Conflicts in Africa | Why Sudan remains trapped in prolonged civil war

Sudan has remained embroiled in a devastating civil war for more than two years, causing an estimated 62,000 deaths and the displacement of approximately 14 million people. But what are the root causes of the war and why has a political resolution remained elusive?

— Samir Bhattacharya

(From civil wars and insurgencies to ethnic tensions and resource-based disputes, Africa has long been a continent marked by conflicts, resulting in widespread instability and humanitarian crises. The region is also becoming a battleground for global power struggle. In the Conflicts in Africa series, our experts explore the root causes of major African conflicts and their impact on India's interests. They will also examine prospects for a peaceful future in the continent.)

After weeks of fierce fighting, Sudan's army has announced that it has pushed the rival paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) out of the capital Khartoum. But the Northeast African nation continues to reel from the prolonged conflict that began in April 2023.

Since its outbreak, the ongoing civil war in Sudan has evolved into what is widely regarded as the most severe displacement crisis in modern history. The escalating conflict between two rival military factions — the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary RSF, under the command of General Muhammad Hamdan Dagalo — has thus far resulted in an estimated 62,000 deaths and the displacement of approximately 14 million individuals, with no clear end in sight.

But how has the rivalry between the SAF and RSF shaped the course of the civil war? What are the possible pathways to peace in the war-torn African nation?

Sudan's "fight to the death"

The origins of the current crisis in Sudan can be traced back to 2019, following the ousting of long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir. His rule lasted from 1989 to 2019 and was characterised by authoritarianism, widespread corruption, human rights violations, and economic mismanagement.

As part of his strategy for "coup-proofing" his regime, Bashir established powerful parallel security forces. Among these was an Arab militia known as the "Janjaweed", which primarily recruited Baggara (cattle herders) Arabs from the Darfur and Kordofan regions. This militia, which later evolved into the RSF, also played a significant role in the Darfur conflict between 2003 and 2005, leading to the genocide of approximately 200,000 indigenous black African Muslims.

Ironically, General Burhan's regular military forces and the RSF cooperated in the coup to oust Omar al-Bashir in 2019. After Bashir's removal, a fragile agreement was forged between civilians and the military to establish a transitional government with a civilian prime minister. However, the fragile coalition between the civilian and military factions quickly disintegrated. In October 2021, General Burhan orchestrated another coup, this time dissolving the transitional government and detaining civilian leaders, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

Following a prolonged political deadlock after the coup, a framework agreement was eventually signed. A key provision of this transition agreement was the planned merger between the national army and the RSF. The recent violence is a direct consequence of disagreements regarding the integration of RSF paramilitaries into the Sudanese Army and the question of who should oversee

the process.

Since then, General Burhan, leader of the Sovereignty Council, has effectively served as Sudan's de facto president. As General Dagalo continues challenging him for power, it has become a "fight to the death", an existential tussle for power and control over resources between two leaders. This deadly contest can also be seen as part of a broader historical pattern.

Sudan's current conflict is not without historical precedent. Over the past seventy years, the country has experienced twenty attempted coups, ranking second only to Bolivia in the frequency of such events, reflecting a deeply entrenched pattern of political instability. In addition, Sudan has endured two protracted civil wars, the most recent of which culminated in 2011 with the secession of South Sudan, now recognised as Africa's newest sovereign state.

The country's tumultuous past has laid the foundation for the current crisis, creating a vicious cycle of conflict and instability. Therefore, any efforts to establish lasting peace in Sudan must be based on a comprehensive understanding of the complex and interrelated historical, political, and societal factors that continue to shape the country's volatile environment.

The underlying causes of the conflict are both multifaceted and deeply entrenched. Primary factors that have contributed to the outbreak of the current crisis include the pronounced politicisation of ethnic and regional identities, persistent challenges related to democratisation and governance, and the significant influence of external actors.

While most violent conflicts have occurred during the post-colonial period, the colonial era played a decisive role in laying the foundations for many of these enduring issues.

When Sudan gained independence from Britain and Egypt in 1956, it inherited more than just a new flag — it also inherited deep and dangerous divisions. Under colonial administration, policies of "divide and rule" and indirect governance fostered significant regional and ethnic divisions, particularly between the predominantly Arab and Muslim North and the largely African, Christian, or animist South.

Colonial authorities promoted the perception of Arab superiority — particularly among riverine Arab groups — over populations in regions such as Darfur and southern Sudan. This preferential treatment extended to the allocation of positions within the bureaucracy and military, where Arabs were disproportionately represented. These colonial-era policies institutionalised ethnic hierarchies and sowed the seeds of the identity-based tensions that continue to destabilise Sudan today.

In the post-colonial period, the divisions entrenched during Sudan's colonial era were further intensified by political marginalisation, economic disparities, and the systematic exclusion of the southern population from meaningful participation in the central government. These identity-based cleavages significantly hindered the development of a cohesive and inclusive national identity.

Over time, the failure to address these structural inequalities and grievances contributed directly to the secession of the southern region and the eventual establishment of the Republic of South Sudan.

The evolution of regimes in post-colonial Sudan has been marked by mismanagement, corruption, authoritarian rule, and a pattern of neglect and confrontation. Successive governments have been marked by corruption, nepotism, exclusion, injustice, and the inequitable distribution of national resources. These systemic issues have not only worsened poverty and weakened the state but have also eroded social cohesion, thus exacerbating the conditions that fuel violent conflict.

For much of the past seventy years, Sudan has been under the control of autocratic leaders who promoted Arab supremacist ideologies, often at the expense of marginalised ethnic groups such as the African tribes of Darfur and the people of South Sudan. This legacy of exclusion and inequality continues to shape the country's political landscape and contribute to its instability.

Another indicator of Sudan's fragile state is its economic structure, which has long been marked by a heavy dependence on oil resources alongside widespread corruption. In 2011, the secession of South Sudan, which controlled over 75 per cent of the country's oil reserves, inflicted a significant blow to Sudan's economy. The loss of this vital resource deepened existing economic grievances and heightened discontent across the nation, contributing to the broader instability that continues to plague the country today.

Sudan is strategically located at the crossroads of the Red Sea, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa. The country is endowed with vast arable land and an array of abundant natural resources, including petroleum, natural gas, gold, silver, chromite, manganese, gypsum, mica, zinc, iron, lead, uranium, copper, kaolin, cobalt, granite, nickel, tin, and aluminium. Sudan's geographic position, coupled with its wealth of natural resources, makes it a significant area of interest for multiple countries.

The ongoing crisis in Sudan is heavily influenced by the involvement of multiple external actors, each driven by its own political agenda and interests. Sudan shares borders with seven countries — Chad, Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Libya, and Egypt — and holds significant geopolitical importance.

Therefore, different countries such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, have sought to secure friendly governments in line with their strategic objectives. In doing so, they have contributed to the crisis by backing different factions and employing a range of tactics to shape the country's political landscape.

Sudan's experiment with democracy has become a paradox, failing to establish good governance or bring stability to the country. At present, Sudan is grappling with severe shortages of food, water, medicine, and fuel, while more than half of the population — approximately 25.6 million people — are facing acute food insecurity, including 8.5 million of them experiencing emergency levels of deprivation.

In the absence of a resolution to the crisis, hundreds of thousands more individuals are likely to be forced to flee in search of refuge and basic humanitarian assistance.

The Sudanese Civil War is indeed a complex conflict with deep historical roots. While the situation remains dire, there are potential pathways to peace that need to be explored. However, addressing the root causes would require a fresh approach, one that involves all relevant stakeholders in meaningful negotiations and commits to long-term economic and political reforms.

In these negotiations, local peace priorities must take precedence over the geopolitical interests of foreign powers. Above all, the peaceful restoration of democratic governance in Sudan must be prioritised within the national and regional security frameworks.

Post Read Questions

Since its outbreak in April 2023, the ongoing civil war in Sudan has evolved into what is widely regarded as the most severe displacement crisis in modern history. Evaluate.

Sudan's current conflict is not without historical precedent. How does the legacy of colonial rule continue to influence Sudan's internal conflicts today?

When Sudan gained independence from Britain and Egypt in 1956, it inherited more than just a new flag — it also inherited deep and dangerous divisions. Comment.

Is the secession of South Sudan an example of conflict resolution or a failure to manage diversity within Sudan?

What role have regional and international actors played in sustaining or resolving the conflict?

(Samir Bhattacharya is an Associate Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation.)

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