



United States Institute of Peace

**“Sudan’s Imperiled Transition: U.S. Policy in the
Wake of the October 25th Coup”**

Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

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Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, and members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the situation in Sudan after the October 2021 coup. Events on the ground in Sudan continue to evolve and provide challenges to U.S. and international engagement, yet there are opportunities to improve the situation.

I am a senior expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace, although the views expressed here are my own. The U.S. Institute of Peace was established by Congress over 35 years ago as an independent, nonpartisan national institute to prevent and resolve violent conflicts abroad, in accordance with U.S. national interests and values.

Introduction

Sudan's citizens affirmed and secured their right to define the nature of the state and their relationship to it through the 2019 revolution. Given the complexities of Sudan's politics, economy, and society, this is difficult. But the transitional period provided for this, subject to the willingness of leaders within the civilian-military partnership to uphold commitments to a different vision for Sudan. There will be many debates about if that partnership was possible from the start. What is clear is that the contested nature of the transition and certain individuals within it overpowered those working toward the revolution's aims of freedom, peace, and justice.

The coup broke the already fragile transition and its constitutional foundation. Sudan is now witnessing an unprecedented political and economic crisis and may be reverting to its pre-revolution state. Violence against citizens continues to increase, including in areas outside of Khartoum, especially in Darfur. As Sudanese, the region, and international community try to plot a way forward, it is critical to examine lessons from the transitional period so they can inform policymaking and assistance.

This testimony outlines some lessons learned from the start of the transition to the present. The lessons cover topics on various stakeholders and key thematic areas of the transition. This is followed by views on the current political situation, and possible U.S. and international diplomatic and assistance tools to support democratic stakeholders and pursue a true civilian transition.

1) Resistance Committees & Protest Groups

As happened in the lead-up to and during the 2019 revolution, the post-coup situation has again thrust Resistance Committees (RCs) and protest groups into the limelight as they face violence during protests. Some of them note that this is a continuation of the revolution after an aborted attempt at transition. It frames their current "no negotiation, no partnership, no compromise" posture. Diplomats have recently met with RC and protest representatives in Sudan and learned more about how they are adapting structures to the current situation. They are also hearing about positions being developed organically on local consensus-building, social justice, community representation, and resource mobilization.

This attention is a welcome shift from 2019 when it seemed that the diffuse nature of protests, coupled with the horizontal organization of RCs, led international actors to face difficulty with—

or indifference to—engaging with them. Attention moved to the operation of government and challenges, such as economic reform and international relations. A key lesson is that the motivations and strategies of all elements of the revolution matter, not just organized political and civic forces. The RCs can be studied and engaged more closely. There is much to learn about their evolution during the previous National Congress Party (NCP) regime through to their role in 2018-19 protests, their engagement with the Sudan Professionals Association and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), and how they undertook advocacy during the attempted transition. Charting this evolution will provide clarity to their current positions and analyzing the nonviolent nature of the protests can provide lessons for situations elsewhere.

There is a narrative that some RCs oppose political parties or wish to replace them. However, there is another one that suggests they realize political party participation in elections and governance is needed. Within that, there is a desire for politicians to carry forward their positions, outlined in section seven below, that are informed by the previous two years and to be held accountable through fair elections. Lastly, while protests in urban centers are important, so too are those citizens who share similar aspirations, but who are further removed among nomadic, internally displaced, rural, and agrarian communities.

2) Security Sector

International actors should reassess their understanding of Sudan’s security sector, including the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Since the security sector is not one bloc and there are differences within SAF circles, their internal opinions on transitions and coups are important. At the beginning of the transition, an international fear was that the paramilitary RSF would seek to dominate security and economic power. While this fear may have been warranted, it detracted from attempts to understand dynamics within the SAF and between the SAF and RSF.

The removal of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) leadership and supposed reduction of its operational capacity after the revolution led many to assume it was rightsized. This should have been groundtruthed, as it now appears that after the coup the NISS heir, the General Intelligence Service, reverted to its predecessor’s pre-revolution state. There were also accusations that former regime elements remained prominent in the security sector, but this never seemed adequately explored by international actors and could have shed light on security sector commitments, power dynamics, and the resurgence of certain elements after the coup.

Given the security sector’s prominent role in the economy and politics, a key need of the transition was to undertake security sector reform (SSR). Along with what SSR traditionally entails—such as integration of paramilitary forces into the regular army—thought was given by some international actors and Sudanese stakeholders on how to develop a national security vision that prioritized citizen security over regime security. This was grounded in the reality that security actors have a role to play in the country and have insights that are relevant to discussions about security priorities, risks, and threats. However, the distinction between these two was not sufficiently stressed by some international actors that focused primarily on the tactical aspects of SSR. SSR was rightly seen as necessary, but without also prioritizing dialogue about security sector priorities and civilian-led security sector governance.

While protestors and RCs are diametrically opposed to the SAF and some other security sector actors, attempts to learn how the wider Sudanese public views them is important since it is possible that there are divergent views in more rural areas beyond Khartoum. Lastly, observing international engagement with the security sector, especially by Russia, Egypt, and the Gulf states, can also help extrapolate how such countries view the transition. Key questions should have been asked, such as did the security sector assume that its regional allies would provide them with more overt support than they did, especially after the coup.

3) Political Parties & Civilian Groups

Political parties and organized civilian groups are a necessary part of any resumed transition, and their ability to work with each other and effectively represent citizen stances on a new, more sustainable, and truly civilian transition will build a healthier political environment. Understanding the motives, strategies, and personalities among them can help comprehend how they, and the wider public, perceive their role.

Far from being one unified bloc, the civilians that composed half of the transition are diverse in political ideology and approaches. Assumptions about their unity on issues beyond the desire for a civilian-led government should be groundtruthed. Political and civic leaders as individuals are important, but more significant is the environment in which they operate and, if provided the opportunity, govern. Focusing on the former without attention to the latter can create a distorted, underdeveloped political system.

The umbrella created by the FFC, a loose grouping of political parties, unions, civic bodies, and rebel movements, arose during the revolution and negotiated the Constitutional Declaration that ushered in the hybrid government. Tensions within and between FFC groups widened during the transition, whether the result of genuine differences, personal animosity, or interference by security sector or other actors in Sudan. This chipped away at trust, splitting some groups, causing some withdrawals from the FFC, and limiting the ability to present actionable views on a way forward. By the time of the coup, continued disagreements and interference from some armed movements and security actors created discernible factions. However divided they may have been, this was no excuse for a coup and saying that it needed to happen to get the transition back on track is disingenuous.

In the post-coup environment, the role of the FFC, its factions, and other civilian groups in proposing a political roadmap and engaging with actors such as the United Nations Interim Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) is contested. The gulf between political groups and the protest movement is wide and there is mistrust—or misunderstanding—on both sides. International engagement with such political groups can help advocate for and possibly facilitate understanding through diplomacy and assistance.

4) The Juba Peace Agreement

A key goal of the transition was to reach peace agreements with armed movements in Sudan's peripheries. Given the historic U.S. and international role in peace processes in Sudan—and what is now in South Sudan—this theme is particularly relevant. The Juba Peace Agreement (JPA)

was brokered by South Sudan and signed by the transitional government with some armed groups and political movements in October 2020. Two main groups from Southern Kordofan and Darfur remained outside the agreement. The negotiations process was convoluted and expanded to include separate deals with areas such as Eastern Sudan. While civilians were initially involved in discussions, security elites took the lead. This created a bond between some JPA signatories and security components of the transition that was solidified by their entry into government in February 2021. The continued presence of some JPA representatives in the post-coup government is testament to this relationship and its complicated power dynamics.

Many observers criticize international involvement in Sudanese and South Sudanese peace processes going back to the 1990s since they produced power-sharing deals that seemed to reward rebellion. Positions were doled out, resources divided, and ineffectual committees formed. Citizens barely benefited. The JPA replicated a similar process that bred similar implementation problems that plagued previous peace deals. Taking a fresh look at peace processes and agreements can find ways to avoid reinforcing zero-sum, militarized politics. While peace agreements and deals between elites are needed, their shape and impact need to account for citizen needs and long-term socio-economic benefits, not just short-term elite gains.

Assumptions about the nature of rebel movements and their relative legitimacy and representativeness also need to be interrogated, with evaluation of the credibility of such groups accounting for their commitments to democracy, especially when in government. Agreements can provide for detailed, enforceable political deals that do not simply provide a screen for signatories to make untransparent decisions and trade power. Lastly, a comprehensive peace arrangement may be more beneficial than the JPA's peace by pieces approach. That process may be more effective if run by civilians, with security sector involvement on security arrangements.

5) Economic Issues

The transition inherited an economic crisis based on crushing international debt, decreasing revenues, chronic budget deficits, corruption, and decreased oil revenue after South Sudan's 2011 secession. Citizens coped with rising urban and rural food insecurity amidst government attempts to undertake sweeping economic reforms. Such efforts were also impacted by the rise of COVID-19. At the beginning of the transition Sudan's economy was effectively blocked from the international financial system. The process to reverse this was well underway before the coup due to international engagement, particularly the U.S. government's removal of Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism after Sudan paid compensation to victims of terrorism. Subsequent arrears clearance with international financial institutions and reaching the Highly Indebted Poor Countries decision point in June 2021 continued forward movement. The coup stalled progress since it halted international financial institution support and other key assistance, and jeopardized debt relief.

A more technical discussion of economic issues is beyond the scope of this testimony. A main lesson is that while economic reforms are critical to a transition, equally important are their political implications. For example, the scope and timing of subsidy removals that can drive popular discontent if mishandled. The international community may have realized the need for a social safety net and economic dividends, but plans were too often divorced from inescapable

political linkages. Tied to this is the importance of efforts to address Sudan's gray economy, corruption, and undue influence of the security actors and previous regime on many sectors. Looking at challenges faced by the Empowerment Elimination, Anti-corruption, and Funds Recovery Committee tasked with seizing assets of the previous regime is critical, as is its treatment after the coup, including reversal of some of its decisions.

Sudan may have moved toward reintegration into the international financial and development community, but it was unable to sufficiently bring local political actors into this orbit or show more tangible dividends to citizens. The precarious post-coup economic situation provides impetus for international stakeholders to observe how it impacts protests, political discussions and power dynamics, and responses from the post-coup government. This could create a more nuanced political economy analysis—for example on the controversial gold sector—to help inform U.S. and international policies on Sudan.

6) Transitional Justice

The need for transitional justice and accountability, and an overhauled judicial sector to advance this, is critical to any transition in Sudan. For those who suffered abuses under the previous regime—and from the 2019 revolution until now—justice is often the most salient issue. They must be involved and support outcomes. The previous transitional government was unable to advance the issue.

International theory varies on issues such as the extent and timing of justice, as well as strategies such as amnesty. Like many things, it is foremost up to the people of Sudan to determine these issues. There are relevant comparative examples from the region, though they often cripple efforts at justice mechanisms during negotiations and implementation of agreements. Though it may sometimes be appropriate to delink negotiations on transitional justice from wider talks, this often results in implementation being watered down or postponed, or formation of toothless committees. Sudanese can discuss concrete options for sequencing and leveraging justice issues and determining the level(s) of accountability.

7) Political Pathways Forward

There are over ten civilian groups at both national and local levels advocating positions on the way forward. They range from political parties to community organizations and the families of those killed during protests. They seem to agree on the need for: a fully civilian democratic government; removal of the security sector from politics and the economy; accountability related to the June 2019 Khartoum massacre and those killed since the coup; JPA and peace process reviews; creation of the transitional legislative council; and a unified national army and reformed civilian-led security sector. They disagree on whether to reject all dialogue with security actors. Some are suggesting that security sector involvement in government be limited to a civilian-led security and defense council to advise on security matters. Some are in favor of engaging with the UNITAMS consultations while others are opposed.

It is remarkable that these groups can prepare positions through consensus-building and dialogue while many are peacefully confronting state-sponsored violence. This violence is unacceptable,

and the international community must take measures beyond words to halt it. Continued violence will likely prevent a viable, inclusive political process and solution. However, continued violence and international reactions to this should not put undue pressure on civilians to overly compromise for the sake of a quick, halfhearted peace. Focusing on simultaneously creating a safe space for them to refine positions and encourage political actors to embrace them is needed. Similarly, premature calls for national dialogue that is not inclusive and/or ignores the need for a level playing field are unhelpful. If not carefully planned and executed, a contested dialogue process could reinforce power inequalities and harden positions.

Many political processes begin with a defined process, topics for negotiation, and identifiable stances. But they often lack clarity on what an end state may be. The current case of Sudan appears to be the opposite; civilian groups seem to agree that a fully democratic end state is needed with security forces taking up their proper role and devoid of involvement in non-security arenas. A comprehensive peace is also critical. The U.S. and international community should embrace this end state. However, it is the process to that end state that needs a clear strategy, bolstered by coordinated international engagement. The inclusion of women in such a process is paramount. They have often borne the brunt of repressive regimes. For example, surviving the use of rape as a weapon of war from the beginning of the Darfur conflict until now. Their inclusion in political and peace discussions, and security sector reform and accountability, is critical.

It is important for political processes to be Sudanese-led. However, there are ones that are well-constructed, align with the revolution's vision, and likely to result in a sustainable agreement. And those that are not. Sudanese recognize this and are wary of blanket acceptance sometimes employed by the international community. Additionally, intervention by regional states, some of which may be seen by Sudanese as unhelpful, needs to be accounted for in political solutions. It is tempting to use previous models for political discussions and negotiations. This post-coup situation is a rare opportunity to test new ways and avoid overlaying Sudan's evolving dynamics onto stale frameworks. Many Sudanese see beyond the end of a transition to future events that can strengthen a democratic outcome. This requires medium- and long-term international strategies that extend beyond the horizon of any renewed transition.

The UNITAMS initiative has received much attention because it is the first structured political consultation process. In its public statements UNITAMS was careful to note that it has not embarked on a formal mediation effort but is beginning with consultations to feed into a possible process that could be facilitated by the UN and/or other partners. Any process can be made more inclusive, especially by including women, youth, and other civic actors. But if inclusivity is symbolic or disingenuous, the bitterness it creates among those groups can cripple support for outcomes.

International discussions underway to identify eminent international personalities that can assist with UNITAMS' work are important. Something akin to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development Partners Forum may also be helpful. There is precedent, for example during the 2010-12 African Union High-level Implementation Panel talks between Sudan and South Sudan, for broad collaboration between the UN, AU, and international champions. If this is replicated in Sudan, its impact can be magnified if it stretches from UN headquarters in New York where the

Security Council's P5 and A3 can be invoked, to regional capitals and AU headquarters. Technical experts in fields such as constitutional design and security issues can be on standby, and secretariat services organized. Genuine partnerships among those with the mandate and stake in the future of the country are required for success. Absent such collaboration, energy and political coherence will be wasted and parties are likely to “forum shop” at the expense of forging a timely, equitable deal.

8) United States Assistance & Diplomacy

The U.S. government, in particular the Department of State and USAID, has decades of experience amidst the complexities of Sudan's politics, economy, and humanitarian situation. Never has the U.S. government had access to so much information to help understand the current situation. This is key to advancing policy objectives and assisting in Sudan's democratic transformation.

After the coup, the U.S. suspended portions of a \$700 million assistance appropriation related to direct government support, along with similar support provided by other U.S.-funded programs. Fortunately, civil society support, democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) programs, and conflict mitigation assistance was expanded. It may be tempting to restart assistance at first sign of improvement or if it appears it can fix an emergency, but care should be taken to ensure that a restart is not premature. Having to suspend assistance again, or weather a period where it is clear that the situation has not effectively changed, can dent credibility of the U.S. approach. A scenario for the suspension's lifting is when violence against civilians has ceased and there is tangible, irreversible progress toward a civilian government.

While it may seem counterintuitive, the suspension provides a rare opportunity to return to first principles and assess the aims of assistance. The collapse of the transition and upending of the constitutional order is a shift that requires serious reconsideration. During this time, however, close attention on the nationwide economic, livelihoods, and food security situation is needed to ensure that appropriate help is applied. In most cases, humanitarian crises are best solved through negotiated solutions to political and conflict issues. This can unlock assistance for community resilience and economic growth programs, such as small and medium agricultural enterprises, and supporting Sudanese organizations working on environmental issues.

The U.S. could better align its diplomatic and political efforts with development assistance. There are times when diplomacy can provide tangible support for assistance objectives, particularly for DRG and conflict mitigation ones. However, they can be inadvertently undermined through the course of diplomacy, especially during key political milestones, negotiations, or conflict. An example is the April 2010 Sudan national elections. While the U.S. supported electoral management bodies and citizen-led monitoring to advance elections, some diplomatic messages did not address contested processes and outcomes amidst the focus on moving the Comprehensive Peace Agreement closer to other milestones. An overriding consideration for bridging the gap between diplomacy and assistance is that the latter is unlikely to completely resolve complex problems, but it can help support outcomes and consolidate gains.

All assistance, especially to the DRG sector, is most effective when grounded in a “do no harm” principle and adaptable to situations on the ground. Sudan’s citizens can best express ways to achieve this, more so now due to closing space. Proposed assistance should undertake the necessary groundwork with possible beneficiaries to build trust and overcome any misunderstandings. For example, if assistance to RCs is requested, it should be based on careful, transparent discussions to ensure buy-in and that resources are going where RCs think they are most needed. Assistance to RCs could include continued development of strategies for nonviolent action, ensuring that mobilization is sustained while aiming to stop civilian deaths, and support for new political mechanisms arising from RCs and other civic groups. It is possible that some groups will not want U.S. and international assistance for valid reasons. Lastly, it is possible that some groups may benefit more from political and non-monetary support or feel that financial support will not be effective without political support. Coordination between assistance and diplomacy is critical in such cases.

A U.S. all-of-government DRG strategy for Sudan to help restore, support, and consolidate a genuine transition is needed. It could be conceptualized, implemented, and monitored by a joint USAID/Department of State/National Security Council task force with senior-level leadership. It could also link diplomatic and political efforts with assistance programs and be informed by rolling assessments of political economy and conflict situations. Areas for mutually reinforcing international partnerships could be explored. A task force could be staffed with experts in digital communications, independent media, civil society protection, women’s political engagement, and political party and legislative development, among others. Many relevant program areas can be found in the 2020 Sudan Democratic Transition, Accountability, and Fiscal Transparency Act. A Sudan DRG strategy could be viewed in the context of the Biden Administration’s democracy agenda and be a case study for turning democracy promotion ideals into actionable policy placed at the heart of bilateral relations.

Diplomatic and assistance strategies are important, but individuals do the hard work of implementation. Some embassies and assistance missions in Khartoum were not backfilled after some billets were transferred to South Sudan in 2011. While assistance opportunities may have been limited in post-secession Sudan, there has not been adequate staffing up since the 2019 revolution. Additionally, there are good examples of Washington, DC-based U.S. government surge support for Sudan. For example, the Office of the U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan in 2010 had over 20 staff, including some detailed from the Departments of Defense and Treasury, and Schedule B and contractor hires for negotiations support, programming assistance, security sector advising, public affairs outreach, and other specialties. Retired ambassadors were brought back to focus on political issues and the Darfur conflict.

More personnel could be devoted to messaging and public affairs outreach, both in person in Sudan and on social media. For many protestors and RCs, the idea that the U.S. can on the one hand publicly say they support the people of Sudan in their struggle for democracy, and on the other hand support dialogue with security actors, is not valid. The U.S. can help publicly bridge this gap and explain why it believes these things can happen simultaneously.

It is right for the U.S. and others to diplomatically engage security actors in Sudan, but it should be grounded in a firm view of a truly civilian government end state grounded in comprehensive

peace. As the U.S. engages with security actors that are using some tactics reminiscent of the pre-revolution era, it can analyze lessons from its engagement with the NCP regime, particularly on how it did or did not utilize concrete incentives and disincentives.

It is understandable that some call for targeted sanctions because they are a powerful tool to translate statements condemning violence against citizens into action. They must be applied smartly and be part of a clear, detailed strategy grounded in political realities. Sanctions are not a substitute for a strategy. The argument that sanctions may in theory negatively impact prospects for dialogue through hardening positions or stoking violence needs to be groundtruthed. The argument is often made based on assumptions instead of objective analysis. Assumptions that sanctions on lower-level officials will provide necessary warning to senior leaders and change their behavior should also be checked.

Conclusion

The 2019 revolution was informed by decades of repression and struggle, and what came after did not arise from a clean slate. Many Sudanese rightly have a long view of history and link their generation's struggles to prior ones. In the British colonial era library at the University of Khartoum there is a small shrine to Ahmed al Qurashi, a 20-year-old student whose killing galvanized popular protests that brought down a military government in October 1964. Today, the photos of many 2019 revolution victims are alongside his. More have probably been added since October 2021.

Complex social and demographic changes got underway due to the relative opening of civic space after the revolution. It will be difficult to definitively close that space without resistance from citizens, as is currently happening on the streets of Sudan. The complexity of Sudan's politics has also increased during this historic time. While contrasting views abound, a plurality of views is normal in deeply divided societies like Sudan, and it is possible to encourage civil debate and consensus. This can lay a strong foundation for a vibrant democracy that Sudanese have struggled to achieve and that the U.S. values in its own society.

The U.S and international community can, and should, avoid a neutral stance on what has happened in Sudan. There was a military coup and the government's constitutional bond with its citizens was severed. It is not possible to return to the pre-coup dispensation. A new constitutional order is needed. There will be no stability in Sudan until there is a genuine civilian government and the role of the security sector is firmly decided and implemented. That stability must extend to Sudan's peripheries such as Darfur, Southern Kordofan, Blue Nile, Eastern Sudan, and the Far North. For now, instability there is tied to national-level politics, exacerbating local issues during a time of economic and humanitarian crisis. The onus is on Sudanese to achieve their democratic goals, but the U.S. and international community have an explicit role to play in the interest of regional and international stability. More importantly, there is a duty to nurture citizen-led, non-violent democratic change at a time when this is in short global supply.

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