



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

P. O. Box 34, Juba, South Sudan • Tel: +211 (0)956 305 780  
Email: thesudd.institute@gmail.com • www.suddinstitute.org

## Weekly Review

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### **Sudan's Popular Uprisings: Where South Sudan Stands**

*Jok Madut Jok*

#### **1. Introduction**

In April 2019, Sudanese protestors in Khartoum, the capital and other major towns, managed to push their country's longest reigning dictator, Omer Hassen al-Bashir, out of power after 30 years of a brutal dictatorship. The fall of al-Bashir was a cause for jubilation amongst crowds across the country, and true to the history of popular uprisings that Sudan has come to be known for.<sup>1</sup> This protest, as in previous ones, succeeded in removing al-Bashir because of the decision made by the army command to side with the protesting public. But, as the country moved towards forming a transitional government to replace the ousted regime, the events took a turn no one could have predicted. A vicious violence ensued and plunged the country into turmoil and a future of uncertainty. The violence against the protestors was carried out the Rapid Support Force, the militia composed of fighters formerly known as the Janjaweed, now part of the Sudanese army. It is now feared that Sudan will likely struggle with the violence in Khartoum for some time to come, and the threat of this violence plunging the country into more war is all too real.

This weekly review examines the various reactions by South Sudanese to the turmoil in Sudan. It also attempts to highlight some of the main questions that are being raised about the impact of Sudan's crisis on South Sudan and whether or not South Sudan has a role to play in the efforts to bring Sudan back from the brink of total war, concerned that continued violence in Khartoum and other major towns threatens regional security.

#### **2. Sudan's Conflict and South Sudan's Reactions**

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<sup>1</sup> S. Ahmed, "Sudan Uprising: We're on the verge of history, even as the world looks away." *African Arguments*, April 8, 2019.

The crisis in Sudan has thrown the whole regions of the Horn, East, and Central Africa into confusion. It has also stirred multiple reactions among South Sudanese, throwing up numerous questions that have no obvious answers. The most ubiquitous of these is the fate of the South Sudan's peace agreement that Sudan's deposed president had brokered under the auspices of IGAD several months before. Al-Bashir had pursued the agreement with the heavy-handedness that is emblematic of his dictatorship, which saw many opposition groups being strong-armed into signing that agreement. Can the agreement survive without its main guarantor? Whoever will eventually take the helms of power in Khartoum, it is uncertain to what extent they will be committed to the implementation of the agreement and to ending the war in South Sudan. This will depend on the calculations the new government in Khartoum will make, whether a peaceful South Sudan or a South Sudan at war is strategically useful to them. Or will the developments in Sudan take South Sudan back to the drawing board with regards to political settlements? Gladly, South Sudanese parties to the agreement seem to signal that their commitment to the agreement will not be affected by the status of power struggle underway in Sudan.

Both Sudan and South Sudan, since they parted ways in 2011, have been trading refugees and each other's rebel movements, as both of them have been gripped by separate but related civil wars, and have been using the rebels as proxies against one another. It is, therefore, not surprising that the crisis in Sudan has also raised questions about the fate of the estimated 1 million South Sudanese who had flocked to that country fleeing the civil war in their own country. What about the future of the SPLA-North—is Juba likely to pressure them to seek peace with the new power? Or will the dynamics in Sudan pave the way for the return to Khartoum of Yasir Arman, Malik Agaar and Adam el-Hilu, the top leaders of the armed opposition allegedly backed by Juba?<sup>2</sup> But beyond the strategic concerns on both sides of the border, there seems to be an undeclared call for South Sudanese to stand in solidarity with the Sudanese protestors, as the latter believe they have a common cause with anyone who abhors al-Bashir's regime and its elements remaining in control to date.

Many ordinary South Sudanese who are observing the events in Sudan and wondering how to react are reminded of the long history of oppression and violence that Sudan had always imposed on them. The overall tendency of the South Sudanese, it seems, is to stay away from the Sudanese affairs. This is because the political wrangling in Sudan no longer concerns most of them at individual and communal levels. "If the state of South Sudan wants to get involved based on its official strategic assessment, that would be just fine for me, but I think that it does not involve me as an individual," remarked one social media commentator. The Sudanese protestors, on the other hand wish the South Sudanese could just see that al-Bashir's reign of terror had not spared anyone, and that solidarity is now

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<sup>2</sup> Yasir Said Arman, deputy chairman of the SPLM-N, indeed returned to Khartoum with the hope of joining forces with the rest in CFC and the Sudanese Professional Associations towards reaching a compromise with the military leaders. But when the RSF attacked the sit-ins, he was arrested and was deported to Juba a few days later.

sorely needed in order to stem any remaining vestiges of his exploitative and divisive regime and to celebrate his departure by restoring the relations between the people of the two countries.

Though there has been no official statement from the government of South Sudan on its position vis-à-vis the crisis in Sudan, the situation in Sudan has raised concerns that Juba's ambivalence towards the protests and al-Bashir's exit from power could mean the new government in Khartoum will be unfriendly to Juba and might be more interested in unstable South Sudan. The failure to pick sides during the crisis could end up being very costly to South Sudan when stability returns to Sudan, unless Khartoum's strategic requirements dictate otherwise. The uncertainty among South Sudan's leaders whether to stand in solidarity with the protestors or to embrace the Transitional Military Council (TMC) that replaced al-Bashir has caused a sense of nonchalance among the public and many people seem to distance themselves from Sudan's events. But with the TMC likely to control power, to the exclusion of the Freedom and Change Forces, the coalition of political forces that was behind the protests, which essentially means that the TMC will become an extension of al-Bashir's reign by another name, it is not hard to see why Juba has been reluctant to throw its weight behind either side. To support the protestors might encourage similar protests within South Sudan but to openly support the TMC would contradict the country's own values and the position of the African Union and regional blocs. Put another way, the people and government of South Sudan seem to influence each other's positions. If there is a popular demand for action in Sudan, the South Sudanese government might follow the popular sentiment. If the government is proactive, the people might take a cue.

Signs are that the military will remain in total control of power in Sudan, as the TMC has now suspended the negotiations over power-sharing with the protestors (the CFC) and the protestors having vowed not to resume talks with a military council that has clearly turned out to be made up of the same military and security cabal that had waged war against the Sudanese people. This means the country will be steered away from the people's aspirations to build a democratic society. But while the two Sudans will remain strategic to each other, especially with regards to the economy and security, it is still unmistakable that there will always be mutual suspicion between the two capitals and that suspicion will always dictate the decisions each side makes.<sup>3</sup> That said, however, economy and border security are so important to both countries that they can dictate the terms of engagement between any next power in Khartoum and Juba, regardless of which side of the Sudan's contest the government of South Sudan stood. None of the two will have the capacity to predict the behavior of the other, nor will any side be willing to blink first. But a situation where the military returns or the TMC maintains power in Khartoum will most likely mean that both Sudan and South Sudan will not exit from the state of fragility they are in at the moment,

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<sup>3</sup> "Sudan's unrest might destabilize peace in South Sudan." *Foreign Policy*, December 29, 2018.

as the mutual suspicions would cause the parties to keep their cards too tightly to their chests.

### **3. South Sudanese Reactions**

If everyone is watching and can understand how the leaders and the governments of both countries will act towards one another going forward, the reactions by the South Sudanese public will remain somewhat undecipherable. For a moment, the public reactions were possible to gauge through how people were shocked by the actions of the Rapid Support Force (RSF), the paramilitary militia derived from Janjaweed, Khartoum-sponsored genocidaires who laid waste to the western region of Darfur between 2003 and 2016. The RSF were initially a border guard that gained notoriety for their vicious violence in that part of Sudan, particularly when Brigadier General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, better known as Hemeti, rose to the top of their command. Hemeti is now Deputy Chairman of the TMC, emboldening him to unleash his militia onto civilians, committing heinous atrocities, beginning on Monday June 3, 2019.

The RSF started the crackdown on the protestors using attacks that are emblematic of the way al-Bashir's regime had always used paramilitaries against protests in the peripheries of the whole country. The RSF engaged in civilian massacres, indiscriminate shootings, door-to-door searches for activists, and the drowning of opposition elements in the River Nile. These actions are all reminiscent of the well-known signature actions of the paramilitary force in Darfur. As this militia force is composed of Sudanese and African Muslims from across the border in Chad, Libya and Niger, and given that the extent of the violence they demonstrated in Darfur was largely unknown to the populations in the center, it is unclear what further rifts their actions in Khartoum will create among the Sudanese. These actions shocked the Sudanese in Khartoum and other major towns in the center of the country in ways that only the Darfuris, people from the Nuba Mountains, and from other peripheries had experienced and alerted the rest of the country to for years to no avail.<sup>4</sup> Their actions are also likely to create xenophobia against foreigners, including South Sudanese.

Some South Sudanese think standing with the Sudanese protesters is a duty for everyone who is repulsed by the nature of abuse of rights and the ghastly atrocities that have been committed by the Rapid Support Force since they stormed the sit-in at the Army General Headquarters. Such support would be based purely on the fact that everyone wanted al-Bashir gone and not due to any sort of ideological meeting of minds.

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that while the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and TMC have tried to blame the RSF for Khartoum atrocities in which 100 people have so far been killed and uncounted disappearances, there is no question that these two entities cannot sufficiently absolve themselves of responsibility for these atrocities, as it is unthinkable that SAF would stand idle while their citizens are being killed if indeed they disagreed with these acts.

Furthermore, there are South Sudanese whose position on Sudan's crisis is based on the historical context of varied experiences with violence, between center and periphery, and between the north and south before South Sudan broke away. This position is also informed by the religious, racial, and class undertones the wars of Sudan had always exhibited. Because of this, some South Sudanese reacted to the mayhem in Sudan this time around with a sense of vindication as to why their decision to break away had been the correct move. To the extent that a collective sentiment can be ascertained, it seems that a large segment of the South Sudanese population that has followed the events in the north believes that the Sudanese in the center are essentially taking a dose of their own medicine for disregarding the past atrocities that the successive Khartoum regimes had committed in the regions of Sudan far away from the corridors of power, and that the South Sudanese have or should not have a say on the events in Sudan at this point.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Whatever happens because of the current crisis in Sudan, it will be the Sudanese themselves who can sort out their affairs. As things stand, the use of a paramilitary force, the RSF, in an attempt to break the back of the popular protest, has succeeded at the moment. But unless the fundamental structural flaws in the way Sudan is governed are fixed, the protestors will return, and the time will come when the force of arms will no longer be more powerful than the sheer numbers of a determined citizenry. Although there is a historical residue from north-south relations that stands in the way of the South Sudanese getting involved in the Sudanese affairs one way or the other, it is imperative to recognize that Sudan is extremely important to South Sudan, for better or for worse. A Sudan that can quickly return to order is more useful to South Sudan, both in terms of economic and political stability.

History indicates that a Sudan at war with itself has often carried out attacks within South Sudan on the pretext of searching for rebels. This makes it extremely important that South Sudan participates in whatever limited way in the efforts to shape the next government in Khartoum in hope that such a government would base its relationship with Juba on mutual benefits of cooperation. But it is also equally important for South Sudanese to work out exactly what it is that causes them to shy away from involvement in the current situation in Sudan and what issues might compel them to want to have a say. There are, of course, matters of sovereignty, which are diplomatically delicate. Then there is uncertainty about which side of the divide would be more strategic to support. There are also the memories of relations between Sudan and South Sudan before the split that have caused a big gulf between the people of the two countries. For example, the Rapid Support Force attack on the protest sit-ins, right in front of the Army General Headquarters, with a view to crashing the uprising, was entirely reminiscent of how the Sudanese army and its affiliated militias had acted in the rest of Sudan for years and the center had not reacted in any meaningful ways. This time around, the response from nearly all corners of the Sudan to the brutality in Khartoum was one of total outrage. But brutal attacks on civilians had been the norm in

Darfur, Kordofan, and South Sudan for many years, but no similar level of outrage has ever been expressed by people in Khartoum. This makes many South Sudanese suspicious about the level of conviction about the human rights of all, allowing some people to suggest that perhaps it is about time for the people of Khartoum to taste a bit of what they knew Khartoum was doing in the peripheries but chose to ignore.

Many have an aversion to the idea that any South Sudanese should comment on the events in Sudan, often based on the contention that South Sudanese have enough problems of their own and should focus on their own mess, or something to this effect. Others say neither the government nor the people should get involved in the Sudanese current issues. This is partly because, whereas many people on both sides do not trust the government to engage in transparent ways for the public to assess the value of government of action, the people are also constrained by their own identity politics, whether or not a South Sudanese has any place in a northern Sudanese conflict that is driven by racial, religious and class identities.

However, such sentiments arising from memory of past events, while important to remember and to commemorate, do not have to be the only lens through which to strategize, to create alliances for a common cause or to rebuild relations on entirely new basis. The Sudanese protestors deserve support from all corners of the world, let alone from people and governments from nearby countries, people who might also stand to benefit from the results of the protest. For example, the toppling of al-Bashir was something that South Sudanese should have applauded, augmenting the revolution in Khartoum so as to quickly operationalize the gains of the protest and prevent the backdoor return of the elements of the toppled regime.

Apart from the sentiments of vindication, payback or nonchalance, there are purely strategic reasons why South Sudanese need to side with the Sudanese protestors. For example, there is a degree of wariness about the uncertain future regarding the governing of the over 2000-kilometer long borders between the two countries, all holding the promise of a thriving trade, cultural exchange, and population movement, but dotted by contested areas and ripe with insecurity. This requires South Sudanese, particularly the government, to be extremely strategic in deciding how to react to the predicament in Sudan. The longer the political uncertainties in Sudan remain, the longer it will take South Sudanese to put their fears about Sudan's potential for destruction to rest.

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### **About Sudd Institute**

*The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.*

## **Author's Biography**

***Jok Madut Jok*** is a senior policy analyst and Executive Director at the Sudd Institute. He is also a professor of Anthropology at Syracuse University, New York, USA, specializing in gender and sexuality, violence as a public health scourge.