



Omar Shahabudin McDoom

May 17th, 2023

Sudan: To break the cycle of violence, end the kleptocracy

0 comments | 1 shares

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes



The violence in Sudan is often portrayed as simply a disagreement between two men with money and guns. It is not, writes Omar McDoom.

Mohamed Hamdan 'Hemedti' Dagalo, leader of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) are the two public faces of extensive elite networks whose members had – until recently – a shared understanding of how to distribute Sudan's wealth among themselves and their client supporters.

To stop the fighting in the short-term then, mediators need to facilitate not only a political deal between warring parties, but also to broker a financial settlement among their allies.

In the longer term, to break the cycle of violence, action is needed to make the prize of state capture less attractive to the country's ruling class. This means sanctioning Sudanese individuals and their corporate entities and also targeting those who help move and convert their corrupted capital abroad: the bankers, lawyers, and accountants in places like Dubai, London, and New York.

Impunity for kleptocracy must end if a transition to stable, rule-based government is to succeed in Sudan. But this must be done carefully. Sudan – just like Myanmar – should serve as cautionary tale for democrats seeking change; in both countries, the military regimes have demonstrated that they are happier to relinquish political power than they are to give up their economic interests.

Sudan's previous longstanding political settlement under President Omar al-Bashir was dramatically re-written by a popular revolution, which led to his ouster in April 2019. Soon after, a transitional government took over after civilian forces and the military struck a power-sharing deal. But the civilian faction in the government moved too quickly to dismantle the lucrative network of businesses built under al-Bashir's rule and controlled by the military. This resulted in a military coup carried out by al-Burhan in October 2021.

The new political settlement, which seemed to be just another military junta, in fact represented an unstable balance of power between Sudan's principal security actors and their networks of domestic and international allies.

Hemedti, the face of one network, built his powerbase among armed groups – known as the Janjaweed – co-opted by al-Bashir to suppress the rebellion in Darfur in 2003. A decade later, he was promoted as the head of the newly-formed RSF, which was put directly under presidential control. Eventually, Hemedti gained control of lucrative gold mines in the region and used its riches to recruit and expand these forces massively.

He also lent out the RSF troops to fight in Yemen and in Libya, expanding his political network to include the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and the Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar. His business network also grew to comprise not only private military contracting but also gold trading, mining, construction, and high-end real estate.

Al-Burhan, the face of the other rival network, commands the SAF, whose business empire is also extensive. Senior officers control companies in sectors as diverse as construction and meat-processing. Al-Burhan enjoys the support of Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who is keen to avoid the example of a military regime being replaced by a civilian government in the region.

What finally broke the fragile pact between these rival networks was the plan to incorporate the RSF into the SAF. Hemedti wanted to slow-roll integration. He knew that once the RSF were no longer under his exclusive command, he would lose his military veto on actions that threatened his interests.

Sudan's violence then should be understood as a function of rival networks and competing material interests and should be addressed accordingly. One strategy would be to incentivise groups within a network not to fight. The US and Iraqi governments did this effectively in Iraq in 2007 when they paid Sunni tribesmen to stop fighting against them and instead to fight with them.

Mediators should extend feelers then to groups within the RSF whose allegiances could be turned when brokering a financial settlement to stop the violence in the short term. Loyalties may be more negotiable among Chadian and other foreign fighters, as well as those recruited from Sudan's Kordofan region. Mediators should also reach out to Sudan's other major armed groups who have not yet taken a side: Minni Minnawi of the Sudan Liberation Movement; Gibril Ibrahim of the Justice and Equality Movement; and Malik Agar of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North are key players whose involvement could turn the violence into a protracted civil war.

Longer term, a message needs to be sent to Sudan's kleptocratic class that violence to secure vested financial interests does not pay. US President Joe Biden's executive order authorising sanctions against individuals deemed to be "destabilising" Sudan is a step in the right direction.

Much has been learned on how to make sanctions bite after the West's punishing response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

It means not only freezing the overseas assets of Sudanese individuals and the companies they control, but also criminalising assistance given to them by the bankers, lawyers, accountants, and other service providers located in major

financial centres, to transfer, hide, launder, and grow illicitly-acquired wealth abroad.

We could also be bolder by making the kleptocrats, not foreign donors, pay for the destruction wrought. This could be done by helping Sudan recover stolen assets.

According to anti-corruption NGO Global Witness, Hemedti's wealth is concentrated in the family-controlled company, Al Junaid, and the RSF, reportedly, has an account in its name with the First Abu Dhabi Bank. For Al-Burhan, the military's business empire is held by the umbrella company, Defence Industries System. Their assets could be confiscated and deployed to rebuild the country and compensate victims of the violence.

The costs of inaction are well-known. Sudan is home to nearly 47 million people and Khartoum to over 6 million. If the fighting continues, the humanitarian and refugee crises will be massive. A disorderly exodus of civilians risks destabilising neighbours and further straining a fatigued international refugee regime. It may also entrench a war economy wherein the parties learn fighting is more profitable than peace. The effort required to stop the killing then will be much costlier than it is now.

This article originally appeared on Al-Jazeera and has been republished with permission.

Photo credit: Christopher Michel used with permission CC BY-NC 2.0

About the author



Omar Shahabudin McDoom

Omar Shahabudin McDoom is Associate Professor of Comparative Politics in the LSE's Government department where he specializes in the study of conflict, security, and violence.