

Has the Pursuit of Democracy Failed in Sudan?

by [Dr. Khidir Haroun Ahmed \(/experts/dr-khidir-haroun-ahmed\)](/experts/dr-khidir-haroun-ahmed)

Jul 13, 2023

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/hl-fshlt-alswdan-fy-syha-aly-thqyq-aldymqratyt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/hl-fshlt-alswdan-fy-syha-aly-thqyq-aldymqratyt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Dr. Khidir Haroun Ahmed \(/experts/dr-khidir-haroun-ahmed\)](/experts/dr-khidir-haroun-ahmed)

Dr. Khidir Haroun Ahmed is a Dean of Faculty at the International University of Africa. He previously served as Sudan's Ambassador to the United States.



Brief Analysis

The current conflict in Sudan has been exacerbated by a limited democratic process after the fall of Omar al-Bashir that failed to incorporate a diversity of Sudanese civilian voices.

Two years prior to the independence of Sudan in 1956 from Anglo-Egyptian rule, an election was held to establish an interim government that paved the way for a fully-fledged independent country. This transitional government came about as the result of general elections and it continued to rule as a legitimately-elected government even after independence was realized.

Though General Ibrahim Aboud took power in a military coup d'etat just a few years later in 1958, kicking off the first military rule in independent Sudan, the people eventually toppled this regime in 1964, bringing back general elections and effectively restoring democracy. And though a subsequent military coup led by General Jafaar Nimeiry set the country back for another sixteen years from 1969 to 1985, the Sudanese people again eventually succeeded in effecting change through public uprising. Within twelve months of the end of Nimeiry's regime, undisputed democratic elections were held in Sudan through which Sadiq al-Mahdi was elected Prime Minister.

The common denominator in each of these eras of Sudanese history is that the Sudanese people have been able to successfully and peacefully move from dictatorship to civilian rule through the democratic mechanism of election and without the interference of regional or international powers. This repeated success is a testimony to the Sudanese people's deep desire and capacity for democracy. It also contradicts any narratives suggesting that democracy has failed in the context of the current conflict between General Abdul Fattah al-Burhan's Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo's Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

In examining Sudan's internal crisis—a crisis that has displaced millions, deprived citizens of food, healthcare, and housing, and subjected women and children to brutal assault—it is instead necessary to point to the specific policies that have contributed to a democratic breakdown in spite of the Sudanese people's willingness to commit to democracy. Though it was certainly the RSF who instigated the current violence, popular frustrations and fears were

widespread even before the military crisis.

Rather than overseeing a seamless internal transition from the regime of Omar al-Bashir to a democratic government—as has happened in Sudan’s past—caretaker Prime Minister Abdulla Hamdok invited the UN in to essentially take over his job. The UN then established the Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITMAS) headed by Special Representative Volker Perthes in what was supposed to be an effort to usher in general elections in consultation with Sudanese from all sections of society.

However, Perthes and the UN Mission instead handpicked individuals from just one segment of the Sudanese political landscape—known as the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC)—to consult in the formation of a “Framework Agreement,” excluding other key groups and individuals. These chosen interlocutors were considered the only stakeholders in a future democratic Sudan. By excluding large swaths of the Sudanese people—while simultaneously inviting international parties such as the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to have a say—the agreement formed by UNITMAS and the FFC infuriated the majority of Sudanese, who felt that the resulting democratic vision served only the ideologies and interests of the few groups involved in government formation.

In particular, many Sudanese felt frustrated by the extreme version of liberal democracy that the agreement seemed to impose. This version did not recognize the customs, traditions, and religion that inevitably play a central role in the Sudanese way of life. Though the FFC **claimed (<https://redress.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/The-2022-Proposed-Transitional-Constitution-Approved.pdf>)** to be fending off the dangerous rise of “Islamists” in their decision-making—grounds on which they purged thousands of ambassadors, judges, police officers, government workers, and college professors simply because these individuals obtained their jobs during the al-Bashir era—this justification does not align with the reality of religious, traditional culture in Sudan. According to media reports at that time, a tribal leader from Eastern Sudan, a Bija tribe Shaikh, claimed that an ambassador from a quadrilateral body threatened that if he didn’t sign the Framework Agreement, he would be disfranchised in the future general elections.

Sudanese citizens are largely conservative, but they are still tolerant, non-violent, and modern individuals who simply long to be ruled by a government of their choice through the ballot. They are not anti-democratic, but rather desirous of a democracy that exists in harmony with their cultural realities. In contrast, the democratic framework imposed by UNITMAS and the FCC seemed foreign and uncomfortable.

It is this failed international design for a transition to civilian rule that paved the way for the RSF’s rebellious act that launched the conflict. In May, the U.S. Under Secretary of the Department of State for Political Affairs even seemed to **recognize this mistake (<https://youtu.be/3jYIFPm9s>)**, promising to broaden the base of interlocutors in order to include more segments of Sudanese society. But by then, it was too little too late.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time that U.S. policy towards Sudan has drawn from misinformed or one-sided interlocutors. In fact, this happened throughout the Second Sudanese Civil War. Then, U.S. policymakers over-relied on partisan lobbyists and unreliable informants to form opinions about the conflict, resulting in an oversimplified but digestible narrative that the civil war pitted a vulnerable, Christian South Sudan against a Muslim North Sudan. In hindsight, diplomats from a variety of stages of the Sudan conflict—including former U.S. Ambassador to Sudan Donald Petterson, career diplomat Elizabeth Shackelford, Director of Policy for the U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan Zach Vertin, and U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan Amb. Princeton Lyman—have openly recognized these miscalculations.

When policy towards Sudan lacks inclusivity of the voices of so many stakeholders, the reality of the Sudanese political landscape is obscured and the suffering of the Sudanese people is only amplified. As the battle between the SAF and RSF continues, the international community must seriously reassess the lenses through which they view Sudan’s political and cultural environment to make sure they can see the full picture of what democracy in Sudan

can look like. ❖

RECOMMENDED



The Reality of Normalization with Assad: Syrians' Perspectives

Jul 11, 2023



Ishtar Al Shami

(/policy-analysis/reality-normalization-assad-syrians-perspectives)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Militia Propagandists Comment on Tsurkov Kidnapping

Jul 7, 2023



Hamdi Malik

(/policy-analysis/militia-propagandists-comment-tsurkov-kidnapping)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Why a Weak Abbas Is Dangerous for Israel

Jul 6, 2023



Dennis Ross,
Ghaith al-Omari

(/policy-analysis/why-weak-abbas-dangerous-israel)

TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)