. Therefore, the state is unlikely to overcome the cycle of democratic regression, violence and military intervention (Al-Karib 2023).

### **Disunity among Pro-Democracy Forces**

The disunity among the pro-democratic forces contributed in failure to develop effective strategy to negotiate with the military and implement democratic transition. Hala Al-Karib, Regional Director of the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) argued that Sudan’s thriving civil society in the post Al-Bashir period lacking genuine support and guidance, failed to generate an effective political leadership. Sudanese youth and women that spearheaded the movement leading to removal of Al-Bashir had “to yield to the leadership of weak and isolated political

parties” (Al Karib 2023). The political groups under FFC were slow to engage and accommodate the new waves of activism led by women, youths and minorities in their policy plans. The parties under FFC therefore are detached from the demands of the ordinary citizens. It focussed on self-preservation causing political infighting and nurturing covert and overt alliances with the military and the RSF. There are number of disagreements within the pro-democracy groups. The signatory groups are operating under the Forces for Freedom and Change – Central Council (FFC-CC) (Al-Karib 2023; Dabanga Sudan 2022 a). The non-signatory groups have expressed objections regarding the political settlement with the military and the RSF.

The non-signatory groups such as National Accord Forces (NAF); Democratic Unionist Party (DUP); Beja Nazirs Council faction under Sayed Tirik; Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) under Finance Minister Jibril Ibrahim and Sudan Liberation Movement split-off faction under Minni Minawi have gathered under the banner of the Forces of Freedom and Change- Democratic Block (FFC-DB) (Dabanga Sudan 2022 b). The deputy head of FFC-DB, Gibril Ibrahim during his meeting with General Burhan on 28 March 2023 warned against instability in case a new government is formed without them (Sudan Tribune 2023 b). Moreover, the FFC-CC faces challenges from the communist dominated Alliance of Forces for Radical Change (AFRC) and the resistance committees (Mashamoun 2022).

The Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party withdrew from the FFC-CC coalition after the signing of the December 2022 framework agreement claiming that the deal legitimised the 25 October 2021 coup and weakens the unity of the revolutionary forces (Dabanga Sudan 2022 c). FFC-CC invited groups such as the resistance committees, the Communist Party of Sudan (CPoS), the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party, the Sudan People’s Liberation



Movement-North under Abdelaziz El Hilu (SPLM-N El Hilu), Sudan Liberation Movement headed by Abdelwahid El Nur (SLM-AW) to join the peace process. FFC-CC extended invitation to two FFC-DB member groups i.e. the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) headed by current Finance Minister, Jibril Ibrahim and the SLM split-off faction led by Minni Minawi.

FFC-CC however asserted that only certain parties are entitled to join the framework agreement. Shehab Ibrahim, spokesperson for the FFC-CC noted that the alliance does not want groups that do not have genuine interest in democratisation to ‘flood the political process’. The addition of these groups according to FFC-CC could dilute the framework agreement and hamper the political transition (Dabanga Sudan 2022 b). The international efforts should focus on nurturing new political arrangement that centres and invests in the pro-democracy movement and assist in building democratic leadership capacity (Al-Karib 2023).

In case of the military, Gen. Burhan utilised the dialogues with FFC to consolidate his leadership over numerous factions and protect himself from accountability for orchestrating the October 2021 coup. Moreover, Burhan is worried about the ability of individuals from the former regime to overthrow him. Therefore, an understanding with FFC is essential to thwart these forces. Al-Burhan’s efforts to widen support are crucial especially prior to the planned 2024 presidential elections. It is likely that Burhan could face several members of the former Bashir regime in the race for the post-transition presidency (Al-Karib 2023; Whiteman 2022).

### **Split between Military and Paramilitary Forces**

The current political situation has been further complicated by the open rift between head of the Sovereign Council and Chief of Staff of the SAF, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohamad Hamdan Dagalo, the

head of the RSF and deputy head of the Sovereign Council. The split has overshadowed the political process. The increasingly visible tension between Burhan and Dagalo can be seen in parallel foreign visits, conflicting public statements, and a heavy military presence in Khartoum. As mentioned earlier, the SAF and RSF collaborated to overthrow Al-Bashir as well as Hamdok government in October 2021. The army leaders forged a tactical understanding with RSF in the post-coup tussle with pro-democracy groups. RSF utilised this opportunity to increase its military build-up and deploy forces in Khartoum (Marsden 2023). In the aftermath of the December 2022 framework agreement, both Burhan and Dagalo are competing for political control in the changing political context that could lead to a civilian led government. While the military under Burhan is trying to establish its authority over RSF, the paramilitary force is unwilling to give up its independence (Hendawi 2023; Reuters 2023). General Burhan insisted that signing off any deal for political transition must include clear and precise language on the integration of the RSF in the military. Dagalo argued that integration of RSF is contingent on comprehensive restructuring of the armed forces. The military's difference with the RSF was seen as a time buying tactic to stall the armed forces reform process (Copnall 2023; Reuters 2023).

The RSF is unwilling to give up its political representation in any constitution framing or government formation talks. The December 2022 framework agreement further emboldened the RSF recognizing it as one of four security forces in Sudan alongside the military, police and general intelligence. According to the framework agreement, Dagalo as the RSF Commander was promoted who had earlier served as General Burhan's deputy in the Sovereign Council. Dagalo similar to the military chief will also be part of a new Security and Defence Council answerable to the civilian head of state as per the agreement (ICG 2023; Marsden 2023).

Both Burhan and Dagalo have been competing to build political support since the October 2021 coup. Burhan utilised the 2020 Sudanese military takeover of Al Fashaga in the disrupted eastern border region with Ethiopia to boost his national standing and receive endorsements from local tribal leaders. Dagalo also attempted to position himself as a champion of the periphery regions especially in the Darfur heartlands (Marsden 2023). The split between the two powerful leaders appeared in public after Dagalo disavowed the 2021 coup and called it a 'mistake' that opened doors for Al-Bashir's loyalists. He publically expressed support for the pro-democracy protests and accepted that he "sometimes makes mistakes" (Africa News 2023 a). General Mohamad Hamdan Dagalo's elder brother, Abdel Rahim Dagalo who serves as a senior lieutenant in the RSF also called for handing over power to the civilian government without delay. RSF is attempting to portray itself as 'defenders of the pro-democracy movement'. He also warned that RSF would not allow any more killings of anti-coup protestors or arrests of politicians (Hendawi 2023). It is likely that the RSF is worried about the continuing public demand in favour of civilian government. The critics however doubt RSF's sincerity in stopping killings, arrests or genuinely push for democratic transition. Moreover RSF avoided taking any accountability over the killings of civilians on 3 June 2019 as well as its role in genocide in Darfur.

The possibility of a full-scale conflict became visible after hundreds of RSF troops were transferred from Darfur to Khartoum in early March 2023. RSF clarified that the troop transfer is part of training exercise. The military following the movement of additional RSF forces also placed troops on high alert levels. The force reinforcement in Khartoum was seen as an act of posturing during deliberations with the military (Sudan Tribune 2023 a). Dagalo during his meeting with Gen. Burhan on 11 March 2023 called for commitment to the framework agreement. Burhan however insisted that the SAF would not hand over power until the inclusion

of more political groups (Nashed 2023). Due to the disagreements over the integration of RSF into the army, the signatory parties missed the deadlines twice on 1 and 6 April to sign the final agreement, formulate a transitional constitution and form a new transitional government with a new Prime Minister and state institutions by 11 April.

The power struggle between SAF under Burhan and RSF under Dagalo ultimately culminated into a full scale conflict. On 15 April 2023, in order to directly challenge the military led government, RSF began attacking key government sites including the Presidential Palace; Khartoum International Airport; Merowe Airport; El Obeid Airport, Soba military base (Al Arabiya 2023; Al Jazeera 2023 b). On 21 April, RSF announced a 72 hour humanitarian and opened the humanitarian corridor marking the Eid al-Fitr holiday. Gunfights however continued in Khartoum and other parts of the state. The US and Saudi Arabia on 24 April brokered another 72 hour ceasefire to establish humanitarian corridors; allow civilians to access essential resources, healthcare and safe zones and evacuate diplomatic missions. Both military and paramilitary forces at the present have maintained stubborn attitude and unwilling to compromise from their respective positions (Horton 2023; Al Jazeera 2023 c). Reportedly, around 604 people including civilians have been killed and around 5,100 injuries until 8 May 2023 (Crisis24 2023; Elhennawy 2023). It has led a new humanitarian crisis causing acute shortages of food, clean water, medicines, fuel, electricity and severely thwarted Sudan's prospects towards building a democratic state. It also raised fear of a protracted and unpredictable civil war that could witness increased presence of foreign armed groups and regional actors; flare up new fault lines in the restive peripheral regions; spread the conflict into bordering states such as South Sudan, Ethiopia, Chad, the Central African Republic, Libya and Egypt. The risk of biological warfare aggravated after RSF took over a Khartoum based lab containing polio isolates, measles and cholera isolates. It is feared

that in case of clash at the laboratory, it could turn the site into a germ bomb (Firstpost 2023 b; Horton 2023).

The present conflict has created a new refugee crisis for neighbouring states. Reportedly, around 20,000 Sudanese citizens fled to Chad and around 4,000 South Sudanese refugees returned to South Sudan. Moreover, an unspecified number has also fled to other neighbouring states. According to UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Sudan hosts around 1.1 million refugees as well as 3 million internally displaced persons largely in Darfur. Besides this, around 800,000 South Sudanese refugees reside in Sudan (Arab News 2023). The dire humanitarian situation could further worsen in case the fight continues. The fragile truce mediated by the US and Saudi Arabia is unlikely to halt the tensions which is primarily rooted in military and the paramilitary's efforts to preserve their respective self-interests. Sudan's political future remains on the brink and the hope for a democratic rule that seemed possible following Al-Bashir's ouster in April 2019 has been destroyed by the power competition between the security forces.

## **India-Sudan Bilateral Relations**

For India, Sudan is crucial for its strategic calculations in the Red Sea region as well as India's trade links connecting the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean. Sudan is integral to India's policy of diversifying energy sources by developing relations with Nigeria, Angola and Sudan (Harshe 2020). India after gaining freedom in August 1947 strongly favoured Sudan's independence. India's Chief Election Commissioner Sukumar Sen conducted Sudan's first parliamentary elections. India also provided budgetary support in the Sudanization Committee between February 1954 and April 1955 to replace British officials. After Sudan's independence in 1956, India carried out several profile visits by then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in July 1957; Vice President Dr. Zakir

Hussain in April 1963; President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed in December 1975 and President A P J Abdul Kalam in October 2003. Sudanese heads of state and governments have visited India on several occasions (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023).

India opposed UN resolutions critical of Sudan in 1993 and 1994 as well as International Monetary Fund's decision to expel Sudan in 1994 (Ministry of External Affairs 2017). Despite international sanctions, India maintained extensive relations with Sudan and in fact it was one of the few states to host Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir in October 2015 on the occasion of 3<sup>rd</sup> India-Africa Forum Summit (The Economic Times 2015). India and Sudan through mutual understanding have set up instruments for direct and regular communication through Joint Ministerial Commission (JMC) rounds since 1997 and Foreign Office Consultations (FOC) since 2000. In January 1995, the Indo-Sudanese Joint Committee was formed. It was upgraded to Joint Ministerial Commission (JMC) in June 1997 during the visit by Foreign Minister Ali Osman Taha. The first round of JMC was held in New Delhi in November 1997 and second round was held in Khartoum in April 2000. The third round was held after a gap of 17 years on 20-21 February 2017. On 3 December 2018, eighth round of FOC was held in New Delhi (Ministry of External Affairs 2019; Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023).

Both states have agreed on bilateral cooperation in hydrocarbon, mining, agriculture, finance, solar energy etc. India has offered Duty Free Tariff Preference Scheme for Least Developed Countries including Sudan. Sudan has also benefitted from Line of Credit since 1980. India has provided around US\$ 617.12 million until 2019 for numerous projects in Sudan (Ministry of External Affairs 2019; Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023). India has funded solar electrification systems, supported railway infrastructure and invested in steel units, packaging industry, agro

products, food and beverages, pharmaceutical industry etc. Indian government under Pan-African E-Network introduced e-Vidya Bharati tele-education and Arogya Bharati tele-medicine network for integration in Sudanese educational institutions and hospitals. India has extended diplomatic training under Professional Courses for Foreign Diplomats (PCFD) and higher education scholarship to Sudanese professionals and students under CV Raman Fellowship programme. India is a key medical tourism destination for Sudanese citizens. In the cultural sphere, Indian government's efforts have facilitated MOU to set up Hindi Language Chair at Alzaeim Al Azhari University in Khartoum. Yoga is also crucial arena of soft power for India in Sudan (Ministry of External Affairs 2019; Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023).

**Table 1: Bilateral Trade between India and Sudan (2005-2021)**

	India's Exports (US\$ million)	India's Imports (US\$ million)	Total Trade (US\$ millions)
2005-2006	294.65	32.62	327.27
2006-2007	403.49	89.08	492.57
2007-2008	407.51	433.14	840.65
2008-2009	485.07	415.53	900.6
2009-2010	461.06	475	936.06
2010-2011	488.46	613.78	1102.24
2011-2012	717.37	438.18	1155.55
2012-2013	754.94	133.34	888.28
2013-2014	862.17	436.19	1298.36
2014-2015	882.46	569.66	1452.12
2015-2016	782.48	149.2	931.68
2016-2017	753.23	166.21	919.44
2017-2018	822.71	452.07	1274.78
2018-2019	920.88	742.63	1663.52
2019-2020	1096.88	396.75	1493.63
2020-2021	1022.33	368.28	1390.61
2021-2022	523.84	129.15	1206.4

Source: Ministry of External Affairs 2017 & Indian Ministry of Commerce & Industry 2021

Table 1 indicates that the total trade between India and Sudan has grown from US\$ 327.27 million in 2005-2006 to US\$ 1390.61 million in 2020-2021. India in the recent years has remained one among the top five trade partners for Sudan. Sudan since 2009 is included in India's Duty Free and Preferential Treatment (DFTP) Scheme for Least Developed Countries (LDC) (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023).

### **India's Inroads in Energy Sector**

India's political and diplomatic support for Sudan has allowed it to make significant inroads especially in the energy sector. India was seen as crucial partner by Sudan to overcome isolation by the west and China's growing dominance. Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) Videsh Ltd. (OVL) invested around US\$ 2.3 billion in undivided Sudan (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023). In March 2003, OVL invested US\$ 750 million to acquire 25 percent equity in the Greater Nile Oil Project (GNOP), initially an area of 49,500 sq. km. in the Muglad basin consisting of upstream assets of on-land blocks 1, 2 and 4 (Puri 2004; The Economic Times 2017). India after 2011 partition holds Blocks 2A, 2B and 4N in Sudan and Blocks 1A, 1B and 4S in South Sudan (Das 2017).

OVL in 2020 along with its Chinese and Malaysian partners, CNCP and Petronas respectively have exited from Sudan due to failure by the government to provide timely payments. Sudan's limited oil production after 2011 partition was incapable of meeting the requirements of local refineries. It asked the foreign firms to sell their share of crude oil to local refineries. Sudanese government did not pay OVL and partners for oil it purchased since 2011 (Battersby, Yihe, Esau & Morgan 2019).

According to the 2003 agreement, Sudan was supposed to cover the project cost and rental worth US\$ 254 million in 18 half yearly equated instalments of US\$ 14.135 million since December 2005. OVL received



11 instalments worth US\$ 155.48 million until December 2010. For OVL alone, Sudan's dues are around US\$ 430.69 million. OVL did not receive US\$ 99 million for 741 km pipeline it built between Port Sudan and Khartoum which was handed over to Sudanese government in October 2005 (The Economic Times 2020 a). Minister of State for Petroleum and Natural Gas Rameswar Teli in a written reply in Rajya Sabha in December 2021 mentioned that Sudan owes total of US\$ 560 million in unpaid oil dues and cost of pipeline (The Economic Times 2021).

OVL after exhausting available diplomatic channels initiated arbitration to recover the pending amount and terminated the Exploration and Production Sharing Agreement (EPSA). On 6 April 2023, OVL won a US\$ 190 million arbitration award against Sudan in the long-standing dispute over oil and pipeline construction payments. In case of non-receipt of payments, OVL has option of approaching the court and seeking to seize Sudanese government assets in different states to collect dues. OVL currently has focussed on diplomatic channels to receive the sum (African Arbitration Association 2023; Choudhary 2023). Despite the hiccup in OVL's ventures and arbitration, India continues to place significant importance due to Sudan's strategic position and interest in its stability.

### **India's Engagement with the Transitional Government**

India maintained a quiet attitude during the 2019 protest that led to Al-Bashir's ouster. Indian Embassy in Khartoum only issued advisory for Indians to restrict their movement, remain cautious and avoid crowded places, protest sites and military bases. India was closely monitoring the internal and external developments after Al-Bashir's removal. India after the establishment of the transitional government made efforts to rejuvenate trade, energy including renewable sources links. Sudan supported India's candidature in the UN Security Council (UNSC) for 2021-22 as well as observer status at the Djibouti Code of Conduct or Jeddah Amendment;

International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) and International Maritime Organisation (IMO) (The Economic Times 2020 b).

New Delhi called Sudan's removal from the US List of State Sponsors of Terrorism as an important milestone and supported normalisation of ties with Israel (The Print 2020). New Delhi welcomed the measures to compliment the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement including expanding the Sovereign Council, restructuring the transitional parliament and formation of the new cabinet including JPA signatories (NDTV 2020). India has identified trust deficit among the parties, outstanding security concerns and lack of financial resources as major problem areas that could hinder successful implementation of federal and democratic system under the said deal. India on repeated occasions expressed support for all efforts of the Abdallah Hamdok government to achieve democratisation and called for ensuring that transitional institutions have inclusive, effective and clearly defined mandates. India backed transitional government's efforts to continue institutional and legal reforms and expressed concern about the continuing inter-communal violence in Darfur. It appreciated the efforts by the transitional government to bring normalcy in the region including setting up of National Plan for Civilian Protection and building 12,000 member protection forces. India called on the armed groups that remained outside the peace process to join the negotiating table (The Print 2020; NDTV 2020).

India hosted Dr. Hamid Suliman Hamid, Undersecretary, Ministry of Energy and Mining to attend 2<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly of International Solar Alliance between 30 October and 2 November 2019. The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the Export-Import (EXIM) Bank organised the first ever "Regional Conclave on India-West Asia North Africa" in Cairo on 6-7 November 2019 to tap into expanding business opportunities for Indian businesses. India hosted Judge Fathia Abd Bagi Fadul and two

other members of Sudanese National Supreme Court during International Judicial Conference on 21-23 February 2020. Sudan PM's Advisor on International Partnerships, Omer Gamereldin virtually participated meeting with Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), UN Development Programme (UNDP) and Indian Ministry of External Affairs (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023). Khairy Abdelrahman Ahmed, Acting Minister of Energy and Mining participated in International Solar Alliance's Summit on 8 September 2020 (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023).

Indian Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan and Sudanese Acting Foreign Minister Omar Gamar Aldin Ismail held virtual meeting on 14 December 2020 to review the bilateral relations since the transitional government assumed office. Both states discussed their government's national approaches to tackle COVID-19 and agreed to harness the vast potential for cooperation in infrastructure, agriculture, mining, renewable energy, health, education etc. India provided 828,000 COVID-19 doses to Sudan until 17 March 2021 (Press Information Bureau 2021).

In terms of defence cooperation, Indian military has trained Sudanese soldiers. On naval front, INS Airavat visited Port Sudan between 2 and 4 November 2020 carrying 100 metric tons of food aid. On 10 September 2021, INS Tabar carried out Maritime Exercise (PASSEX) with Sudanese warships, Abdelfadil Almaz and Almak-Nimr in Red Sea (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023). India is also helping Sudan in the fintech and telecom sector. The National Information Centre (NIC) of Sudan and Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) held meeting on 23 August 2021 to understand the Aadhar project. On 2 September 2021, Indian mission in collaboration with NIC organised webinar on "Sharing India's experience in e-Governance in Khartoum (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023).

Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) and Telecommunication and Post Regulatory Authority (TPRA) of Sudan on 6 April 2021 signed a Letter of Intent (LoI) to advance cooperation in exchange of ideas, information, personnel, skills, capacity building and regulatory experience during a virtual meeting. TRAI conducted a five-day Capacity Building Programme from 20-24 September 2021 for TPRA officers (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023). Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) signed an MOU on 25 February 2021 with Sudanese Standards & Metrology Organisation (SSMO) on 25 February 2021. BIS according to the MOU provided right to SSMO to use indigenously developed Indian Standards. The Indian government, following the floods in July-August 2020 and the COVID pandemic, donated 100 MT food aid i.e. 75 MT white flour and 25 MT sugar on November 2, 2020. In April 2021, Indian government donated 6 tonnes of essential medicines to Sudan (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023).

In terms of capacity building, the Indian representative noted that more than 290 scholarships are provided to Sudanese citizens under Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Training courses. ITEC is the flagship capacity building programme of Indian government providing training to eligible candidates from developing states in various fields including Accounts, Finance, Management, IT, Environment, Solar and wind turbine energy, English proficiency courses etc. India has bilaterally implemented 49 projects in energy, transport and agro industry projects through concessional lines of credit worth US\$ 612 million (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023).

Notably, Indian Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan visited Sudan, one week before the coup on 18 and 19 October 2021 and met with Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok and military chief, Abdallah Fatah al-Burhan and Foreign Minister Dr. Mariam Al-Sadig Al Mahdi focussing largely on bilateral relations and global issues of common

interest. The Indian leader visited the National Energy Research Centre in Khartoum to study its functioning. India through Exim Bank's Line of Credit provided Sudan with photovoltaic modules fabrication machines that are currently in use in the research centre. Muraleedharan also interacted with the business community in Khartoum and emphasised on further strengthening trade channels (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023; United News of India 2021).

### **India's Dynamics with the Military-Led Regime**

Following the October 2021 military coup, the diplomatic relations and defence ties between India and Sudan have continued. In February 2022, a delegation of Defence Industries System of Sudan visited Indian firms leading to three MOUs with Rashtriya Metal Industries Ltd (RIML), Advanced Weapons and Equipment India Limited (AWEIL) and Hyderabad Precision Manufacturing. DIS also proposed two MOUs to Yantra India Limited (YIL) and Munition India Ltd (MIL). On 07 July 2022, INS Tarkash carried out Joint Maritime Exercises with Sudan warships Almazz and Nimer in the Red Sea. Sudanese Minister of Trade and Supply, Ms. Amal Saleh visited India in July 2022 to participate in CII-EXIM Bank India-Africa Conclave. In October 2022, Secretary General, Ministry of Defence, Lt. Gen. Esam Mohamed Hassan Karar and the Commander of the Ground Forces, Lt. Gen. Rashad Abd Alhamid Ismail participated in DEFEXPO-2022 in Gandhinagar. In November 2022, Sudanese Interior Minister and Director General of Police, Lt. Gen. Anan Hamed Mohamed Omer visited India for third Ministerial Conference on Counter-Terrorism Financing (NMFT). Sudanese Minister of Finance and Economic Planning, Dr. Gibril Ibrahim Mohammed virtually participated in the Voice of the Global South Summit hosted by India on 12 and 13 January 2023 (Embassy of India, Khartoum 2023).

India following the October 2021 coup maintained a cautious posture and public statements were focussed on safety of Indian nationals and protecting Indian strategic investments and assets. India is closely observing the recent developments in light of the escalation between military and paramilitary forces since 15 April 2023. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar held discussion with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in New York about the ongoing developments in Sudan. Jaishankar emphasised the role of the UN in establishing ceasefire lines. He insisted that “unless there is a ceasefire, and unless there are corridors, it’s not safe for people really to come out” (NDTV 2023). As mentioned earlier, Indian government has cordial terms with General Burhan and Dagalo since both leaders served in the Sovereign Council during the transitional government period. India’s current approach is based on ensuring the safety of its nationals. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, there are currently around 4000 Indians working in various fields as professionals, skilled workers, entrepreneurs and international organisations in Sudan. Many Indians are facing shortage of food, water and electricity. On 16 April, one Indian national, Albert Augustine was killed by stray bullets. He was working as a security manager at a Khartoum based firm, Dal Group Company (Philip 2023; The Indian Express 2023; Bhattacharya 2023).

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi presided over a high level meeting on 21 April 2023 to discuss the conditions of Indians stranded in the state. The meeting was attended by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, Indian ambassador to Sudan B.S. Mubarak, Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra and Secretary in charge of Overseas Indian Affairs Ausaf Sayeed (Philip 2023; The Indian Express 2023). Prime Minister Modi directed officials to stay vigilant; monitor the developments; evaluate the safety of Indians; provide all necessary assistance and prepare contingency evacuation plans (Philip 2023; The Indian Express 2023; Bhattacharya 2023). The Ministry of External Affairs warned Indians about the active

fighting close to its embassy and advised to avoid the Indian mission building. Indian government has opened a 24\*7 dedicated control room for providing information and assistance (Indian Express 2023; Firstpost 2023 a).

Indian government has maintained constant touch with the authorities in Sudan as well as the UN, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and the US. Indian government has placed two Indian Air Force (IAF) planes in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on standby to carry out evacuation operations. Indian navy patrol vessel INS Sumedha also reached Port Sudan on 23 April (Firstpost 2023 a). India since 24 April launched 'Operation Kaveri' to evacuate Indian citizens stranded in the war torn state. In the first batch, around 278 Indians were transported from Port Sudan to Jeddah by INS Sumedha. Indian government in total rescued 3862 nationals under Operation Kaveri that came to close on 5 May (ANI News 2023; The Times of India 2023; The Economic Times 2023; Bhaumik 2023). The on-going conflict in Sudan has brought to light the direct ramification of the unstable security regional environment on the Indian diaspora. In case of further escalation, the diaspora community serving in all sectors of the economy are at high risk. Indian government will likely continue to coordinate the Sudanese leadership and external players to coordinate the evacuation missions and discuss on approaches to subside the conflict.

## **Conclusion**

The protest in Sudan between December 2018 and April 2019 toppled the regime of long-time autocrat, Omar Al-Bashir on 11 April 2019. The protests reflected the desire among Sudanese people to overcome its economic and political issues; offered an opportunity to initiate a functioning democratic political order and install a civilian led government. The military reluctantly agreed to power sharing with civilian government in a three year transition period with the eventual goal to prepare for

democratically elected civilian led government with limited role for the military. The transitional government under Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, despite its shortcomings managed to sign peace agreements with rebel groups, broadened civil liberties and religious freedoms, place Omar Al-Bashir on trial and normalise relations with Israel. However, economic stagnancy worsened by COVID-19 and 2020 and 2021 floods, coercive laws, harsh security measures; competing political interests among political actors, protest groups and armed rebel groups and crucially the self-interests of the SAF and RSF jeopardised the path to democratisation.

The relationship between the civilian and military leadership had been tense throughout the transition government period from 20 August 2019 until the military coup on 25 October 2021. The military coup was backed by the RSF. The military temporarily allowed Hamdok to assume the Prime Minister's position until January 2022 due to domestic and international pressure. The coup broke the trust in military's willingness to embrace the democratic path and protests continued in favour of democratic transition throughout 2022. The December Framework Agreement offered a breakthrough to overcome the impasse and ease the path for civilian rule. The agreement however ignored crucial issues such as selection of Prime Minister and cabinet, transitional justice, accountability, security sector reform. Therefore, the agreement only offered the Sudanese people, the option of settling for military rule or a hybrid military-civilian government in the name of stability and security making it unlikely for the state to overcome the cycle of democratic regression, violence and military intervention. The framework agreement also elevated the position of RSF Chief, Dagalo as par with Burhan opening the fault lines between the military and the paramilitary force. Currently, the power struggle between the SAF and RSF has transformed into a full-scale conflict creating new uncertainty. The current conflict has shattered the hope among the pro-democracy forces and Sudanese people in general to achieve a democratic



future. The recent flare up is likely to continue that could be diluted through compromises and bargaining offered by international actors and organisations. However, the military and paramilitary is unwilling to concede their respective positions.

Sudan's history of civic mobilisation suggests that it would be difficult for the military to undo the democratic process. The public pressure for limiting military's political and economic role and establishment of civilian led democracy will remain. However, the conflict has disrupted the said momentum and it is likely that political uncertainty will remain until military and the paramilitary could reach an unlikely compromise. India has adopted wait and watch response and its current approach is focused on ensuring the welfare and safety of its citizens. New Delhi after return of normalcy and stability will actively resume its activities in the already wide-ranging fields of cooperation with Sudan.

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## **About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

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### **VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi – 110021

Phone: +91-11-24121764, 24106698

Email: [info@vifindia.org](mailto:info@vifindia.org),

Website: <https://www.vifindia.org>

Follow us on [twitter@vifindia](https://twitter.com/vifindia)