



The Rebels Come to Khartoum: How to Implement Sudan's New Peace Agreement

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What's new? A peace agreement signed on 3 October 2020 paves the way for armed and unarmed opposition groups in Sudan to join the transitional government, dramatically expanding representation of the country's peripheries during the interim period before elections. The two most powerful rebel movements remain outside the accord, however.

Why does it matter? Clinching the agreement was necessary for the country's transition but implementation poses challenges. The agreement risks bloating the military and sets up a prospective political alliance between the rebels and Sudanese security forces, which could further sideline the government's civilian cabinet and threaten to bury its reform agenda.

What should be done? The interim government should negotiate with holdout rebels to bring them into the transition. Sudan's international partners should press for security sector reform that decreases the size and political dominance of a newly expanded military while funding and supporting the authorities' spending commitments in the peripheries.

I. Overview

Sudan's October 2020 peace agreement, involving the interim government and rebel movements in Darfur and the Two Areas, among others, is an important step in the country's transition after the ouster of former President Omar al-Bashir. The deal allows for representatives from armed groups in the country's peripheries to take government posts and for significant public money to go to these areas. It is a way to rebalance the Nile Valley elites' decades-long domination of Sudan's political system. But it also creates new problems. Some of the rebel movements that signed on to the pact are divided; the two strongest remain outside it. Khartoum also lacks the billions of dollars it needs to meet its obligations under the deal. The government should bring in the holdouts and incorporate rebel factions in security institutions without bloating the military, which would drain the treasury and sink the civilian cabinet's reform agenda. While Sudan's backers press Khartoum to reform the security sector, they should

fund demobilisation programs and support the cabinet's commitments to invest in peripheral areas.

Although they fought Bashir's repressive regime for years and can claim some credit for weakening it, members of Sudan's main armed opposition coalition, comprising groups spanning parts of the Darfur region and South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, were largely bystanders when the long-ruling autocrat fell. Bashir was toppled in April 2019 after months of sustained protests by an organic, diverse civilian movement, propelled into the streets by the economy's collapse.

In August 2019, the Transitional Military Council (TMC), which took power after Bashir's downfall, and the civilian Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), representing the protesters, signed a power-sharing deal. That in turn led to formation of a hybrid civilian-military government tasked with revitalising the ailing economy and steering the country to elections. The signatories also agreed to talks with insurgents to end decades of conflict in areas neglected by Khartoum. The talks took place in South Sudan's capital, Juba, leading to an accord on 3 October 2020.

The Juba Peace Agreement seeks to redress the historical imbalance between the country's centre and periphery by devolving power and wealth away from Khartoum. In early February, representatives of armed groups from Darfur and the Two Areas (as South Kordofan and Blue Nile are known) were appointed to the cabinet and Sovereign Council, which oversees the transition. They will also take up seats in the yet-to-be-formed legislative council, which is expected to oversee the executive and craft laws, including those designed to pave the way for elections. Because they have divergent interests and perspectives, the ex-insurgents could, however, jostle with one another as they seek to dominate a limited amount of institutional space allocated to them.

Many aspects of the agreement's implementation could throw up new problems. Crucially, two of the biggest rebel groups on the ground did not join the talks. Politicians in other parts of the country have protested what they perceive as Khartoum's undue focus on Darfur and the Two Areas compared to other historically marginalised regions. Nor is it clear, given the near empty treasury, where the government will find the funds it has promised to pay to compensate war-affected civilians and support recovery and development programs in the peripheries.

While it is encouraging to see rebels integrate into the political system and the security services, their entry comes with risks. With a professed hope for a more inclusive Sudan, the ex-rebels on paper have more in common with the FFC and the transition's other civilians than they do with the security forces. But some already appear to be allying with the interim government's military component, believing that by supping with their old battlefield enemies, whom they consider the real centre of power, they will extract greater political and economic concessions from the system. Merging yesterday's rebels into the security services means that these forces are likely to strengthen and swell in size, adding more pressure to an already strained public purse and increasing pressure on the civilian cabinet members who carry the unenviable burden of reforming a venal political system historically dominated by the military.

The answer is not to abandon the long-overdue push to recast centre-periphery relations in Sudan. Indeed, the interim government and its external partners should try to expand that effort by bringing holdout groups into the tent or risk prolonging their rebellions. Yet in moving ahead with integrating them, Khartoum and its partners must ensure that the security services do not become so swollen that they deplete

state funds or make work even more difficult for the civilian cabinet. That cabinet is already struggling to reform a Sudanese state long dominated by military factions that retain a vice-like grip over the country's political economy. To manage these risks, while also maintaining fair representation within the military, some rebels will need to demobilise, as will some existing military factions, so as to make room for other rebels to integrate into the security forces.

Sudan's parlous economic state means that international assistance will be vital to help soldiers and rebels lay down their arms but also to underwrite the government's spending commitments in the peripheries, which according to the October deal should amount to billions of dollars. The country's partners, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, the UK, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the U.S. and the UN should provide financial and technical support for the deal's implementation, even as they keep encouraging the civilian cabinet to make economic reforms that will give donors confidence. The peace agreement's success will be more than worth the price, as it will help Sudan move to more stable and representative governance.

II. The Challenges of Redressing Neglect

Sudan has known neither peace nor stability since achieving independence in 1956. Underlying the country's bloody conflicts is smouldering resentment in peripheries of their systematic political and economic exclusion by the riverine elites who have ruled Sudan for decades. Until Bashir's ouster, every Sudanese leader since independence hailed from the Hamdi Triangle formed by the cities of Abu Hamad, Khartoum and Shendi in the Nile Valley, home to Arab-identifying ethno-linguistic groups.¹ Elite neglect of other parts of the country, such as Darfur, eastern Sudan, the far north, the Two Areas of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, and what in July 2011 became South Sudan, took the form of economic and cultural marginalisation underpinned by a lack of political representation. The neglect sparked rebellions and wars that killed millions.² Beyond the terrible human and economic toll they have taken on Sudan's peripheral regions, these conflicts have cost the state dearly.³ Most strikingly, the July 2011 secession of South Sudan struck a major blow to Sudan's economy, taking away the bulk of its oil wealth.

Following Sudan's 2018-2019 revolution, the country's civilian and military elites agreed in the August 2019 constitutional accord to seek to redress the imbalance between the periphery and the centre.⁴ The FFC and TMC committed to ensuring that Sudan would shift away from the autocratic, highly centralised state that Bashir

¹ The primary groups in the area are the Bideriyya-Dahmashiya, Rufaa, Ja'alín, Shaygiyya and Rubatab. Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, a member of the Kenani from North Kordofan, is the first Sudanese leader from outside the Hamdi Triangle. General Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti", head of the powerful Rapid Support Forces militia, and arguably the most powerful man in the country today, is from the Arab Reizegat community of Darfur.

² See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°14, *Sudan's Other Wars*, 25 June 2003; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°281, *Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution*, 21 October 2019.

³ See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°157, *Financing the Revival of South Sudan's Troubled Transition*, 22 June 2020.

⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution*, op. cit.

had presided over to a democratic, pluralistic system benefiting all Sudan's diverse people.⁵ Peace talks followed shortly thereafter and, after almost a year of negotiations in Juba between transitional officials and civilian and armed opposition representatives, including from rebel outfits in Darfur and the Two Areas, the parties signed a deal on 3 October 2020.

The Juba Peace Agreement is actually a collection of accords setting out principles covering power and wealth sharing, land reform, transitional justice, security arrangements and the return of displaced persons. It also sets to zero the clock on the country's post-Bashir transitional period that had initially been fixed in the August 2019 accord, extending it by 39 months to early 2024, when elections are now due to be held. Authorities have put the cost of carrying out the Juba deal at some \$13 billion over ten years, with Khartoum responsible for \$7.5 billion of that sum for the agreement's implementation in Darfur.⁶

The important provisions for the rebels are questions related to integration of their leaders into government and their fighters into the security forces, as well as how power sharing between their regions and Khartoum will evolve. Rebels are to be absorbed into security agencies with those who are not returned home through a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) program that will help them find civilian livelihoods.⁷ According to the deal, signatory armed groups will also receive three seats in a newly expanded fourteen-member Sovereign Council, which under the August 2019 agreement acts as government's executive organ, and one quarter of the cabinet seats.⁸ The deal also sets out a change in power sharing between centre and periphery, suggesting that Sudan adopt a federal system of governance. As steps in that direction, it provides for restoring Darfur's former status as a single region, improving national representation for Darfuri tribes and increasing control over natural resources and Darfuris' national political sway while also granting greater autonomy to the Two Areas.⁹

One challenge is the divergence of interests among the armed groups under the umbrella of the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF), the rebel coalition from Darfur and the Two Areas, which signed the October agreement.¹⁰ Malik Agar's Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement-North (SPLA/M-N) faction has little in common with Darfuri groups and a more overtly national agenda.¹¹ As for the Darfuri groups, the

⁵ John Young, "Sudan Uprising: Popular Struggles, Elite Compromises and Revolution Betrayed", Small Arms Survey, June 2020.

⁶ Crisis Group interview, prime minister's office representative, Khartoum, 7 October 2020.

⁷ On paper, the Sudan Armed Forces include the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, the country's dominant security force, which in practice operates well outside the army's command and control.

⁸ On 8 February, Hamdok announced a major reshuffle, naming seven rebel nominees to a new cabinet of 25.

⁹ In the new Darfur region, the signatory parties to the Darfur portion of the agreement will control 40 per cent of the regional government's posts. A further 30 per cent will be appointed by the government, 20 per cent nominated by civil society and 10 per cent named by the Sudan Liberation Movement faction led by Ali Hamid. For the Two Areas, the agreement also allows emerging authorities expanded control over wealth, power sharing and land use.

¹⁰ The SRF is an ethnically heterogeneous coalition. Its leaders hail from the Fur (Al Hadi Idriss), Zaghawa (Jibril Ibrahim and Minni Minnawi) and Ingessana (Malik Agar) peoples. They have often sat together uneasily under the group's umbrella.

¹¹ "Realpolitik, with plenty of guns", *Africa Confidential*, 6 August 2020. The SPLM/A-N's Agar and his deputy Yasir Arman espouse a political vision of a diverse and secular Sudan founded in social

Sudan Liberation Army/Movement of Minni Minnawi (SLA/M-MM) broke away from the SRF in May, though it nevertheless signed the agreement alongside the other groups. Jibril Ibrahim of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), newly appointed as finance minister, has restored ties with Islamists in Khartoum as well as traditional backers from western Sudan's Zaghawa ethnic group. Signatory groups have also fought as mercenaries on different sides of Libya's conflict.¹² The SRF is thus divided in general outlook and over how its constituent groups will share seats in the transitional government.

The agreement excludes Sudan's two most powerful and politically relevant armed movements: an SPLA/M-N faction led by Abdel Aziz al-Hilu, which operates in the Two Areas, and an SLA/M faction led by Abdel Wahid al-Nur, which maintains bases in central Darfur. Abdel Wahid's movement draws significant support from the Fur ethnic group and the internally displaced in Darfur. Abdel Aziz's faction enjoys backing from the Nuba and other groups in South Kordofan and Blue Nile states. Unlike the agreement's rebel signatories, which are militarily degraded following a string of defeats by Khartoum in 2015 and 2016, the two holdout groups have substantial strength on the ground. Both have resisted signing the agreement and are unlikely to do so out of discomfort with the security forces' continued dominance in the transitional government and their insistence on a credible national dialogue as a precursor to an inclusive peace deal, among other reasons.¹³

Getting those groups to lay down their arms and join the government requires more talks to address the holdouts' deep mistrust of the military's dominance of the Sudanese state and their concerns over the persistence of Islamist networks inside various state institutions. Holdout groups' leaders view such networks as working to sabotage the transition and restore the old riverine Islamist order.¹⁴ Indeed, Abdel Wahid rejects the Juba agreement wholesale and declares that he will negotiate only when Khartoum has a civilian government.¹⁵ Abdel Aziz insists that a transitional

justice drawn directly from John Garang, the former long-time leader of the main SPLM group that later constituted the core of South Sudan's fledgling government (and then splintered). The SLA/M-MM has yet to enunciate a vision.

¹² JEM, with its Islamist leanings, has fought alongside the Government of National Accord, the Tripoli-based authorities of whom some are Muslim Brotherhood affiliates. The Tripoli government's adversary, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's UAE-backed Libyan National Army, paid fighters from the SLA/M-MM and several other Sudanese rebel factions. Until recently, the UAE provided weapons and equipment to Haftar's forces, which were then distributed to the Sudanese and other foreign mercenaries. Over time, the UAE established its own relationships with Darfuri movements. Crisis Group interview, confidential UN source, 29 November 2020. "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan", UNSC S/2021/40, 13 January 2021.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Abdel Aziz al-Hilu, Juba, 9 February 2020. "Interview with Sudan Liberation Movement leader El Nur: Paris meeting with Hamdok 'friendly and frank'", Radio Dabanga, 3 October 2020.

¹⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Western diplomat, May 2020.

¹⁵ Given the military's dominance in the transition, Abdel Wahid's reservations about engaging in the political process set an unrealistically high bar. They are understandable, however, and mirror the concerns of many Sudanese and foreigners. Following a French-brokered meeting in Paris with the prime minister in early October, Abdel Wahid said he was "now awaiting the results of whether Hamdok has the power and authority to establish peace" and noted that "the demand of the Sudanese uprising was a 100 per cent civilian government, which did not happen. We reject this and adhere

legislative council be formed to provide oversight of the military, thus ensuring that the Sudanese Armed Forces are accountable to civilian institutions.¹⁶

Both men also wish to see the Council of Ministers rather than the military-dominated Higher Peace Council made responsible for any subsequent negotiations with them.¹⁷ Abdel Aziz fears that if a reform-minded civilian cabinet is not in the driver's seat of the constitutional conference that is planned as a follow-up to the agreement, Islamists will hijack the proceedings and re-establish control over politics and the economy while rejecting his core demand for a secular Sudan.

Finding a way to bring the holdouts into the deal is only one of the delicate tasks that lie ahead. The deal has also provoked hostile reactions in other parts of the country, where some feel that it gives too much prominence and offers disproportionately large dividends to Darfur and the Two Areas.¹⁸

Various forms of protest have already emerged. In eastern Sudan, home to former rebels that in 2006 had signed the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement with Bashir, thousands of Beja youth mobilised by Sayed Tirik, a stalwart of ousted President Bashir's National Congress Party and an important Beja chief, shut the critical Port Sudan-Khartoum highway in July 2020. They wished to signal discontent with the agreement's sections dealing with the east, arguing for inclusion of a right to self-determination for a single region comprising the three eastern states of Gedaref, Kassala and Red Sea, and a provision enabling reclamation of land rights.¹⁹

Arab Misseriya, natives of the former West Kordofan state now absorbed into South Kordofan, are angry that they were not consulted when Agar's SPLA/M-N faction negotiated over the Two Areas with the government.²⁰ Their grievances over exclusion from the talks may make implementation of the agreement in West Kordofan challenging. In response to the perceived slight, Misseriya members of the Popular Defence Forces, a paramilitary group closely aligned with the Bashir regime, have re-mobilised

to full civilianisation". "Interview with Sudan Liberation Movement leader El Nur: Paris meeting with Hamdok 'friendly and frank'", op. cit.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Abdel Aziz al-Hilu, Juba, 9 February 2020.

¹⁷ Article 16 of the Constitutional Charter says it is the cabinet's job to take on the peace portfolio. Crisis Group telephone interview, Amar Deldoum, 30 September 2020.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Gumaa Kunda, peace adviser to the prime minister, Khartoum, 20 October 2020. The five geographic regions or "tracks" are Northern, Eastern, Two Areas, Darfur and Central. Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Ahmed al-Khatim, Northern Track representative, Juba, 8 February 2020. The Central and Northern Tracks secured the least from the government, with Khartoum primarily offering development assistance. Abdel Aziz al-Hilu called the Central and Northern Track agreements "empty". Crisis Group interview, Abdel Aziz al-Hilu, Juba, 9 February 2020. By contrast, the Darfur protocol commits the government to immediately pay \$100 million for development and reconstruction and \$750 million annually over ten years to support sustainable development and implementation of the peace deal.

¹⁹ Sayed Tirik is chairman of the High Council of Beja Nazirs and Independent Chieftains. The Eastern Track comprised the United Popular Front for Freedom and Justice party of Al-Amin Dawood and the Beja Congress faction led by Osama Said. Beja Hadandawa tribesmen have also protested their perceived lack of representation at the Juba talks, rejecting the Eastern Track accord struck in February.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Khartoum, 17 October 2020. Crisis Group interview, Om Salama Mohammed, coordinator of West Kordofan State Coordination Office, Khartoum, 19 October 2020.

to press for greater government consultation with Misseriya over their claims to land and resources produced in West Kordofan.²¹

III. A New Scramble for Power in Khartoum and Beyond

The Juba agreement could alter the balance of power in Sudan's transitional government in two important ways.

First, by bringing actors from the periphery into the transitional institutions, the agreement threatens to dilute the influence of riverine elites from the Hamdi Triangle. These elites include the FFC, who continue to be dominated by old-guard political groups from the centre.²² Some, especially those once associated with Bashir's regime, have already shown signs they are unhappy with this prospect and are prepared to push back, but so far have posed only an indirect threat.²³

Secondly, the arrival of armed factions and their representatives into transitional institutions could tilt the balance of power within the transitional government away from civilians and in favour of a military wing of the power-sharing coalition, with lasting consequences for Sudan's future. General Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti", the head of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the most powerful military actor in Khartoum, has brought rebel factions who signed the agreement close to his own camp, bolstering his overall political weight and that of the RSF within the transition.

The newfound relationship between Hemedti and signatory rebel groups is on one level counterintuitive. They were, after all, on opposing sides in Darfur, where Hemedti fought with the Janjaweed militia that perpetrated atrocities against Darfuris and inhabitants of the Two Areas. But a number of considerations have created the conditions for a pragmatic political alliance. For one thing, Hemedti has sought to overcome the weight of a difficult history by invoking the two sides' common origins in Sudan's peripheries along with shared mistrust of the riverine centre.²⁴ Secondly,

²¹ These concerns include Misseriya claims to Abyei, a region of fertile grazing land contested by South Sudan. West Kordofan Misseriya leaders were surprised and angry to find their state included in the agreement, having been excluded from the negotiations. Crisis Group interviews, international Two Areas expert, Khartoum, 6 October 2020; Om Salama Mohammed, coordinator of West Kordofan State Coordination Office, Khartoum, 19 October 2020; U.S. official, Khartoum, 6 October 2020.

²² The FFC has made little attempt to nationalise its political platform or to gain support from the peripheries, though some individual parties such as the Sudan Congress Party have attempted to broaden their appeal with a program of outreach across the country.

²³ Many riverine elites, including bureaucrats and businessmen close to Bashir's National Congress Party, were already unsettled by the transition and have fled Sudan, been arrested or had assets appropriated by the Empowerment Elimination, Anti-Corruption and Funds Recovery Committee. Those who have remained active in civic and business life are pushing back by snarling bureaucratic processes and reforms in national and state governments, as well as by leveraging their hold over key sectors of the economy.

²⁴ Hemedti came to prominence in 2003 as a commander of the Janjaweed militias operating largely on the Bashir government's behalf, causing vast death and destruction in Darfur and the Two Areas. But SLA-MM commander Minnawi told Crisis Group that Hemedti, a Mahariya Reizegat of Darfuri and Chadian heritage, is now seen by the riverine centre as "one of them", that is, an actor from the margins of Sudanese society seeking a greater role in the country. Crisis Group interview, Minni

SRF members claim that the UAE, which maintains strong relationships with both Hemedti and the armed groups, has encouraged the latter to cooperate politically with the RSF commander.²⁵ Thirdly, many SRF officials believe that FFC representatives, many tracing their roots to the Hamdi Triangle and fearful of having power dispersed from the centre, tried to lock them out of power as the transitional government was being formed.²⁶

Still, the biggest factor may be power politics. Some SRF armed groups might share the FFC's stated hopes for a more inclusive Sudan, but they remain sceptical of the civilians' ability to advance their interests, while also seeing them as comprised of metropolitan elites distrusted by those in Sudan's peripheries. Senior SRF figures view Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok as lacking the clout to deliver transformational change to Sudan and believe that they will be better served by aligning with Hemedti, whom they see as Khartoum's real power centre.²⁷ Typifying the view of several armed group leaders who were part of the agreement, Minnawi said "there is no way civilians will take control" of the state.²⁸

As the signatory armed groups pivot toward a political alliance with the military factions in government, they have taken to recruiting more men into their ranks, to achieve three things.²⁹ First, by ramping up numbers, they aim to claim a greater share

Minnawi, Juba, 8 February 2020. Similarly, JEM commander Jibril Ibrahim told Crisis Group that the military felt the armed groups were closer to the security forces than the civilian section of government. Some of this cooperation, however, is based on concern both in Sudan and among international partners that sidelining the military will sink the transition. "If you want to push the military into the corner, you will lose everything". Crisis Group interview, Jibril Ibrahim, Juba, 8 February 2020. Hemedti has also used confidence-building measures with the groups, such as when, in June 2019, he released 235 Sudan Liberation Army combatants of Minni Minnawi and Al Hadi Idriss whom the RSF had captured in May 2017.

²⁵ Chad, which enjoys ties with both sides, has also been integral to bringing the SRF and RSF closer together. Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, 9 February 2021. The UAE's backing of Hemedti is based in large part on relationships built during RSF deployments to Libya and Yemen. When the RSF withdrew from Libya between June and September 2019, Darfuri armed movements filled this gap in Haftar's forces. UN officials, however, found that "[t]he signatory movements intend to leave a significant number of troops in Libya – up to half of their force, according to some interviewees", theoretically leaving them outside the absorption and reintegration process. "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan", op. cit.

²⁶ See "Sudan rebels take issue with Forces for Freedom and Change", Radio Dabanga, 22 August 2019. Crisis Group interview, Al Hadi Idriss, SRF chairman, Juba, 7 February 2020. Jan Pospisil, "Sudan's Interim Constitutional Arrangement: The Risk of Sharing a Non-existent Cake", Political Settlements, 2 September 2020.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, SRF leaders, Juba, February 2020. Sudan Communist Party figure Siddiq Yousef, leading the FFC's February delegation to Juba, told Crisis Group that it was only logical that SRF representatives might see greater sense in allying with the military establishment, whom they expect to keep a firm grip on power. Crisis Group interview, Siddiq Yousef al-Nour, member of Sudan Communist Party's political bureau, Juba, 11 February 2020.

²⁸ Minnawi believes it is "simply crazy" to expect civilians to control a country "swimming in weapons". Crisis Group interview, Minni Minnawi, Juba, 8 February 2020. In discussing whether it would be possible to hold credible elections in 2024, another SRF commander declared that it was not a question of the military influencing elections but a question of whether the military would allow elections to be organised. Crisis Group interview, SRF commander, Juba, 8 February 2020.

²⁹ The SLA-MM, for instance, spent about a week in mid-October recruiting around Niertiti, South Darfur. Sudanese armed movements recruited heavily throughout 2020, organising for the transport of

of positions within the security services, which they argue are too dominated by riverine elites.³⁰ The October agreement directs that the armed groups be either absorbed into the police, General Intelligence Services, Sudanese Armed Forces or paramilitary RSF, or disarmed, demobilised and reintegrated into civilian life.³¹ Secondly, the more recruits the groups bring in, the better positioned they are to benefit from the cash windfall that armed movements believe will flow from participation in that demobilisation process.³² Finally, recruitment is a way for the groups to ensure they have a standing force at hand if the transition collapses.³³

As a result, a number of dangers may emerge from demobilisation. From a financial perspective, if the security forces are bloated after absorbing more men, the national treasury will be further strapped at a time when the cabinet is under pressure to spend more on other public services.³⁴ Failure to provide those services could contribute to public restiveness and endanger the transition. In addition, the bigger and more powerful the security services become, the harder it will be for the civilian cabinet or legislative council to enact reforms that curb their business interests, which include control over many state-run companies that generate profits for top officers even as they consume vast amounts of public resources.³⁵

Moreover, should signatory rebels and other armed actors beef up their numbers and the expected demobilisation windfall fail to materialise, the former rebel com-

recruits from Darfur and elsewhere into Libya, via Chad. Recruitment to fight in Libya has been easy, both because Haftar's forces pay well, thanks to Emirati financing, and because, with the Juba Peace Agreement looming, recruits expected to be beneficiaries of the agreement's integration or DDR programs. Some recruits have been simply brought directly from home to the cantonment sites. Crisis Group telephone interviews, confidential UN source, 12 November 2020; confidential UNAMID source, 29 October 2020.

³⁰ During the talks, SRF commanders expressed reservations about the professional and organisational state of the security forces as well as the dominance of riverine elites in senior positions. Crisis Group interviews, Minni Minnawi, Juba, 8 February 2020; Al Tahir Hajer, Juba, 11 February 2020.

³¹ The agreement on security arrangements for the Darfur Track specifies that Darfuri armed groups will be integrated into "the Armed Forces, the Rapid Support Forces and other regular forces". The agreement on security arrangements for the signatory SPLM/A-N does not specify fighters' integration into the RSF, referring only to "integration into the Sudanese Armed Forces and other regular forces". Both agreements state that fighters can also be integrated into the police and intelligence services.

³² In the words of one UN official, the rebel movements "see DDR as a cash machine". Crisis Group telephone interview, UN official, 16 November 2020.

³³ Distrust in the twin processes of absorption and disarmament runs deep: Yasir Arman, deputy head of Agar's SPLA/M-N faction, suggested that troop integration into the Sudanese security forces should only take place once political change has become more apparent through the completion of the constitutional conference. Crisis Group interview, Yasir Arman, Juba, 10 February 2020. Other SRF commanders have told Crisis Group that they seek a successful transition culminating in elections but will hedge their bets by maintaining military capacity as long as possible in case the transition collapses. Crisis Group interviews, SRF commanders, Juba, February 2020.

³⁴ The security sector reform provisions contained in the Darfur protocol of the Juba Peace Agreement ask little from the military in the way of concrete reform. Crisis Group telephone interview, senior UN official, 9 October 2020; Crisis Group interview, senior Sudanese military intelligence official, Khartoum, 12 October 2020; Crisis Group telephone interview, former diplomat, 13 November 2020.

³⁵ A senior UN official told Crisis Group that there is simply no sign that the military is preparing to meaningfully reform, step aside or divest itself of economic assets that are key to its power. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Financing the Revival of Sudan's Troubled Transition*, op. cit., for details on how security actors dominate economic fields.

manders' command and control over newly expanded and diverse forces, which may be harder to control, may deteriorate. With more recruits in their ranks, rebel forces also become a possible future threat if the agreement collapses. The threat could be particularly acute in Darfur, where the mandate of the UN-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) has ended, meaning that a key mechanism for deterring violence has vanished. Renewed intercommunal violence is a risk, as is a descent into fighting among disaffected armed groups.³⁶

Still, if absorbing armed factions into transitional institutions carries risks, leaving them out in the cold would be even worse. It would perpetuate a sense that Sudan's transition is playing out only within the confines of the Hamdi Triangle, deepening centre-periphery tensions that have been a powerful driver of conflict in Sudan. The task for Khartoum now will be to negotiate the many challenges in the path toward implementation, which will be key to driving the transition forward.

IV. Implementing the Juba Agreement Wisely

In attempting to redress the exclusionary policies that have dogged Sudan for decades and spread power more evenly between the Nile Valley and Sudan's diverse peripheries, Khartoum has taken on a set of daunting challenges. It and its partners should take a number of steps to improve prospects of success and minimise dangers.

For starters, the interim government should prioritise efforts to reach a separate accord with the two major armed groups that did not join the Juba accords.³⁷ In entering the Juba talks, Khartoum had said it was seeking a "comprehensive" solution to Sudan's long-running conflicts. But the absence from the table of Sudan's two most powerful armed groups undercuts that ambition and undermines the Juba deal's effectiveness in actually ending conflict.³⁸

There are divergent opinions among authorities in Khartoum on how to bring the holdout groups to the negotiating table. To date, Khartoum's strategy has included military pressure on al-Hilu's SPLM/A-N faction through empowerment of the SPLM/A-N faction headed by his rival Agar in the Two Areas, requests to the South Sudanese government to cut off al-Hilu's forces from resupply and gold smuggling routes, and efforts to limit aid to areas controlled by al-Hilu.³⁹ Authorities have also pursued partly

³⁶ In place of UNAMID, whose mandate ended in December 2020, the government has begun to deploy a joint force of 12,000 to maintain peace and stability in Darfur. Of these, 6,000 will be drawn from the existing government forces, and 6,000 more will come from Darfuri signatory armed movements. The government forces are deeply distrusted by many Darfuris for their central role in prior violence in the region and are ill-equipped to provide security evenly and effectively. Just two weeks after UNAMID's closure, ethnic and tribal violence spiralled out of security forces' control in West Darfur and South Darfur, killing well over 300 and displacing over 100,000. "Violence in Sudan's Darfur region dims hopes of a long-sought peace", *The New York Times*, 19 January 2021.

³⁷ According to Sudan's peace commissioner, the modality for accords with the holdouts remains unclear, but any such agreements would take the form of annexes to the agreement or distinct accords. Crisis Group interview, Suliman Dibelow, Sudan peace commissioner, 11 October 2020.

³⁸ The SLA/M of Abdel Wahid al-Nur has been entirely absent from the talks. The SPLM/A-N of Abdel Aziz al-Hilu has often been present in Juba, meeting with government and SRF negotiators as well as FFC representatives throughout, but without ever joining the negotiations.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Sudanese government official, 12 October 2020.

successful attempts, with Egyptian cooperation, to splinter Abdel Wahid's Sudan Liberation Army/Movement, the other major holdout group.⁴⁰ Khartoum also hopes that the deal's implementation and resulting peace dividend will ramp up grassroots pressure from the holdouts' constituencies.⁴¹ This approach assumes optimistically that effective implementation on the ground can begin expeditiously.

But to many, military pressure is the wrong approach and only dialogue can work.⁴² The holdouts' entry into the transition likely rests less on the success of military operations against them and more on their being offered sufficiently influential roles in the transition and seeing the military's hold on power being rolled back. Sudan's international partners, particularly the EU and U.S., can help get the ball rolling by engaging with both Abdel Aziz al-Hilu and Abdel Wahid al-Nur to reassure them that they will continue to press Khartoum to undertake such reforms, including by offering to underwrite those measures, and to encourage them to continue talking with the government about addressing the core concerns that have kept them outside of the agreement. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and the EU, UAE, UK and U.S. should urge the military to press for progress on reducing the armed forces' stranglehold on the economy; this is imperative for the transition's success more broadly, but it could also help persuade the two holdout groups' leaders that things are moving in the right direction.⁴³

At the same time, the newly reshuffled government should accelerate the process of forming the legislative council, which would have oversight powers over the military. Its formation should make clear that there will be meaningful space at the table for the holdouts to participate in government and advance their interests from inside the transition. International partners, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK and the U.S., should also prevail upon authorities not to launch new military offensives in an effort to bring the holdouts to heel.

How the Juba Peace Agreement's armed signatory groups will be incorporated into the security services will be crucial. It is essential that the transitional government does not bloat the security services, and in so doing further empower the military while deepening the country's fiscal crisis, leaving it without resources to fund other key components of the agreement and needed services. To achieve that and maintain fair representation within the security services, only a certain number of rebels can be accommodated. The rest should be disarmed and supported to reintegrate into civilian life. For this to work, the Sudanese Armed Forces and Hemedti's Rapid Support Forces will

⁴⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Western diplomat, 22 April 2020.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Suliman Dibelow, Sudan peace commissioner, 11 October 2020.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, Khartoum, 11 February 2020 and October 2020; Sudanese government official, Khartoum, 7 October 2020. With support from Hemedti and Lieutenant General Shamseddin al-Kabbashi, Agar established a cantonment and training site near Dilling, South Kordofan, in early 2020, clearly a provocation to al-Hilu, whom the government may be seeking a pretext to fight. Confidential third-party document, January 2020, on file with Crisis Group. Crisis Group telephone interview, mediation expert close to Juba peace talks, 12 February 2020.

⁴³ These four governments and the EU meet regularly as "the Quad" coordinative mechanism to discuss support to Sudan.

need to be prepared to demobilise some of their men in order to make room.⁴⁴ Further difficult negotiations will be required to thrash out this balance.⁴⁵

The risk is that the generals will do just the opposite, seeking instead to absorb entire units of signatory rebels, thereby indeed bloating the size of the military and expanding its influence, while also allowing the ex-rebel groups to keep chains of command open for reactivation if the transition goes bad. That is an outcome that Sudan's partners must steer the country away from. As Crisis Group has pointed out since 2019, the survival of Sudan's transition will require the state to clean up institutions dominated by armed elites and their cronies, which have preyed on the country's economy and profited from the persistent conflicts they have helped feed. Only a reform-minded civilian government can do this job. If the military grows more powerful at the expense of civilian leadership, prospects for positive change will dim.

External powers that have a stake in Sudan's future can help guide the country away from that outcome by providing civilian authorities resources to manage implementation of the Juba deal prudently. To guard against bloating of the armed forces, Sudan's partners should bankroll demobilisation efforts, so that there is a viable path out of the security services for those rebels who cannot be absorbed into the army, and any current units that have to be shed to make room for other rebels to be integrated. Donor funds will also be needed if Khartoum is to make good on the rollout of the billions of dollars it has promised to spend in the peripheries, which it does not have on hand.

Donors should stand ready to offer other forms of bilateral support. As Crisis Group has previously advocated, authorities must press ahead with enacting painful economic reforms to give confidence to donors that they can manage any influx of funds responsibly.⁴⁶ In turn, donors should be ready to channel funding through the transitional government's civilian-led ministries to strengthen the civilians' hold over the budget and their ability to direct development funding to all the peripheries. In supporting Khartoum's spending commitments in the peripheries, donors should work with Sudanese authorities to shape high-impact aid programs in neglected areas. These dividends are needed to reinforce to the armed signatories the value in drawing close to the FFC and civilians rather than to the military.

⁴⁴ The RSF was also found to be recruiting heavily during 2020, particularly in eastern Sudan. Crisis Group interview, Sudanese researcher, Khartoum, 7 October 2020.

⁴⁵ Rebel signatories were supposed to provide their force numbers to facilitate calculations around DDR and the integration of fighters, but they have yet to do so.

⁴⁶ On 21 February 2021, enacting its most consequential economic reform to date, the Central Bank of Sudan unified the country's exchange rate, sharply devaluing the Sudanese pound in the process. The move brings the black market and official exchange rates closer together in an attempt to improve government control over the exchange rate and has been a key demand of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and most other international partners. Previously, the black market exchange rate between the Sudanese pound and U.S. dollar consistently hovered at some five times the official rate, meaning any financial assistance arriving in Sudan was immediately devalued to one fifth of its original value, as donors must use the official rate even while the black market rate is used for all other transactions. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Financing the Revival of South Sudan's Troubled Transition*, op. cit.

International assistance to the transitional government has fallen short of the robust levels that the situation calls for.⁴⁷ Until the December removal of Sudan from the U.S. State Sponsors of Terrorism list, a key block to addressing Sudan's crippling debt, the U.S. government had largely stayed on the sidelines, offering limited support to the transition. On 1 January, however, the U.S. Congress passed the Sudan Democratic Transition, Accountability and Fiscal Transparency Act providing for increased support to Sudan for development, peacebuilding, governance and economic growth.⁴⁸ The UAE and Saudi Arabia, which funnelled several hundred million dollars into Sudan while the TMC remained in charge at the start of the transition, have since chosen to keep their purse strings tight, instead providing staple commodities such as flour and fuels and maintaining quiet backing for their military partners in government. The EU has made Sudan a priority country in the region, providing an attendant funding boost, although the amounts have also been too small to meet the country's considerable needs.⁴⁹

It is not just the civilian authorities that are counting on stepped-up external support to the transition. Hemedti, a key ally for the UAE, is looking to Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to offer more funding to rescue an economy whose tailspin has already created tensions and driven demonstrations across the country over bread and fuel prices as well as dissatisfaction with the pace of government reforms. If the protests spread, they could result in the kind of unrest in the streets of Khartoum and violence in the periphery that the government might not be able to control.⁵⁰

Despite its shortcomings, Sudan's external partners need to rally around the Juba agreement and help steady the transition.⁵¹ A new U.S. administration creates an opportunity to breathe new life into this and other transition-related efforts. The

⁴⁷ According to the Sudanese government, donor disbursement has been "very slow". Crisis Group interview, civilian member of transitional government, Khartoum, 7 October 2020. In mid-January 2021, however, senior UK and U.S. officials visited Khartoum in quick succession, inking deals to provide Sudan with all-important bridge loans to clear the country's debt arrears at the World Bank, easing access to new loans and financing from international financial institutions. Disbursement of these bridge loans had been largely dependent on the Sudanese government's late February move to unify its exchange rates. The new capital will afford the Sudanese government access to the foreign currency required to defend the Sudanese pound's value.

⁴⁸ The Act seeks to "support a civilian-led democratic transition, promote accountability for human rights abuses, and encourage fiscal transparency in Sudan, and for other purposes". "Sudan Democratic Transition, Accountability and Fiscal Transparency Act of 2020", H.R. 6094, 1 January 2021.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, EU official, Nairobi, 17 February 2021.

⁵⁰ Khartoum has repeatedly asked for billions in support from donors, who have been at pains to tamp down expectations, citing the global economic downturn as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Crisis Group interviews, RSF leader, Khartoum, 6 October 2020; civilian member of transitional government, Khartoum, 7 October 2020. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have communicated that the era of free money is over. Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. government official, 25 November 2020. Crisis Group interview, senior diplomat, Khartoum, 11 October 2020.

⁵¹ International emissaries in the room during the Juba talks included a representative of the Office of the U.S. Special Envoy, a technical adviser from the British government, two or three representatives of the U.S. law firm PILPG, a representative from UNAMID and, on occasion, an EU representative. Chad, the UAE and Qatar participated intermittently. During South Sudan's coronavirus lockdown from March-May 2020, few international observers were in attendance. The AU remained notably absent from the talks beyond limited representation through UNAMID. Crisis Group interview, UNAMID official, Juba, 7 February 2020.

U.S. should press Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular to boost support to the civilian side of the government while impressing upon the military that security sector reform must begin. The latter will be an especially sensitive, challenging and deeply political process, but it is indispensable to Sudan's transition. The peace agreement and the constitutional charter place responsibility for this reform with the military itself, meaning the security forces must be convinced to buy into a painful reorganisation. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are best suited to helping them muster the requisite political will. For its part, the new UN special political mission, known as UNITAMS, should provide technical support and mobilise funding for this vast undertaking.⁵²

V. Conclusion

Sudan's transition – beset by an economy in freefall and the poisonous legacy of years of autocratic rule – may be stuttering but it remains an inspiration to many in the region and beyond. A peaceful and diverse protest movement achieved what many considered barely possible in unseating one of the Horn of Africa's most entrenched rulers. But the progress can easily be reversed if Sudanese and international stakeholders do not pour the requisite energy, attention and resources into helping propel the transition forward.

A key task is to make a success of the Juba Peace Agreement, which advances Sudan's transition by opening up political space to previously neglected corners of the country. For all its imperfections, the agreement creates a framework for addressing inequality and resolving conflicts that have plagued the country since independence. Its implementation will have to be handled wisely, lest it trigger a second order of problems that could destabilise the country further. Particularly critical is to ensure that absorption of rebels does not skew the balance of power further against the government's civilian side. The responsibility lies primarily with Sudan's leaders, but they cannot do it alone. The transitional government's external partners must step up with political and economic support. Absent that, even greater pain could await Sudan and all those with an interest in the Horn of Africa's peace and security.

Khartoum/Nairobi/Brussels, 23 February 2021

⁵² Sudan's new Chapter VI special political mission, the UN Integrated Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), is a political and peacebuilding mission accompanying the transition. The mission is responsible for mobilising resources in support of the agreement's implementation. UNITAMS' first-year budget is only \$34 million.

Appendix A: Full List of Signatories of the Juba Peace Agreement

Track	Group and Leader
ALL	Transitional Government of Sudan
Darfur	Sudan Liberation Movement – Minni Minnawi
	Justice and Equality Movement – Jibril Ibrahim
	Sudan Liberation Movement-Transitional Council – Al Hadi Idriss Yahya
	Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces – Al-Tahir Hajar
	Sudanese Alliance – Khamis Abdallah Abakar
	Sudan Liberation Movement/Leadership Council – Ali Mohammad Hamid “Shakoush”
	The Third Front/Tamazuj – Yasser Mohammad Hassan Bakhit
Two Areas	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North – Malik Agar
Eastern	Opposition Beja Conference – Osama Said
	United Popular Front for Liberation and Justice – Khalid Idriss
Northern	Sudanese Kush Liberation Movement – Dahab Ibrahim Dahab
Central	Opposition Democratic Unionist Party/Revolutionary Front – Eltom Hajo



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