



Good morning/afternoon, Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Dr. Comfort Ero, and I am the President and CEO of the International Crisis Group. Previously I served as the organization's Africa program director and I have spent my professional and academic career focusing on peace and security issues in Africa. International Crisis Group is a global organisation committed to the prevention, mitigation, and resolution of deadly conflict. We cover over 50 conflict situations around the world and our presence in Sudan dates back more than two decades.¹

I very much appreciate the opportunity to speak to you about the deteriorating situation in Sudan today. The country is at a dangerous crossroads. Not for the first time in its history, the military has turned its back on the demands of the Sudanese people for more just and representative rule by violently seizing power. The coup on October 25 brought a sudden halt to a civilian-military coalition that since 2019 has been charged with steering Sudan toward elections and full civilian rule.² It was a major reversal in a transition that had brought hope to so many in the Horn of Africa and beyond. I will share with you my analysis of the current situation in Sudan and recommendations for steps the United States might take to help guide it back on the path towards greater democracy and stability.

Background

By way of background, the transition that was interrupted on October 25 followed 30 years of rule by the notorious strongman Omar al-Bashir.

- After coming to office in a coup in June 1989, Bashir maintained his hold on power by repressing political opposition, fighting costly counter-insurgencies in the country's peripheries and underwriting his factious security sector with patronage-driven expenditure that ate up, by some estimates, 70 per cent of the national budget.³
- The patronage system that Bashir built eventually bankrupted the country and contributed to the strongman's ouster. A small cabal of favoured cronies including Bashir's Islamist allies from the National Congress Party, senior military officers (many of them drawn from the tiny riverine elite that has dominated Sudan's military and politics for decades) and newly minted allies such as the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which was blamed for some of the worst violence in the western region of Darfur,

¹ Crisis Group Africa Report N°281, *Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution*, 21 October 2019; Jonas Horner, *After the Coup, Restoring Sudan's Transition*, Crisis Group Q&A, 5 November 2021; Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°168, *The Rebels Come to Khartoum: How to Implement Sudan's New Peace Agreement*, 23 February 2021.

² Crisis Group Africa Report N°281, *Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution*, op.cit.; Jonas Horner, *After the Coup, Restoring Sudan's Transition*, op.cit.

³ Shortly after taking office, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, who was mandated to lead the civilian-military transition in August 2019, listed as an ambition driving down military expenditure to 20 per cent of the national budget. He said in some years, that budget line had stood at 80 per cent. "Sudan PM seeks to end the country's pariah status", ap, August 25 2019.

benefited substantially from Sudan's rigged, lopsided economy.⁴ These same actors continue to try to preserve their privileges atop Sudan's political, economic and security establishment.

- Popular frustration over political repression, rising prices and a sclerotic economy that could not absorb Sudan's ranks of unemployed youths helped trigger the protests that eventually drove Bashir from power. The uprising began in the south-eastern towns of Damazin and Sennar, where crowds took to the streets on 13 December 2018 in response to a tripling of bread prices. By the time the protests reached Atbara, the historic bastion of unionism in Sudan, demonstrators were demanding regime change. Against long odds and despite heavy repression, the protesters eventually overwhelmed the security forces, who staged a palace coup against Bashir on 11 April 2019.
- The military tried to maintain the upper hand but was forced under pressure both from the protest movement and external actors to compromise and accept to share power with civilians. International revulsion over a 3 June 2019 massacre of protesters encamped outside the military headquarters was particularly important in forcing the generals to cede to the will of the Sudanese people.⁵ Under the terms of a 17 August Constitutional Declaration, the country would be governed by a hybrid civilian-military coalition for 39 months leading up to elections.
- The task before that coalition was enormous. The new cabinet headed by the technocrat and diplomat Abdalla Hamdok was charged with breathing new life into Sudan's anaemic economy, reforming political institutions to lay the ground for elections and delivering justice to the many Sudanese victims of atrocities during Bashir's rule – and in the weeks following his fall. Despite the formidable obstacles the authorities faced, that coalition represented the country's best hope for emerging into a stable, prosperous, and democratic future and was a source of hope for those supporting democratic renewal in other countries in the region.
- Always reluctant participants in the alliance, the generals barely disguised their opposition to the Hamdok administration's reforms and were particularly opposed to efforts to deliver justice and to reshape the country's economy. In defiance of the United States government and others who warned them against doing so, they seized power and ousted the civilians.

The October 25 Coup and its Aftermath

Today, unfortunately, the picture looks grim. The military violently applied the brakes on the transition in the early hours of October 25 when they placed Hamdok under house arrest, rounded up numerous other civilian officials in the administration, declared a state of emergency and dissolved key institutions including the cabinet. Since then, Sudan's military chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has

⁴ "Who are Sudan's RSF and their Commander Hemeti?", Al Jazeera, 6 June 2019.

⁵ "Sudan commemorates the June 3 Massacre", Dabanga Sudan, 3 June 2021.

taken a series of steps to reverse the reforms the civilian-led administration had rolled out including by disbanding a committee charged with reclaiming public assets, by packing the Sovereign Council, which serves as the country's executive, with his allies and by appointing Bashir-era figures into key posts including in the judiciary and security forces.⁶ The military attempted some window dressing when it reinstated Hamdok on 21 November, a move Sudanese protesters rightly dismissed as an effort to legitimise their power grab. Some efforts to stimulate talks among Sudanese actors to find a way out of the crisis continue although the prospects of a resolution appear dim.

Overall, the country has been on a downhill trajectory since the coup. On 2 January, Hamdok resigned in frustration after failing to persuade the generals to stick by their commitments under the August 2019 constitutional charter, and in particular to give him a free hand to appoint a new cabinet. In the meantime, the public's frustration has been growing. For the past few weeks, Sudanese people across the country have taken to the streets to signal their revulsion at the military's power grab. The general's response to the protests has come right out of the Bashir playbook. The security forces have repeatedly fired into crowds, killing dozens, according to human rights groups and the UN⁷. A late December decree by military chief Abdel-Fattah al-Burhan gave the police effective immunity for their actions. Still, the Sudanese people continue to risk their lives by staging protests, work boycotts and other strike actions.

While it is not yet clear who will come out on top in this contest between the security forces and the street, there is evidence to suggest that the generals have gravely miscalculated the strength of their hand. This is a different Sudan from the one in which the army captured control of the state at least five times in the past, including in 1989 when Bashir took office.⁸ Sudan has one of the youngest populations in the world.⁹ Six in ten Sudanese are aged between 15 and 30 -- and the current generation rejects the notion that the country should go back to being governed by an unaccountable, out of touch elite.¹⁰ This mobilised, youthful population showed its power at the end of 2018 when it rose up in protest at Bashir's repressive, kleptocratic rule. The protest movement captured the imagination of pro-democracy campaigners well beyond Sudan with its diversity, with the prominent role that women played -- sometimes outnumbering men in demonstrations -- with its tenacity, and ultimately with its success. Against what many viewed as tall odds, it brought a halt to Bashir's rule. Since the coup, this movement has again shown its strength by mobilising millions of Sudanese to take to the streets and send a clear signal to the generals that they will not, as past generations of officers did, get away with imposing their will on the Sudanese people.¹¹

⁶ Crisis Group EU Watch List, 27 January 2022

⁷ "Bachelet condemns killings of peaceful protesters in Sudan", UN, 18 November 2021.

⁸ "A history of Sudan coups", Statista, 25 October 2021

⁹ "After the Uprising: Including Sudanese Youth", Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2020

¹⁰ Crisis Group Horn Podcast, *Sudan's Political Impasse*, 26 January 2022.

¹¹ "Deaths Reported in Sudan as 'March of Millions' Demands Restoration of Civilian Rule", Voice of America, 30 October 2021

Getting the transition back on track would serve both the people of Sudan's democratic aspirations and the interests of the United States and other regional and international actors in the strategically important Horn of Africa – where Sudan sits between major regional powers Ethiopia and Egypt and shares a border with seven countries, several in the throes of conflict themselves. Support for Sudan's transition would comport with the U.S. government's stated commitment to champion democratic values and to "demonstrate that democracies can deliver by improving the lives of their own people"¹². It would also be the surest pathway to medium and long term stability in the country.

Recommendations

The United States is one of Sudan's most important external partners. It provides about half a billion dollars in assistance annually and was a champion of efforts to reconnect Sudan's economy with international financial institutions. Given these ties and the United States government's relations with all the main regional actors, the U.S. is well positioned to support efforts to reverse the military's power grab and set Sudan back on a path toward elections and representative government. Specifically, it could:

- **Press the generals to immediately halt violence against protesters and coordinate targeted sanctions to hold them to account:** As outlined, Sudan's security forces have responded to peaceful protests by indiscriminately shooting into crowds and sometimes reportedly even pursuing fleeing and wounded demonstrators into hospitals.¹³ This pattern of behaviour, on top of its grave human cost, threatens to poison relations between the parties and render a resolution even further beyond reach. In coordination with partners including the African Union (AU) and the European Union, the United States should make clear that the generals will face consequences including asset freezes and travel bans if they continue to kill unarmed demonstrators. The White House should simultaneously convene an interagency process to design a targeted sanctions programs aimed at key figures in the military and outline that it is willing to deploy these against individuals that continue to sanction the killing of protesters or obstruct progress toward elections more broadly.
- **Support Sudanese-led efforts to rerail the transition:** The United States has already signalled its backing for efforts to stimulate negotiations among the generals and civilian groups including the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), the coalition that spearheaded the protest movement and neighbourhood resistance

¹² "President Biden to Convene Leaders' Summit for Democracy", White House, 11 August 2021

¹³ "Sudanese security forces 'hunt down' injured protesters in hospital", France 24, 25 January 2022

committees, which play an integral role in the day-to-day organisation of protests and have proved a particularly effective channel of resistance to the military coup. The United States should warn the generals against taking precipitous measures that could derail these potential talks, including refraining from unilaterally appointing a new prime minister. It should further insist that these talks are maximally inclusive and in particular that they should take on board the views of the resistance committees. The 2019 power-sharing agreement should be the blueprint for a compromise that could restore civilian-military governance and lead to elections.

- **Withhold financial assistance until the military reverses its coup:** In the immediate aftermath of the military takeover, the United States suspended \$700 million in assistance to Sudan. This was the right step given the generals' brazen decision to terminate the power-sharing agreement. The United States should make clear to the generals that this support will not resume unless they accept to return to the path toward elections laid out in the 2019 power-sharing agreement. In the meantime, the United States should advance with efforts to repurpose some of its support to civil society groups and also to work with partners including the UN to offer direct assistance to Sudan's long-suffering people.

- **Urge all regional actors to back a return to a civilian-led dispensation:** Many on the Sudanese street perceive some external actors, namely Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, as tacitly backing military rule.¹⁴ Such perceptions will ultimately be damaging to those countries' standing in Sudan if it is able to reinvigorate its transitional process. But it is still possible for these key regional actors to play an important role in helping Sudan return to a civilian-led transitional process, thereby protecting their relations with the Sudanese people. Given his strong background in regional diplomacy, Special Envoy Satterfield should be well-positioned to engage these actors and urge them to use their privileged relations with Sudan's generals to convey to them that the power-sharing agreement they torpedoed remains Sudan's best and perhaps only chance for stability, a goal they all profess to share. With the welcome appointment of a new ambassador to Khartoum, the United States could play a key role in marshalling a coalition of actors within and outside Sudan that can help steer the country back toward the path to elections.

Sudan is at a historic hinge-point. The military's power grab has derailed a transition that was an inspiration well beyond Sudan, and still could be, if the generals step back and allow Sudan's civilians to steer the country to elections. With a piling set of challenges – not least an economy in deep distress, resurging violence in Darfur and elsewhere, and a tottering peace deal

¹⁴ Crisis Group Horn Podcast, *Sudan's Political Impasse*, 26 January 2022.

with armed groups – the generals can hardly afford to stonewall the Sudanese people’s demands for change. The world – and the United States – should stand with Sudan’s people in their quest for a more democratic and accountable government, an outcome that represents the country’s best hope for achieving long-run political, social and economic stability.

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