

Why the idea of the establishment of a civilian transitional authority in Sudan should be taken seriously and how it can be realized

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Almost three months into the fighting, there is no sign of the war in Sudan slowing down let alone ending. Each of the warring parties in Sudan, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), is locked in a logic for imposing its will by the barrel of the gun. The resultant entrenchment of the fighting is exacting enormous suffering on the Sudanese public and destruction on the state infrastructure.

Despite various diplomatic efforts involving regional and international actors and the announcement of about a [dozen ceasefire](#) initiatives or agreements, there is little to show for it. If anything, the approach of the peace and security and humanitarian diplomacy is aggravating the situation. It has bestowed legitimacy on the two warring parties. The singular focus of the efforts for ceasefire or humanitarian truce as well as peace mediation, as illustrated by the 12 June 2023 [IGAD summit decision](#), is on the two parties, thereby inadvertently incentivizing the reinforcement of their respective positions.

Instead of any change of course, both the logic of the warring parties to achieve their objective through fighting and the glorification by the diplomatic processes of the two belligerents have set Sudan on a path for a protracted conflict with all the more [catastrophic risks](#) it carries with it. There is as a result a present [danger of the collapse](#) of the Sudanese state.

Sudanese civic actors are the only ones that provide the Sudanese state and the international community the viable window for averting this present danger of state collapse and the accompanying apocalyptic consequences that are frightening to contemplate. These civic actors comprise diverse groups, including the neighborhood/resistance committee, professional associations, trade unions, political parties and local community formations. Distinguishing themselves from other civic actors in other countries, Sudanese civilian actors have displayed incredible level of organizational ingenuity, agility and resilience.

It was the peaceful protest and other civic actions that they mobilized that set the stage for the overthrow of the three decades dictatorial rule of Omar El Bashir in April 2019. While drawing on rich civic traditions, the non-violent movement waged by these actors, or what is referred to as the 'December Revolution', drew the participation of people from various walk of life, with women and youth taking active role in organization and leadership.

When the military sought to abort the revolution by declaring military rule for three years after seizing power by ousting Bashir in April 2019, it was the Sudanese civic actors that fought this illegal seizure of power and imposition of military rule. Despite violent crackdown by the SAF and the RSF, Sudanese civic actors did not opt for armed insurrection as was the case in Libya. They displayed firm commitment for peaceful resistance. As [Susan Stigant](#) pointed out, 'any tensions among Sudanese civilians should not belie their near-

unwavering unity on a foundational principle: A commitment to democratic politics and debate, however messy. That commitment stands in stark contrast with the persistent behavior of senior officials in the SAF and RSF, who use force indiscriminately to settle their differences.'

All these provided the basis for the African Union (AU), together with the then Chairperson of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), supported by the US and gulf countries, to facilitate mediation for the establishment of a transitional process.

The power-sharing agreement this process produced with alteration of leadership of the Sovereign Council (the highest authority of the transitional power-sharing government) during an agreed 39-month period and legitimizing the military's seizure of government power and active role in politics was the original sin that the international community committed. Seen as a pragmatic necessity, this arrangement ended up incentivizing the appetite of the SAF and the RSF to entrench their grip on power. Thus, just before transferring the role of heading the Sovereign Council to the civilian leadership of the power-sharing government as per the terms of the August 2019 Constitutional Declaration, the SAF and the RSF [staged a coup and arrested Prime Minister](#) Abdela Hamdok and his cabinet on 25 October 2021.

Once again it fell on the Sudanese civic actors to mobilize against the illegal usurpation of power by going to street with their legendary peaceful protests, forcing the military to engage in a shaky political process that aimed at resolving the standoff between protesters and the military. They even went as far as [articulating a constitutional document](#). This time around, AU, IGAD and UN joined hands under a Trilateral Mechanism to facilitate the political process, but with the same strategy that is anchored on people with the guns. As in 2019, the political process resulted in the signing of a 'Political Framework Agreement (PFA)' on 5 December 2022

between the military and section of the civilian actors organized under Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). The US and other members of the Quad (Saudi Arabia, UAE, and UK) were behind this agreement.

The PFA, lauded by its sponsors as the first step towards the restoration of a civilian-led government but greeted with opposition from the resistance committees, instead of putting Sudan on a footing for democratic dispensation, set the SAF and the RSF, the incompatibility of whose interests has grown increasingly deep, on a collision course. While seemingly engaging the trilateral process, they were preparing for a final showdown to settle their power contest. The Trilateral Mechanism was busy in convening workshops and consultations to facilitate the appointment of a new prime minister when the two generals, Al Burhan of SAF and RSF commander Dagalo, started fighting in Khartoum on 15 April.

This time around as well, Sudanese civic actors, [the unsung heroes](#), rose to the occasion, once again demonstrating their organizational ability to serve the public good even in the midst of fierce fighting between the SAF and the RSF through humanitarian action and local peace activism and peace making. They mobilized themselves to identify safe passages for enabling civilians caught in the cross fire to escape from harm's way into safer areas, thereby serving not only Sudanese civilians but also foreigners including members of the diplomatic community. They organized humanitarian assistance involving the provision of food and medical help for civilians cut off from access to basic necessities due to the heavy fighting. Leaders of local communities in parts of Sudan signed local peace agreements to avoid being drawn into the fighting. Similarly, various civic actors rejected the war and campaigned for keeping Sudanese people from taking side in the war that they never chose.

Despite all of these, the international peace and humanitarian diplomatic processes showed little imagination and flexibility

for anchoring their engagement on Sudanese civic actors and the enormous organizational resources they avail for humanitarian action, peacemaking and monitoring and reporting on the ceasefire commitments of the two fighting parties. Instead, these processes continue to show incredible level of impotence which was further compounded by proliferation of roadmaps and peace forums that continue to glorify the people with guns who are burning Sudan to the ground.

In the light of the extraordinary and present danger of state collapse arising from the continuation of the war and the lack of breakthrough from the use of the same failed diplomatic approach, there is an urgent need for changing course. This necessitates shifting the locus of peacemaking from the greed driven SAF-RSF duo to the Sudanese civic actors, who hold the key for averting the dangers associated with the continuation of this greed driven war.

The most viable avenue for seizing the opportunity that Sudanese civic actors present for saving the Sudanese state from collapse and the apocalyptic dangers that such collapse is sure to precipitate is the establishment of a civilian transitional government. It is true that this is a radical approach that is neither clean nor easy. But the extraordinary nature of the situation in Sudan demands nothing short of such radical approach. Under the circumstances, there is neither a clean nor an easy approach better than this for arresting Sudan's descent into collapse.

While this proposal builds on arguments that analysts such as [Alex de Waal](#) made, we make a case for a two-staged process towards it. With these two phased processes, it is possible to inject a measure of pragmatism to this proposal.

The first phase involves the establishment of a civilian caretaker government. This is a government whose only *raison d'être* is the salvation of the Sudanese state by creating the space for a Sudanese led peace process that brings to the

center of diplomatic efforts the agency of Sudanese civic actors. The mandate of this care taker government is envisaged to be further limited both in time and its non-participation in the subsequent transitional process. As a body with such limited emergency and technocratic power for saving the Sudanese state, there is a need for its urgent establishment whose narrow focus can mitigate, if not dissolve, [fragmentation and contestation](#) which was used against effective engagement with Sudanese civic actors.

Within the framework of the foregoing, this care taker government will have two principal roles. First is to mobilize Sudanese people in their various formations and the international community towards securing ceasefire. For it to succeed, it has to receive not only diplomatic recognition but also importantly substantial institutional support for it to be in charge of such state institutions as the bureaucracy and the Central Bank.

The establishment of such care taker government by Sudanese civic actors and the diplomatic recognition of such government by the international community brings multiple benefits for the search for ending the conflict. First, by creating an entity as main locus of diplomatic efforts and separate from either of the two fighting parties, it ends the glorification of the people with gun who are unleashing the destruction of the country. Clearly, such a care taker government does not dispense with the necessity of engaging the warring parties but disrupts the incentive structure. Second, it thus has the potential to break the logic of total victory and total defeat by which the action of the warring parties is currently dictated. Third, this would incentivize the warring parties, perhaps most notably the SAF, to opt for committing to ceasefire as a means of limiting their loss in any future dispensation. Fourth, by the sheer fact of its presence, it is also possible that the warring parties would be put into a position pursuing their interests by choosing to accept the

role of the care taker government.

The second role of the care taker government, which will not be part of the future transitional government, is the creation of the conditions for the holding of a national popular convention. This is a convention that will bring together various political and social forces of Sudan for the elaboration of a transitional roadmap and the establishment the transitional government for the implementation of the roadmap involving various reforms that will usher in a democratic dispensation in Sudan.

Whether or not this could work and how it could be made to work depends first and foremost on the Sudanese civic actors. With them showing leadership by seizing the initiative themselves and doing so without much delay, they present an opportune challenge for international diplomacy to save itself from its repeatedly failed approach.

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