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The Dynamics of Current Conflict 2023 in Sudan:

Post Islamist Transition Conundrum

Chapter Four

Sudan has had two previous successful revolutions against military dictatorships (1964 and 1985) but they did not last due to leadership's inability to fulfil peoples aspirations. Going by recent history, the war of April 15, 2023, between General Abdul-Fattah Al-Burhan, and General Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo, can be argued to be a direct manifestation of the conspiracies waged by the Islamists to counter the revolution and pave the way for their return to power.

In-depth analysis of the current conflict in Sudan of 2023 is likely to reveal that the focal point of analysis and the core/axis of the Sudanese crisis and war are the Islamists. Since their seizure of power, they had derailed the state from its natural track, and later on—throughout the transitional period—they derailed the December 2018 Revolution from its proper path.

To discuss this hypothesis, it is significant to point out the post-Islamist Regime transition in Sudan was/is handicapped by many factors:

First, the transitional government formed by the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC)—who organized the peaceful civil resistance which deposed General Al-Bashir in April 2019—had been impeded by a counter revolution waged by the 'militant' Islamists. The Islamists already established a 'deep state' since they assumed power through a military coup led by Gen. Omer HA Al-Bashir on June 30, 1989.

Second, the Islamist regime established institutions parallel to the state apparatus—in security, the police, the army, and the economy. Gen. Al-Bashir—who was influenced by the late Islamists' leader, Dr. Hassan Abdulla Al-Turabi—deposed any person who is not loyal to their Political Party (The National Congress Party).

Third, the Islamists established their own police, various para-military forces such as the units of Jihad in universities and different ministries, students' security, *Kataiyeb Al-Zil* (shadow battalions)—that means those, which operate behind the scene, and the people's Defense (*Al-Defa'a Al-Sha'abi*). They received especial training and well-armed to lead a 'sacred war' against the Southerners, and later on against the rebel movements in different parts of Sudan who took arms against the central government of Khartoum for policies of exclusion, marginalization and injustice. The Islamists penetrated ideologically into the society, dominated trade unions, women, youth and students' associations.

As ethnic conflicts erupted in Darfur, the Islamist regime was not neutral in dealing with the conflicting parties where the Islamists' government supported the Arab tribes against the non-Arab (Musa, 2009). It established the 'Janjaweed' militia whose personnel were drawn from the Arab tribes. In 2013 the Janjaweed were changed into the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo (nicknamed Hemeidti). The goal behind this was to annihilate the rebel movements of Darfur who were mainly the non-Arab (African Negroes) tribes who obtained weapons from Chad (intra-tribal solidarity though they geographically live in different countries), where the late Chadian President Idris Debi belongs to Zaghawa. This tribe led and dominated one of the two

major armed movements in Darfur against the Islamist regime, Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Actually, borders separate about 23 tribes—that share ethnic belonging with their counterparts in either of the two countries (Musa 2009: 78).

By 2017, the RSF did a good job for Gen. Al-Bashir in defeating the movements in a few battles in Darfur.

As opposition to the Islamists grew vigorously. Gen. Al-Bashir called the RSF to Khartoum to crush the demonstrators. However, when Hemeidti arrived Khartoum and saw the extent of suffering and oppression of the people by the Islamist regime, he took the side with protestors and forced Al-Bashir to step down. It might be a matter of lack of confidence on the Army's loyalty, that Gen. Al-Bashir did not rely on the Army to do the job. While Gen. Al-Bashir was building up these (para-military) forces, he neglected the army. The army was weakened and demoralized. The salary of an RSF officer is ten times that of the officer in the Army. Al-Bashir was also not sure about the allegiance of all military officers or how far they are loyal to him. Moreover, transition in Sudan was further undermined by the Egyptian interference in Sudan's affairs to guarantee the flow of the Sudan's agricultural products. So, Egypt supported Gen. Abdul-Fattah Al-Burhan—despite being backed by the Islamists—to protect its vital interests in Sudan—not only with respect to economic interests only but also with respect to the Nile Water vis-à-vis the dispute over the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) which Egypt sees as endangering their life. Paradoxically, Egypt—which is fighting Islamists at home—supports the military in Sudan (who is fleshed by Islamists)—to ward off potential challenges to its allies in the SA. Therefore, a fourth factor hindering the peaceful democratic transition in Sudan is the existence of five armies in the country besides the official Sudan's Army—a situation inherited from Al-Bashir's Islamist regime. There were the RSFs, the two-armed movements of Darfur (JEM and SLM), the Northern Faction of former Garang's SPLM/A (known as the SPLM/North, formed after the secession of the South). These latter ones include Malik Agar's Army, of the S. Blue Nile, and that of the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan state, led by Commander Abdel Aziz Al-Hilo. Abdel Wahid M. Noor (resident in Paris), of the Sudan Liberation Movement, has also his own army active in Jebel Marra area in the Central state of Darfur (Musa, 2021).

In October 2020, two of the rebel movements (JEM and SLA) signed a peace agreement with the Transitional Government in Juba. Accordingly, the leaders of the two movements obtained seven federal ministries and some state governorship in the Transitional Government (TG) whereas the people in Darfur got nothing—although there are many provisions for their sake in the agreement but were ignored by the insurgents. This was one of the political mistakes of the Transitional Prime Minister, Abdullah Hamdok (named in August 2019) who signed such an agreement. Abdulla Hamdok was named by the FFC as Prime Minister in August 2019. The cabinet, which was formed on party basis-lacked cohesion, harmony and competence. Conflicts erupted on two levels: among the FFC (civil-civil) on the one hand, and between the cabinet/FFC and the military component of the Council of Sovereignty on the other. Intra-civil conflicts along with the lack of competence and effectiveness resulted in a poor performance of the TG that was further weakened by the vindictive activities waged by the Islamists' counter-revolution. This caused deterioration in security, economic conditions and services provided to the citizens. These conflicts and deterioration in general conditions of life in Sudan provided Gen. Al-Burhan with justifications to adopt new measures.(Musa, 2021, p. 13)

Consequently, on October 25, 2021, General al-Burhan dissolved the TG (the cabinet and the CS), suspended seven articles in the Constitutional Charter, declared the state of emergency, released all ministers, state governors, as well as the undersecretaries, detained some ministers and put Hamdok under house arrest. The Forces of Freedom and Change 2 (FFC-2)(who align with the military) commended the decisions, describing them as a correction to the path of the revolution and ended the sit-in—which they had launched in Mid October 2021—whereas the FFC-1 described al-Burhan's decisions as a “military coup”. Nonetheless, demonstrations broke out in hundreds of thousands—in Khartoum and several towns all over the country—denouncing the coup

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and calling for reinstatement of Hamdok's civil cabinet. Despite being largely peaceful, forty people were killed and hundreds were injured in three protests (on October 21, Oct. 30, Nov. 13 and Nov. 17, 2021). In the face of continual demonstrations and international pressure, Gen. al-Burhan signed a “Political Agreement” with Hamdok on November 21, 2021—ending his house arrest, releasing political detainees, declaring a commitment to: form a technocratic cabinet, completing the institutions of the transition and organizing elections by July 2023.(Musa, 2021: 13)

In the next month, November 21, 2021, Hamdok signed a pact with Gen. Al-Burhan. His justification was that he aimed at stopping the bloodshed (ie the killing of protesters). However, killing of demonstrators continued. The demonstrators criticized Hamdok for signing that agreement which was not in favour of the revolutionary process. They believed that Prime Minister Hamdok “betrayed the revolution” by signing that agreement with the military leaders who were an extension of the Islamists' regime “in the removal of which many innocent civilians paid with their lives in heroic sacrifices”. Subsequently, Hamdok's popularity dropped dramatically. Few days later, he resigned and left the country. Al-Burhan exploited the opportunity and reinstated all elements of the Islamists' deposed regime in all posts in the state (Musa, 2021: 14).

For half a year, the political parties were still looking for a formula to form the cabinet. However, this was hindered

by disputes over “who will take what?” The revolutionary forces—the youth (known as “the Committees of Resistance”) decided to bypass these competing elites and formed a cabinet of technocrats to be supported by a transitional national Revolutionary Council, which would form a transitional “Parliament of the People,” to be realized through elections from the bottom (local council at the residential areas) up to the federal level. The

FFC who were already divided into two factions, were supported by the international community as represented by 'the Tripartite Mechanism' that was formed in June 2020 composed of the UN, IGAD and the African Union. Additionally, there is a 'Quadruple Committee'—which include the USA, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and the KSA—meant to support the political process in a bid to help the civil forces to achieve a consensus over a transitional government (Musa, 2021: 14).

Responding to internal and international pressures Gen. Al-Burhan and Gen. Hemedti signed the so-called "The Frame Political Agreement" with FFC. Among its articles, the military should no longer involve in politics, nor in commercial activities, amalgamating the RSF into one national, professional army and a civil prime minister vested with broad powers including appointing the Director of the Security and Intelligence Body (Munzul, 2023).

This Political Agreement would knock the Islamists out of the political sphere and would strip them of any power by which they can influence the government or be represented in the transitional government. Therefore, they waged intensive criticism against the Agreement alleging that the signatories had no legitimacy for the action or not authorized to do that. Hemedti declared that he would strongly support the Agreement and support a peaceful democratic transition. However, there appeared some points of difference particularly between the Army and the RSF with respect to the period of amalgamation. Tensions erupted and media war with heated debate and exchange of accusations that led to the outbreak of war between the two Generals—Al-Burhan and Hemedti in April 2023 (author's observation and analysis).

The third transitional government (began in September 2019) has so far failed (at least in terms of timelines) to achieve what the previous two had accomplished in putting the country to a path of democratization for the following reasons/factors:

First, at the time of the two previous transitions, the army was still relatively a national professional army, not yet manipulated or dominated by one political party or partisan allegiance to one ideology contrary to what

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happened under the Islamist regime. Starting by 1989, when the Islamists—by the help of their elements (officers) in the Army—toppled the democratically elected government, Thereafter, no one can join the colleges of Military or the Police only if he is a genuine member of their movement or recommended by an Islamist figure. Thus, the Military and Police colleges, and hence the jobs therein, were confined to Islamists. Therefore, when the Popular Uprising broke out in 2018 against the Islamist regime the protesters were not facing the national army per se, but rather "the army of the Islamists"—as the protesters believe and see as a fact. Parallel to the official army, the Islamists have their own Militias such as the Jihadists, militant students' cells, special secret missions' militias (known as *Katayib al-Zil* (the shadow or behind the scene battalions). Therefore, they used excessive force against the civil protesters to crush the demonstrations because the success of the Uprising threatens their existence in office and their interests. This explains why the regular forces dealt with the demonstrators brutally—killing tens and injuring hundreds every month.

Second, unlike under the two previous uprisings' transitions, the Islamists in the third transitional period used their 'deep state' against the transitional government and led a counter-revolution to cripple it in a bid to declare its failure and justify their come back to power. Here the Islamists used other pretext that the leading figures of the transitional government are "secular, leftists and communists" and the Islam in Sudan will be in danger under their rule. However, the fact is that when the Islamists were in power for 30 years, they did not serve Islam but rather they distorted the image of Islam by alleging that they are Islamists whereas in practice their behavior has nothing to do with Islamic teachings and values.

Third, the Islamists used the state apparatus and institutions to sustain their interests and protect their stay in office against any opposition and when the civil resistance broke out in 2018, they were not willing to give up power to the people. Unlike the two previous uprisings where the Army forced the two generals (Abboud, in 1964 and Nimeiri in 1969) to step down. In the Uprising of 2018 the strong and nation-wide demonstrations—that paralyzed life in Sudan—the Security Committee of al-Bashir's regime, pressured al-Bashir to relinquish.

Fourth, unlike under the two previous transitions where there was only one army, at the third one there are five armies. That has posed great challenge to the stability of the Transitional Government and undermined security in the country. When al-Bashir was toppled on April 11, 2019, there were more than five armies in Khartoum: the regular Sudanese Armed Forces (ie, the Sudan official Army), and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF—led by General MH Dagalo, nicknamed Hemeidti). Then each of the other major armed opposition movements have its own army. The Sudan Liberation Army, Justice and Equality Movement, Sudan liberation Movement, The Sudan People's Liberation Army/North—originally part of the Late Gerang's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). This one includes two armed factions: one in the Blue Nile state led by Malik Agar, and the other in the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan led by Commander Abdel Aziz Al-Hilo. (Musa, 21, 14). Fifth, In the past two transitions, there were no tribal conflicts on large scale with fire guns, nor armed rebel movements in Darfur and other parts of the country. They all emerged under the Islamists' regime as a reaction for its mismanagement of the country and mistakes in handling the public affairs. These include inequitable development, injustice, exclusion of those who belong to certain ethnicities and regions, or those who do not belong to the Islamic movement. Sixth, under the previous two transitions, according to this author, there was no foreign intervention

as is the case with the third one .

The Prelude to Conflict: Uneasy alliances

The FFC which organized the protests, allies under this name in January 2019 combining tens of political parties and professional associations, suffered from schisms when the well-organized Sudanese Communist Party broke away on 7 November 2020. Some other civil society organizations and professional associations followed suit leaving the FFC with only few (four) political parties (Musa, 2021: 14)

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Conflicts broke out in the FFC over power sharing—with regard to “who takes what in the transitional cabinet!”

If they were not selfish and formed the cabinet from ‘independent’ (ie non-partisan) or neutral technocrats, as it was the case with the two previous transitions, the state of affairs might have taken a different track, or might have secured a smooth transition. However, forming the cabinet on partisan basis brought incompetent elements, with poor performance vis-à-vis great challenges and conspiracies continually and intensively being waged by the Islamists who still control the nerves of the state machinery (Musa, 2021: 14)

These points of weaknesses were cunningly exploited by the Islamists by hindering the proper performance of state apparatus, worsening the economic conditions and security situation. The intra-FFC differences were paralleled by inter-FFC dissensions—the critique waged by the parties, which defected from it, as well as aggravated by the FFC-military disputes over major issues that—with media war of exchanging accusations—developed into conflicts over handling the TG. The military component of the CS encroached onto the Executive’s jurisdictions and controlled files that do not fall within their authorities and powers—as the Constitutional Declaration demarcated it (Musa, 2021: 14)

Meanwhile, tens of parties—including the two major opposition movement of Darfur (the Justice and Equality Movement, led by Jebreel Ibrahim, and the Sudan Liberation Movement, led by Mini Arko Minawi) met on October 16, 21, signed a charter and declared the formation of the “National Consensus”(NC). They are labeled as “FFC-2” as they broke away from the mainstream FFC which organized and led the protests of the Uprising (2018/19). After witnessing split this main faction is known as “the FFC-the Central Council” or (FFC-1)”. Then the new faction waged a campaign of criticism against Hamdok’s cabinet of being controlled by only four parties while excluding the majority. On October 16, 2021, this FFC-2 (the National Consensus) organized a sit-in at the Republican Palace in Khartoum asking for the dissolution of Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok’s cabinet, dismantle the monopoly of the four parties and broaden the participation in the TG to be representative to the different revolutionary forces (Musa, 2021: 15).

Consequently, in response to the demands of the FFC-2, on October 25, 2021, General al-Burhan dissolved the TG (the cabinet and the CS), suspended seven articles in the Constitutional Declaration, declared the state of emergency, released all ministers, state governors, as well as the undersecretaries, detained some ministers and put Hamdok under house arrest. The FF-2 (NC) commended the decisions, described them as a correction to the path of the revolution and ended the sit-in. whereas the FFC-1 described al-Burhan’s decisions as a “military coup”. Nonetheless, demonstrations broke out in hundreds of thousands—in Khartoum and several towns all over the country—denouncing the coup and calling for reinstating Hamdok’s civil cabinet. As highlighted in the preceding literature, Despite being peaceful, Forty people were killed and hundreds were injured in three protests (on October 21, Oct. 30, Nov. 13 and Nov. 17, 2021). In the face of continual demonstrations and international pressure, Gen. al-Burhan signed a “Political Agreement” with Hamdok on November 21, 2021—ending his house arrest, releasing political detainees, declaring a commitment to: form a technocrat cabinet, completing the institutions of the transition and organize elections by July 2023 (Musa, 2022: 14).

On 5 December 2022, the major participants of the political process signed a Political Framework Agreement: The Army, the RSF and the representatives of the civil forces. About 39 political parties and associations signed. The Trilateral Mechanism that was formed from the UN, the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) sponsored it. Actually, this mechanism came as an implementation of the UN Security Council’s Resolution No.(2524) on June 3, 2020. The UNITAMS (The UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission

in Sudan) as a special political mission to provide support to Sudan for initial 12-month period during its political transition to democratic rule (Europa Publications 2022). Volker Pirthes was assigned as the head of the mission. He became active in Khartoum trying to bring the conflicting parties to agree on forming an effective and

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efficient transitional government but failed to do that amidst deep differences on the issue on the part of the ‘disputers’.(IGAD, 2023).

Although Volker was keen to undertake his task, the FFC-2 and other social groups, declared that Volker is not

neutral—taking side with FFC-1 (the central council). They later on pressured on al-Burhan (who reinstated all Islamists in state's key posts after dissolving Hamdok's cabinet in October 2021) to declare Volker as a *persona non grata*. The declaration that was announced by the Sudan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs was bitterly criticized, as this diplomatic tradition is applicable to states' diplomats only—not to the UN officials. Nonetheless, in mid-September 2023 (the war of the Generals was still on progress) Volker decided to quit and left Sudan. Actually, Volker was supporting smooth transitions through formation a civil government. The Islamists however accused him of bias. This was more likely for the reason that the formation of a civil government according to what was proposed by the Political Framework Agreement, would knock them (the Islamists) out of the political scene as the Agreement postulates excluding the Army (and the RSF) from the political process. This would endanger them because they could involve in the political process—or even participate in the transitional cabinet—only as far as the Army is one component of the transitional government. (Remember that the Islamists dominate the Army). This—partly—explains the mechanisms of the political crisis crippling the third transitional period in Sudan.

Foreign intervention

In the final days on Omar El Bashir, the RSF had become better equipped than the Sudanese official Armed Forces. The RSF were able to obtain advanced weapons and were financially better off. They had different sources of funding—notably: the gold whose mines in Darfur are controlled by Gen. Hemeidti; the European Union funds for the RSF for warding off the illegal migration to Europe coming from different African countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, the Republic of Central Africa, and Chad. In addition, they previously received money in hard currency from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) for fighting in Yemen (Stephen, 2020). This is besides their salaries from the government of Sudan. In addition, Russia benefited from the gold; it was believed that the Western sanctions had not had a powerful impact on Russia when it waged war against Ukraine. So that many army officers endeavor to get seconded to the RSF. Having (official) military officers among the RSF, complicated the relationship between the two sides. Moreover, the UAE has dealings with both the SAF and RSF, and warring parties have to varying degrees, fought in Yemen alongside the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Egypt has historically supported the SAF and in recent years, there were frequent joint exercises between Sudanese and Egyptian armed forces. Tensions erupted between the two sides during the transitional period as the RSF's leader, Gen. Hemeidti declared his support for the (FFC) and peaceful civil transition to elections and that he would not allow any more killing of the protestors (denoting that he is against the Islamists who ally with military component of the Transitional Government). Tension between the two sides also escalated when the Commander-in-Chief of the military (and head of the Transitional Council of Sovereignty) declared that the RSFs are rebels and deposed Gen. Hemeidti from his post as a Deputy President of the Sovereignty Council. He summoned all officers who were authorized to join the RSF for a fixed period to come back to the Army. Some of those who did not respond were considered as a 'fifth column'.

Conclusion

In the conflict in Sudan, there are two major conflicting parties: (1) The Islamist-backed Sudan Armed Forces (SAF); and (2) The FFC-backed Rapid Support Forces. If either one of them seized power unilaterally, the other one would continue waging conspiracies to destabilize the transitional period by all means. One possible solution

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is to exclude both conflicting parties from the political process and call upon the non-partisan technocrats to form a transitional government and organize elections. It would be advisable for the international community to work with the civil society organizations notably the university professors, the professional associations and the Resistance Committees. These bodies have organized themselves in form a confederation "Tagaom" that need the international community to support to form a technocratic competent cabinet for an efficient/effective peaceful transition.

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