



Updated August 21, 2019

Sudan

On April 11, 2019, Sudan's military removed President Omar al Bashir from office after three decades in power. Four months of near-daily protests across the country had shaken the government, and in early April, huge crowds gathered in front of the military's headquarters in Khartoum to demand regime change. The protests, triggered by austerity measures amid an economic crisis, were fueled by a range of grievances against the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and Bashir, who took power in a 1989 coup.

The demonstrations did not end with Bashir's ouster. When the Transitional Military Council (TMC) that seized power from Bashir defied calls for a swift transfer to civilian rule, protesters staged a sit-in. It lasted for almost two months before security forces violently dispersed it on June 3. Over 100 people were killed in the attack, reportedly led by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The RSF, which has roots in the Janjaweed militia and is linked to serious abuses, has been heavily deployed in Khartoum since April. An internet shutdown that began on June 3 lasted over a month, restricting both dissent and business activity.

Sudan's military has a long history of intervention in politics (Bashir's 1989 coup was the country's fourth). Military leaders played prominent roles in Bashir's regime, and the extent to which the TMC represents a break from the NCP is debated. The African Union (AU) declared Bashir's overthrow to be another coup d'état and, after the June 3 violence, suspended Sudan from the organization.

AU and Ethiopian mediators revived negotiations between the TMC and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) a coalition of opposition, civil society, and professional groups. On July 4, after another mass protest, the two sides agreed to a three-year power-sharing arrangement, charting a path toward civilian rule and elections in late 2022. They signed a constitutional charter a month later, and on August 21, the TMC was dissolved and replaced by a joint military-civilian Sovereign Council. A prime minister nominated by the FFC, Abdalla Hamdok, will lead a civilian cabinet; a transitional legislative council is to be formed by November. Major challenges lie ahead. For more detail, see CRS Report R45794, *Sudan's Uncertain Transition*.

With rampant inflation, a foreign currency shortage, and a heavy debt burden, stabilizing the economy is a critical priority for the new government. Arrears of \$1.3 billion to the International Monetary Fund restrict Sudan's access to international financing, as does its designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism by the United States. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, which supported the TMC, are influential with Sudan's military leaders. The UAE and Saudi Arabia offered \$3 billion in aid during the TMC's tenure. As civilian authorities take office, Western donors are now considering how to engage. Congress, which pressed for a civilian-led transition in S.Res. 188,

H.Res. 432, as well as in statements and correspondence, may review options for U.S. support to the transition.

Figure 1. Sudan Key Facts



Sources: CIA World Factbook and IMF data, 2019.

Background

Sudan, when unified (1956-2011), was Africa's largest country. In 2011, after decades of fighting often broadly described as a conflict between the predominately Muslim "Arab" north and non-Muslim "African" south, Sudan split in two. The split did not resolve Sudan's other conflicts; overlapping struggles between security forces and rebels, nomadic and farming communities, and among ethnic groups have caused extensive displacement and suffering.

Northern regimes espousing Islamist ideals have dominated government for much of Sudan's post-independence history, despite its diversity, pressing distant provinces to conform to the riverine heartland, rather than accommodating local customs and institutions. Instead of forging a national identity, these policies exacerbated the country's racial, cultural, and religious differences. Attempts to Arabize and Islamize the south sparked insurgencies. Groups in other regions also rose up periodically, citing local grievances. Some in the states of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile joined the southern rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

The north-south wars took a heavy toll. In 2005, the government and the SPLM signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which enshrined the south's right to self-determination after a six-year "interim period." Southern Sudanese voted overwhelmingly in January 2011 to secede and achieved independence in July of that year.

South Sudan's secession was a major financial blow to Sudan, which lost 75% of its oil production, two-thirds of export earnings, and over half its fiscal revenues. A bloated security sector budget, mismanagement, and corruption have all compounded Sudan's economic troubles. The International Monetary Fund assesses that U.S. sanctions also undermined economic growth. Major U.S. enforcement actions for sanctions violations in 2014-2015 significantly reduced Sudan's access to U.S. dollars and further impeded its access to international financial markets and institutions.

While disputes remain, relations between Sudan and South Sudan have improved in recent years. Sudan surprised many when it mediated a new peace deal between South Sudan's warring parties in 2018. The deal, if it holds, would allow oil production in fields shut by South Sudan's civil war to resume, generating needed revenue for both countries. Rebel activity along the countries' shared border complicates the border's demilitarization, as does the unresolved status of contested areas, notably Abyei, which was granted special semi-autonomous status in the CPA. An official referendum for Abyei residents on whether to retain their special status in Sudan or join South Sudan was slated for 2011 but has been delayed indefinitely. The deployment of the U.N. Interim Force for Abyei (UNISFA) defused a violent standoff in 2011, but local tensions still have the potential to spur a larger conflict.

Conflicts

The CPA did not resolve long-standing center-periphery tensions in Sudan. Successive governments have responded to the political demands of restive regions more often with force than reform and have financed local militias to help counter insurgencies. Those militias have been linked to indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilians. U.N. experts continue to document violations of an arms embargo and ban on offensive military overflights established in Security Council resolution 1591 (2005).

Darfur. Violence continues to plague the Darfur region of western Sudan, where peace remains elusive. Government forces launched a major offensive in early 2016 that led to mass displacement. Fighting has diminished since Bashir declared a ceasefire in mid-2016; some rebels withdrew to Libya to regroup. U.N. monitors reported serious clashes between government forces and one rebel faction in 2018. Sporadic skirmishes, intercommunal violence, and attacks on peacekeepers, aid workers, and civilians persist. The political uncertainty after Bashir's ouster led the Security Council to pause the drawdown of the African Union-U.N. Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID); it is unclear whether UNAMID's planned 2020 exit will be affected.

In 2005, the U.N. Security Council granted the International Criminal Court jurisdiction over serious crimes committed in Darfur. The TMC rejected calls to extradite Bashir to the Hague, where he is wanted on Darfur-related charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Instead, he now faces charges at home related to corruption and the deaths of protesters. His trial began in mid-August.

Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile. The conflict in these states, often referred to as "the Two Areas," is driven by unresolved grievances that date back to the north-south war, when some local groups joined the SPLM rebellion. The CPA set out a process by which the two states might achieve greater autonomy within Sudan, but it stalled and the conflict reignited in 2011. The Sudanese government has restricted aid agencies' access to rebel-held areas.

Humanitarian Situation

The number of Sudanese in need of aid rose from roughly 5.7 million in early 2019 to 8.5 million mid-year. Roughly 1.8 million Darfuris are displaced internally, and Chad hosts over 338,000 Darfuri refugees. IDP estimates for Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile vary; South Sudan and

Ethiopia host over 300,000 refugees from those areas. Over 30,000 people are displaced in Abyei. Sudan hosts over 900,000 refugees, most from South Sudan.

Sudan's Foreign Relations

Strategically positioned on the Red Sea, Sudan's political trajectory is of interest to an array of foreign actors. Egypt's engagement is driven by domestic political considerations and its concerns about the flow of the Nile. Sudan's former ties with Iran and links to the Muslim Brotherhood under Bashir strained its relations with key Arab Gulf countries, which are important sources of investment. In 2014, struggling with the loss of oil revenue and under mounting pressure from Saudi Arabia, Sudan severed relations with Tehran. It joined the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen in 2015, reportedly deploying as many as 14,000 troops, some underage, in return for Gulf aid. Bashir's refusal to cut ties with Qatar was a source of tension with the Saudis and Emiratis. Sudanese officials worked to repair relations with the United States, but Bashir also engaged Russia, already a top weapons source, seeking to expand cooperation and offering to host Russian naval facilities. Russian security contractors have been increasingly active in the country.

U.S. Policy and Foreign Assistance

U.S. relations with Sudan have been turbulent for three decades. The United States restricted aid after the 1989 coup, and in subsequent years imposed a range of sanctions through Executive Orders and congressional measures. Restrictions on U.S. engagement are based on Sudan's debt arrears, links to international terrorism, and pervasive human rights violations. The State Department has repeatedly designated Sudan as a Country of Particular Concern under the International Religious Freedom Act.

Sudan has long sought relief from U.S. sanctions. The Obama Administration moved to ease them in January 2017 as part of a bilateral reengagement effort, after determining Sudan had taken positive steps on five "tracks": enhancing counterterrorism cooperation; ceasing hostilities in conflict zones; improving humanitarian access; ending negative interference in South Sudan; and addressing the threat of a regional armed group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

In October 2017, the Trump Administration reported that Sudan had sustained positive actions on the five tracks and permanently revoked certain sanctions. Others remain in place, and in November 2018, despite reports of backsliding in some areas, the Administration announced "Phase II" of the bilateral engagement framework. Under Phase II, the Administration stated that it would consider lifting Sudan's 1993 State Sponsor of Terrorism designation if the country met statutory criteria and made further progress on the five tracks and other areas of long-standing U.S. concern, including human rights, religious freedom, outstanding terrorism-related claims, and relations with North Korea. The United States suspended Phase II discussions after Bashir's ouster and is weighing conditions for delisting.

Development aid for Sudan is extremely limited, and debt relief is restricted by Congress in annual appropriations. The State Department requested \$1.5 million in nonemergency aid for FY2020, to support civil society and consensus-building. The United States has provided over \$344 million in humanitarian aid to Sudan in FY2019.

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