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Sudan: a complicated transition in a troubled region

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Two years after the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir, the situation in Sudan appears ambivalent in many regards. Politically, the fragile balance between military and civilian powers does not seem at a major risk, though critics highlight the compromises made by the Prime Minister.

Economically, the population suffers from high inflation and shortages, and several recent debt agreements have yet to translate into the daily life of poor people who wonder why so little has improved over the last two years.

A peace agreement with several rebel groups from Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile was signed in Juba in October 2020, but difficulties are emerging on its implementation. Regionally, a new wave of tensions and uncertainties may affect internal political dynamics, either on the East or on the West.

The following analysis provides a contrasted vision of Sudan politics at this stage. Despite a radical political change at the top level, many aspects of the previous regime are yet unaffected which brings difficult questions on the ability of the current cabinet to deliver reforms without disappointing a large part of its constituency.

1. Beyond politics a dysfunctional State apparatus

A paramount parameter for the current transition is the ability of the various state administrations to deliver, which implies to be able to translate new laws and regulations into practical measures. Question marks should be raised on this point whatever the policies are.

Throughout Omar al-Bashir regime, drastic changes occurred in the civil service, some voluntary, others being side effects of different decisions. From the very beginning, the state apparatus was purged from civil servants whose political affiliation or family connection identified them with sectors of the opposition. These workers, at top, middle and grassroot levels, were dismissed, some put in jail and others advised to get into exile as the security apparatus would do everything to cut their professional future within Sudan.

Instead, new people were recruited. At first, in the highest positions, the regime was able to select cadres, highly educated Islamists who had made their career outside Sudan, most often in the Gulf States. But those diaspora skilled staff were not numerous enough and local members or sympathizers were recruited to get positions at all levels. At the end of the 1990's, the conditions for recruitment increasingly included ethnic and family connections instead of ideological commitments.

Therefore, for the last twenty years, civil servants were recruited less for their expertise or education than because of their recommendations. The results have been seen at least at two different levels. The first one is the growth of corruption at all levels of the state apparatus.

This issue is actually an old problem, and no one should expect an easy and quick fix to a problem that has become prominent for the last 40 years at least. Even, in the more militant

moment of the regime (in the early 1990's), examples of corruption were surfacing but were tainted with political repression and not seen as they should have been: the crude personal appropriation of properties under the flag of an Islamic regime.

Yet, curbing corruption today means operating in a very sensitive environment as intelligence and military officers may have stake in certain operations. Moreover, ethnic and family networks are as powerful today than yesterday because of the dereliction of the population and the fact that burden-sharing is a need for nearly everyone.

Another problem that is dampening any attempt to address corruption seriously is that a due process has to be determined and that legal rights should be respected. Meanwhile corruption is widely spread in the state apparatus, not everyone is corrupted.

If the issue of corruption is often quoted, there is another, maybe more serious, problem: the informalization of the state apparatus and its growing incompetency. Mid-level civil servants may or may not have the skills required for their position and therefore behave in an unpredictable way when they are confronted to professional challenges.

For instance, laws are not enforced the right way and taxation for a company may vary according to the interlocutor at the Ministry of Finances. These shortcomings are beyond corruption and emphasize the need for a review of the civil service.

Getting the right skills at the right position may appear an obvious need but such a review could be seen as untimely and politically costly at a time, civilians have to strengthen their control of the state apparatus against the remnants of the previous regime and/or the military/security complex.

A last point should be mentioned here. Sudan is a federal state and the peace process with rebel groups pushes for providing a new reality to federal structures that have been neglected for years because of the economic slowdown. This is a constitutional requirement and, first and foremost, a political necessity to make inclusiveness more credible.

Yet, federalism is an expansive system of government but there is no much funding available for it. Moreover, federalism requires good and solid institutions. This is hardly the case in Sudan today and one should therefore be cautiously optimistic in any attempt to revive governing structures in the federated states, as besides funds, problems that are affecting the state in Khartoum may be more vivid in the region.

2. The slow reconfiguration of the political arena

A social movement seldom is able to transform itself into a popular uprising against a dictatorship. Although everyone applauded the courage and determination of the demonstrators and their organizational capabilities, one should also note the discrepancy that existed between the political representation of the social movement and the Sudanese society at large.

Without contesting their merits and achievements, movements such as the Communists or the Ba'athists were not anymore mass movements in Sudan: the brutal coercion exercised on them from Nimeyri's time until 2019, the numerous splits they faced for different reasons meant that their role in the leadership of the movement was more substantial than their ability to gather the populace under a political movement.

This remark is also valid for many other groups, including SPLM North, JEM and the so-called traditional parties. The National Ummah Party under the late Sadiq al-Mahdi and the various political factions of the Mirghani Party provided ground populace to the demonstration but their weakness after three decades of dictatorship and the inability of their leadership to coopt a new generation in their leadership meant that their future is still uncertain whatever importance they can claim in the political alliances of the moment.

Elections may take place in 2024 and a new political arena has to emerge sooner than later. The current situation is both a time of opportunity as the youth is mobilized and many who were involved in the uprising against al-Bashir want to defend the purpose of their movement.

Yet, the political situation is much more complex today than early 2019 because the government has to maneuver not only to ease the predicament of the population but to calm down the concerns of the military and the expectations of the international community.

The Prime Minister is increasingly criticized for the compromises he passes with the military or with the Bretton Woods institutions. He is also criticized for the many friends (often diaspora people, not always especially qualified) he has been appointing in the state apparatus at a high level.

To a large extent, these debates and criticisms are the illustration of a healthy political debate again possible in Sudan. They raise one important point: the fact that this cabinet yet does not answer to any parliament and could make decisions without always thinking to justify them in front of the population.

Today the military are divided. Its top leadership understands that the Army should not play a direct role at this stage, first of all because the moment is very difficult, and the population blames whoever is ruling the country. This leadership may also see the advantages an international normalization will bring to them: they get amnesty for what they did in Darfur and elsewhere; they will be offered nice positions once the transition is over and are building an international profile as other African military officers did in the past (Amadou Toumani Touré or Pierre Buyoya).

What is unclear is the mood of officers such Majors and Lt Colonels: truly some endorsed the social uprising, which allowed to limit the brutality of the coercion, but most understand that the military business empire is being dismantled and that they won't benefit from the same end of career as their predecessors. Ideology may not be a driving force but the loss of status in the Sudanese society is.

One dimension of the social movement that pleased the West was its radical departure from the religious understanding cultivated by the Bashir regime. One complicated issue is what is going to happen to the National Congress Party (NCP) and the Islamists. Concerning the NCP, many could move to other organizations such as the so-called traditional parties with no much problem. Islamists within or outside the NCP may likely try to gather under an umbrella organization (a new Front) and get a political representation. The risk that a minority of them choose a more violent form of political activity should not be excluded.

3. Peripheries and center

Against political correctness, one may say that the Juba Peace Agreement comes too late with potential signatories missing. The upheaval against Omar al-Bashir was not exactly a revolt from the so-called peripheries against an oppressive center. But the new regime, at least its radical fringe, for its own reasons wanted to end armed conflicts in the regions that jeopardized any reconciliation with the West. The Juba Peace Agreement signed in October 2020 is therefore an exercise that, beyond its celebration, would need some qualifications to avoid wrong hopes.

The armed groups that signed it are not as powerful as they had been in the past. This is especially true for Darfuri movements, and the two SPLM-North factions are nowadays much weaker because the support provided by South Sudan has diminished drastically and Juba prefers a normalization with Khartoum.

Besides this, two weak points should be considered at least in Darfur. Although the current level of violence is high, the groups responsible for it are not interested at this stage by any peace agreement. This goes much beyond the attitude of the sole SLM led by Abdel Wahid al-Nuur, whatever influence it is still credited in the IDP camps.

New violent entrepreneurs have emerged, and it is unclear whether they express a continued communal violence or have their own ambitions. Their connections with national players such as Hemedti are subjects to controversy.

Moreover, looking at the signatories of the Juba agreement, many Sudanese observers criticized the over-representation of Zaghawa leaders, a feeling that translated into bitterness when Minni Arkoi Minnawi was allocated the governorship of Darfur and Dr. Jibril Ibrahim the Ministry of Finances in Khartoum.

The agreement itself is criticized because of its wording but no text of peace agreement is deprived of ambiguities and lack of consistency. However, it faces at least three points that could undermine its implementation. A further one is not discussed below but nevertheless relevant: the quality of the leadership. Some leaders have proven courageous and determined fighters but in this new period, other skills are required. Several - not all - have no real formal education and in their political life have not been able to articulate clear visions of the problems their region faced and the solutions they required.

First, the financial backing of the agreement is unrealistic if the current economic conditions of Sudan are considered. The funds available to Darfur for the time being are a minor fraction of what is mentioned in the text of the agreement. Nothing has been said about the absorption capability of the Darfur economy, which appears as a problem since the quality of the implementation is measured by the number of positions allocated to rebel groups and the money spent under their authority.

Some in Khartoum are protesting: as funds are scarce, they should be used in the most efficient manner and spent in a more productive manner. Attributing generous funding for the peripheries is certainly more accepted at a top level than among an urban population that shares only a formal sympathy with the people in the countryside affected by these long conflicts.

Second, the accountability of the federated administration has to be connected to the achievement of local peace processes, which needs setting up institutions and committees that

still do not exist today. Doing this is time and money-consuming, while there is no clear vision of how land issues and victims' compensation would be addressed.

Local peace agreements are likely but eventually people will compare their content and may not feel they are converging into a same framework. Loyalty of the former rebels will have to go to the whole Darfur population, not their own constituency, a challenge that exists also on the side of the local civil service that has been appointed under the previous regime.

Third, implementing a peace agreement needs first the end of hostilities and a genuine cease-fire. While these conditions may likely be fulfilled in South Kordofan and Blue Nile regions, one may doubt that this would be the case in Darfur. As said, armed groups - many small and some bigger - are not signatories of the Juba agreement and fight for their own cause.

Khartoum needs to set up a new force made up of the troops that are under the Juba agreement' signatories and the RSF. While reaching an agreement at the top was possible, it would be a different situation at the grassroot level for their troops as so many atrocities have been committed over the years. The possibility of scores being settled is real and local alliances may prevail on the global agreement (as it happened so often throughout the conflict).

Moreover, establishing a mixed force would require fresh funding not only to pay the troops but also a demobilization plan for those who won't be part of this new contingent. Again, one may feel that time and money are urgently needed at a moment the peace agreement should demonstrate that it is improving the overall situation in Darfur.

4. A volatile region

Sudan has often run against the political trends in its region. The change of regime in Sudan in 2019 was very dissimilar from the political process which outcome was the nomination of Abiy Ahmed Ali as Prime Minister of Ethiopia.

While Khartoum swallowed many difficulties in its international isolation but worked for an internal pacification, its neighbor enjoyed broad international support and eventually went to war against Tigray and involved Eritrean troops in the destruction of the government and people in that region. Today, the regional situation looks grim and constitutes a growing concern for Khartoum regime.

When Omar al-Bashir was in power, he cultivated good relations with Addis-Ababa since he needed Ethiopia to talk to the USA and an ally to contain Eritrean ambitions to become an influential player in Sudan politics by providing sanctuary and/or military training to the opposition to Khartoum regime. Therefore, he always played down tensions linked to the occupation of the al-Fashaqa area or the GERD (having a more ambivalent stance on this project). The end of Bashir time meant also the end of this complacency.

The border issue should not have existed since Addis-Ababa over the years always made clear that whatever land Amhara farmers bought or occupied, it was under Sudan' sovereignty. As Abiy Ahmed has no more full control of his own troops, including Amhara Liyyu Police and other militias since he needs them to wage a poorly planned war against TPLF remnants, he cannot argue publicly against their undue territorial ambitions.

Sudan therefore faces a kind of schizophrenic interlocutor. At one level, Addis-Ababa calls for normalization and repeats the past stance and on the other, Amhara militias and Ethiopian military make incursion into Sudan with the hope to repeat what they have achieved with Tigray: taking some of its land away by force.

Sudan's Army is playing a political game in (over-) emphasizing the threat to regain popular support in Khartoum at a time, the cabinet is trying to take over state owned companies that are under military supervision. The new nationalism is not only directed against Ethiopian infringements but also against whoever in the political class tries to weaken the military at a time the country is leaning to war.

Although Ethiopian (and Tigray) elites have proved unwilling to compromise, the probability of a major deterioration is unlikely because Addis-Ababa understands that Sudan could provide sanctuary to TPLF and all Oromo factions that would like to restart an armed struggle against Abiy Ahmed and his allies.

Asmara's regime could act alongside Addis-Ababa and has real possibilities to affect the stability in Eastern Sudan, but it may also suffer from a trade blockade that will raise tensions in Eritrea. Yet, as exemplified by the course of events in Tigray, these stakeholders are not pure rational actors.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have a vested interest to avoid a major confrontation between these two or three countries as they are willing to please the US in achieving this and could see their influence unraveled in case of failure to do so. Turkey, Qatar and even Russia may play the spoiler card with talent.

The death of Idriss Déby Itno in Chad, mid-April 2021 and the military junta (CMT) that emerged in Ndjamena provide an ambivalent opportunity to Sudan and some of its military leaders.

Darfur has its own reasons to be unstable after UNAMID departure. France and the CMT are concerned that such a Darfur could become a possible sanctuary for Chadian armed opposition groups. Sudan's efforts to avoid such a situation would therefore be rewarded in some ways by more support to manage the debt (as it happened in May 2021) and other programs (a more liberal disbursement of the European funds allocated to migrations control, for instance).

General Hemedti is crucial in this regard, not only because he leads the RSF but also because over the years the RSF recruited many former or potential Chadian rebels who then forgot their ambitions for their own country and followed the RSF in its various missions in Darfur, Kordofan and Yemen.

For the Chadian CMT, it is crucial that those people do not try to leave the RSF and join (or create) armed groups either in Libya or in Darfur. Hemedti therefore is less than ever an outcast but the leader who could keep the RSF together and avoid disenfranchised Chadians to gather against Idriss Déby's son. This may provide some leverage to get funding to the Darfur mixed force (since RSF will be well represented in it).