

AFRICA

Sudan Rivals Agree to Share Power, Envoy Says

Ruling military council and pro-democracy movement support timetable for transition to civilian rule



An emerging political deal could end a standoff that began when the military ousted President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, seen here on Oct. 5, 2016. PHOTO: AMR ABDALLAH DALSH/REUTERS

By Nicholas Bariyo and Justin Scheck

Updated July 5, 2019 5:35 pm ET

Sudan's military junta and protest leaders reached a truce to share power, marking a tentative end to months of protests and violent crackdowns and setting out a blueprint for democratic rule for the first time in three decades.

Since youth-led protests pushed Sudan's military to oust longtime strongman President Omar Hassan al-Bashir in April, the country has been paralyzed by a standoff between opposition leaders calling for a transition to democracy and the Transitional Military Council ruling Sudan since the coup. Repeatedly, protests calling for civilian rule ended in bloodshed.

Early Friday, after weeks of false starts and mediation attempts by U.S., Ethiopian and African Union officials, the military and protest leaders agreed to form a sovereign council comprising military and civilian officials to govern the country for just over three years, said Mohamed Hassan Lebatt, a mediator for the African Union.

Crucially, however, the junta will be in charge of the 11-member council the first 21 months of the transition, countering protesters' demand for immediate civilian rule. Only after that, a civilian will take the helm and prepare for elections in 2022.

If successful, the deal could end weeks of uncertainty during which the capital Khartoum was overtaken by thousands of heavily armed troops in an attempt to quiet protesters. At many street corners, soldiers, police and members of the Rapid Support Forces—a military unit with roots in the so-called janjaweed militia responsible for brutality in the Darfur region—camped next to camouflage-painted Toyota pickups with machine guns mounted in the back and bundles of rocket-propelled grenades.

The RSF installments, in some cases manned by soldiers who appeared to be in their teens, taking selfies with machine guns and catcalling at women in the street, imposed a tense calm on the city following a violent June 3 crackdown on protesters.

The calm broke on June 30, when thousands returned to the streets demanding civilian rule.

Elections would mark a long-awaited return to democracy for the people of a vast nation that spent nearly three decades under Mr. Bashir's iron grip, weathering the secession of South Sudan, years of Western sanctions and meddling by foreign power players vying for regional influence.

Saudi Arabia, Iran, the U.S. and the European Union have all sought influence over Sudan, a nexus for global trade via the Gulf of Aden and a Western ally in managing migration toward Europe and combatting terrorism in neighboring Libya. At different points, each group helped to strengthen Mr. Bashir's rule.

Negotiators and mediators also promised an independent investigation into last month's brutal raid on a civilian sit-in camp in Khartoum and other opposition sites by soldiers and the RSF. Protest leaders say nearly 140 civilians died that day and in the month that followed, with many more injured by bullets, raped and beaten. The government puts the number of dead at fewer than 80.

"This is a great step in the right direction and both sides have committed to agreement," said Amsaku Hate, a counselor at the Ethiopian Embassy in Khartoum.

It wasn't clear how the deal would be received by some protesters—a mix of traditional opposition groups and young people and professionals who first took to the streets in a December over the soaring price of bread and lack of opportunities. An agreement on a three-year transition reached in May quickly collapsed as it became clear that the military wasn't ready to give up power.

The Association of Sudanese Professionals, one of the groups spearheading the protests, welcomed the deal in a statement on its Facebook page. “May the sun of freedom shine without clouds that block its light and grow crops throughout the country,” it said.

The military council has restricted internet access for several weeks, and it remained suspended across Sudan on Friday, leaving its citizens to piece together details of the agreement from state television, Arab news channels and word-of-mouth.

Hours after its announcement, thousands of people poured into the streets of Khartoum, waving Sudanese flags and banners to celebrate the deal, witnesses said. Television footage showed youths marching through the streets of the capital with drums, singing and chanting.

Some analysts questioned whether the military, whose leaders also control various militias and much of the local economy, was really willing to share power. “A lot is still needed for this deal to stand,” said Alan Boswell a Sudan analyst with International Crisis Group, a nongovernmental organization aimed at preventing and resolving conflict. Open issues include the makeup of a transitional legislature and the personalities that will join the sovereign council.

A crucial player is Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, the deputy head of the Transitional Military Council and head of the RSF, which protesters have blamed for much of the bloodshed in recent weeks. In the waning days of Mr. Bashir’s rule, Gen. Dagalo, better known as Hemedti, won an internal battle to keep his forces separate from the army, said an official involved in that fight.

Since then, RSF detachments have been deployed to guard key military installations around the country, giving them a measure of control over the army that has increased Mr. Dagalo’s power. By deploying a large force to fight alongside the United Arab Emirates in Yemen, the general has also secured allegiance and funding from a key regional power.

There is also no clear strategy on how this oil- and gold-rich nation will deal with multiple rebel groups that have been fighting guerrilla wars with Khartoum for decades in the regions of Darfur, South Kordofan and the Nuba Mountains.

“Uncertainty surrounding the entrenched dispute between the army and the protesters raises the risk of civil war,” said Andrews Atta-Asamoah a research fellow with South Africa-based Institute for Security Studies.

Corrections & Amplifications

Nicholas Bariyo was reporting from Kampala, Uganda. An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated he was reporting from Khartoum, Sudan. (July 5, 2019)

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