

THE SECURITY APPARATUS AND THE POLITICAL TRANSITION IN SUDAN

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ABSTRACT

Since the 11th of April 2019 and the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir, Sudan has been engaged in an uncertain and complex political process. Among the many questions that arise, one dominates, that is the nature and extent of current developments. Is there real regime change or simply a transformation of the system to survive the crisis? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to examine the security apparatus since it has taken over the reins of power. The army has emerged as the central actor in this transition along with civilian opposition. This paper analyzes the structure, history and evolution of this apparatus since 1989. During thirty years of authoritarian Islamist power, a policy of counterbalancing was implemented, resulting in the fragmentation and multiplication of security agencies. This policy partly explains the course of the coup and subsequent events, while also presenting specific challenges for the transition in the short and long term, in particular the management of multiple armed actors that may hinder it.

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INTRODUCTION

On April 11, 2019, Omar al-Bashir, the man who had ruled Sudan since 1989, was overthrown by his security apparatus after nearly four months of protests and a week of peaceful sit-ins in front of the headquarters of the armed forces in Khartoum. A Transitional Military Council (TMC) took the reins of the country and began laborious negotiations with the opposition, which called for the establishment of a civilian government and for soldiers to return to their barracks. These negotiations, which were interrupted several times, were characterized by mutual mistrust between the junta and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), the umbrella organization that brings together trade unions, political parties, and civil society organizations and played a coordinating role in the movement and negotiated with the military. The signature of a constitutional declaration acting as a road map for the transition, on the 17th of August, does not imply a new era of trust. Indeed, the long transition that has started – elections are scheduled for 2022 – is likely to remain characterized by conflictual relationships between the various stakeholders. This mistrust of the military may appear surprising given that demonstrators have, since the beginning of the movement in December 2018, called on the armed forces to side with them, invoking the memory and modes of action of the revolutions of 1964 and 1985 where, in both cases, a peaceful mass protest movement combined with divisions within the armed forces and the ruling coalition to lead to the overthrow of the dictatorship by a military coup d'état. In 1964 and 1985, a short transition took place allowing the transfer of power to civilians and the implementation of a democratic regime, albeit short-lived, as General Nimeiri seized power through a coup d'état in 1969 and Colonel Omar al-Bashir did the same in 1989.

To understand this paradoxical attitude towards the army as well as the way negotiations are conducted and the future of the political transition, it is necessary to consider the structure, history and evolution of the security apparatus, of which the army is only one component, since 1989. Firstly, the army which now finds itself sharing power at the top of the state is certainly not the same institution as in 1964 and 1985 – thirty years of authoritarian Islamist power have transformed it. Secondly, the Sudanese army has on three occasions overthrown autocrats, but these were all career soldiers who came to power through coups d'état. Finally, the armed forces did not act alone on the 11th of April. The story of the junta's coup d'état is one of an alliance between the three main organizations comprising the security apparatus – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the intelligence service (NISS) and the paramilitary militia of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – opposing the President and his desire to violently repress demonstrations.¹

Based on a corpus of news articles, interviews conducted during fieldwork in 2015 and in January 2019, and academic sources, this paper aims to provide an analytical portrait of the composition and operation of the security apparatus and in particular the armed forces, the dominant player in the Sudanese political arena. We will see that the dynamics

1. There are several alternative accounts of events, some of which emphasize the role of foreign powers such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Khalid Abdelaziz et al., "[Abandoned by the UAE, Sudan's Bashir Was Destined to Fall](#)," Reuters, 3 July 2019).

of politicization, cooptation and fragmentation, since 1989 and are in continuity with the practices of previous regimes, have been at the heart of the governance of this apparatus since 1989. They explain the occurrence of the coup d'état of April 11 and how it happened, with both collaboration and competition between the various bodies of the security apparatus.

First, we will present the fragmentation policy of Bashir's regime, then try to explain how this alliance between three institutions was formed despite this policy of "divide and rule". Finally, this last point raises the question of the cohesion of the apparatus and its impact on possible changes in this post-Bashir period.

DIVIDE THE SECURITY APPARATUS AND RULE

Since 1989, the Sudanese leadership has implemented a counterbalancing strategy meant to protect it against coups d'état. Parallel security institutions, autonomous from the army have been created with the main task of defending the regime. These institutions kept each other in check and competed for access to resources, rents and benefits rather than with the regime itself.² Such a strategy produces a fragmented security apparatus, in which the different actors have an autonomous capacity for action. It can be accomplished either by partitioning an existing institution – for example, by creating elite corps within the army³ – or by adding new organizations to existing ones, as is the case in Sudan. After a brief look at the main institutions of this apparatus, we will examine the relationships they had until the coup of April 11, 2019.

The Major Organs of the Security Apparatus

In June 1989, a coalition of Islamist members of the National Islamic Front (NIF) and a faction of the army that shared their political vision took power. Following the coup, the country was officially led by The Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation, composed mainly of military personnel, but behind the scenes power was in the hands of the NIF and especially its leader, Hassan al-Turabi. The latter's mistrust of the army, which he considered impossible to completely Islamize, as it had previously been highly secular,⁴ partly explains the regime's counterbalancing policy.

Al-Turabi multiplied the number of **paramilitary militias**, often by co-opting existing tribal militias. One of the most important during the first years of the regime was the Popular Defense Force (PDF), created in 1989,⁵ and meant to replace the existing military

2. Michael Makara, "Coup-Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring," *Democracy and Security*, 9:4, 2013, p. 336.

3. Elizabeth Picard, "Armée et sécurité au cœur de l'autoritarisme," in *Autoritarismes démocratiques et démocraties autoritaires au XXI^e siècle: convergences Nord-Sud*, Paris, La Découverte, 2008, p. 317-18.

4. Millard Burr and Robert Oakley Collins, *Revolutionary Sudan: Hasan Al-Turabi and the Islamist State, 1989-2000*, Brill, 2003, p. 17.

5. The official decree creating the PDF dates from November 1989, but Sadiq al-Mahdi's democratic government had already proposed the creation of such an institution from existing militias in February 1989. The proposed law

and police forces by 2025.⁶ Conceived as the armed wing of the NIF, the PDF was trained more in ideology than in combat and was tasked with fighting the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), a South Sudanese rebel movement. Divisions deployed in urban areas were entrusted to protect the regime in the event of a popular uprising or military intervention.⁷ The rulers' suspicion of the army explains why some military units were redeployed outside the capital while PDF units were moved into key areas of Khartoum and around military garrisons. Its importance however has declined since the late 1990s, and even more so with the signing of the peace agreement with the SPLM in 2005. In fact, since the outbreak of conflict in Darfur in 2003, it is another paramilitary militia that has grown in importance and today has a central role in the transition: The Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The **RSF** is headed by Mohammed Hamdan Dango, commonly known as Hemeti, who became Vice-President of the TMC in April 2019. It is in fact a reorganization of some of the Janjaweed militias who were acting on behalf of the government during the civil war in Darfur (2003-2011⁸). In 2013, these militias moved to the outskirts of the capital, becoming the regime's agents of repression in the center. Its members are from marginalized regions, mainly Darfur and South Kordofan. Their presence has led to clashes with the local population who is subjected to the units' violence.⁹ In 2013, these militias repressed major demonstrations in Khartoum, causing approximately 200 deaths in two days.¹⁰ The same year, they were integrated into the NISS. Hemeti therefore gradually succeeded in establishing a central place for himself within the regime, as evidenced by some of the senior positions distributed to his close associates in several institutions after the April 2015 general elections.¹¹

It is difficult to accurately estimate the size of the RSF because inflating figures enables its leader to claim increased political importance, but according to a report from the Small Arms Survey,¹² the force was estimated to be between ten to twenty thousand at the end of 2016. Jérôme Tubiana mentions that 9,000 militiamen were reportedly positioned in Khartoum before the beginning of the protests and have since been joined by an additional 4,000.¹³ In comparison to the regular army and its 104,000 men,¹⁴ the RSF is therefore relatively small. This disparity may seem strange for a force meant to interfere with the NISS or SAF in case they turn against the regime,¹⁵ but the counterbalancing policy does not necessarily require the establishment of forces of equal magnitude capable of defeating the

actually formalized a policy that had been in place since 1985, but was then rejected by the Assembly (Jago Salmon, *A Paramilitary Revolution: The Popular Defence Forces*, Small Arms Survey, 2007, p. 13).

6. Ibrahim Elnur, *Contested Sudan: The Political Economy of War and Reconstruction*, Routledge, 2009, p. 71.

7. Jago Salmon, *A Paramilitary Revolution: The Popular Defence Forces*, p. 16.

8. The *Doha Document for Peace in Darfur* was signed in 2011, officially putting an end to the conflict. Violence though has continued since and, in some respects, it can be considered that the conflict is not yet over.

9. "[Clashes Erupt in North Khartoum between Villagers and RSF Militia](#)," *Sudan Tribune*, 27 December 2014; "[Sudan's RSF Militia Blocks Highway in Khartoum for Several Hours](#)," *Sudan Tribune*, 6 September 2015.

10. Human Rights Watch, "[Sudan: Dozens Killed During Protests](#)," 2013.

11. Hamid E. Ali and Ahmed Hussain Adam, "[Bashir's Autocratic Regime Is Fighting for Its Survival](#)," *African Arguments*, 17 July 2015.

12. Small Arms Survey, *Remote Control Breakdown. Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and pro-Government Militias*, HSBA for Sudan and South Sudan, April 2017.

13. Jérôme Tubiana, "[The Man Who Terrorized Darfur Is Leading Sudan's Supposed Transition](#)," *Foreign Policy*, 14 May 2019.

14. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, 2019, p. 494.

15. Atta el-Battahani, "The Sudan Armed Forces and Prospects of Change," *CMI Insight*, 2016, p. 6

regular forces. The purpose is simply to increase the cost of defection and military intervention in politics; thus, building a force with a capacity for resistance and nuisance is enough to discourage potential dissidents. It is not a question of erecting an impenetrable wall, but rather an additional barrier.

The NISS, which oversaw the RSF for some time, became the central actor in the repression of political activities, surveillance and censorship under Bashir. It played a central role in the repression that followed the 1989 coup d'état, setting up the infamous *ghost houses*, secret prisons where opponents were sent to be killed and/or tortured. Acting within and outside the country, the NISS is both an executant and the coordinator for various militias in rural (in this case mainly tribal militias) and urban areas (where, for example, student militias linked to the ruling party operate). During the colonial period, the Sudanese secret services were characterized by their weak institutionalization and their inability to control society.¹⁶ Since independence in 1956, they have constantly been the subject of often successful co-optation attempts by diverse political and social forces: traditional political parties, trade unions and professional organizations – often linked to the Communist Party –, the Sudanese army, and finally the Islamist movement.¹⁷

As soon as it came to power, the NIF embarked on a reform of these services and founded a new organization known as IS-SOR (Security of the Revolution-Revolutionary Intelligence Agency). In 2002, the internal and external security services merged to become the National Security Organization, and the NISS in 2005 after the signing of the peace agreement with the SPLM. There is little reliable and accurate data on the internal structure of the NISS or the number of agents deployed. Like any secret service, it is certain that the power of the NISS rests on a number of individuals who are not formal members of the structure but act as informants, contributing to its ubiquity, both objectively and as perceived by the population. According to Battahani¹⁸ and Berridge,¹⁹ NISS executives are mainly from the riverine regions of the Nile Valley, from which much of the Sudanese elite is historically drawn from. While the secret services are in charge of surveillance and repression of these populations, in the peripheral region these same tasks are delegated to various militias. However, this structure of repression has evolved with the Islamist regime and has been shaped by the threats it faced, as evidenced by the trajectory of the RSF.

The SAF are the third core institution of the security apparatus, and have been, like the secret services, constantly influenced by wider social, political, and religious dynamics. It has been the object of capture and co-optation attempts by various interest groups, notably the communists and the Islamists. After several unsuccessful attempts, the latter succeeded in infiltrating the institution in 1977²⁰ when the NIF reconciled with Nimeiri, allowing it to come out of hiding, access positions within the government and broader state apparatus, and to influence policymaking. Capture of the armed forces accelerated in 1983 when the

16. Willow Berridge, "Sudan's Security Agencies: Fragmentation, Visibility and Mimicry, 1908-89," *Intelligence and National Security*, 28:6, 2013, p. 845-67.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 847.

18. Atta el-Battahani, "The Sudan Armed Forces and Prospects of Change," p. 6.

19. Willow Berridge, "Sudan's Security Agencies: Fragmentation, Visibility and Mimicry, 1908-89," p. 867.

20. Mustafa Abdelwahid, *The Rise of the Islamic Movement in Sudan (1945-1989)*, Lewinston, New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 2008, p. 179.

regime embarked on a process of Islamization by establishing sharia law. All first and second rank officers were required to follow courses on Islamic teachings at the African Islamic Center in Khartoum, an institution established, supported and led primarily by leaders of the Islamist movement.²¹ These courses were used to indoctrinate the military and, most importantly, to detect officers sympathetic to the cause of the NIF. Those who were not were sent into retirement or to fight in the South, where civil war resumed in 1983. It was therefore an Islamized faction of the army that took power in 1989 and carried out massive purges: between 1989 and 1993, 1,500 officers – nearly a third of the total corps – were dismissed or retired, as well as 11,000 non-commissioned soldiers.²² They were replaced by young graduates of the pro-NIF military academy. Therefore, it is necessary to not confuse or overlay distinctions between civilians and the military and between Islamists/non-Islamists: the delimitations of these groups are not similar, and their cleavages intersect. In terms of numbers, the army consists of about 100,000 men, the navy 1,300 and the air force 3,000.²³

Between Collaboration and Competition

The relationships between the various institutions of the security apparatus are particularly complex to grasp in an authoritarian context marked by secrecy and mistrust of external observers. The hierarchical relationships between the institutions are often unclear, characterized by a contradiction between written rules and practices. The PDF is a good example. They were meant to report to a brigadier of the army and answer directly to President Bashir. Their recruitment was organized by civil coordinators at the different levels of the administrative structure: national, federal and local.²⁴ However, in the field, their organization was largely decentralized, and some groups had a high degree of autonomy, particularly those composed of pre-existing tribal militias. Their leaders acted as coordinators, forming a hierarchy parallel to that of the army and maintaining total control over their men. Some requested that their groups only operate along migration routes and according to their seasonal schedule, even though they received the same benefits as professional soldiers.²⁵

Similarly, the status of the RSF in relation to the NISS and SAF was and remains uncertain. Before they became this organization, Janjaweed militias were cooperating with the army in the fighting in Darfur. Testimonies collected by Human Rights Watch report that, in many cases, villages were first bombed by the Air Force, with the Janjaweed and the army later intervening to eliminate the remaining civilians.²⁶ However, this cooperation was not without tension. For example, in 2003, the Governor of North Darfur, Lieutenant-General

21. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

22. Julie Flint, "[Even If They Have to Beat Schoolboys Senseless the Rulers of Sudan Will Have Their New Society](#)," *Independent*, 2 May 1993.

23. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, 2019, p. 493.

24. Jago Salmon, *A Paramilitary Revolution: The Popular Defence Forces*, p. 14.

25. *Ibid.*

26. HRWA, *Entrenching Impunity: Government Responsibility for International Crimes in Darfur*, Human Rights Watch, December 2005, p. 19.

Ibrahim Suleiman Hassan, imprisoned Musa Hilal, another Janjaweed militia leader and a traditional chief, following complaints from his own community.²⁷ By contrast, the previous governor, a former pilot in the Air Force, was known to be close to Hilal, showing that it may be primarily interpersonal relationships that govern relations between the organs of the security apparatus.

In this context, the integration of militias into other institutions, such as the RSF into the NISS, should not necessarily be interpreted as reduced autonomy. On the contrary, it can grant new benefits that increase it. By joining the NISS, the RSF gained new identification papers and immunity under the National Security Services Act of 2010.²⁸ Hemeti was also offered the rank of Brigadier General within the NISS, a promotion that was part of his objectives as stated in 2014, when he explained the reasons for a brief rebellion he led against the government in 2007: “We just wanted to draw the government’s attention, to tell them that we are here to guarantee our rights: military ranks, political positions and development in our area.”²⁹ In 2017, the RSF was integrated into the army, but the relationship between the two institutions remains ambiguous. The new constitutional documents stipulate that “The armed forces and Rapid Support Forces are a national military institution that protect the unity and sovereignty of the nation. They are subordinated to the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and subject to the sovereign authority.”³⁰ This wording reiterates the existence of two distinct institutions but places them under the supervision of a single authority, leaving open the question of the degree of autonomy and the role of each.

The same question arises for the NISS, placed under military control after the coup d’état, even though it was an institution that had become on all accounts more powerful than the army under Bashir.³¹ It had become autonomous in relation to other security agencies and its supervisory ministry, the Ministry of the Interior, since the early 1990s. This was due in particular to its make-up: it was constituted essentially of NIF members who took their orders directly from the movement.³² Quickly put aside after the coup against Bashir, with the resignation and house arrest of its director Salah Gosh, the NISS currently appears to be the losing institution in the new configuration of power. The fact that a struggle between the three organizations took place at the same time as they overthrew the president is not particularly surprising given the conflict that characterized their past relationships. In 2015, a retired army officer reported that in 2008, when the Darfuri rebel movement JEM was at the gates of Omdurman, Khartoum’s twin city, the army was caught between the rebels and NISS forces. The NISS launched its attack without worrying about the military, decimating its ranks on the way. It therefore appears that if the various agencies of the security apparatus were able to complement each other in the conduct of repression, operating in

27. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

28. Akshaya Kumar and Omer Ismail, *Janjaweed Reincarnate: Sudan’s New Army of War Criminals*, The Enough Project, 2014, p. 2.

29. Jérôme Tubiana, “[Out for Gold and Blood in Sudan](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, 2014

30. “Draft Constitutional Charter for the 2019 Transitional Period,” International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2019, p. 12.

31. Atta El-Battahani, “The Sudan Armed Forces and Prospects of Change,” p. 143.

32. Millard Burr and Robert Oakley Collins, *Revolutionary Sudan: Hasan Al-Turabi and the Islamist State, 1989-2000*, p. 14.

distinct areas and against different threats, their prerogatives regularly overlapped, provoking tensions.

In addition, the three main organs of the security apparatus, the SAF, the RSF and the NISS, have access to separate financial and economic resources, contributing to their autonomy. The army and intelligence services hold stakes in a number of companies.³³ Safat in the aviation sector, Danfoudio in furniture and construction, Al-Hilou al Mukatamila in the catering and media sector, or Alaia in the pharmaceutical sector all are linked to SAF.³⁴ Hemeti has control of the gold mines in the Jebel Amir region of Darfur and has obtained funds through participation in the Yemeni conflict – the RSF makes up the majority of ground troops for the Saudi coalition – as well as by contributing to the smuggling of migrants to Libya even though he claims to be fighting against it.³⁵

THE FAILURE OF THE COUNTERBALANCING STRATEGY?

The coup of April 11, 2019, the establishment of the TMC and the beginning of a political transition seem to indicate the failure of the regime's counterbalancing strategy. How can this be explained?

The Risk of a Domino Effect

First, we must take into consideration the specificity of a crisis triggered by a mass protest movement. The scale of the demonstrations shows that the regime no longer dominates society and that there are constituencies that will support and protect defecting soldiers, a choice that thus becomes less costly.³⁶ The chances that the army as an institution will not be the target of large-scale purges and reforms after the uprising is strong. In calling on the military to side with the population and organizing the sit-in in front of their headquarters, the Sudanese protestors clearly demonstrated the existence of such support for potential deserters. In addition, defections often have a domino effect: loyalist factions decide to join the opposition for fear of being on the losing side if the regime collapses.

Three factors may have contributed to this fear. First, the existence of large-scale demonstrations creates the perception of a likely victory for the opposition. Second, the circulation of videos on social media in which soldiers announced their support for the protesters also contributes to this, even if their authenticity is questionable. In a context of crisis where actors are trying to identify the preferences of others in order to position themselves on the winning side, these videos contribute to raise doubts and to this domino effect. Third, Hemeti's attitude from the beginning of the movement, giving speeches critical of the

33. Atta El-Battahani, "Civil-Military Relations in Sudan: Negotiating Political Transition in a Turbulent Economy," in Elke Grawert and Zeinab Abul-Magd (ed.), *Businessmen in Arms. How the Military and Other Armed Groups Profit in the MENA Region*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, p. 148.

34. Atta el-Battahani, "The Sudan Armed Forces and Prospects of Change," p. 4.

35. Jérôme Tubiana, "[The Man Who Terrorized Darfur Is Leading Sudan's Supposed Transition.](#)"

36. Michael Makara, "Coup-Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring," p. 340.

authorities,³⁷ can be interpreted as signaling the existence of forces ready to defect within the security apparatus. The sincerity of those speeches and the aims pursued by this actor can certainly be debated, but what matters here is how these discourses are perceived by opponents and other members of the security and political apparatus, what these actors make of them and how they react accordingly. It contributes to a climate of uncertainty regarding the agendas and positioning of the actors involved.

The Sociological Composition of the Security Forces

This domino effect is more likely when the opposition faces an army that has not been structured along the main social cleavages of society.³⁸ Indeed, in these cases, the regime builds an army of loyalists based on a common identity, creating the perception that the fate of the army is intrinsically linked to the fate of the regime. The cost of defection increases all the more as the army will face groups that have been marginalized and are therefore likely to conduct large-scale purges in if they reach power. This effect is amplified when a minority group is favored, as Makara³⁹ explains in his analysis of the differing reactions of the Egyptian, Syrian and Yemeni armed forces confronted with the Arab Spring uprisings. The fact that the Syrian security apparatus, although having experienced defections, has remained relatively loyal and consistent and violently repressed the civilian population could be explained by the policy of “ethnic stacking” implemented by Hafez and then Bashar el-Assad. The majority of the members of the security apparatus are Alawites, like the regime’s leaders, even though this group represents only 10% of the population.⁴⁰

Such a hypothesis is difficult to test in the case of Sudan because, to the best of our knowledge, sociological data on the composition of the army after 1989 does not exist. Figures from 1972 show that a large majority of SAF officers and non-commissioned officers are from Khartoum and the North, although this proportion decreased between 1962 and 1972.⁴¹ In 1962, 92.3% of the generals and 87% of the colonels came from these regions, a figure which fell to 66.6% and 70% in 1972. This decrease seems to have mainly been to the benefit of Kordofan, since the number of officers from this Western province increased in almost all ranks.⁴² As outlined by Marchal in 1995, men from the Nuba Mountains and Darfur have dominated the non-commissioned ranks of the military since the colonial period.⁴³ According to the Black Book, a pamphlet circulated in Khartoum in the early 2000s,⁴⁴ the revolutionary command established in 1989 was composed of eight officers from the North out of a total of fifteen members. Every minister of Interior - all high-ranking military

37. “Sudan’s Militia Leader Urges Government to Provide Services,” *Sudan Tribune*, 26 December 2018.

38. Michael Makara, “Coup-Proofing, Military Defection, and the Arab Spring,” p. 341.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 348.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 348.

41. Siddig Umbadda, “La ‘tribu’ des diplômés et la mauvaise gestion de l’économie soudanaise,” *Égypte/Monde arabe*, 15-16, 1993, p. 5.

42. *Ibid.*

43. Roland Marchal, *Éléments d’une sociologie du Front national islamique soudanais*, Les Études du CERI, September 1995, p. 28.

44. These authors were anonymous, but they were most likely activists who went on to found the JEM rebel movement in Darfur. The document is also available [on the movement’s website](#).

officials⁴⁵ – until the publication of the book was also from this region, while out of five Defense Ministers only one came from the peripheries, in this case Darfur.

The continued domination of those from the riverine regions within the ranks of the army seems partially confirmed; it is in any case not absurd since it is from these groups that most of the country's elites have come since its independence in 1956. In addition, these populations regroup a number of ethnicities, including the Ja'aliyin, to which Omar al-Bashir belongs, and who constitute this elite. However, if some authors claim, for example, that the NISS is dominated by members of this ethnic group,⁴⁶ the lack of data does not allow us to go any further and identify potential power balances with other groups in the various organs of the security apparatus. Furthermore, the importance of ethnicity in Sudanese politics must not be overestimated or essentialized: not only does the importance of this membership vary according to individuals and regions, but the Bashir regime has often formed alliances and co-opted groups with different ethnic identities depending on the circumstances.

The Decreasing Cost of Defection

This logic of ad hoc alliances has gone hand in hand with a decreasing cost of defection over the past thirty years. Admittedly, the attempted coup d'état of March 1990 was violently repressed, with the execution of 28 senior officers,⁴⁷ but it is difficult to determine whether this has had a deterrent effect since there is no agreement regarding the number of attempted coups between the available databases. McGowan⁴⁸ counts only one coup attempt between 1989 and 2001, in 1990, while some databases list ten⁴⁹ or twelve.⁵⁰ One of the main recent coup attempts was in December 2012. Salah Gosh, who headed the NISS at the time of the April 11 coup, was one of its instigators. Diplomatic cables published by Wikileaks show that he considered – as early as 2008, when he was head of the NISS⁵¹, using the ICC's arrest warrant against Bashir to remove him from power in favor of Ali Osman Taha.⁵² Arrested for his participation in the 2012 coup d'état, he was released in July 2013 without being prosecuted. The cost of an attempted coup d'état therefore appears relatively low, particularly compared to the fate of dissident officers in 1990. Gosh even returned to his position as head of the NISS in February 2018. Similarly, Hemeti's brief rebellion in 2007 was not sanctioned, allowing him to improve his position within the regime. In these circumstances where the cost of the defection is low, and where it is even a successful strategy

45. Since the NISS, police and army have the same rank, it may be difficult to determine with precision their institution, although in this case they seem to be mainly from the military.

46. Luka Kuol, *Sudan's Shifting Calculus of Power*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 11 March 2019.

47. Roland Marchal, *Éléments d'une sociologie du Front national islamique soudanais*, p. 11.

48. Patrick J. McGowan, "African Military Coups d'Etat, 1956-2001: Frequency, Trends and Distribution," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41:3, 2003, p. 339-70.

49. *Coups d'Etat, 1946-2017*, Center for Systematic Peace, 2017.

50. *Coup d'Etat Project*, Cline Center for Advanced Social Research.

51. He left the organization in 2009 and took up the position of Special Advisor to the President on Security.

52. "Wikileaks: VP Taha & Gosh Appear Open to Removing Sudan's Bashir," *Sudan Tribune*, 6 September 2011.

to gain new guarantees and benefits,⁵³ the institutions of the security apparatus retain the capacities to overcome the leadership's coup-proofing strategies. These capacities can be mobilized in a context where the social movement (and therefore the structural factors that cause it, notably the collapse of the economy) and the support of external actors – Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia⁵⁴ – produce a critical juncture or at least the perception of crisis.

A UNIFIED POLITICAL AND SECURITY APPARATUS

However, the low cost of defection can be interpreted differently, in a perspective that questions the very idea of a counterbalancing policy. If defection and rebellion do not completely close the possibility of being allocated a piece of the national pie, it may be because these actors are not really attempting to overthrow the regime but rather are engaging in internal struggles. In other words, the divisions of power are mainly appearances that conceal the reality of a unified political and security apparatus that will prevent radical change if its interests are threatened.

Behind Apparent Divisions, the Cohesion of a System

In 2015, a former soldier who became a rebel reported in reference to the attempted coup in 2012 that its organizers “are part of the system.” Going even further, another person met at the time evoked a conscious strategy from the leadership:

All these people who are ruling the country are united, but they behave as if they are divided... It's a kind of deception, the message that there is a hope they are going to collapse. But this collapse, which might come, as a consequence of their fragmentation or conflicts, is itself used to intimidate the Sudanese or the international community. If we are to fight each other, this would bring hell for Sudan. And not only Sudan, to the whole region.

Given the duplicity of the regime from its inception, with Tourabi's imprisonment while he was behind the scenes leading the new regime, such mistrust is hardly surprising. With this perspective, the events of April 11th must be taken with caution. They are undoubtedly the result of an internal struggle within the coalition in power, but it remains to be seen to what extent this is the starting point for a profound change of the political system in the medium and long term. Violent repression of the Khartoum sit-in on the third of June seems to indicate otherwise.⁵⁵

The regime has also implemented a clientelist approach to ensure the loyalty of the army, and more generally the security apparatus, which in addition to the purges creates a

53. This strategy may fail depending on the risk assessed by the regime, as shown by the fate of Musa Hilal, the other Janjaweed militia leader, arrested in 2017.

54. Magdy Samy, “[As Sudan Uprising Grew, Arab States Worked to Shape Its Fate](#),” *AP News*, 8 May 2019.

55. “[Au Soudan, au moins 35 morts dans l'assaut des militaires au pouvoir contre les manifestants](#),” *Le Monde*, 3 June 2019.

structure that is potentially hostile to profound systemic changes and is united by specific interests. Paradoxically, this strategy has contributed to the respective autonomy of the organs of the apparatus by providing them with an economic base, all the while giving them common interests linked to those of the regime, at least for a certain period of time. The growing role of the army, but also of the NISS, in the economy since 1989, reflects this dynamic. The officers retired during the purges have benefited, for example, from preferential loans from Islamic banks controlled by the NIF⁵⁶ and retained the benefits of their status as military personnel. The army has been fortunate in terms of salaries and services, with access to low-cost shops and housing.⁵⁷ A significant portion of oil money has also been invested in the security apparatus and more generally in the various conflicts of the regime.⁵⁸ The decrease in oil revenues after the independence of South Sudan in 2011 did not stop the increased expenditure on defense and state security, which grew from 78 to 88% of the total budget between 2013 and 2014.⁵⁹ The share of these expenses going to the army versus the other components of the security apparatus cannot be accurately determined, but according to Battahani,⁶⁰ the NISS was the main beneficiary. The construction of modern buildings to house the headquarters of the various army corps in Khartoum, however, shows that the SAF was not forgotten.

Beyond these investments, the role of the military in the economy has grown. The Bashir regime continued a logic initiated by Nimeiri aimed at making the army a new social class with an interest in maintaining the status quo.⁶¹ Under the dictatorship of General Abboud (1959-1964), the loyalty of officers was bought with shares in agricultural projects, but there was no intent of creating corporatist economic interests. This was developed with the establishment of military corporations by Nimeiri, most of which have functioned poorly and have remained focused on activities with military purposes such as the production of weapons and uniforms.⁶² With the arrival of oil revenues, Bashir's regime was able to give a new dimension to this process. Today the Military Industrial Company (MIC), created in 1993, owns 25% of GIAD Industrial City, a space 50 kilometers from Khartoum where the factories of GIAD Automotive Industry Holding Group and GIAD Company for Steel Manufactures are located. However, it is not clear whether this benefits the army or the NISS, who apparently led the initiative to create the MIC. These structures remain opaque, but it is certain that they have transformed the Sudanese army by turning officers into members of a well-off class whose economic interests gave them a stake in the regime's preservation and the reproduction of a neo-patrimonial system of crony capitalism. In view of these developments, the possibility of reproducing the 1964 and 1985 scenarios was questionable, something the opposition and the demonstrators were certainly aware as evidenced by their mistrust of the junta.

56. Jago Salmon, *A Paramilitary Revolution: The Popular Defence Forces*, p. 17.

57. Roland Marchal, *Éléments d'une sociologie du Front national islamique soudanais*, p. 26.

58. Daniel Large, "Arms, Oil and Darfur: The Evolution of Relations between China and Sudan," *Small Arms Survey*, 7, 2007, p. 4; Alex Vines, "China in Africa: A Mixed Blessing?," *Current History*, 106, 2007, p. 216.

59. Atta el-Battahani, "The Sudan Armed Forces and Prospects of Change," p. 4.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Atta El-Battahani, "Civil-Military Relations in Sudan: Negotiating Political Transition in a Turbulent Economy," p. 141.

62. Henry Bienen and Jonathan Moore, "The Sudan: Military Economic Corporations," *Armed Forces & Society*, 13:4, 1987, p. 489-516.

The Limits of Change

Some decisions taken by the junta have only compounded the trust issue. First, it adopted an ambiguous attitude towards the former dominant party, the National Congress Party (NCP), but also towards the Popular Congress Party (PCP), the party founded by Turabi after he was removed from power by Bashir in 1999. The PCP has sometimes been in opposition, but it joined the National Dialogue launched by the regime in 2014 and participated in the subsequent government. It reiterated its support for the dialogue process and its outcomes during the demonstrations, but at the beginning of April also tried to move towards an intermediary position between the government and the opposition, a less than popular move with demonstrators. It should be added that Turabi's death in 2016 weakened the party for which he remained the main strategist. At first, the TMC refused to recognize the FFC as the legitimate interlocutor and central actor of the revolution. It thus opened the door to the inclusion of the PCP – a proposal made expressly by the military – and perhaps even to a return of the NCP in a new form. A confrontation took place in early May during a meeting between the TMC and the opposition due to the presence of figures known for their links with the NCP.⁶³ A further source of contention was the junta's attitude towards the role of religion in the future regime. In response to the FFC proposals, the TMC expressed reservations about the absence of references to Sharia law as the source of the law.⁶⁴

The break with the old regime was therefore not straightforward and the question of the inclusion of Islamists in the transition remains a central issue. Their exclusion is potentially risky, as it could contribute to formation of a counter-revolutionary faction reinforced by future purges with the state apparatus. There are indeed a number of NCP members within all public administrations, but most might have affiliated themselves with the party to have access to employment rather than because of a sincere ideological conviction.

In any case, this context explains why the successive resignations of members of the TMC⁶⁵ perceived to be closely linked to the old regime during its early days may have been perceived as further manipulation. The fact that General Ibn Ouf, former Minister of Defense and vice-president under Bashir, who headed the TMC for 24 hours, was able to simply go into retirement fueled this perceptions. It is interesting to note here that civilian Islamists linked to the former regime have not enjoyed the same clemency, with several important personalities from the NCP having been imprisoned, including Ahmed Haroun, Ali Osman Taha and Nafie Ali Nafie. All three joined the Islamist project early and were involved in the implementation of the regime. Additionally, the experience of 1989 and Turabi's false imprisonment also explains why many Sudanese remain suspicious of these alleged arrests. It is in this context that we should consider the proposal made in early May by the TMC to the opposition's representatives to visit Kober prison to check that these personalities are indeed imprisoned. Indeed, it seems that this is not the case, as the TMC's

63. [“Sudanese Politicians Brawled at Meeting with Military Council,”](#) *Sudan Tribune*, 9 May 2019.

64. [“Sudan’s Military Council Want Protesters to Back Sharia Legal System,”](#) *France 24*, 8 May 2019.

65. [“Three Members of Sudan’s Military Council Resign Ahead of Major Protest,”](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 24 April 2019.

spokesperson apologized for claiming that one of Bashir's brothers had been imprisoned when he had actually fled the country.⁶⁶

Finally, the violent repression of the Khartoum sit-in and the comments made in the media by a member of the junta defending the army against accusations of human rights violations in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains⁶⁷ are evidence of the persistence of the repressive practices of the former regime and the limits of what the security apparatus considers acceptable changes.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing the role played by the security apparatus in the overthrow of Bashir and in the events that followed bring us back to pondering the reality and depth of its divisions. This issue is central in the short and long term for the transition and the actors involved. The FFC can indeed instrumentalize these divisions to undermine the unity of the military representatives in the Sovereign Council, set up on the 21st of August, and in the government, where they hold the posts of Minister of Defense and Minister of the Interior. By playing one actor off another, civilians can increase their power and hope to move the process forward in the desired direction. However, the divisions within the security apparatus are also a threat to the transition because they raise the risk of an armed conflict between the SAF and the RSF. It appears that civilians are faced with a paradoxical situation in which maintaining peace requires the unity of this apparatus even though it is an obstacle to democratization.

It is though worth recalling here that the threat of potential chaos has served above all to legitimize keeping power in the hands of the military, who for many Sudanese and members of the opposition are the ones actually producing this chaos. In the Sudanese context, the "spoilers" are also on the side of the government. Developed in research on peace processes, this notion refers to individuals and organizations who believe that peace threatens their power, their worldview and interests and will consequently use violence to obstruct the peace process.⁶⁸ These are generally actors from the old regime: excluded from the negotiation process, they have an interest in blocking it. Potential spoilers are the NCP's militias, which played a central role in the repression of the movement, but most importantly the RSF. After having succeeded in reaching the top of the state, will Hemeti agree to give up power permanently? Yet, since this is an impossible question to answer short of having the capacity to predict the future, it might be more relevant today to examine the existence of institutional safeguards and their capacity to be activated, in anticipation of the moment where the RSF or the army will overstep the boundaries of their role.

66. "Brother of Sudan's Bashir Escaped with Ethiopian Support: Report," *Sudan Tribune*, 17 May 2019.

67. Declan Walsh, "The Son Protested the Dictator. The Father Helped Throw Him Out," *The New York Times*, 23 April 2019.

68. Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security*, 22:2, 1997, p. 5.

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