

The Crisis in Sudan

Implications for the Country and the Region



Seminar Report



Institute of Policy Studies
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Executive Summary

Sudan, located in North Africa, is one of Africa’s largest countries with a diverse population and over 500 ethnic and tribal groups. Due to its proximity to internal trade routes and the presence of enormous natural resources, the country has been a focus of attention for several regional powers such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

Sudan is currently going through a complex crisis leading to political instability, widespread corruption, and human rights violations. The crisis initially began when president Omar al-Bashir was ousted from power in 2019. A transition period followed during which it was decided that 69% of the parliament would comprise a civilian government while the rest would be under the army. It was agreed that the army would rule for two years and after that the government would be handed over to civilian groups. However, this did not happen as elections were delayed because of various factors such as disagreements among political parties, challenges in implementing necessary reforms and widespread intervention of external powers. Recently, tensions have increased between the Sudanese armed forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), with the latter seeking a share in power.

Sudan and Pakistan share brotherly and cordial relations; both countries have Muslim-majority populations and have common cultural ties. They have maintained relations in political, economic and cultural spheres and the relationship is based on mutual respect and cooperation. Pakistan has also been providing assistance and support to Sudan during calamities. Keeping in view the current situation in Sudan, Pakistan must highlight the issue to create awareness and provide necessary assistance.

Against this backdrop, the Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad organized a hybrid seminar titled “The Crisis in Sudan: Implications for the Country and the Region” on May 3, 2023, which was moderated by Dr. Tughral Yamin. The speakers included Ambassador of Sudan Salih Mohamed Ahmed Mohamed Siddig, Sami Hamdi al-Hachimi, managing director, The International Interest UK and MENA expert, Ambassador (r) Imran Yawar, Ambassador (r) Manzoor-ul-Haq, Ambassador (r) Syed Abrar Hussain, vice chairman, IPS, and Dr. Fakhr-ul-Islam, director research and academic outreach, IPS.



Dr. Tughral Yameen, Syed Abrar Hussain, Salih Mohamed Ahmed Mohamed Siddig and Dr. Fakhr-Ul-Islam

Takeaways from the Seminar

Q. What is the nature of the crisis in Sudan, and what factors have contributed to its emergence?

Sudan is currently facing a complex crisis that has its roots in the various political, economic, and social issues which have plagued the country for decades. The crisis began when president Omar al-Bashir was removed from power after protests erupted against his government. Afterwards, the country's army, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Force, a paramilitary group led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as Hemedti, joined hands for a new government.

Currently, General Burhan and Hemedti are at loggerheads. Hemedti has been accused of committing atrocities in the Darfur region while Burhan is also linked to these atrocities. Both are currently under investigation by the International Criminal Court over the allegations.

Q. What is the dispute between the Sudanese armed forces and the RSF, and why the army is reluctant to accept the RSF's demands? What is the general sentiment among the Sudanese people regarding this issue?

In February, Army Chief General Burhan announced that the RSF, established during the presidency of al-Bashir and led by Hemedti, should be merged with the army. The RSF has become an independent organization over the past five years, capable of forging international agreements, receive funding, and exercise its influence and power in the country. Hemedti, in response to this announcement, launched an attack on the government to express his disapproval. He believed that any merging of his forces with the army would result in the clipping of his wings or a significant diminishing of his power.

No nation or country in the world would accept the lieutenant general of any faction within the army trying to get in the power game and launch a coup against the institution of the national army. So this conflict is not between Burhan and Hemedti, rather it is the Sudanese army versus Hemedti's bid to subdue the army and topple Burhan in order to seize power for himself.

The implications of a victory by the army or RSF would be extremely different. If General Burhan and the army win, Sudan will have greater independence to dictate its future. On the other hand, if Hemedti wins, he has promised to abide by the changes that external powers are trying to impose on a population that does not want them. And this is the reason why the Sudanese are standing with their army; they realize that Hemedti is threatening the disintegration of the very institution that has preserved the territorial integrity of Sudan.

Q. Why have there been no elections in Sudan since the fall of Omar al-Bashir's government? What factors have contributed to the delay?

To fully understand the dynamics of the current situation in Sudan, it is important to look back at the events that preceded it. After Omar al-Bashir was ousted, there was a concern that immediate elections would result in Islamist parties coming into power with a democratic mandate, which was not acceptable to the international community. The international community also feared that the Sudanese people may choose wrongly as happened in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

To avoid this scenario, it was decided to establish a negotiated transition to delay elections. So an agreement was signed between the Forces for Freedom and Change and the military government, according to which civilian parties were given 69% participation in the parliament with the rest allocated to the Sudanese military junta. The parties knew that in case of elections, they will be sidelined so they decided to enter into this agreement with the army to negotiate the transition period. As a result, it was decided that the army would rule for two years, and after that power would be handed over to the civilian government.

After the passage of two years, when the time finally came to transfer power to the civilian government, some of the Darfurian leaders, essentially Jibril Ibrahim and Minni Manawi, who enjoyed sweeping international support in the 2000s, started creating issues. They accused the Forces of Freedom and Change of receiving inappropriate power based on a transition that had no democratic mandate. To put it simply, they said that why should the army hand over power to these civilian forces who have no chance of winning the elections.

Q. What is the true objective of the transition in Sudan, is it about establishing a democratic system in the country or just simply complying with the demands of the international community?

The transition in Sudan is not about democracy, rather it is more about implementing what the international bodies and communities want in the country like the deletion of Islamic laws and values from the constitution and not allowing Islamic parties to come into power. Some of the party leaders have been trying very hard to satisfy the international community through their anti-Islamist and anti-religion actions.

Hemedti has been appearing on several Israeli channels to present the rhetoric that his party is inclined to fight against the Islamists in order to attract support and assistance. He has been an essential part of the transition for the last five years. During this period, while interacting with international bodies in the US, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, has always presented the idea of fighting against Islamists and not letting them rule the country, something that resonates with the objectives of the international community.

Yasir Arman, a political leader of Sudan, when asked about the role of international players, clearly said that there is no harm in relying on or getting help from them to topple the Islamists and to fight back against them. This unfolds the truth that the whole process is more of a propaganda rather than a democratic transition. It is a negotiated transition, the people in power are doing what the international community dictates them to do so that they can keep on ruling and do not have to transfer power to a civilian government.

General Burhan acted very cleverly and he indicated to the international community that either they let him rule or he will hold elections, which would bring the Islamists to power. So the international community has entered into negotiations with the army with the sole purpose of trying to convince Burhan not to hold elections. They are also trying to mediate between Hemedti and Burhan to keep the situation under control and reduce the intensity of the conflict, as the dispute between the two armed forces can cause chaos in the country which can ultimately lead to undesirable state of affairs.

The key issue in Sudan is not the army, forces, or militia, but rather a lack of trust in the people's ability to vote correctly. The international community, for this reason, is supporting a transition that guarantees to not let elections take place. The situation is more like a whole process of social engineering. The people, however, are aggrieved because despite popular protests and demanding a democratic transition of their own, nothing positive happened and they feel that their freedom has been hijacked by international actors who prefer to remove Islam from the constitution.

Q. What is the current situation in Sudan? Are there any foreign powers that are involved in this crisis?

At the moment Sudan is experiencing a complex crisis that commenced with a failed coup attempt by the RSF in April which then transformed into a rebellion. The RSF launched attacks on various armed forces bases, including the residence of General Burhan and the premises of the army's general command, along with other vital and strategic centers in the capital. Simultaneously, they also attacked several military headquarters and airports in different states including the Maravi International Airport in northern Sudan.

Following the commencement of these attacks, General Burhan, who is also chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, issued a decree dissolving the RSF and declaring them a rebel force. In addition, he called upon the RSF members to lay down their arms and join the armed forces, thus offering a general amnesty.

The dissolved RSF has also been violating all norms and international laws by attacking several foreign missions in Sudan, including the embassies of Saudi Arabia, Russia, Malaysia, and Egypt. The RSF has also been accused of widespread looting and assaults on the Sudanese armed forces. In contrast, the armed forces have adopted a strategy aimed at limited and responsible use of force while adhering to international laws and norms. The aim is to ensure the safety and security of the citizens, protect infrastructure, and prevent the destruction of property. It is worth noting that the government views the conflict with the RSF as an internal issue, and foreign intervention is deemed unacceptable and intolerable. Therefore, the armed forces are fulfilling their constitutional responsibility of safeguarding the people.

There have been major questions regarding the role of international powers in the ongoing crisis. Sudan has been experiencing foreign interventions in its internal and external affairs from the very beginning. There have been several rebellion movements since 1955, in fact even before that.

Avi Dichter, the Israeli former interior security minister, said in a lecture in 2008: “We had to weaken Sudan and deprive it of the initiative to build a strong and united state. That is necessary for bolstering and strengthening Israel’s national security. We produced and escalated the Darfur crisis to prevent Sudan from developing its capabilities.”

The same minister had talked about Israel’s role in the separation of South Sudan in 2011 by helping the rebels at that time.

Q. To what extent can the current political crisis in Sudan have an impact on regional and international powers?

If the current situation persists, it can have devastating effects for the regional and international powers as well. The existence of the dissolved RSF represents a great threat, not only to the stability and any possibility of a democratic transition in Sudan, but also to the peace, security, and development of the whole region. The country shares borders with seven countries, each with a vested interest in its stability. If Sudan remains stable and prosperous, the neighboring countries will also benefit, but if the situation becomes unstable, the neighboring countries may also suffer.

These kinds of crises can easily spread to neighboring areas. There are armed conflicts going on in other parts of the region, and if this discord spreads to those areas, it can further exacerbate the situation there. Libya, at the moment, is facing a power struggle between two governments while Chad is going through an economic crisis due to the presence of a large refugee population. The Central African Republic and Eritrea also face potential economic challenges. The spreading of Sudan’s crisis into these countries can create further problems for them. Moreover, the continuation of this crisis can lead to bigger issues like displacement of people, illegal immigration, rise in international organized crimes and deterioration of the humanitarian and health situations in the whole region.

Therefore, it is in the best interest of all neighboring countries to work towards and prioritize Sudan’s stability. A peaceful Sudan benefits the entire region, while instability could negatively impact the Red Sea and shipping routes. Sudan’s strategic location makes it an important hub for trade, as shown by the large number of ships which cross the Red Sea through the Suez Canal. So the country’s stability is of great importance.

Q. What factors have contributed to external intervention in Sudan's internal affairs?

Foreign interventions in Sudan have been motivated by diverse factors, the most prominent of which is the country's abundant natural resources. Sudan has vast reserves of minerals including gold, uranium, and petroleum. It also possesses fertile arable land, water resources, diverse climates, and a vast livestock industry. Many foreign powers have been attracted to Sudan due to these resources which provide them with significant economic and financial opportunities.

Furthermore, Sudan has become an important player in regional politics and security due to its geo-strategic position. The country is situated in the Horn of Africa and borders seven major countries, which makes it a gateway to Africa. With an 800 km coastline along the Red Sea, Sudan controls a vital sea lane. The Red Sea is a crucial route for trade between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. Any blockade of this sea lane would have severe implications for global trade, as ships would have to reroute and travel an additional 4,000 km around the Cape of Good Hope. Therefore, many countries, particularly Arab and African states, have an interest in maintaining their influence in the Red Sea, thus making Sudan a valuable ally.

In addition to its natural resources and strategic location, Sudan's human resources are also important. The Sudanese people are a diverse and culturally rich population. Moreover, the country is home to ancient civilizations and historical sites, such as pyramids, which attract tourists. The country's forests, deserts, and five rivers make it a unique tourist destination in Africa.

Finally, Sudan's potential to contribute significantly to global food security has attracted the attention of foreign powers. The world faces the challenge of food insecurity, and Sudan's fertile land and water resources make it a potential major food producer. This potential has attracted many countries that seek to secure their food supplies.

Q. What are the main reasons for the interest of Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia in Sudan?

The interest of Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia in Sudan is driven by various factors. Each country sees Sudan as a potential ally in their respective regional interests and is thus investing in the country.

Egypt has a strong interest in Sudan due to its ongoing tensions with Ethiopia over the Grand Renaissance Dam. As Sudan shares a border with Ethiopia and has a close relationship with Egypt, it provides a strategic ally in this conflict. Egypt also has a significant military presence in Sudan. It also has the largest military base in Berenice, which is only 300 km from the Egyptian border with Sudan.

The UAE has invested heavily in Sudan and is interested in increasing its influence in the Red Sea region. The UAE signed an agreement worth \$6 billion to develop a port called Abu Amama Port near Port Sudan in 2022. The project also included the construction of roads, airports and other infrastructure.

Saudi Arabia, being a littoral country of the Red Sea, also has an important role to play in the region. It has set up the Red Sea Council to increase its influence among the littoral states, and Sudan is one of its eight members. Saudi Arabia is also interested in Sudan due to its strategic location at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East. It has already invested around \$3 billion in the country.

Ethiopia, on the other hand, has a border with Sudan and had good relations with it in the past. However, tensions have risen between the two countries due to the Grand Renaissance Dam. Ethiopia believes that it has the right to use the waters of the Blue Nile, which originates from Lake Tana in northwestern Ethiopia, whereas Egypt asserts that previous agreements give it the majority share of Nile water. Sudan's relationship with Ethiopia has deteriorated under General Burhan also due to the al-Fashaga border dispute.

Q. What are the intentions of the US and Russia in the region and what's the role of Israel in that perspective?

Israeli politicians have been openly talking about Sudan in their memoirs. They have declared multiple times that they have been pressurizing Washington to impose sanctions on Sudan because it has been providing a safe haven for Muslims, specifically Palestinians. This is one of the reasons that the US wants a transition period in Sudan with the sole objective to remove Islamism from the country. After facing resistance from the Sudanese army in this regard, the US asserts to hand over power from the army to the minority political groups to enact the ideological changes they want.

From Washington's perspective, the people cannot be trusted to vote, as it is concerned that the sanctions that were supposed to achieve ideological changes will be ruined by a Sudanese population that, in democratic elections, will not vote for leftists or communists and rather they will tend to vote for people proud of their Islamic identity. So they want a transition that promises no Islamic identity in the country. And that is why Hemedti, in his every argument, says that he is fighting Islamists because he knows that this resonates with the international community.

Q. Are there internal or ethnic conflicts in Sudan? Can the Sudanese make the right decision if they are given the option to choose for themselves?

There are more than 500 ethnic groups in Sudan. The vast country has had trouble in four regions for quite some time. There are different tribes in those regions but they are not fighting, nor are hostile to one another, nor are they involved in the conflict on ethnic and tribal lines. This is a positive thing about Sudan that even if there is resentment against the government in certain parts of the country, it is localized, does not spread throughout the country and does not pit one group against another group.

Sudan has been under dictatorial rule for 50 to 70 years but it has seen democratic periods as well. There was a period when there were elections and there was peace. When the flag of Sudan was raised on January 1, 1957, the prime minister was Ismail al-Azhari and he had the opposition leader, Muhammad Mahjub, by his side. This was a very positive signal, which shows how democratic and tolerant the Sudanese people are. Whenever they are given a choice, they are very sensible.

Sudanese are very political in their thinking and temperament, and despite the ban on political activities, they know how to go about politics, how to vote, and how to elect. This is because they have experienced a democratic and representative government.

Another example is of General Abdel Rahman Suwar al-Dahab. He took over the government in 1985, conducted free and fair elections, and then handed over the power to a civilian elected representative government. So Sudan has a tradition of democratic institutions, and if the people are given the right to choose, they will be able to make the right decisions, and they would be able to go through this transition in a very positive manner.

Q. What can be the possible solution to this crisis?

Peace can only be restored if foreign actors stop interfering in the affairs of Sudan. The involvement of countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia has worsened the situation and unless they stop interfering in Sudan's internal affairs, the restoration of peace is impossible.

The US and UK have their interests and they are least interested in resolving these issues. Whether it is the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, or Mauritania, the footprints of the Americans, British, and French can be found almost everywhere. Europeans were the colonizers so they will never be interested in resolving issues of other countries. Hence, the issues can only be resolved if states solve their problems on their own with least foreign intervention.

Picture Gallery



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Disclaimer

This report outlines the salient points that emerged in the discussion and does not necessarily reflect the views of all the participants or the IPS.



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