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A Breakthrough in Sudan's Impasse?

Sudan's military leader, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, says the army will step aside to make way for a civilian government. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Alan Boswell discusses why a solution for the political stalemate has proven so elusive and what may come next.

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What has happened?

On 4 July, Sudan's de facto head of state, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, said in a surprise announcement that the military would withdraw from negotiations with the country's civilian political forces and allow them to form a government on their own. He added that once the government is in place, he would dissolve the Sovereign Council, the executive body that he chairs and which nominally shares power with civilian politicians, and appoint a supreme military council with security, defence "and related responsibilities". This military council would then negotiate its exact powers with the new administration. In a move that appeared to set up a precursor to the council, Burhan removed civilian members from the Sovereign Council later that week. But more than a month later, military and civilian actors remain stuck in an impasse, with civilian groups yet to agree on a path forward.

The fault for this predicament rests primarily with Sudan's military, which overthrew the civilian government in an October 2021 coup, thereby derailing the country's transition away from authoritarian rule that began in 2019, when an uprising toppled long-time President Omar al-Bashir. While Burhan's offer could prove a breakthrough, it is also a tactical manoeuvre designed to defuse popular unrest and shift blame for Sudan's political deadlock and economic woes to the regime's fractious opponents, who are struggling to come to a unified position on the proposal. While [political parties](#) and [protest leaders](#) immediately accused Burhan of acting in bad faith, they are divided about how to proceed. Meanwhile, international responses have cautiously welcomed the move, with the so-called Troika of the U.S., the UK, and Norway [urging](#) Sudanese to "move quickly" with negotiations toward a political agreement that would be the basis of a new government, while calling on the military to "withdraw from the political scene" as promised once civilians form one.

How did Burhan come to power, and why is his government under pressure?

Sudan's security forces first seized power in April 2019 to stem a months-long popular revolt against Bashir's rule. Four months later, that August, military leaders [signed a power-sharing agreement](#) with the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), an umbrella group representing civilian, political and armed opposition groups. (Some ex-rebel groups later splintered off and formed a separate iteration of the FFC.) The agreement, known as the [Constitutional Declaration](#), transferred most powers to a civilian administration while also creating the Sovereign Council, a body with few delineated powers, and also established late 2023 as the time for fresh elections to put in place a fully civilian government. Despite its lack of enumerated powers, the Council – led by Burhan – took on significant executive responsibilities, including in foreign policy. The transitional period rapidly became mired in various power struggles, particularly between civilian political leaders and senior army officers bent on preserving the military's political dominance and safeguarding its considerable economic interests, as well as avoiding accountability for past alleged crimes.

In October 2021, the army once again seized sole power, dismissing the prime minister and most of the civilian cabinet. The coup, in effect, halted the fragile transition that was supposed to pave the way for elections in 2023. Since then, the economy has been in an accelerating crisis and, despite an often brutal security response that has killed more than a hundred since the coup, the massive protest movement that brought down Bashir has continued to take to the streets on a near-weekly basis.

Burhan's 4 July announcement came amid a fresh wave of protests. On 30 June, tens of thousands (and by some counts many more) turned out to denounce the junta, buoyed by widespread frustration with high food and fuel prices as well as a looming hunger crisis. Security forces fired into crowds, reportedly killing ten protesters and wounding hundreds (the exact death toll was hard to verify due to a communications blackout); it was the deadliest crackdown since November 2021. Civilian and political parties then organised a number of sit-ins throughout the capital Khartoum and surrounding areas as part of a civil disobedience campaign. An all-women's march followed, while fans at a match between Sudan's two top football clubs engaged in organised pro-democracy chants. The events were illustrative of a broader phenomenon: although the 2021 coup placed power firmly back in the military's hands, the protest movement has proven so resilient that it regularly brings Khartoum to a standstill.

The economy has been another source of pressure on the Burhan-led junta. Sudan is without a functioning government and in economic freefall: while inflation decreased after July 2021, in June 2022 the rate was still at 148.9 per cent. In response to the 2021 coup, Western donors froze billions of dollars in financial assistance to the government and suspended plans to reduce Sudan's \$50 billion external debt, quashing hopes for economic recovery. The war in Ukraine has made the situation even worse. Global food prices fortunately have returned to roughly what they were before the war – though they are still substantially higher than before the outbreak of COVID-19 – but with oil, natural gas and coal prices, and global inflation rates, still running high, household budgets continue to be squeezed. Before the war, Sudan imported [85 per cent](#) of its wheat supply from Russia, Ukraine and other countries; experts have in recent months expressed fear that the country will not be able to find the hard currency to import enough of the staple to feed the population. Some [15 million](#) (about one third of the population) are acutely food-insecure, and the number is expected to climb. In July, the World Bank said it [will channel](#) \$100 million of suspended government assistance to the World Food Programme instead, in order to provide two million Sudanese with food and cash transfers.

On top of all these problems, violent clashes have broken out anew across parts of the country, including in the long-troubled Darfur region and [Blue Nile state](#).

Against this backdrop, Sudan's generals have reasons to want to bring in a civilian government, although they show no sign of being genuinely willing to relinquish power (much less give up control of lucrative state businesses or subject the security apparatus to civilian oversight or judicial accountability). In particular, the junta is desperate for Western donors to restore financial aid and resume debt negotiations. It is also eager to transfer political responsibility for Sudan's increasingly dire straits to a civilian administration, provided that the civilians do not undermine the military's hold on behind-the-scenes power or trim its economic privileges. Lastly, continued popular opposition to military rule has limited Burhan's ability to govern. The generals hope putting a civilian face on government in Khartoum will ease these pressures and restore donor relations, yet they have been unable to convince civilians to form a credible government on the military's terms.

Why is Sudan stuck in a political impasse?

At its heart, the stalemate concerning government formation pits Burhan and his allies in the security forces against the youth-led movement that mounted the protests ending in Bashir's ouster. As noted above, the coalition that Burhan leads has thus far resisted most efforts to loosen its grip on politics and the economy, evident in its 2021 dissolution of the civilian cabinet that was making headway toward structural reform. Leaders of Sudan's protest movement, meanwhile, want to completely remove the military from the political realm and publicly reject any negotiations or deal with the generals. Young Sudanese activists in particular are furious with the army's decades of meddling in the country's politics and its [control](#) of large sectors of the economy.

Fragmentation in each camp further complicates the picture. Following Bashir's overthrow in 2019, Burhan inherited a complex military-security apparatus that includes not just the army and various shadowy state security and intelligence units, but also the semi-autonomous Rapid Support Forces (RSF). An offshoot of the notorious Janjaweed militia, which is accused of committing atrocities in Darfur, the RSF now operates as a paramilitary force in much of the country with extensive commercial interests and political power. [The 2020 Juba Peace Agreement with rebel groups](#) from Darfur and other areas of the country brought additional armed groups to the military's side, while community and tribal militias with murky connections to the state have proliferated in the countryside. The military's supremacy today largely relies on Burhan's ability to keep this loose collection of armed stakeholders together. It could start to crumble were he to make key concessions to civilian protesters, such as forcing armed groups to merge and professionalise, or exposing military officers to judicial accountability and targeting their business interests.

Burhan's tenuous alliance with his Sovereign Council deputy, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti" – an influential general from Darfur who heads the RSF, is very wealthy and often conducts his own foreign relations – is especially critical. Although allies on one level, Burhan and Hemedti are also rivals, with Burhan hailing from Sudan's military establishment and traditional elite, and Hemedti

increasingly trying to position himself as a champion of the country's peripheries. After weeks of silence, Hemedti declared on 22 July that he supported Burhan's announcement. He has since [publicly said](#) the 2021 coup failed to achieve its objectives.

Meanwhile, competing interests, agendas and constituencies continue to hobble Sudan's civilian opposition, an unwieldy coalition of veteran opposition elites, political parties, formal civil society groups, such as trade unions and professional associations, and youth-led neighbourhood committees. This broad group is generally aligned in its goals to oust Bashir's regime and reject military rule but otherwise spans the ideological spectrum and lacks a united vision for the country, while its diverse make-up and some of its members' personal ambitions hamper decision-making. For instance, its most senior figures, who mostly consist of the FFC leadership, are keen to negotiate their return to government but are wary of provoking the street's ire, while many of the opposition political parties have splintered into multiple factions. Trade unions, which also helped lead the 2019 revolution, have similarly struggled to overcome internal divisions.

The power to mobilise people in the streets appears to rest principally with Khartoum's neighbourhood resistance committees, which also participated in the 2019 uprising and fiercely oppose any negotiations with Sudan's generals as well as any future role for the military in politics. Rather than disband after Bashir's ouster, the youth-led committees have improved coordination among themselves, even as they debate how to engage in politics moving ahead. They largely oppose the 2019 Constitutional Declaration, which memorialised the military-civilian power-sharing arrangement and transitional scheme that Burhan upended in 2021. Though the resistance committees often coordinate with the FFC, they are also critical of various FFC leaders' performances in the transitional government prior to the coup, and their views on the path forward diverge. In addition, through their mobilisation capacity, the resistance committees wield a de facto veto over opposition politicians who might otherwise be inclined to seek a compromise with the military – although their inchoate structures and diverse views make it complicated for the resistance committees to engage as political actors.

Complicating matters further, any new government that takes advantage of Burhan's opening would likely need to include an even wider range of actors, including those who have struck tactical alliances with Burhan or Hemedti. The main civilian opposition groups face an especially thorny problem in dealing with former rebel leaders who gained positions of power after signing the 2020 Juba peace deal and supported the 2021 coup. Previously allied to the opposition, these ex-rebels remained in senior positions after the coup and some now appear firmly aligned with the military. Opposition groups also have divergent views on whether and how Islamist elements, which gained political and cultural prominence during the Bashir era, should be included in any future government. Though weakened by Bashir's ouster, some remain influential domestically, have ample financial means and are well connected abroad. Needing experienced administrators and likely seeking a tactical alliance with Islamist factions, Burhan has begun to rehabilitate some ex-regime and Islamist figures.

More generally, the high stakes of Sudan's deep existential crisis make the impasse that much harder to break. Under Bashir's long rule, the Sudanese state eroded and eventually split, even as the regime waged internal wars and fanned the flames of Islamism and Arab nationalism to bolster support from its political base. South Sudan's secession in 2011 was a blow – Sudan lost a third of its territory and most of its oil reserves – but it presented Bashir's regime with an opportunity for a political reset. But internal divisions and discontent continued to mount, as regime officials grabbed assets, hoarded power among riverine elites and essentially abandoned vast regions of the country to warlord rule, eventually leading to economic collapse and Bashir's ouster. The 2019 revolution thus opened the floodgates to a level of unprecedented contestation over Sudan's national identity and state structures, including the role of Islam in politics and society, accommodation with non-Arab identities, and the distribution of power and resources. The widening array of armed camps and the proliferation of guns among the population raise the risk of wider instability.

Has mediation made any headway?

Faced with such polarisation and divisions, intermittent mediation efforts have done little to break Sudan's political deadlock. After the 2021 coup, there were several quiet initiatives to find consensus on a new government, none of which went anywhere. In January, the UN mission in Sudan hosted a wide spectrum of Sudanese actors at a roundtable to discuss a path forward. While the UN [found broad consensus](#) on the need to amend the 2019 Constitutional Declaration, the participants disagreed on how it should be changed. In May, the UN, African Union (AU) and Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a Horn of Africa regional bloc, launched a joint dialogue among Sudanese actors that included military officers. This initiative immediately stumbled, however. The resistance committees and the rest of the main opposition alliance, including most of the senior civilian officials dislodged by the coup, refused to participate, reiterating their demand that the military step away from politics.

In June, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia stepped in to lead back-channel discussions between Sudan's

generals and the main FFC bloc, mainly in the hope of nudging the latter back into UN-AU-IGAD mediation. The two sides made some headway, by some [accounts](#). But other Sudanese parties predictably felt excluded, viewing this track as a way for the main opposition alliance to negotiate directly with the military, while some AU officials saw the back channel as undermining the official mediation process. The U.S.-Saudi-brokered talks eventually reached a stalemate over the question of the military's future role. Some opposition figures say the military proposed maintaining authority over sovereign functions such as the central bank and foreign policy. Today, some FFC leaders believe that Burhan's offer to let civilians form a government was deliberately meant to undercut the U.S.-Saudi initiative and thus avoid further pressure to compromise. The UN, AU and IGAD have also suspended their dialogue.

What could break the impasse?

A clear path out of the impasse has yet to emerge. Civilian opposition groups continue to organise protests but remain divided about how to proceed. They have yet to decide whether to form a government now, which parties to include should they try to do so, and whether to strive for a return to something close to the status quo ante set by the Constitutional Declaration or forge consensus on an entirely new roadmap leading to elections. With the country's security, economic and political slide, young activists are also divided over whether indefinite protests are a sustainable avenue for meaningful change. Many Sudanese believe that Burhan is deliberately setting up his opponents for failure, hoping that the public will eventually grow tired of the continued crisis and chaos and will accept military dominance if civilian and political forces remain too divided.

But despite all these challenges, progress remains possible. Sudan's pro-revolution forces can be frustratingly fractured but have also shown extraordinary resolve to transform Sudan in ousting a long-time dictator and now stymying a military coup in achieving its objectives. While most Sudanese are understandably wary of the military, Burhan's July move suggests that the security forces feel mounting pressure to make some sort of concession. Even if he has ulterior motives, his (and Hemedti's) professed willingness to let civilians form a government creates an opening that could help break the political gridlock, provided that civilian leaders find the wherewithal to take advantage of it.

As a first, necessary step, protest movement and other civilian leaders need to agree on a sufficiently inclusive consultative political process to form a representative government that can manage relations with the military, salvage the country's finances and ease the unrest. While many groups would prefer to replace the 2019 Constitutional Declaration, forging consensus on a fully reconceived alternative roadmap might prove too great a challenge in the short term. Instead, civilian and political groups could focus on the most important amendments, such as a revised timeline for elections, and on mechanisms for resolving major disagreements. They should do so with utmost urgency, given the military's propensity for tactical manoeuvring, the broken economy and the spectre of worsening insecurity.

Agreeing on a process that can credibly form a government and address these issues will be difficult given the wide range of actors and their different objectives. FFC leaders may seek to be immediately reappointed to senior government positions, while many resistance committees [want to establish](#) bottom-up democratic representation, whereby a legislative council (which the previous civilian-led government failed to form amid political infighting) would choose a consensus prime minister and formally approve that person's choice of key cabinet officials. One path forward could be for core opposition groups, especially the major political parties and the resistance committees, to come together in a coordinating council to agree on how to form a government and select a consensus prime minister. A particular challenge for the committee and prime minister-designate will be to come up with a position on the junta's participation in any future government that is tough enough to satisfy the street, which would like to see the generals excluded from any political role, while accommodating the reality that the military's cooperation will be required to govern, at least in the immediate term.

Whatever path is chosen, any political process involving the formation of a civilian government should include representatives from Sudan's peripheries, whose historical neglect has driven decades of internal conflict and who often seem on the sidelines of Khartoum's political dramas, as well as from civil society and women's groups. More awkwardly, the main civilian forces will also need to engage in difficult discussions with former rebel groups that signed the Juba peace agreement and broke away from their FFC comrades to support the coup. The UN, AU and other actors should offer to assist with such a process.

What should outside actors be doing?

The U.S. and European countries have struggled to keep Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, both of which have close ties to Sudan's military leaders, supportive of the idea of a civilian-led administration as the preferred path forward. Neither the Saudis nor the Emiratis share the West's preference for democracy in Sudan, but they both value stability, reliability and a renewal of Western economic aid

for the country and have therefore at various times helped broker talks between the military and civilian sides. Burhan, who already has firm backing from Sudan's influential northern neighbour Egypt, which views a stable military ally in Khartoum as indispensable in Egypt's dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, wants to convince these Gulf allies that the military is a more capable steward of the country's stability than a fractious civilian government would be, despite popular resistance to his rule. He also has sought, less successfully, to leverage Sudan's new relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords to relieve pressure from Washington.

It is important, therefore, that international partners coordinate pressure on Sudan's military leadership to assent to a civilian-led transition, as they originally agreed to three years ago, and abide by their many other commitments to leave the political sphere. Yet Western allies in particular need to proceed with sensitivity lest they accidentally suffocate the pro-democracy movement in an attempt to save it. Pushing civilian political forces to find a path forward or to act on an externally imposed timeline risks becoming counterproductive if done in a way that shatters their coalition or takes pressure off Sudan's military leaders. Indeed, foreign pressure to negotiate with the military, while understandable, has regularly stoked divisions within the opposition. Given the diverse political currents still surging in the wake of the 2019 popular revolt, outside actors should also properly engage a wider set of civilian actors – in particular, resistance committees, as well as traditional authorities from outside Khartoum. If Sudanese parties announce a deal to form a government, diplomats should stay closely engaged, as any such deal will set off a new period of jockeying that could bog it down.

Both external and domestic actors must also keep in mind the big picture: Sudan's already shaky stability is in grave peril. The country's hunger crisis is set to escalate, and the government is withering, amid growing concern that the restless peripheries could become ungovernable. Dangerous divisions among armed factions, including between Burhan and Hemedti, also loom. Both sides of Sudan's civilian-military divide face major risks should they continue to disagree on a path forward for Sudan's political transition. The military grows ever more unpalatable to civilians with every protest it violently suppresses. It is already being held responsible by many Sudanese for the economic chaos and will bear the brunt of popular anger if that worsens. Civilian leaders, meanwhile, could wind up sharing the blame for Sudan's steady deterioration should they look more concerned with the struggle for power than with the plight of the population, and fail to seize the political moment because of their many differences. All should redouble efforts to find a path forward, lest Sudan continue its dangerous slide toward deeper economic and political collapse.

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