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Sudan

Sudan: “Give us back the keys to the country”

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One year after the coup d'état organized by the military against the transition process following the fall of Al-Bashir, the mobilization continues against a weak and divided government. Structures of self-organization of the populations have taken over the political field and are fighting against both the traditional parties and Western diplomacy, which are in favour of a return to the status quo.

The Fall of Al-Bashir

The 1989 coup of Al-Bashir, supported by the Islamists of the Al-Turabi-led National Islamic Front (NIF) gradually plunged Sudan into a deep crisis. This new government engaged in a costly war against the populations of southern Sudan in the name of jihad, it imposed a retrograde morality on the way of life of the Sudanese and favoured the capture of wealth by the military hierarchy. It also exacerbated discrimination against the populations of the periphery, so much so that the country remains deeply divided between what academics call the "riparian elite", or greater Khartoum, and other neglected and despised regions.

Starting in 2010 demonstrations were organized against the economic crisis and they quickly took an anti-government political turn. The revolution of 2019 was nourished by these struggles. The power of the mobilization was such that the army had no other solution than to dismiss Al-Bashir and take power. A manoeuvre that was immediately contested by the revolutionaries, who demanded a civilian government. The ferocious repression was ineffective, the army was forced to come to terms. It accepted the creation of a sovereignty council composed of military and civilians, chaired by General Burhan, and a civilian government led by an economist, Abdallah Hamdok.

This government became doubly fragile, both in terms of the military and the population. On the one hand, it was pursuing a policy of purging Islamist militants in the senior civil service and beginning to dismantle the financial structures of the army; on the other hand, it was applying an austerity policy imposed by the IMF and Western governments. The military made use of people's fatigue and even popular resentment against Hamdok's economic and social policies to seize power. General Burhan remained president of the Sovereignty Council and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemidti, became his vice-president.

The inglorious record of the military government

Since their coup d'état of 25 October 2021, the putschists have not been able to assert their power. Contrary to what they thought, the refusal by the population of the government of Abdallah Hamdok did not give them a social base. Especially since many remember the history of the country, which is used to oppressive and corrupt military governments.

The mobilizations are not weakening, despite the repression which has left dozens dead and hundreds of wounded and prisoners.

In an attempt to break the deadlock, the military initiated a manoeuvre. In their July 2022 declaration, they declared themselves in favour of a civilian government and the constitution of a Supreme Council, without really spelling out what it would be like. However, the Minister of Finance specified [1] that this Council would have the task of defending the sovereignty of the country and as such would be in charge of defence, foreign affairs and control over the country's central bank. In other words, the essence of the sovereign functions of the state.

This manoeuvre has not received any significant support in society [2]. It aims to try to blame the blockade on opponents and let a civilian government manage a country that is economically drained. The latest United Nations report [3] gives the IMF's estimates. Real gross domestic product is estimated at only 0.3 per cent and inflation at 245.1 per cent in 2022. The average prices of sorghum and millet have increased by 150 per cent and 250 per cent respectively compared to 2021 and by 550 per cent and 650 per cent over the last five years. Shortages of electricity, fuel, foodstuffs and other commodities have dramatic consequences for the poorest populations, as indicated in the above-mentioned United Nations report:

"It is estimated that almost a quarter of the population is in a situation of acute famine during the lean season, from June to September. (...) Up to 11.7 million people (an increase of 2 million) are expected to be vulnerable, including 3.1 million in emergency situations".

Weak support for the coup

The putschists rely more and more on Islamist militants [4]. In the era of Al-Bashir, the backbone of the state apparatus, but also of the public companies, was made up of Islamist adherents and sympathizers of the NIF. They thus followed a strategy of entry into the high administration advocated by its leader Al-Turabi [5]. During the revolution many of these senior officials were sacked. Gradually, with the coup, they were reinstated in their functions, thus demonstrating that the Burhan government is evolving along the path traced by Al-Bashir. Taking advantage of this openness, fundamentalist militants restructured themselves with the creation of a party: the Great Islamic Current [6].

Other supporters, more surprising at first glance, are some regional militias that fought the regime of Al-Bashir. In fact, he not only waged a war against the south of Sudan, which became independent in 2011; he also did so in Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile. For many years, the populations were attacked by the Janjaweed, led by Hemidti in the service of al-Bashir. They tried to carry out real ethnic cleansing against certain communities. In response, the latter formed armed groups fighting the soldiers of Hemidti. During the 2019 revolution, these militias joined the coalition of forces of change and participated in the civilian government of Abdallah Hamdok. Djibril Ibrahim, leader of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), remains the Minister of the Economy and Minni Minawi, head of a faction of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), still holds the post of governor of Darfur. How can we explain that these two militias supported the coup? Many elements of an answer can be provided. First, their leaders do not believe in the possibility that civilians can conquer power and keep it, because of from the influence of the army and its history. Secondly, Hemidti, the former enemy, played a central role in the negotiations with these two militias. He counted on the division between Khartoum and the periphery. He defended the idea that the revolution was led by this riparian elite, who would only perpetuate the ostracism suffered by the populations of the periphery. Hence the idea of forming a bloc composed of leaders from

these peripheries, to establish a balance of power and, why not, one day accede to power. Lastly, these groups were sensitive to the need to be more on the side of the strongest, demonstrating the political inconsistency of most of the armed groups in the region.

A heterogeneous government

Divisions remain acute among the putschists. The most obvious is the one between Burhan, chairman of the council, military chief of staff belonging to the elite of greater Khartoum, and Hemidti, vice president, former camel driver, who managed to transform the Janjaweed into a paramilitary force, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) [7]. This two-headed government is condemned to work together because of the equilibrium of the political and military relationship of forces between the two leaders. Each of them has his sources of finance. The military hierarchy owns the largest banking institution, the Omdurman National Bank, as well as construction and agricultural enterprises [8]. The sources of funding for the RSF are gold mines [9], migrant racketeering [10] and the provision of mercenaries for the benefit of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates(UAE) in their war in Yemen [11].

Other divisions appear within the army itself, with the presence of Islamist officers close to the National Congress, which comes from the NIF, particular units such as the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), an intelligence agency and political police which has a wide autonomy with specific economic networks.

This heterogeneity is a source of weakness of the government and of instability. The exploitation of each other's weaknesses must not reach the fateful level where the entire edifice of power could collapse. Each of the protagonists is well aware of this.

Sudan at the heart of geopolitical stakes

The putschists benefit from the leniency of a large part of the countries of the region. Two days before the coup, Burhan had made a trip to Egypt. The green light given by his powerful neighbour was decisive. Historically, Egypt has been linked to Sudan since the latter was subject to colonization led by an Anglo-Egyptian condominium. The armies of the two countries have very strong ties. Egypt needs Sudan as an ally in its dispute with Ethiopia over the use of Nile waters with the construction of the Renaissance dam. There is also a border dispute between Sudan and Ethiopia, which claims fertile land in the Al-Fashaga area. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, although they condemned the coup, do not take a dim view of a strong and authoritarian central power that is a source of stability, an important element for these two countries. In addition, these two Gulf monarchies wish to continue to benefit from the help of RSF troops in their war against the Houthis in Yemen.

On the Russian side, they are trying to advance their pawns by resurrecting an agreement in principle reached at the time of Al-Bashir for the installation of a military base in the city of Port Sudan. A particularly strategic place:

"In Russia's eyes, Port Sudan is a key position in the centre of the Red Sea, a strategic corridor linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, choke points [12] where 12 per cent of world trade passes, and an interface between Africa and the Middle East." [13].

In addition, the Wagner company has been present in Sudan since 2017 and, in alliance with Hemidti, operates gold mines [14]. Russia is providing diplomatic support to the junta.

As for the Westerners, they are trying to impose their solution through diplomatic channels. A negotiation with the military allowing a return to the previous situation with a de facto sharing of power between military and civilians. A solution totally rejected by the revolutionaries, who maintain their slogan regarding the junta: "No negotiations, no partnership, no legitimacy." . Obviously, the UN envoy, Volker Perthes, aligns himself with the Western position, provoking the ire of part of the population [15].

A self-organization that shakes up the traditional parties

There are two major historical parties in Sudan: the Umma Party and the Unionist Party. They have many points in common. At first, these two organizations were the political expression of brotherhoods, the Khatmiya for the Unionist Party and the Mahdiyya for the Umma Party. The Mahdists of the Umma Party fought a victorious war of independence in 1885. This experience was ended 13 years later with the terrible repression carried out by the British troops. Mahdists have always advocated an independent Sudan, while the supporters of Khatmiya campaigned for a union with Egypt as a solution of independence, hence their name of unionist party. These parties have a dynastic character: their leaders can only come from the family of Muhammad ibn Abdallah, known as the Mahdi, and for the unionists from the Mirghani family, one of the branches descending from the Prophet Muhammad. In political matters they are conservative, and liberal at the economic level. Apart from history and competition between the party apparatuses, basically there is no big difference and in the revolutionary process they did not play a leading role. Their leaders belong to Khartoum's elite, which facilitated their accession to ministerial positions in the government during the transition. They would be ready to accept the mediation of the United Nations for a return to the previous situation if there was no popular pressure.

The 2019 revolution saw the emergence of self-organizing structures that for the most part have their source in previous mobilizations. Thus, the Association of Professionals of Sudan (APS) was created in 2012 and brings together intellectual professions such as lawyers, academics, etc. Its role was decisive in the 2019 revolution and still is decisive in the ongoing mobilizations.

At the same time, a self-organizing structure, the resistance committees, was developed, present in the districts of the country's major cities. Many of their organizers had been active in organizations such as Girifna ("We have had enough"), Al taghyr al an ("Change now"), Sharara (the Spark), or Khalass ("Enough") a structure present in the regional capital of Al Qadarif, Gedaref.

These resistance committees are the backbone of the fight against the coup by Burhan and Hemidti. These structures are places of mobilization, debate and material solidarity and become politicized as the struggle progresses. They adopted a "people's power charter" as a result of a long process of discussion that took place throughout the country. The programme of this charter defends the demands of democracy and justice, and above all details how the new power must be exercised. The main idea is to foster people's power with basic structures that decide and coordinate throughout the country. This charter is important because it proposes a political alternative to attempts at conciliation with the putschists.

To counter any inclination for an understanding with the military junta, the Forces for Radical Change (FRC) were created with the participation of the APS, trade unions and women's organizations, as well as the Sudanese Communist Party, which has managed throughout its history to maintain a certain influence in the mobilizations.

Feminist demands during the revolution are central. The fall of Al-Bashir is also partly the result of the struggle for women's rights, denied for decades by the alliance of the military and the Islamists.

The feminist movement in Sudan has a long history. From 1952 the Sudanese Women's Union was formed. Since then, struggles have continued despite fierce repression. A feminist manifesto has been adopted by about fifty organizations. Demonstrations have been organized against violence against women, including article 146 of the Sudanese Constitution, which allows for the stoning of women guilty of adultery.

Feminist struggles are also taking place within the revolution, against sexist attitudes that remain frequent. These

battles thus make it possible to change society on these issues [\[16\]](#).

A racist and ethnicist junta

The construction of an unequal Sudan, composed of a periphery despised by the elite of greater Khartoum, is partly the consequence of the British colonialist policy. The British administration tried to prevent nationalist fervour from affecting the southern part of the country by instituting an almost hermetic separation. Once Sudan was independent, this riparian elite continued to impose its vision on the entire country. Forces such as the Sudanese Communist Party and John Garang's SPLA opposed it. Garang, the leader of southern Sudan, had no intention of secession between the south and the north, but wanted a united, multi-confessional Sudan open to all. After his death in 2005, his successors, both Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, moved towards the independence of the South by fighting for the capture of the resources of the new country.

The venom of this elitism of greater Khartoum has spread in today's Sudan:

"Sudan's peripheries have been at the heart of the country's ongoing conflicts since independence in 1956. Their asymmetrical relationship with a 'central power' characterized by extreme centralization can even be considered to be the essential cause of these conflicts. The inability of the 'centre' to end this asymmetry and unite the country also explains the longevity of these conflicts in the 'two areas' of the Nuba mountains and the Blue Nile, adding to the Darfur conflict and leading to the separation of South Sudan in 2011" [\[17\]](#).

It is one of the challenges of the revolutionary struggle to integrate this anti-elitist dimension and to ensure the equality of all citizens, regardless of their origins. Consciousness of this problem is becoming more widespread. So when Al-Bashir in 2018 accused the protesters of being manipulated by Darfur rebels, they replied in one voice, "We are all Darfuris" [\[18\]](#). However, this ethnicist ideology that makes some citizens, according to their region, second-class citizens, continues to persist despite the efforts of the most conscious wing of revolutionaries.

Strengthening the revolutionary process

The coup did not succeed, despite the repression of the junta as well as the manoeuvres of the Western countries, in weakening popular combativity. Of course, some demonstrations may be more or less massive, but overall the degree of mobilization remains high. Over time, a political maturation emerges, the resistance committees project themselves more and more on the political scene, to the great despair of the traditional parties. There is a strong synergy of the different structures of struggle that nourish the diversity of the revolution. Revolutionaries would benefit from raising awareness among soldiers. Although the military hierarchy, whatever its internecine manoeuvres, will remain on the side of those in power, it is not the same for the rank-and-file soldiers. They come mostly from poor regions and are often underestimated; they can be sensitive to discourses on social justice. In view of the repression, forging links is certainly not easy but could prove effective for the rest of the movement.

We can only regret the weakness of international solidarity. To this day, Sudan remains the only country whose population defends its revolution. International solidarity is not up to the task. The example to follow and amplify is the work carried out in Britain by different organizations [\[19\]](#). Solidarity should be more substantial, especially in the Western camp, which is putting enormous pressure for a return to the status quo. It is therefore necessary to oppose it vigorously by developing contestation within these countries themselves.

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A victory of the revolutionaries on the basis of a programme of rupture, as advanced by the resistance committees, would open a breach in the bringing to heel of the Arab world and more broadly in Africa.

In response to Al-Bashir's coup in 1989, Mohamed Wardi, one of Sudan's great singers, composed the song "Give us back the keys of the country". Thirty years later, tens of thousands of Sudanese have taken up this anthem on their own, tracing the continuity of a fight recounted in these verses [\[20\]](#).

Towards you, the procession moves forward

In front of you, the people squeeze together and stand up

And they say, "Give them back!" (x2)

Give them back, and you don't give them back

Was there a day when you took pity on us,

So that we now have mercy on you?

Give us back the keys of the country (x3)

Give us back the dresses and the scarves

Give us back the Qurans and the Prayer Rosaries

Give us back the mosques and the churches

Finally give back the keys to the country!

The treasures of our ancestors, give them back to us,

The spirits of our children, give them back to us,

And our own guns which hit us,

The guns that aim at our breasts and yet belong to us

Give them back to us.

Give us back the lost time,

These years of exile and sorrow,

Sudan: "Give us back the keys to the country"

The dreams we have lived,

The dream of a country so big and dying of hunger,

Finally give us back the keys to the country!

Where are you going to flee? Tell me, where are you going to flee? Where are you going to flee?

How are you going to run away from all this suffering, and all this hunger?

How are you going to run away from your expensive schools (your education for the rich)?

How are you going to flee a people who gave you their milk and whom you did not serve in return

Only humiliation and hunger?

You, who irrigate the country with poison

How will you flee from these memories and their trails of torment and suffering?

How will you flee from the mothers' milk and God's judgment?

How are you going to run away when both your hands are soaked in blood?

And the blood says, joining us: "Give them back to us."

8 October 2022

Translated by International Viewpoint.

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