Special Briefing by International IDEA

Developments in Sudan and Prospects for Democratization

Hosts: International IDEA and Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Netherlands to the UN
Date: Wednesday, 21 June 2023
Time: 1:15 pm to 2:30 pm
Location: ECOSOC Council Chamber, UNHQ, New York

Description

On April 15th, 2023, tensions between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) turned into fighting, escalating into a severe armed conflict that has engulfed the country in what risks turning into a large-scale civil war. The warring factions took power together through a military coup on October 25th, 2021, which upended a fragile democratic transition that started after the removal of long-time ruler Omar Al-Bashir. The situation is deteriorating rapidly, hundreds have been killed, and a chaotic situation has engulfed the country. In the capital city, Khartoum, essential services have been primarily interrupted, threatening to generate a vast humanitarian crisis. Hundreds of thousands have fled the country during temporary truces, but thousands more are expected to flee as the war progresses. International efforts to stop hostilities have been unsuccessful until now.

Following Sudan's popular uprising in 2019 which ousted Sudan's longstanding military ruler Omar al-Bashir, civil society leaders and political parties began to forge alliances and political partnerships with a view to cementing the gains of the uprising and to ensure that Sudan would be led by civilian government. Initially, the transitional military council showed immense goodwill by agreeing with the opposition alliance to an interim power-sharing arrangement and appointed an interim prime minister and a cabinet which was overseen by the supervisory military council, with a view to elections and permanent civilian rule thereafter. The promised transition failed to materialize, due to a myriad of domestic political, governance, and economic challenges, external interests influencing the military leadership and the transitional phase, which effectively derailed the civilian-led transition and led to the resignation of the prime minister.

Since then, there have been multiple efforts to get the transitional process back on track and to work towards moving to a fully civilian-led government. In May 2022, the trilateral mechanism comprised of the United Nations (UN, the African Union (AU) and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) was launched to mediate and facilitate agreement among the parties, but many domestic actors including the prominent civilian coalition known as the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) refused to join as they perceived the military as having breached their mandate and promises to hand over to a civilian authority.

In July 2022, negotiations with the military council broke down, but with an announcement that they would let the civilian actors form a government themselves. This was received well

by Sudanese groups, among whom a group of lawyers tabled a new draft constitution to be adopted following a transitional period, which became the basis of renewed talks with the military council. On 5th December, the FFC bloc signed a framework agreement with the military council, including with Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (SAF) and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (RSF) (also known popularly as Hemedti), other political and professional association representatives, civil society groups and some of the armed movements. The agreement was crucially important in that it signals a clear end to the role of the military in formal power-sharing, and importantly agrees to bring the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces under the command of a civilian head of state serving as commander-in-chief. The agreement also posited that the current leaders of the SAF and RSF would continue as respective heads of various state security institutions. Whilst the agreement has been criticized for lacking full inclusivity and participation, it provided a slither of an opportunity out of the difficult political impasse, and one that met the demands of most of civil society and political coalitions.

The agreement importantly addressed the concerns of the RSF and proposed quasi-integration of the RSF as a regular armed force affiliated with the Sudanese Armed Forces, placing it under the command of a civilian head of state, during a period of transition, with a view to full integration into the armed forces eventually, but left the timeline open. This agreement – and its open-ended nature – may have exacerbated the distrust between the two entities and led to escalating activity between rival units, vying for the recruitment of new members and alliances with other armed groups. Al-Burhan's unilateral proposal to dissolve the sovereign council – which would have meant stripping Hemedti of his position therein – also led to escalating tensions between the two and their respective troops. They both met to de-escalate the matter successfully and Hemedti withdrew his forces from Khartoum. The deadline to form a civilian government was set for 1st April – this was missed, largely due to the failure of the parties to agree on the security sector's restructuring, and particularly the negotiations on the merging of the RSF into the SAF.

This again escalated tensions and both sides, which prepared for possible armed confrontation and mobilized their forces at key positions inside and outside of Khartoum. The RSF was accused by the SAF of having stationed their troops in Meroe around mid-April and were told to retreat. Internal and external negotiations to de-escalate the situation failed and armed conflict began between the two sides around 15 April in major urban areas in Khartoum, Darfur, and other strategic towns such as in Meroe and Port Sudan.

Two months since the conflict began, Sudan is now facing a full-blown civil war, largely fought in urban centers across the country, in a sustained form of warfare that is unprecedented in Sudan, at least not for decades. Civilians have been forced to remain in their homes for weeks and are facing increasingly hotter temperatures, lack of water, electricity and dwindling food supplies, and few and insufficient opportunities to seek safe haven and refuge. Humanitarian access is almost non-existent and evacuation to neighboring countries remains difficult with the airports closed, few routes by road, several checkpoints without guarantee of safety of passage, reports of lootings and kidnappings and the death of hundreds of civilians. The conflict situation is facing the potential risk of being exacerbated by external actors siding

with one or the other side in the conflict – providing the hallmarks of developing into a violent proxy war.

With this background and the ongoing conflict threatening the lives of civilians, plunging Sudan into all-out armed conflict which has not been seen in the country for over two decades, there is an urgent need to cease hostilities, to return to dialogue and to forge a way out of the current crisis based on political negotiations. Key among the priorities will be the negotiations concerning the security sector, the positioning and process for integration of the RSF into the SAF within a clear timeline, and a swift transition to civilian-led government in Sudan.

Objectives

This briefing aims to provide insights into current developments in Sudan and past context, what unfolding events may mean for lasting peace and democratization, and implications for international actors, including the UN and regional actors such as IGAD and the African Union. The briefing is divided into three contributions: First, insights will be provided by Dr Sami Saeed the International IDEA's Head of the Sudan Programme. Sami will analyze the situation and provide an overview of IDEA's programme supporting sustainable peace and stable democracy. Second, Dr Suliman Bildo, Senior Policy Advisor at the Enough Project and former Director of the Sudan Democracy First Group will speak about the challenges of building democracy in Sudan and the prospects for democratization in the current context; and third, Mrs Maha Tambal, a Sudanese civil society activist, will provide insights into the situation from the CSOs' point of view.

Programme

Moderator:

- Dr. Annika Silva-Leander, Head of North America and Permanent Observer to the United Nations, International IDEA

Opening Remarks:

- Dr. Djeyhoun Ostowar, Deputy Head of Political Affairs Section, Mission of the Kingdom of Netherlands to the United Nations

Panelists:

- Dr. Sami Saeed, Head of the Sudan Programme, International IDEA
- Dr. Suliman Baldo, Senior Policy Advisor, Enough Project
- Mrs. Maha Tambal, Civil Society Activist, Sudan