THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

DEVIL'S BARGAIN:

HOW ELITE DEALS UNDERMINED SUDAN'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how counter-revolutionary forces utilize a playbook to derail democracy and exploit the ostensibly pro-democratic international community's efforts to secure a democratic transition. Focusing on Sudan's attempted democratic transition (2019-2023) it consists of three chapters plus an introduction and conclusion that investigate the actions of civilian, international, and military actors during the transitional period and highlight the incentives that plunged the country into civil war.

In 2019, the Sudanese uprising forced out President Omar al-Bashir capturing the world's attention and providing optimism on the democratic prospects of nonviolent resistance movements in the wake of authoritarian resurgence in Egypt and Tunisia. Yet halfway through a planned 39-month run-up to elections, the Sudanese military carried out a coup against the transitional government. By April 2023, with a deal to return to the transition hanging in the balance, war broke out between factions of the military putting an end to hopes for a democratic Sudan.

Chapter 2 (Escaping the Transition Trap) lays out the counter revolutionary playbook that was used against Sudan's would-be democrats. This chapter argues that counter-revolutionaries worked hard to derail the prospects of democracy in Sudan, thrusting the opposition in a sort of transition trap. Similar to a finger trap, unless both the radical democratic forces and the established opposition parties pushed against the military, they would be unable to free themselves.

Chapter 3 (With Friends Like These) examines the international community's reliance on pacted transitions to "support" Sudan's democratic transition. While pacted transitions are seen as a relatively safe way to shepherd democratic transitions, the international community in Sudan failed to see the danger of introducing additional division in a country with two militaries. The lack of a security guarantee due to the withdrawal of peacekeepers also gave the military free reign.

Ultimately, the international community's support of the military as a political actor deeply compromised the country's democratic prospects.

Chapter 4 (When Democratization Kills Peace) asks how likely civil war was in Sudan. By examining major correlates of civil war, the chapter makes the argument that though the country was at an elevated risk of civil war, the resulting conflict was not fought along ethnic lines as the literature would predict. Instead, the "war of the generals" was sparked by democratization, a known correlate of civil war that introduced a dangerous bargaining issue the generals chose to resolve with force.

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Acknowledgements

I did not set out to write a dissertation on failed democratic transitions. In 2019, when Sudan's uprising dislodged Omar al-Bashir, the country stood as a beacon of possibility. It is a testament to the steadfast efforts of my committee, especially co-chairs, Lisa Wedeen and Sue Stokes that this project survived the uprising's reversal of fortunes.

Lisa Wedeen's work on Syria and Yemen inspired me to join the PhD. program and her incisive comments have regularly pushed me to find the right question instead of settling for an easy answer. Sue Stokes has imparted her vast knowledge of democratization to make this project much richer and more relevant than it would otherwise have been. Cathy Cohen helped focus my thoughts on what it might mean for a social movement, like Sudan's uprising, to be successful, and what obstacles stand in its way. Collectively, they are responsible for any value this dissertation provides and free from blame for its defects.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Glossary

CPA **Comprehensive Peace Agreement**

A peace agreement signed in 2005 to end the second Sudanese civil war. It paved the way for the secession of South Sudan.

DDR **Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration**

The process of socially and economically reintegrating combatants into society

DFC **Declaration of Freedom and Change**

The proclamation signed by the civilian coalition in the early days of the 2019 Sudanese uprising, calling for comprehensive democratic change.

FFC **Forces of Freedom and Change**

The civilian coalition that initially included both radical and mainstream political parties

IGAD **Intergovernmental Authority on Development**

An international body of East African nations that played a mediating role in Sudan

JPA **Juba Peace Agreement**

A peace agreement signed in 2020 between the central government and rebel leaders that altered the composition of the transitional government

NCP **National Congress Party**

The party of the former regime

Quad **The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK, and the US**

	Countries who formed a group ostensibly to support Sudan's democratic transition
RC	**Resistance Committee**
	A horizontal network of over 5000 neighborhood committees that emerged during the uprising and served as the engine of protest refusing compromise with the military
RSF	**Rapid Support Forces (formerly the Janjaweed)**
	Initially a tribal militia that carried out ethnic cleansing for the former regime in Darfur, later reconstituted as the RSF a military arm of the state
SAF	**Sudanese Armed Forces**
	The official military of the Sudanese state. Controlled by Islamists
SCP	**Sudanese Congress Party**
	A mainstream opposition party that was part of the pro-democratic FFC
SPLM/A	**Sudan People's Liberation Movement/ Army**
	A party/military organization largely from the South of Sudan that fought in the second Sudanese civil war before becoming a political party. A member of the pro-democratic FFC
TLM	**Trilateral Mechanism**
	The UN, the African Union and IGAD. A group that was set up to support Sudan's democratic transition and highlight coordination between international and regional actors
TMC	**Transitional Military Council**

The military body with the head of the SAF in charge and the head of the RSF as second in command, that was supposed to hand over control of the transitional government to civilians, but instead carried out a coup

UNAMID **United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur**

The peacekeeping mission in Sudan that was removed shortly after the uprising

UNITAMS **United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan**

The UN mission charged with assisting Sudan's democratic transition

1.1 Democratic Transitions, Authoritarian Outcomes

In 2019, the Sudanese uprising utilized nonstop street protests and a unified political front to force out President Omar al-Bashir. Weathering a massacre at the hands of the military and political machinations from domestic and international actors, the pro-democratic forces turned initial bread protests into a political coalition and eventually a transitional government. The uprising captured the world's attention and provided optimism on the democratic prospects of nonviolent resistance movements in the wake of authoritarian resurgence in Egypt and Tunisia.

Yet halfway through a planned 39-month run-up to elections, the Sudanese military carried out a coup against the transitional government. Despite an immediate response from protesters and condemnation from international organizations, the derailed transition could not get back on track. By April 2023, with a deal to return to the transition hanging in the balance, war broke out between factions of the military. At the time of writing the civil war still rages leaving the capital in ruins along with protestors' vision of a democratic Sudan.

Sudan raises broader questions on the prospects of democratic transitions born out of nonviolent resistance movements amid an uptick in military coups[1]. Chief among those questions is under what conditions is a democratic transition possible when confronting an economically and politically powerful military? Relatedly, how can the international community effectively support civilians in the face of military pushback? The project also explores how pacted transitions, generally thought to be an effective mechanism to secure elite support for democracy (e.g., O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986), can instead imperil the transition when facing a divided military. What factors led Sudan's democratic transition to fail and why did that failure result in civil war?

[1] "How to Respond to a 'Year of Coups?' We Can Try in Mali.," United States Institute of Peace, October 28, 2021

In this introduction I first provide a brief overview of the attempted democratic transition in Sudan and lay out my main arguments. Next, I discuss the literatures that I engage with, situating my contributions to each one. First, I will review the literature on the 2011 Arab uprisings and nonviolent resistance movements more generally. Next, I explore the literature on democratic transitions and transitional pacts. Finally, I explore relevant work on coups and civil wars. I finish the chapter by summarizing each chapter's main arguments and briefly discussing my methodology.

1.2 From Unexpected Triumph to Unstoppable Conflict

Any account of the Sudanese uprising must reconcile the surprising strength and longevity of the protest movement and the ultimate failure of the democratic transition. Initially, Sudan's uprising was favorably compared to the previous wave of Arab uprisings: Sudan, it was argued, displayed superior organization, massive turnout, and a favorable domestic and international situation (Grewal 2021). Chenoweth (2021) also notes innovation in the "repertoires of contention" (Tilly 1983) utilized by protesters that built upon the experience of past uprisings. What explains the failure of a movement with "sustained mobilization but also organization, divided regimes, and international pressure," that was able to turn a "revolution into a transition" (Grewal 2021, 105)?

The main cause, according to Volker Perthes, leader of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission (UNITAMS) tasked with shepherding Sudan's democratic transition, was two armies "set for war":

> Arguably no UN mission could have prevented two armies that were prepared to fight each other from going to war and continuing the war as long as their interests compelled them

> to do so and their access to resources enabled them to do so. From that perspective, UNITAMS's experience and record reinforces a hard putative truth of international relations: only major powers motivated to use their political and economic leverage decisively can change the calculations of imminent combatants. (Perthes 2024, 144)

While Perthes casts the onset of civil war as seemingly inevitable due to "two armies that were prepared to fight each other," the details of Sudan's civil war reveal a relatively uncommon occurrence. While intrastate war has eclipsed interstate conflicts,[2] most civil wars are fought over national self-determination.[3] Conflicts for the control of government are less common, non-ethnic conflicts in Africa are rare, and the combination of the two is vanishingly so. In fact, when excluding Islamist insurgencies, only Mozambique's cold war-influenced struggle and Libya's post-2011 conflict join Sudan as examples of non-ethnic civil wars for the control of government in Africa since 1946[4]. Non-ethnic civil wars are more prevalent outside of Africa including in Colombia, El Salvador, and Peru.

Further, Sudan's conflict is being fought between former allies. The clash is between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), the country's official military, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) a paramilitary force was previously known as the Janjaweed militia or the infamous "Devils on horseback" who conducted ethnic cleansing for the regime in Darfur. The leaders of these factions are General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, for the SAF who is also leader of the Sovereignty Council and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo known as Hemedti, for the RSF, the former

[2] Intrastate conflict remains more common than interstate wars, however, the presence of foreign troops in intrastate conflicts is increasingly common.
[3] Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2025/06/01) UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia: www.ucdp.uu.se, Uppsala University.
[4] Nils Gleditsch, Petter, Peter Wallensteen, Mikael Eriksson, Margareta Sollenberg, and Håvard Strand Armed Conflict 1946-2001: A New Dataset. *Journal of Peace Research* 39(5). (2002).

Deputy Chairman of the Sovereignty Council. While conflicts between former allies do occur (Atlas & Licklider 1999; Roessler 2016), they are again usually fought along ethnic lines unlike the current conflict in Sudan, which is a marked difference from former conflicts in the country. What soured the former coup-partners into "powerful losers" (Jones 1996) to the point that they became in Perthes' (2024) words "imminent combatants?"

This project argues that the seeds of civil war were planted by enshrining the military as a key actor in the political process and adopting an accommodating stance towards it. This approach, which was supported by international actors, including those directly supplying factions in the military with materiel and arms,[5] hamstrung the country's democratic prospects. Instead of following through on the promise of the country's uprising, the international community pursued a program of democratization that alienated the most vital revolutionary actors and promised very little democracy.

I identify two critical junctures that did particular damage to Sudan's democratic transition. First was the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) in October 2020, which was hammered out between the military and a host of rebel leaders shortly after the formation of the transitional government. Pushed by the US and international community (Interview with Siddig Yusuf 2023) it caused rifts within the FFC and created "a bloc of commanders beholden to the military leadership" (Craze & Khair 2023, 6) rather than the civilian government. The JPA "allowed former rebel groups to leverage violence to obtain political positions in government" (Craze & Khair 2023, 6) and in doing so repeated the mistakes of past agreements including the 2005 Comprehensive Peace

[5] Declan Walsh, Christoph Koettl, and Eric Schmitt, "Talking Peace in Sudan, the U.A.E. Secretly Fuels the Fight," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/29/world/africa/sudan-war-united-arab-emirates-chad.html.

Agreement (CPA), which taught rebel leaders that "peacemaking can enhance rather than diminish, violence's value" (Srinivasan 2021, 128).

The military commanders who joined the transitional sovereignty council after the signing of the JPA also helped enable the second major negative event: the coup of October 2021. According to Craze and Khair (2023) the coup "was actively supported by two of the Darfuri signatories of the JPA and had the tacit approval of other signatories." Sudan's military had used the JPA to pack the transitional sovereignty council and despite warnings from the FFC (Interview with Al-Haj Warrag 2023) the UN failed to properly assess the danger. Only determined protest and strikes by revolutionary actors prevented the military coup from immediately ending the prospect of a democratic transition.

Both the signing of the JPA and the military coup were critical junctures where different decisions taken by the international community could have greatly increased the chance for a successful democratic transition. Had the US allowed the civilian government to run the peace process instead of pushing through a military-led deal it would have increased the government's authority and given rebel leaders a stake in democratic Sudan. If warnings of the coup had been taken seriously by the UN and the US and a clear message had been sent to regional actors like the UAE and Egypt that a coup would not be tolerated, the transitional process would not have been interrupted.

Democratic transitions across the globe have been threatened with similar errors in decision-making?. In Spain, which members of the international community compared to Sudan due to the long history of authoritarian rule, it took decisive action by King Juan Carlos I to avert a military coup and keep the democratic transition on track (Maxwell 1991). Lessons from successful democratic transitions emphasize a key point, "reformers should bring all the security

services under democratic civilian control as soon as possible" (Lowenthal and Bitar 2016, 139). Bringing the military under civilian control in Sudan would include holding the leadership of the military that carried out massacres responsible and replacing them with commanders who did not view a democratic Sudan as an existential threat. At the very minimum, removing those generals from command and proscribing their entry into politics would establish some civilian control. A full truth and reconciliation committee might encounter pushback from the entire military and Iraq's disastrous experience with De-Ba'athification argue against a full purge. At any rate, there was little concerted international pressure to bring about civilian control of the military. Why did the international community take this approach?

Some countries have managed to transition to democracy even with the military playing a major role in politics. From 1964-1980 Bolivia experienced eight coups (including one auto-coup) interspersed with periods of military rule. From 1978-1980 in particular Bolivia experienced a series of crises (Hudson & Hanratty 1991) culminating in a military coup supported by European mercenaries, narco-traffickers, and Argentinian advisors. Yet the resulting international isolation and extreme corruption discredited the military to the point that many officers wanted to return to democracy (Kim 2012). After a general strike in 1982 and diplomatic pressure from the United States to return to democracy, Bolivia returned to civilian rule (Kim 2012). Though Bolivia's transition to democracy was far from cemented, the decision by the military to stay out of politics after the disastrous period of coups and military governance opened a path to democracy. In the Middle East, Turkey also stands as a case where the military took direct control of the country for decades.

Returning to Sudan, the international community's approach is partly explained by the split in United States foreign policy between "prodemocratic policies" which have led to democracy

promotion around the world and "security and economic interests," which instead have "led the United States to continue supporting or seeking cooperative engagement with some authoritarians" (Carrothers & Feldman 2023, 7). According to an international expert on Sudan, both sides of US policy were present in the country, with USAID and Congress championing democratic assistance and the State Department backing authoritarians, "USAID, and the Hill[6] side doesn't have a problem with messy coalitions and people who disagree as long as they don't kill each other. Where the state department is like, give me one leader and deliver my agenda efficiently" (Interview with International Sudan Expert 2025). European countries were conflicted as well as despite their commitments to democracy assistance, they were "scared to death of immigration" (Interview with Maha Tambal 2025). Nor was the UN free from conflict due largely to its establishment under Chapter 6 rather than Chapter 7 which does not allow coercive measures to resolve disputes.[7] Tambal explains, "UNITAMS moved from chapter 7 to chapter 6 while making promises that they could support the peace process and guarantee security. But there were limitations. They were vulnerable to being expelled by the military. This is a conflict of interest because they cannot push too hard" (Interview with Maha Tambal 2025). Rather than address these contradictions, the international community reached for a tool seemingly ideally suited for the task: pacted transitions.

A pacted transition, where moderates in the regime softliners come to an agreement with moderates in the democratic forces, (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986) would allow the international community to work with military forces that it was loath to confront. Achieving a pacted transition entailed a program of democratization that "move[d] the polity toward democracy by undemocratic means" (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986, 44) characterized by elite bargains combined with a skepticism of grassroots democratic actors. Sudan's democratization drew upon a narrow

[6] Capitol Hill, or the US Congress
[7] Charter of the United Nations. (1945). U.N. Doc. S/50/Rev.1. (art 33-51).

proceduralistic definition that equated democracy with elections (Interview with Volker Perthes 2023). By contrast, the activists who swept al-Bashir out of office, described themselves as members of a revolutionary movement, dedicated to "radical change in the economic, political, and social conditions" (Written Interview with Resistance Committee Spokesperson 2023) in post-Bashir Sudan. The activists called for a democracy that could correct the injustices of the past and provide free elections, a restructured civil service and army, and a commitment to human development, social welfare, and the environment as laid out in the initial Declaration of Freedom and Change (DFC).[8]

Between the fall of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 and the onset of civil war in 2023 the international community represented chiefly by UNITAMS and the Friends of Sudan[9], spearheaded a process to assist the country's transition through democratization. I argue that it was the democratization process itself which undermined Sudan's democratic transition and ultimately led to civil war. Confronted with a powerful counter-revolutionary actor in the form of the economically and politically empowered military (Grewal 2023), the international community pushed for civilian forces to compromise on democratic ideals in order to make democracy palatable for the generals.

Yet the military's aversion to democracy was more than a matter of taste. One international expert on Sudan claimed that asking Sudan's generals to submit to democracy was "like turkeys planning Thanksgiving. We can't ask them to plan it because there's not a vegetarian option. We keep asking the military in the region and the political elites to serve a menu where they're on it" (Interview with international Sudan Expert 2025). This was especially true in Sudan, where the

[8] Sudan Professionals Association, Declaration of Freedom and Change, January 1, 2019 See Appendix
[9] France, Germany, Norway, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and the European Union were the core members of the Friends of Sudan, a group intended to assist the democratic transition in Sudan.

"Tamkeen" or empowerment system had stacked the armed forces and civil services with regime loyalists. The transitional government included an empowerment removal committee which sought to dismantle the system and recover public funds that had flowed into the bank accounts and mansions of well-connected individuals including generals. Therefore, despite extensive accommodations from the international community, the military employed a range of measures to undermine the democratic transition before carrying out a coup against the civilian government in 2021. The coup, however, proved more unpopular than expected, and months of dedicated street protest helped convince one of the generals that it had been a mistake.[10]

Following the 2021 military coup, the international community, chiefly the Trilateral Mechanism (TLM): the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the UN, and the Quad (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the UK, and the US), pushed for civilians and the military to sign a new "framework deal" to return to the transition. The content of the deal, however, was much watered down in order to appeal to the military. The phrase civilian-led replaced civilian in the communiques regarding the new transition and political processes. Demands for democracy, so central to the DFC penned during the initial uprising, fell by the wayside as well.

Perthes expressed the rush to a deal regardless of its consequences as follows: "Yes, we are pushing for a deal since we are saying time is not on your side. You may lose your country. Get to a deal. But we are not pushing for an ideal deal. It's not democratic governance. It would be governance on the basis of an elite compromise" (Interview with Volker Perthes 2023). Few stopped to consider what such an elite deal could mean. With democracy emptied out of any commitment ideals except for an eventual election, democracy became compatible with the RSF.

[10] Dickens Olewe, *BBC News*. "Mohamed 'Hemeti' Dagalo: Top Sudan Military Figure Says Coup Was a Mistake." https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64704858, February 20, 2023.

The same group that had ethnically cleansed Darfur while known as the Janjaweed militia before becoming an official part of the country's armed forces.

Yet according to the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Sudan, the prospect of violence was so remote that, "the new mission shouldn't have peacekeepers, because without troops there would be more money for other U.N. agencies." (Lynch 2022). In fact, the founding of UNITAMS also marked the drawdown of the joint peacekeeping mission between the UN and the AU, UNAMID, in Darfur. The Security Council agreed to end the mission at the request of the transitional government, but the decision vastly strengthened the RSF (Kurtz 2024, 30).

Without checks on their military power, the SAF and the RSF could use this freedom to their advantage politically. The elite bargain approach had taught the military that its willingness to do violence gave it political power and international recognition. The Quad and the TLM believed they were pursuing a pragmatic approach by working with the military, but they were in effect putting their finger on the scales as their centering of the RSF and SAF concerns "repeatedly strengthened those who had material power, especially the military and the security forces," and ignoring "the well-organised non-violent resistance by civil society" (Kurtz 2024). No amount of negative feedback seemed to shake confidence in this approach as, "Time and again, key international players such as the Quad sought a power-sharing deal with the military, even after their representatives had openly lied to them" (Kurtz 2024). The Quad and TLM had decided that only the military could deliver the security guarantees necessary to establish a democratic government despite the fact that it was not in the interest of the RSF and SAF to guarantee security for the transitional government. This approach also ignored the Quad and TM's own role in

producing the military's monopoly over coercion through the withdrawal of peacekeepers and the lack of any substantive pushback to the military's violence against civilians.

Instead of a deal, the residents of Khartoum woke up on April 15, 2023, to the sounds of gunfire. As fighting spiraled to create the largest internal displacement crisis in the world at the time,[11] it became clear that the Sudanese had indeed lost their country, but not for the reasons Perthes envisioned. It was not the absence of a deal but the push for a deal at any cost that helped sink the hopes of a democratic Sudan. The violence that civilian forces faced before, during, and after the fall of the transitional government was not epiphenomenal to the internationally supported political process but instead was partly the result of its structure and decisions.

This project is not intended merely to identify who is to blame for the failure of Sudan's democratic transition. The international community has been taken to task even before the outbreak of civil war (Berridge et al. 2022). Though I do examine the ways that the military worked against democracy, I also argue that democratization itself helped undermine the transition. In doing so, I uncover the unexpected (by some) logics that unintentionally brought the country to the brink of war. These logics are recognizable to scholars of civil war who are familiar with the politics of civil war where bargaining over power causes instability and leads to violence (Roessler 2016). However, following the slogan of Samuel Huntington, the still-influential scholar of democratic transitions; "when in doubt, compromise," (Huntington 1993, 163) the international community focused on making democracy palatable to the military even as troops flooded the capital. The tension between these two approaches turned efforts at democratization into the precursor of civil war. I now turn to the literature review to situate my contributions.

[11]United Nations International Organization for Migration. "Sudan Faces World's Largest Internal Displacement Crisis." October 16, 2023. https://www.iom.int/news/sudan-faces-worlds-largest-internal-displacement-crisis.

1.3 Nonviolent Resistance Movements and Lessons from the Arab Uprisings

The literature on the 2011 Arab Uprisings as well as broader studies of non-violent resistance movements suggest that although rare, large-scale protest movements can eventuate in the overthrow dictators but that there remains the difficulty of extending the gains made in the street to the halls of government. The experience of Egypt in particular is instructive not simply because of its geographical proximity, but because both protesters and regime in Sudan took lessons from the initial protests in Tahrir in 2011 and subsequent military coup of Mohamed Morsi's democratically elected government in 2013. Beyond specific cases, work focused on nonviolent resistance movements more broadly captures some of the strengths so prevalent in Sudan that gave the democratic transition its initial optimism. Finally, the counter-revolutionary turn in analysis has uncovered the tactics that regimes use to undermine transitional governments and turn partners in the streets into rivals over seats. These tactics prove remarkably portable.

The 2011 Arab Uprisings initially threw into question much political science scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa. Previously focused on the durability of authoritarian regimes (Bellin 2004), authors now sought to explain their fragility after dictators fled from thousands camped in central squares across the region (Gause 2011; Bellin 2012). The rapid success in Tunisia and Egypt gave rise to a new focus on nonviolent protest movements drawing on their ability to challenge existing power structures (Sharp 1973) and finding them almost twice as successful as violent uprisings in bringing about transitions to democracy (Chenoweth & Stephan 2013). These movements drew particular strength from their ability to recruit large numbers from across society and transform them into broad political coalitions (Chenoweth 2021).

Yet by 2019 as Tunisia slid backwards into authoritarianism, optimism that protest could lead to lasting democratic outcomes began to ebb. Were the quickly built "negative coalitions"

(Goodwin 2001) present in many countries unable to sustain political demands once the targeted dictator was gone? What of the role of social media which spurred turnout during protests but could result in weaker ties among participants (Tufekci 2017) and potentially less effective solidarity? Due to the lack of stated political goals once Mubarak was gone, many protesters in Egypt were passionately committed, but only to vague ideals and "the act of revolution itself" rather than consensus building (Mekawy 2020).

The astounding rapidity with which protesters toppled dictators could be a problem, as shorter campaigns were more likely to lose solidarity after achieving their initial objective and often failed to build enduring coalitions (Wittells 2017; Kadivar 2022). In Egypt specifically, the initial democratic coalition did not survive the elected government's first term as former allies of the Muslim Brotherhood helped the military carry out a coup (Ketchley 2017; El Sherif 2014).

Was the lauded horizontalism that enabled effective protest (Chalcraft 2012) equally ineffective at institutional politics? While this project pays attention to the impact that organizational structures of the Sudanese civilian forces had on the transitional government, it does not find that the barriers between protest and institutional politics were insurmountable. Indeed, early observers saw Sudan as an example of a movement particularly well suited to achieve a transition due to its size, breadth, organic ties, and big tent political coalition (Grewal 2021; Chenoweth 2021). Because consensus building was one of the first acts of the protest movement in releasing the DFC, it was always more than a simple negative coalition. However, the big tent approach also meant that there remained ample room for parties to disagree (Berridge et al. 2022).

To locate the cause of Sudan's transitional failure it is necessary to move beyond limitations of protesters and other civilian actors and include the behavior of the military, international actors, and a broader regional counter-revolutionary movement. Military interference

has been extensively studied in Egypt, which in addition to sharing a border with Sudan, also has a military with extensive political and economic power. While the Egyptian army claimed in 2011 that the military and the people were "one hand" after the military was famously seen "defecting" to the side of the protesters during the 18 days of protest, its allegiance to the protestors was in fact quite limited and strategic (Ketchley 2017), and it did not stop the military from pursuing its own interests (Grewal 2023). The military began to undermine the elected government Mohammed Morsi almost immediately after he took office even as the Muslim Brotherhood sought accommodations with the generals (Ismail 2015). A security alliance in the form of Gulf countries and the US (Allinson 2022) did their part as well to support counterrevolutionary attempts to undermine the democratic transition and paved the way for a military led coup (Grewal 2023). The manipulation of security and economic crises including the sudden scarcity of electricity (Grewal 2023; Ketchley 2017) stoked discontent with the elected government, enabling a massive coup from below (Holmes 2019) financed by the military and shielded by tanks and helicopters.

I argue that the actions of the Egyptian military to destabilize Morsi's government, supported by international sponsors and either encouraged or accepted by the United States, who simultaneously claimed to support the democratically elected government, form the basis for a counterrevolutionary playbook that would be applied again in Sudan. This dissertation lays bare that playbook and shows how it was used to dismantle the solidarity of the civilian actors in Sudan. Using similar tactics to the Syrian regime which transformed pre-existing divisions between communities into entrenched enmity (Wedeen 2019, see especially chapter five), the Sudanese military found fertile ground for division in the big tent democratic coalition. However, informed by the Egyptian experience, and largely due to the unique neighborhood-based RCs, Sudan's protest movement was ready to defend the transitional government, defiantly chanting "Victory or

Egypt"[12] during sit-ins and, despite political differences with the transitional government, defended it after the military coup.

While the counterrevolutionary playbook is more fully explored in chapter 2, it included dividing the opposition, stacking the transitional government with loyalists, and creating security and economic crises to undermine the government and was successful in fracturing the opposition it did not succeed in fully defeating the civilian forces. After the military coup in October 2021, the immediate and furious response from the protest movement, who had previously left the transitional government, took the military aback. No previous coup in Sudan, a country which has seen seven successful instances (including 2021) drew such protest (Interview with Professor Atta al Battahani 2023). The result however was a stalemate where "the highly mobilised civil society could not be repressed, not even by force" but equally it was not possible to "to negotiate away the dominance of the security forces over the means of coercion and the economic resources" (Kurtz 2024). To exit the impasse both political parties and the Quad and TLM turned to an approach best explained by the next literature.

1.4 Democratic Transitions

How do Democratic transitions typically occur? The answer has differed greatly depending on the timing and individual circumstances of individual transitions. While Samuel Huntington described three great waves of democratization stretching from the 1900s to the end of the Soviet Union (Huntington 1991), others criticized the notion of waves (Przeworski et al. 2000; Schaffer in his Democracy in Translation book too Slater 2025). The concept has been revisited in the context of the 2011 Arab uprisings amid claims that the new characteristics of social media created

[12] "'Victory or Egypt': What Can Sudan Learn from Its Neighbour?," Al Jazeera, July 8, 2019.

a new fourth wave of democratization (Tudoroiu 2014). Even absent the periodization into waves, the context of democratic transitions has changed enormously.

While the earliest works focused on democratization in the aftermath of social revolutions (Moore 1966), subsequent studies have captured transitions primarily after military defeat in an international conflict (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986). Transitions can also be top-down affairs (Trimberger 1978) or in the case of Sudan and its predecessors from 2011, bottom up. One crucial difference with nonviolent bottom-up transitions is that "since the victory of the radicals has been nonviolent, forces of the ancien régime both hard and soft, remain political players with points of leverage over the transition." (Pinckney 2020, 21). Without full control, the both elites and pro-democratic forces must bargain to agree upon a transition that is acceptable to both (Tilly 1978).

Bargaining is often schematized as occurring between regime softliners (as opposed to hardliners) and moderates (as opposed to radicals) in the democratic forces (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986). Exploiting the division between soft and hardliners is thought to be so essential that "there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence - direct or indirect - of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself." (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986, 20) Achieving a pacted transition (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986; Linz & Stepan 1997) via agreement with the softliners in the regime can "move the polity toward democracy by undemocratic means," (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986, 43). However, I argue that transition pacts did not serve the Sudanese transition well. While Sudan's well-organized opposition was able to force a pact with the military to secure the possibility of transition (Grewal 2021), neither the RSF nor the SAF were initially prepared to move the polity toward democracy, no matter how undemocratically. Instead, the military used the undemocratic nature of the transition pact to divide the opposition and leave it vulnerable to the coup of October 2021.

Despite the protest movement's response to the coup, the military's refusal to accept even a politically moderate civilian government points out two weaknesses with the transition pact approach in the Sudanese context. First, as noted elsewhere in the literature, pacts must have an enforcement mechanism to stop the regime from abandoning its promise to democratize (Ulfeder 2010). This context was absent in the Sudanese context due to the draw down of UNAMID. Second, pacts with an economically and politically powerful or "empowered" military (Grewal 2023), are particularly fraught as nearly any move to democracy threatens the "corporate interests" of the military. In Sudan, steadfast opposition to civilian control of the peace process or any oversight of military budgets hollowed out much of the democratic content of the Framework Deal that was set to return the country to a democratic transition.

The transition pact also allowed civilians to play the military's own game of divide and conquer. While during the transitional period it was the opposition whose solidarity was torn asunder, after the coup what remained of the FFC sought to ally themselves with the RSF, who it saw as the lesser evil (Interview with Al-Haj Warrag 2023). While Hemedti issued statements declaring the military coup a mistake,[13] and enthusiastically supported the return to a transition, his former coup partners were left in a position that endangered their corporate interests even more so than under the previous democratic transition. I argue that the divided structure of the Sudanese military presents a situation in which transition pacts do not have their desired effect. While splits in the regime, or even within a single military may give democratic forces an opening to secure a transition, splits between two divided and empowered militaries introduce additional risk of civil war.

[13] Dickens Olewe, *BBC News*. "Mohamed 'Hemeti' Dagalo: Top Sudan Military Figure Says Coup Was a Mistake." https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64704858, February 20, 2023.

Instead of understanding that the military was beginning to view a return to the democratic transition as a matter of life or death, the Quad and the TLM painted the military as a rational actor seeking to maximize its return. This view found theoretical backing in Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's influential book *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, which places economic interests at the core of democratic transitions. Driven by their own economic interest, elites can be induced to support democracy through a fear of revolution, as long as the cost to repress is too high and the redistributive agenda of the democracy is not too radical. While they and others sought a more theoretically grounded approach (e.g., Boix & Stokes 2003; Rueschemeyer, Stephans & Stephans 1992; Ansell and Samuels 2010) than O'Donnell and Schmitter, there are limits to the rational actor paradigm. While Acemoglu and Robinson (2005) expressly do not consider the military as an autonomous actor, their approach may have informed the approach of the Quad and the TM, which featured a political economist as head of UNITAMS and a US ambassador that was ABD in political science before entering the diplomatic service. In fact, the FFC's political strategist Al-Haj Warrag claims that he went to Perthes to warn him of the coup in advance and was rebuffed,

I said to him, 'there is a coup, and we have to work so as to deter the coup before it happens.' He said, 'a coup by whom?' I said to him 'Burhan and Hemedti' he said to me, 'Burhan? This is impossible. He is the President of the Sovereignty Council, and many civilians come to me here to tell me to allow him to complete the transition. Why would he wage a coup?' I said to him, 'because he is not rational like you, he is not German! He is a greedy general and he believes that the coup is in his interest.' (Interview with Al-Haj Warrag 2023)

However, the reliance on an economic analysis of the situation, meant that the Quad and the TLM believed that war was "bad for business" for both militaries, blinding the Quad and the TLM to the very real prospect of civil war. The RSF and the SAF were not merely trying to "mitigate their downside risk" as one senior American involved in the negotiations told me (Interview with Senior American Embassy Personnel 2023), they were actively fearful of their lives, their fortunes, and their status. Yet despite flattening the military's motivations to purely "rational" concerns, the Quad and TLM simultaneously failed to identify a way to address them. Rather than focusing exclusively on making democracy more accommodating to the military (an approach which had little success until it could be weaponized by one faction against the other) the international community could have raised the cost of repression. Even when civilian forces showed themselves surprisingly capable of making repression costly through continuous protest, the Quad and the TLM viewed their actions as counterproductive. As a result, Sudanese civilians were left largely on their own and with a free hand, the military eventually moved to coup in October 2021.

1.5 Coups and Civil Wars

The 2021 military coup was not the first coup of the Sudanese uprising. Though massive protests had turned out against President Omar al-Bashir, it was the military with al-Burhan and Hemedti at the head who decided he was bad for business (Hassan and Kodouda 2019). Sudan's democratic transition, which was derailed by a coup in October 2021, also began with one. The Sudanese experience reveals a wider truth, that, as Mai Hassan and Ahmed Kodouda note, "popular uprisings for democracy and human rights are vulnerable to the very players who might

make their short-term success possible" (Marks 2024, 110). Yet success for those movements is often very short lived.

Faced with a nonviolent resistance movement, empowered militaries often do "jettison" their country's dictator, but only in the service of staving off a transition (Grewal 2023; Koehler & Albrecht 2021). If the empowered militaries cannot, they are "more likely to engage in 'conservative rollback coups' designed to position the military to constrain and control the subsequent democratic transition" (Grewal 2023, 42). These coups however, are most effective when there is widespread disillusionment with democracy, if there is a high level of international and domestic support there is no opportunity for a coup (Grewal 2023). Though Sudan's generals were taken aback by the massive protest movement domestically, the international response offered little beyond sternly worded statements against the coup. The relative lack of international reaction (the US refused even to issue targeted sanctions until after the outbreak of civil war) reflects a growing truth, military coups have become increasingly common, and to some extent accepted as commonplace in Africa (Kieh Jr & Kalu 2020).

In the second half of the 20th century, international organizations including the Organization of African Unity, the predecessor to the AU, unwittingly incentivized coups by recognizing the ruler of the capital as the legitimate ruler of the country (Roessler 2016). Though the AU has changed its policies, they provide little deterrent, as Egypt only had to wait a year after its military coup before regaining membership. In Sudan there remained other perverse incentives for the military to carry out a coup. Far from being a beacon of democracy in the region, the US has become known as one of the key drivers of the authoritarian outcomes in the Middle East (Brownlee 2012; Baissa & Cammett 2022) and Egypt, one of the largest recipients of US aid, supported the SAF in its coup. Further, a security relationship between the EU and the RSF to

deter migrants from reaching European shores that paid Hemedti $30 million a year also tied the Europeans to the military's coercive apparatus.[14] While talking about democracy, many in the international community were arming Sudan for war. This was true for no country more than the UAE, which flooded Sudan with arms and after the outbreak of civil war supported the RSF under the cover of aid missions.[15]

While many civil wars in Africa have started on the grounds of ethnicity (Fearon & Laitin 2003; Denny & Walter 2004) Sudan's "war of the generals" is different as the RSF was a genocidal weapon of the former regime's Arab elite in Darfur. Instead of rival ethnic groups, the Sudanese civil war is the revolt of a former servant (the RSF) against its master (The SAF), far from the classic result of the coup-civil war trap (Roessler 2016). Similarly, while correlates of war such as sparsely populated regions and mountainous terrain are present in Sudan, the civil war began in the capital of Khartoum. In fact, the presence of both a coup and a civil war flies against the predictions of work on empowered militaries (Grewal 2023), which holds they are likely to carry out coups and unlikely to start civil wars.

However, there are other correlates of war that do provide a theoretical explanation for Sudan's conflict. Democratization has been studied as a potential cause of both inter and intra-state wars (Mansfield & Snyder 1995; Bates 2008; Cederman et al. 2010). According to Mansfield and Snyder, democratization can cause conflict due to "inflexible interests and short time horizons. Groups threatened by social change and democratization, including still-powerful elites, are often compelled to take an inflexible view of their interests, especially when their assets cannot be

[14] Marya Hannun, "At Any Cost—The War in Sudan and Europe's Flawed Migration Policies," MERIP, July 26, 2023, https://merip.org/2023/07/at-any-cost-the-war-in-sudan-and-europes-flawed-migration-policies/.
[15] Declan Walsh, Christoph Koettl, and Eric Schmitt, "Talking Peace in Sudan, the U.A.E. Secretly Fuels the Fight," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/29/world/africa/sudan-war-united-arab-emirates-chad.html.

readily adapted to changing political and economic conditions" (Mansfield & Snyder 1995, 90-91). The military's inflexible interests were evident from the 2021 coup, and the RSF's alliance with the democratic coalition further threatened the SAF.

Democratization has a "strong effect…on the outbreak of internal conflict while controlling for the influence of incoherent regime types and regime instability," (Cederman Hug & Krebs 2010, 378) and so was the case in Sudan. The danger was increased due to the presence of another civil war onset risk factor, the presence of militias. Pro-government militias are present in "81 percent of all country-years affected by civil war between 1981 and 2007" (Jentzsch, Kalyvas & Schubiger 2015, 756). Militias can increase the likelihood and duration of conflicts (Hughes & Tripodi 2009; Jentzsch et al. 2015) as well as affect electoral politics. Ultimately it was the combination of armed actors and electoral politics that turned Sudan's democratization into civil war.

Far from sanctioning the generals for their roles in ordering the massacre of protesters, the international community accepted them as candidates for the country's highest office with Perthes saying, "If people are able to reinvent themselves in the transitional period while reinventing the country, so be it. Maybe there would be a cooling off period, but would you ban them for life? If Hemedti or Burhan takes time off and runs in four years I have no problem" (Interview with Volker Perthes 2023) This stance flew in the face of best practices found in successful democratic transitions which advise that, "Reformers should remove top officers responsible for torture and brutal repression, place senior military commanders under the direct authority of civilian ministers of defense, and insist that active-duty military officers refrain entirely from political involvement" (Lowenthal and Bitar 2016, 140). The international community's willingness to look past Hemedti and al-Burhan's violence against civilians blinded it to the potential for the two generals to turn on

each other. While the international system is thought to have helped suppress the outbreak of civil war in other cases (Fearon 2017), in the Sudanese case the international community heightened the danger of a civil war, which has now consumed the country.

1.6 Chapters

The rest of this dissertation will focus on three major ways that the political process pushed the country to civil war. In chapter one I explore the military's efforts to divide the civilian forces and derail the democratic transition. Through detailed interviews with cabinet members and others in the transitional government I chart the military's campaign to sabotage the security and economic situation across the country in order to force the transition to fail. I also examine the role of the Juba Peace Agreement and the addition of armed movements to the transitional government as laying the groundwork for military takeover. With insight from coalition members who left the government as well as those who stayed, I track the fracturing of the civilian forces as well as the marginalization of the RCs from the political process. I also introduce a 2X2 showing how sustained protest can increase the costs of repression but requires opposition solidarity to escape what I call the transition trap.

In chapter two, I focus on the international community which nominally supported democracy in Sudan. While leadership in the Quad and the TLM believed they were moving closer to a deal, other international actors included in the broader Friends of Sudan group were flooding the country with arms. I show how accommodating the military and refusing to push back against its actions further enshrined it in the political process and hollowed out the democratic prospects of a transition. While the international community pushed for a pacted transition, the fractures that emerged from an already divided military ultimately paved the way to civil war.

In chapter three, I examine how likely civil war was in Sudan. By evaluating the correlates of civil war onset present in Sudan, I establish that there was a high risk of civil war. However, the non-ethnic nature of the conflict defies the predictions of the literature including the "coup-civil war trap" (Roessler 2016). I then identify democratization itself and the presence of militias as key to the conflict, thereby showing how the potential for RSF domination of electoral politics lit the fuse of civil war.

1.7 Methodological Note

This project is informed by two research trips I completed to Khartoum during 2022 and 2023, arriving after the 2021 coup against the transitional government. Over four months, I carried out more than 50 individual and group interviews and attended a dozen events held by political parties and the RCs. The interviews, conducted in both English and Arabic ranged from street level members of neighborhood RCs, to political party leaders, to current and former ministers, members of the transitional government's sovereignty council, as well as international experts, and US and UN sources. The timing of my trips captured Sudanese political society dealing with the consequences of the 2021 military coup and attempting to recapture the revolutionary energy of 2019. My last interviews were carried out a month before the onset of hostilities between two branches of the military as both the potential for a deal to return to civilian governance and civil war hung in the balance. To supplement in-person interviews I also conducted zoom interviews and followed 100+ Sudanese Twitter accounts and Telegram channels, archiving posts related to protests and the mooted political framework deal. The responses I gathered show the richness of Sudan's political scene and the devotion of so many to achieve the radical goals of 2019's "Glorious Revolution." Those responses also show the structural and political obstacles activists

and politicians faced in their quest to build a new Sudan. Some who spoke with me suffered imprisonment and torture while nearly all residents of Khartoum faced the ransacking of their homes and destruction of their neighborhoods. Aside from public figures who explicitly gave their consent to be quoted, pseudonyms have been provided for respondents

Chapter 2

Escaping the Transition Trap

2.1 Explaining Success and Failure

On March 11, 2023 in the courtyard of a neighborhood club in Bahri, or Northern Khartoum, representatives of Sudan's major political parties and the resistance committees met at a forum titled "Clash of Visions: Ending or Overthrowing the Coup."[1] Featuring speakers from the main democratic coalition, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) along with their former partner, the Communist Party, and a spokesman for the most dedicated protesters, the Resistance Committees (RCs), the event ran long into the night. Arrayed on the makeshift stage the speakers argued over how to bring back a civilian government while fending off occasional outbursts from the capacity crowd. During one exchange on the role of the military in politics a member of the RCs shouted, "No negotiation, no partnership, and no legitimacy!"[2] at FFC leader Khalid Omer Yousif, reciting a slogan known as the "three no's" to reject the FFC's alignment with military factions. Moments later, a smoke bomb lobbed over the walls went off amongst the spectators. As several youths sprang into action to remove it and search for the culprit, Yousif himself remained unfazed and few in the crowd moved from their chairs. The last four years had taught the audience that the struggle for democracy could not wait for the smoke to clear.

The acrid stench of smoke bombs regularly filled Khartoum during the 2019 uprising, and returned with a vengeance after the 2021 military coup removed the transitional government. Yet by the spring of 2023, the military's weapon of choice for controlling boisterous protests began to be employed more selectively. Only the week before, the annual meeting of Yousif's Sudanese Congress Party (SCP) was interrupted by smoke bombs thrown by an unknown assailant. The attack set off rampant speculation. Was this the military's work or had the Communists, the Resistance Committees, or even the SCP itself carried out the raid? As the clock ticked down to

[1] صراع الرؤى إنهاء ام إسقاط الانقلاب
[2] لا تفاوض لا شراكة لا شرعية

an anticipated deal with the military on a new transitional government, the civilian parties were further apart than ever.

This chapter asks what pushed the civilian forces apart and what effect their fractionalization (Cunningham 2017) had on the democratic transition. In keeping with the growing body of counter-revolution studies (Allinson 2021; Clarke 2022) I approach this question not as an attempt to explain the failure of the Sudanese revolution, but rather to reveal the factors behind the counter revolution's success. Similar to the Syrian Civil war, (Wedeen 2019) much of that success was due to the Sudanese military's ability to activate and intensify pre-existing cleavages.

Yet, contrary to the expectations of the literature (Nugent 2020) and the experience of other cases since the 2011 Arab uprisings, even as the once united democratic coalition devolved into yelling and recriminations, the Sudanese retained the ability to challenge the military in the streets. The increase in polarization and resulting fractionalization of the democratic coalition did not put an end to mobilization. Therefore, this chapter asks a second question, why was the Sudanese democratic movement able to sustain mobilization even in the face of such polarization? Finally, the protracted standoff between military and civilian forces suggests a third question; under what circumstances can sustained mobilization secure a democratic transition in the face of an economically and politically powerful military?

2.2 The Transition Trap

Finding the answer to these questions requires examining the obstacles that the counter-revolution put in the way of the Sudanese democratic transition. Those obstacles, a bloody repression campaign on the streets and the undermining of "countervailing institutions"

(Carrothers & Press 2022) delayed and eventually overturned efforts to democratize. In fact, Sudan's counter-revolution was particularly dedicated to opposing any possibility of democratization. Sudan's generals moved aggressively to protect their "corporate interests" (Grewal 2023). Finding common ground between protesters in the street and political elites is an important component of any democratic transition (Pinckney 2020) but, in Sudan, facing an empowered military, this coordination became of paramount importance.

Recognizing the importance of coordination the military laid a transition trap for the democratic forces that sought to play street and institutional politics against each other. With civilian forces caught between preventing a military coup, and institutionalizing the goals of the revolution, the military turned the initial unity of the coalition into a cycle of blame and recriminations that impeded unified action against the counter-revolution (Carrothers & Press 2022). By the fractionalization of the democratic coalition the military robbed the democratic coalition of its greatest strength, a united approach to dealing with the military.

For the sake of clarity, I represent the transition trap as a finger trap, which grabs onto its victim's fingers when they try to pull them apart and can only be released by pushing both fingers towards each other until they meet in the middle. As seen below in Figure 1, only by opposing the military from both sides via institutional politics as well as revolutionary action could the democratic forces escape the transition trap. However, in their fractionalized state the two sides of the democratic forces moved in opposite directions instead of working together to free themselves from the trap. The outcome is an increasingly tight squeeze that will eventually cut off blood flow. For Sudan's democratic forces, the transition trap sought to cut off support from both the street and institutional politics.

Figure 2.1: The Transition Trap

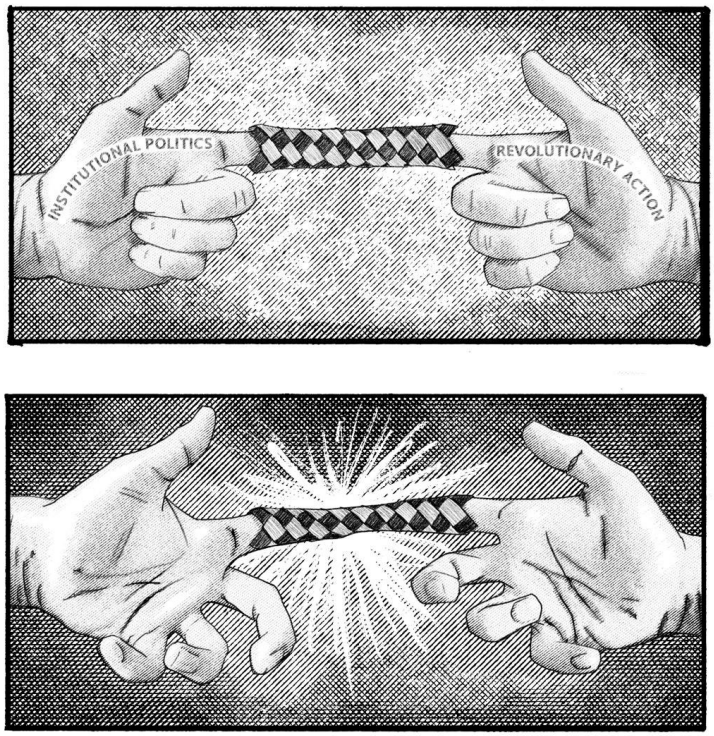

Image Credit: Peter Hopkins. Used with permission.

Conceptualizing the dilemma facing Sudan's democratic forces as a transition trap is useful for several reasons. While O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) famously described transitional governments as playing a game of "coup poker" with the former regime, empowered militaries like Sudan's do not play by the rules. Dedicated to preserving their "corporate interests" empowered militaries leave little to chance seeking instead to "constrain and control the subsequent democratic transition" including through 'conservative rollback coups'" (Grewal 2023, 42). Instead of a game of poker where if civilians play their cards right they can hold a winning

hand, empowered militaries rig the game and refuse to accept defeat. For that reason, the transition trap, which forces civilians to engage in a compromised democratic transition under threat of coup, better captures the dynamic present in Sudan. Among its advantages, the transition trap highlights the consequences of a divided opposition and illustrates the importance of establishing civilian control of the military. Only after freeing themselves from the military's trap can civilians hope to build lasting democratic institutions, a lesson common to past instances of successful democratic transitions including Chile and Spain (Bitar and Lowenthal 2015). While chapter three will explore the role of international actors in more depth, their push for democratic forces to accept a deal with the military without first restraining their ability to renege and carry out a coup against the transitional government proved fatal to Sudan's prospects for democracy. Finally, the transition trap illustrates why Sudan's democratic transition became in the words of one political commentator "so, so, so, so complicated and contradictory," where all the elements "work against one another" (Interview with Hamad Al Nour 2023). While fractionalization has not always prevented democratic transitions (Spoerri 2014), fractionalization without security guarantees from the military and other armed groups together explains the success of the counter-revolution and the insidious nature of the trap.

How Sudan's democratic forces responded to the transition trap varied over time. Initially in lockstep, the coalition managed to wield both institutional and street power to secure a democratic transition. Yet, the counter-revolutionary playbook of the military explained below, which effectively divided the coalition, did not allow the FFC to escape the transition trap. By October 2021, with a fragmented coalition and protests beginning to target the transitional government itself, the military moved to end the transition once and for all with a military coup. Only the quick return of massive protests against the military saved the democratic forces from

total disaster. But opposing the military coup did not bridge rifts within the coalition over strategy going forward. Convinced that it needed protection, the FFC pursued an institutional approach in partnership with a military faction, the RSF, while the RCs and more radical parties, who believed that the military could not be trusted, adopted a more confrontational protest-based approach that sought to prevent backsliding (Pinckney 2020) while rejecting negotiations with the military.

Throughout this chapter I will contrast the institutional building approach of the FFC that led it to compromise with factions of the military with the more radical street politics of the RCs and their allies that rejected the military. The diametrically opposed approach of these strategies leaves the civilian forces in an impasse as they simultaneously push against the military in the streets and pull towards it in the corridors of power. Split between these two approaches, the civilian parties could not bridge the gulf between themselves leading to polarization, paranoia, and dangerous partnerships. As the military stacked the transitional government's sovereignty council with regional warlords and exploited security crises across the country, Sudan's democratic future hung in the balance.

To better understand the unique nature of the Sudanese transition, as well as to extract more generalizable takeaways for democratic transitions, I track states of high/low polarization and high/low mobilization during the Sudanese uprising and democratic transition. As laid out in the table below, I argue that the interaction between high and low levels of these two independent variables produces outcomes ranging from transition to military coup, to political impasse. A fourth outcome present in the Sudanese case, civil war, is discussed further in chapter 4.

Table 2.1 Transition Outcomes

	High Mobilization	Low Mobilization
Low Polarization	Democratic Transition	Not Observed
High Polarization	Political Impasse	Military Coup

Why are mobilization and polarization the relevant independent variables to examine? To begin with mobilization, the literature on social movements has long pointed to high levels of mobilization as an important determinant of movement strength (Tarrow 1994; McAdams, Tarrow, Tilly 2001; Davenport 2005). More recently work on civil uprisings has seen widespread mobilization as an important differentiator between successful and unsuccessful (Chenoweth & Stepan 2013; Chenoweth 2021) uprisings. Sustaining that mobilization through the post-uprising transitional period has been a key determinant of the long-term success of democratic transitions (Kadivar 2022; Wittels 2017) while the inability to do so can have the opposite effect (Ketchley 2017; Tufekci 2017; Allinson 2022).

However, despite its recognized power to challenge regimes during an uprising, mobilization is not seen as an unalloyed good. For some, sustained mobilization during a democratic transition signals an unwillingness to let go of maximalist demands (Pinckney 2020) and a threat to institution building. This view sees protest as a mere step in the direction of a new political settlement, where, "mass revolts are merely a precursor to the real business of transition pacts conducted between opposition and regime elites" (Allinson 2022, 10). In keeping with this viewpoint, protest, which secures the initial democratic opening, is soon seen as a destabilizing element and "The continuation of popular mobilisation may even inhibit the success of such a pact" (Allinson 2022, 10). Indeed, foundational texts have suggested that pacted transitions as one

of the surest ways of achieving a democratic transition (O Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Linz and Stepan 1997). Yet in the polarized and paranoid setting of the transition trap such pacts may have unintended consequences.

Scholars of democratic transitions have long pointed to polarization as an important determinant in the ability of elites to work together (Huntington 1984, O'Donnell & Schmitter1986; Higley & Burton 1989; Mainwaring 1989; Przeworski 1991; Linz & Stepan 1996; Brownlee & Massoud & Reynolds 2015; Nugent 2020). Without trust in each other, the prospects for democratic transition and consolidation decline. As polarization increases, it becomes less likely that coalitions will form and that compromises can be made to consolidate democracy (Nugent 2020). In Sudan, the destabilizing effects of polarization were particularly evident on the transitional government, which when stripped of its ability to reach consensus, found itself unable to institutionalize the structural changes brought about by the uprising.

Polarization of the democratic forces is measured by the commitment of groups to common political goals as well as agreement on the methods of achieving them. Low polarization is observed during the initial uprising with the signing of the Declaration of Freedom and Change (DCF) as well as the initial stages of the transitional government when nearly all signatories were represented in the government. High polarization occurs after the radical forces leave the government and during the heated political discussion in the lead up to the civil war.

Mobilization is observed through protests and occupations. Periods marked by high mobilization show increased frequency and turnout at protests. The general sit-in during 2019 marks the high-water point as the permanent occupation around the military headquarters gathered huge numbers and lasted for months. Mobilization dipped during the latter days of the transitional

government, but spiked after the coup and remained high until the first shots of the civil war were fired.

Taken together the two variables, mobilization which charts civilians' ability to challenge the repressive arm of the regime and degree of polarization, which helps determine the ability to build democratic institutions, index the status of Sudan's democratic transition. While high mobilization periods drive the military to the bargaining table, only when polarization is also low do the RCs and other radical groups have a seat at the table. After leaving the transitional government, the RCs faced a dilemma, while they alone were able to make the military reconsider its coup, their adherence to the "three no's: no negotiation, no partnership and no legitimacy" meant they refused to participate in negotiations with the military. The outcome of this split strategy becomes clearer by returning to the concept of a transition trap. While one side of the civilian forces is pushing against the regime via protests the other is pulling towards it to pursue a pacted transition. The result leaves a return to the democratic transition just out of reach.

2.2 Springing the Transition Trap

How do we explain the variation in these variables over time? To do so I turn to a discussion of the military regime's counter-revolutionary project. Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, regimes have engaged in "collective and reactive efforts to defend the status quo" as Dan Slater and Nicholas Rush (2016, 1472) define counter-revolution. The Sudanese revolution represented an abrupt rupture to the status quo of Omar al-Bashir's 30 years of Islamist rule. That rule instituted the Tamkeen system, which purged institutions and replaced them with regime sympathizers creating a network of sinecures that drained the state of its resources. Perhaps none benefitted from this system more than the military, which grew a vast business empire and controlled a large chunk

of the country's GDP with individual commanders sometimes personally controlling banks and gold mines.[3] A civilian government that sought control over the country's resources to help address the country's crippling economic issues and lack of infrastructure was thus a threat to the military's "corporate interests" (Grewal 2023) In response to this threat the military in Sudan engaged in a counter-revolution from above (Allinson 2022) which involved, "both the dismantling of any structural changes achieved by a revolutionary movement and the redoubled repression used to crush such a challenge" (Allinson 2022, 47). This dual approach neatly illustrates the two sides of the transition trap. One flank devoted to suppressing protest with repression and the other undermining the creation of democratic institutions.

The military looked to achieve these goals by what the civil war literature terms the fractionalization of the civilian democratic coalition (Cunningham 2017). Three factors determine the degree of fractionalization, "the number of organizations, the degree of institutionalization, and the distribution of power" (Cunningham 2017, 14). Interviews with key members, including ministers and members of the sovereignty council, of the transitional government conducted in early 2023, shortly before the onset of civil war reveal much of the counter-revolutionary playbook deployed in Sudan. Those interviews reveal a level of political fragmentation in 2023 vastly different from the unity displayed by democratic forces during and shortly after the initial uprising and formation of the transitional government.

Following the decision just weeks into the protests to form a broad tent coalition that became the FFC, Sudan showcased a unity across the political spectrum absent in previous cases attempted democratic transitions like Egypt post 2011 or the 2019 civil resistance uprising that toppled Algeria's longtime dictator. The FFC played a key role in unifying Sudanese demands

[3] Mat Nashed, "Sudan's Economy Dominated by Military Interests: Report," Al Jazeera, June 29, 2022.

behind a shared political vision (Grewal 2021). That unity survived not only a month's long protest campaign but also the June 2020 massacre at the general sit in surrounding the Military Headquarters in Khartoum. Yet if repression could not destroy the coalition's unity, the counter-revolution had other means.

Once established, the transitional government was designed to follow a 39-month roadmap to elections. Composed of both military and civilian leaders, during the initial 21 months the military chaired the 11-member sovereignty council split between civilians from the FFC and military officials. While civilians were supposed to take over control of the council at the 21-month mark, the military did everything it could to block the transitional roadmap.

The military found fertile ground to sow dissension among the fractious political parties that had flocked to the FFC banner. By 2019, political parties had faced 30 years of authoritarian rule under Omar al-Bashir and his National Congress Party (NCP) regime. Similar to opposition parties across Africa (Rakner & Van De Walle 2009), the opposition parties remained very weak and undemocratic in their own governance, run more as personalistic vehicles for their leaders, who were often direct descendants of the original founders. The largest parties were also sectarian and prone to splintering, with one major party fracturing into seven separate parties (Interview with Al-Noor Hamad 2023).

Widespread suspicion was another legacy of the regime. In the words of al-Haj Warrag, a journalist and key FFC strategist, "After 30 years of totalitarian Islam, it is not a dictatorship. It is like Nazism or Communism…And under totalitarianism to survive you have to be paranoid. Because totalitarianism destroyed trust among people. If you trust, you will be smashed. And one of the repercussions of that is trust is a really rare currency in the country and even among democrats they don't trust each other" (Interview with Al-Haj Warrag 2023). It was this lack of

trust among the opposition parties that made the RCs rather than established parties the face of the uprising (Hassan and Kodouda 2019).

The weakness of the parties initially kept the peace in the broad FFC coalition as they ceded leadership to those driving the protest movements. However, once the transitional government was established cracks began to appear. Almost immediately, a clear conflict emerged between moderates and more radical members of the coalition. When Abdalla Hamdok the transitional Prime Minister and his cabinet supported economic reforms demanded by the IMF and World Bank, RCs protested (Interview with Siddig Yusuf 2023). Then, when Hamdok was unwilling or unable to counteract the military manipulating the peace process with Darfur and changing the composition of the sovereignty council the unity shattered. By the summer of 2021 the Communist and Baath parties, which had members on the sovereignty council, felt they could no longer support the transitional agenda and withdrew from government (Interview with Siddig Yusuf 2023). As the coalition that had driven the uprising frayed, those still left inside the government were confronted with another problem.

The lack of unity had not occurred by accident, instead the military altered the composition of the transitional government seeking to encourage the fractionalization of the coalition (Cunningham 2017). The transitional government was staffed with technocrats some of whom had only returned to Sudan in 2019 and they were finding themselves outflanked by longtime political operators including Minni Minnawi and Gibril Ibrahim, leaders of rebel groups who were given positions in government as part of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) signed in 2020 to end long running armed conflicts in Darfur. One experienced international observer noted that Minnawi and Gibril “made spies of those under them” in a bid to gain power and influence, adding that he “cringes thinking about technocrats versus politicians” (Interview with Senior International

Observer 2023). Despite efforts to keep the FFC together, the coalition had become beset with division with its more radical members protesting its decisions from without and veteran political operators undermining it from within. As the same international observer noted, the FFC's open door policy had inadvertently led to an exodus "Consensus broadening within the coalition is great until it breaks the camel's back" (Interview with Senior International Observer 2023). As discussed in chapter 3 the push to include additional parties and viewpoints in the civilian coalition, particularly those sympathetic to the former regime, was championed by the US and other Friends of Sudan.

Returning to practices that had plagued previous democratic transitions in the country, the FFC welcomed the street actors' revolutionary enthusiasm when it suited their ends but blocked the prospects for meaningful change. The result, a fragmentation of the once formidable FFC and an opportunity for the military to run roughshod over the transitional government, was partly due to what one observer termed "Sudan syndrome."[4]

According to the University of Khartoum's Professor Atta Al Battahani, Sudan syndrome has negatively affected the country's previous efforts to realize a democratic transition:

> We have kind of a very strange kind of thing in that political forces, political parties, civil society organizations, trade unions, women, etc. All of them. They unite against authoritarian dictators, and they go to the extent of even overthrowing. But immediately after that they fail to agree on what's next. What's after that? We had this many times. 1964, Nimeiri, April 85 and now al-Bashir. I mean really it baffles me. (Interview with Professor Atta al Battahani 2023)

[4] عطا الحسن البطحاني إشكالية الانتقال السياسي في السودان مدخل تحليلي مطبعة جامعة الخرطوم 2019

Yet, Sudan syndrome was far from being unique to Sudan. In Serbia, which became famous as an example of a "successful" democratic transition, political parties exhibit many of the same tendencies, refusing to unite, forming an ever-changing constellation of short-lived coalitions, and employing corrupt practices (Spoerri 2014). Even after achieving electoral democracy, the parties retarded the transition to liberal democracy and led to political instability (Spoerri 2014). During Sudan's transitional period it was the military's manipulation of the government and the "unceasing whirl of (over)information" as Lisa Wedeen (2019, 105) puts it in the Syrian context, which helped spread what Al-Battahani calls "Sudan syndrome" among the opposition. Misinformation campaigns on social media, now a standard destabilization tactic employed by state actors like Russia, only added to the confusion, "The military groups and the Muslim Brotherhood worked really hard to break the unity of the people. There are thousands of fake accounts on social media using Russian and Chinese tools. There are too many divisions and accusations of being allies to the RSF in their war crimes"(Interview with Maha Tambal 2025). These online campaigns heightened divisions and led to polarization that strained relations between civilian actors based on their perceived closeness to the RSF.

By focusing on the reasons for the success of the counter-revolution rather than merely the failure of the revolution, the lack of unity that puzzled Al Battahani, seemed obvious to Amgad Fareid Eltayeb, who served as Hamdok's deputy Chief of Staff during the transitional government: "One of the reasons for the instability of the transitional period leading up to the coup was the fragmentation of political forces. This fragmentation was the result of several factors, the primary of which was the unrelenting pursuit of control over the Transitional Government" (Eltayeb 2023). The pursuit of control made for unexpected bedfellows as, "Various civilian actors did not shy

away from attempting to leverage the military component's influence or the populist language in the media to put pressure on the executive branch in situations and circumstances that had nothing to do with the nature of such debate" (Eltayeb 2023). However fragmentation, even when paired with repression (Davenport 2014), is not always a death knell for democratic transitions. Instead, allying with the military against rival segments of the civilian forces was a key factor that led to the October 2021 military coup. It also helped render the transitional government extremely ineffective at a moment when unity was crucial to undo 30 years of neglect to the country's political and physical infrastructure.

As one member of the sovereignty council and a Baath party official noted, "the most important characteristic of this transition is that it is coming after three decades of monopolization of political dictatorship" (Interview with Professor Siddig Tauer 2023). Al-Bashir's government had been particularly disastrous for the country's institutions. In order to protect his rule al-Bashir had made a pact with the Islamists, first through his deputy Hassan al-Turabi and later directly. He supported a policy of Tamkeen, or empowerment where Islamist party cadres were systematically hired throughout the state apparatus. Dislodging the thousands hired under al-Bashir era policies would have been nearly impossible to achieve overnight especially for a transitional government (Hassan and Kodouda 2023).

Other participants in the transitional government point to more achievable steps that the FFC ministers failed to take despite holding huge majorities in the government. In the words of Siddiq Yusuf, leader of the Sudanese Communist Party and a former member of the sovereignty council:

Unfortunately, the FFC, who formed the government failed the people and still they want

> to convince others that they are part of the revolution. In fact, they are not honest in criticizing themselves. They took power for two years. The agreement, the constitutional agreement, states that until parliament is formed, all the power, legislative and executive power, lies in the two between the council of ministers and the supreme council. OK they have the full power, legislative powers and executive. … What did they do? They didn't even cancel the security law by which they were imprisoned." (Interview with Siddig Yusuf 2023)

The ineffective nature of the FFC suited both the military and those who wished to see the transitional government fall. In the views of some political observers that included the FFCs former members, "And then came the divisions, the communist party has its own and the Baathist party, who are also communistic, they divided the people. And actually, the communist party they are allied with the deep state to topple Hamdok government" (Interview with Al-Noor Hamad 2023). The Communist party was a frequent target of other democratic forces who claimed it controlled the RCs or conspired with the Islamists. One key FFC strategist provided what he called an arrest list of the 60 most prominent people distributed by the Islamists that showed Communists alone from the civilian parties would be spared (Interview with Al-Haj Warrag 2023). The radicals had become a convenient boogieman and scapegoat.

Such swirling speculation turned the democratic transition into a fight for survival. The attitude was a stark reminder that "Democratization is not just a process of institutional and organizational engineering; it is also, if not more so, a high-stakes political fight" (Ulfelder 2010, 125). In Sudan's case that high stakes game fragmented the democratic coalition in a classic move of divide and conquer (Schwedler 2011).

For the military, the increasing polarization of the civilians, along with a dip in mobilization as protests began to turn against the transitional government provided an opportunity that was too enticing to pass up. In October 2021, the military led by al-Burhan and Hemedti overthrew the transitional government. The coup showcased all the tricks from the counter-revolutionary playbook according to Jason Matus, a longtime Sudan aid practitioner:

> The most recent coup started with sabotaging the economy and creating insecurity while arming up the periphery so it remains under martial law. In addition, the regime infiltrated and split the civilian actors, discredited their leadership (not letting them have success), amplified this with dis/misinformation and then mobilized some public discontent to justify the military seizing power. And the regime played the armed and street struggle against themselves for example, the Constitutional Declaration in response to the protest movements was largely superseded by the Juba Peace Agreement negotiated with minor armed actors. (Matus 2025)

Striking the opposition when it was weakest, the generals expected their victory to be swift, yet within hours for the first time in the country's history, the people were protesting a military coup (Interview with Professor Atta al Battahani 2023). What enabled that quick response? The commitment of the RCs and other radical parties to make common cause with their former FFC compatriots even after leaving the coalition. Sudanese protesters vigorously protested the coup, shocking the military with their dedication and intensity. RCs that had demonstrated against the decisions of the Hamdok government weeks before, now chanted alongside FFC members for his release. New weekly mass protests were accompanied by daily neighborhood specific actions so

that whole sections of the capitol were shut down by burning tires or brick "Tetris" barricades. Some marches, especially those on the anniversaries of previous revolutionary actions or massacres drew hundreds of thousands in a show of force to the military. International reaction from the US and EU nations who collectively called themselves the "Friends of Sudan" was also negative and soon even one of the main coup plotters, Hemedti, was declaring the move a mistake.[5]

How did the RCs reignite their mobilization against the military? The answer lies in their structure and unwavering commitment to the revolution. Such diversity of views necessitated the RCs method of collective decision making. Members of the committee would meet and discuss issues with all members free to offer their views, often for hours, before taking a vote. A majority was needed to decide on a course of action (Interview with Resistance Committee Coordinating Committee 2023). Due to the thousands of committees that sprung up around the country, coordination committees were also formed to aggregate up the decisions from individual committees. This grassroots structure allowed committees not simply to rigidly adhere to the published calendar of protest marches, but to adlib other forms of collective action in what Mai Hassan titled Coordinated Dis-Coordination (Hassan 2023).

Though effective at mobilizing participants and antagonizing the military, the radically democratic grassroots structure of the RCs did not allow them to easily scale up their actions on a national level to take advantage of the huge geographical reach of the committees, which numbered into the thousands. One attempt to propose a unifying political vision in the summer of 2022 saw the introduction of a political charter. Holding a series of symposiums across Khartoum, the RCs sought to gather comments and build consensus around the new document. However, the charter writing process produced not one, but three draft charters with distinct differences. The event was

[5] Dickens Olewe, "Mohamed 'Hemeti' Dagalo: Top Sudan Military Figure Says Coup Was a Mistake," *BBC News*, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64704858, February 20, 2023.

a learning lesson as one member of a Khartoum RC noted "These charters have caused separation among the resistance committees. For example, as Khartoum's resistance committee, our solution for Sudan's cases is different than the solution of Aljazeera state or the Western Sudan and that has caused conflict between the committees" (Interview with Al Yarmouk Resistance Committee 2023).

Beyond deciding the content of a political charter, the RCs faced another more essential problem. How would they get the power to enact it? The answer for the RC's was not politics as usual. Instead, according to one RC member their approach was best epitomized by the three no's: no negotiation, no partnership, and no legitimacy:

> Yes, honestly the slogan wasn't a coincidence; there are some factors that have pushed us to be in this radical situation. We had an agreement with the military which led to a constitution. They decided to move with a coup d'état, and this isn't their first time, nor is it the first time happening in Sudan or outside of Sudan. We reach points that we referred to as critical situations, then comes some kind of civilian ruling democratic transition that results in civil governance and then coup d'état.
>
> This perhaps happened three times already [in Sudan], we don't have any guarantees if we negotiate anything at the moment. They won't commit to anything. They already committed crimes against the Sudanese people so any step they will take will be merely political to assure their safety. Any partnership will lead to the continuation of this situation. This slogan is a revolutionary slogan not political. Because politics means you need to compromise, you need to listen to anyone, but I believe that the committees have taken it as a revolutionary stance, and even if there are some committees that do believe

there should be some kind of compromise even if temporary, other committees reached conclusions that in order to achieve this radical change you need strength, at the moment we aren't armed, this does not mean we need to be, our strength lies in peaceful protests. If we pursue politics, what do we get? Killings? Bullets straight into our chests? Violence. We will oppose the military in any way possible, if we sign an agreement they won't commit to it. In these agreements they just seek a way to run away from accountability to their actions. (Interview with Al Yarmouk Resistance Committee 2023).

As laid out in the above quote, the RCs saw compromise as antithetical to revolution. The RCs planned to keep the military accountable through radical action not politics. In doing so, they played an essential role, yet one that forced them to remain separate from the civilian forces negotiating a return to civilian government. One senior international observer wondered if the situation was sustainable, "The RCs have to have a role, but what happens when you try to institutionalize? What happens when they get institutionalized or not?" (Interview with Senior International Observer 2023). Yet the transition trap meant that the RC's played a vital role that did not encourage or reward institutionalization. It was their responsibility to push back against the military via protest in the streets. In a similar manner to insurgent groups that must operate in the face of state violence (Mattus 2018), their radically democratic cellular structure was well adapted to the task of withstanding repression, but not for institutional politics.

2.4 Lessons from the Transition Trap:

With the mechanism of the transition trap that ensnared the civilian coalition now clear, I turn to broader lessons for democratic transitions in general. While the political situation in Sudan

was, in the words of one political observer, “so, so, so, so complicated and contradictory” (Interview with Al-Noor Hamad 2023) the cause of the dysfunction was simple: high polarization had fractionalized the civilian opposition and allowed the military to disrupt the transition. With civilians divided, the military had attempted a coup and only the quick action of the RCs and radical political parties had stopped a full collapse. Meanwhile the remaining members of the FFC sought a compromise that would return them to power necessitating partnerships with the military. Outmaneuvered in the halls of power and faced with violent repression in the street, the civilians were stuck in an impasse, searching for a political solution with the untrustworthy military.

While O’Donnell and Schmitter speak of coup poker, with democratic aspirants forced to play a cautious hand for fear of a coup, in Sudan the military was both stacking the deck and holding a gun under the table. The ever-present threat of military coup, realized in October 2021 held the transitional government hostage. Previous successful instances of democratic transition from authoritarianism with a powerful military have emphasized that the civilian governments must establish control over the military (Bitar &Lowenthal 2015). Yet the Sudanese military sought to make this as difficult as possible. While the country's constitution provided for the eventual Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of dozens of armed groups and rebel movements, the deadline for achieving this goal was after the planned elections (Interview with Professor Siddig Tauer 2023).

The inability to resolve the security dilemma with the military also highlights an issue with lessons taken from scholarship on successful instances of democratic transitions. Recent work on civil resistance movements has argued that successful democratic transitions are more likely to be achieved when civilians shift mobilization towards institutional politics (Pinckney 2020, 30). Reliance on revolutionary tactics like protest during the transitional period is thought to harm the

possibility of democratic politics and erode public support (Ketchley and El-Rayyes, 2019). A focus on institution building instead lessens what Pinckney (2020) terms the "disruptive characteristic" of civil resistance movements, which could potentially undermine democracy as well as dictators. Thus transitions that reduce "maximalism" are more likely to result in either democracy or semi-democracy (Pinckney 2020).

However, Sudan reveals an important exception to the low maximalism mandate. Democratic forces cannot afford to focus solely on institution building when counter-revolutionary forces are weakening the foundations of the transitional government at every turn. The actions of the military in Sudan, which included arming groups, stacking the transitional council with the leaders of armed groups, and exacerbating security and economic crises were tactics specifically designed to prevent the transitional government from building lasting democratic institutions and the military coup of October 25, 2021, was intended to end the transition to democracy for good. Only the unexpected return of a massive protest movement directed at the military prevented the generals' plan from succeeding.

While taking an institutional route may be preferable in countries without a dedicated counter revolutionary military, engaging in more "maximalist" behavior like protest was essential in Sudan to check the military. The overreliance on institution building reveals a limitation in democratization theory that sees the 2011 Arab uprisings and Sudan's 2019 revolution as but a continuation of the third wave of democratization (Huntington 1991) for, "In such a framework, mass revolts are merely a precursor to the real business of transition pacts conducted between opposition and regime elites. The continuation of popular mobilisation may even inhibit the success of such a pact" (Allinson 2022, 10). Yet it is the mobilization itself, as in Sudan, that stays the regime's hand. Popular mobilization provided the openings for democracy in the first place

and the military knew that "disorienting, dividing and repressing the mass uprisings that brought them about," (Allinson 2022, 67) was of the utmost importance. The transition trap provides a portable blueprint for counter-revolutionary forces to do just that, repressing the more radical democratic forces in the streets while simultaneously suppressing the creation of countervailing institutions.

In the face of a capable and dedicated counter-revolutionary foe like Sudan's empowered military can even a sustained protest movement lead to a successful democratic transition? While future chapters will deal with the question of how outside actors could have better supported Sudan's democratic transition, influential players within Sudan could also have done more. What if Sudan's fractious political parties had been more steadfast in their support of the RCs instead of seeking to secure their own places in the transitional government? One member of a resistance committee coordination council expressed a popular sentiment when he said, "The political parties betrayed us" (Interview with RC Coordinating Committee Member 2023). The cost of that betrayal was the fractionalization of the coalition, a move that greatly increased the danger from the military.

While political elites were grateful for the RC's muscle in the streets, they also bemoaned their refusal to form a political party. Despite being the country's most popular movement the RCs were, "not structured as a political body" (Berridge 2022, 83) likely meaning a political party. In the words of the former member of the transitional government Eltayeb, "the Resistance committees are not a mature political actor" (Interview with Amgad Fareid Eltayeb 2023). Though Eltayeb was supportive of the RCs he echoed both Volker Perthes, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of UNITAMS and American embassy personnel also lamented the lack of a youth party or some other new political entity that could capture the energy of the uprising

in an institutional setting (Interviews with Volker Perthes 2023). Despite hearing repeated pleas the RCs refused. In fact, many RC members already belonged to political parties with multiple parties finding representation in a single RC (Interview with Resistance Committee Coordinating Committee 2023).

Returning to the transition trap illustrates that the success of Sudan's counter-revolution was not due to a lack of maturity on the part of the RCs. In fact, it was their disciplined pushback against the military that stopped the civilians from being wiped out completely. While the RCs and their allies were able to fight to a standstill in the streets it was the FCC who showed a lack of political maturity in trusting that it could negotiate with the military. Pursuing a pact with the RSF al-Haj Warrag believed the FFC could use the militia to wipe out the Islamists who it saw as the greatest threat:

> For a smart strategy toward the main two threats to the democratic transformation of Sudan, NCP people and the RSF We have to weaken both and generally you will never have a stable Sudan and a democratic Sudan without weakening them both. But you have to know how to do it and how to make priorities. Priority number one is to make use of the existence of the RSF to get rid of the Islamists from key positions in the security sector. And after that when you have a professional army and a professional security sector, the pressure should mount against the RSF so as the army meets certain standards and conditions and so on. Unless you prioritize things in a smart way you will help the Islamists and instability, and this is the Egyptian scenario.…The endgame should be to weaken them and not let them be in power. But you should do this in a smart way. You have to weaken them and keep them divided. And you use the less powerful against the most powerful. … So, you

have to weaken the Islamists and the RSF without getting the country into civil war." (Interview with Al-Haj Warrag 2023)

Yet while al-Haj Warrag was convinced that a smart strategy could take care of both military factions without inciting civil war, events would prove him wrong. Future chapters will deal in more depth with the onset of war, but the mistakes that Warrag and the FCC made in allying with the RSF was one of tunnel vision, "The FFC had only one goal, to get rid of the Islamic movement and they would do anything to get that" (Interview with Maha Tambal 2025). Despite devoting reams of paper both in his pamphlet "Towards a sustainable democracy in Sudan" (Warrag 2023) and the voluminous proceedings of a conference dedicated to evaluating the transitional period held in July 2022 (al-Sadiq 2022) to the admirable goals of reinstating the democratic transition, attempting to divide the military without asserting civilian control or receiving third party security guarantees set the scene for tragedy.

Instead of protecting democracy with an arm of the military, the FFC provided a genocidal militia the veneer of democratic legitimacy while simultaneously threatening members of the former regime who were "desperate and suicidal because they are already in the prison" and "believe they have to take risks" (Interview with Al-Haj Warrag 2023). Far from appearing as the more mature political actor, the FFC was too sanguine in their capabilities to manage the deadly and increasingly hostile factions of the military. Yet even if the FFC had been more cautious, any democratic forces attempting to negotiate with either side of the military would run up against a harsh reality. Democratic institutions that are built before empowered militaries are brought under civilian control face an existential threat as once those institutions threaten their corporate interests, they become targets (Grewal 2023).

Successful democratic transitions have managed to place the military under civilian control and built countervailing institutions to keep it there. Beyond Sudan, any sustained mobilization campaign is vulnerable without the support of such institutions as protesters will become trapped in a standoff that an economically powerful military is better suited to endure. We will never know whether Sudan's RCs could have outlasted the counter-revolution thanks to the greed of the generals and the naive opportunism of politicians. Yet even in the midst of war, the RCs have managed to continue their service to the people of Sudan, helping to evacuate civilians and coordinate aid. Both the RCs successes confronting the military and the techniques the counter-revolution used against them should prove instructive for future struggles.

Chapter 3

With Friends Like These:

The International Community and Sudan's Transition

3.1 International Assistance and Democratic Transitions

Against a background of rising tensions between different military factions and with a political deal for a civilian-led government hanging in the balance, the head of UNITAMS, the United Nations mission to support Sudan's democratic transition, dined with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) second in command Lt. Gen. Shams al-Deen al-Kabashi. Emerging from the iftar, a traditional meal held during Ramadan, Volker Perthes the Special Representative of the Secretary General and his staff insisted "There was no hint of a coming war."[1] Khartoum did not have to wait for sunrise to catch the hint that the UN had missed. As the streets roared to life with gunfire and the sound of jets and explosions, the city of 8 million awoke to find that war had come.

Perthes was not alone in his miscalculation. Despite evidence of troop buildups and widespread anxiety over the potential for clashes, John Godfrey, the first American ambassador in 25 years, was on vacation, leaving the political deal unsigned, when the first shots were fired. The two main representatives of the international community's commitment to supporting Sudan's Democratic transition were both taken unawares. Nor was this the first time that the international community was blindsided by the military.

The military coup of the transitional civilian government in October 2021, which the political agreement was designed to remedy, had also come as a surprise. At that time, Jeffrey Feltman, one in a series of short-lived US Special Envoys for the Horn of Africa, was assured that no coup was in the works during a visit to Khartoum. Yet mere hours after the envoy's plane lifted off from Khartoum International Airport, the generals made their move to depose the civilian government (Berridge 2022, 203).

[1] Declan Walsh, "Sudan's Generals Dined with Peace Negotiators, Then Started a War." *The New York Times*, April 19, 2023

The failure of the UN, the US, and others to predict, let alone prevent, the initial reversal and subsequent destruction of Sudan's democratic transition begs the question; why was the international community unable to support Sudan's democratic aspirations? While this paper focuses on the role that the "Friends of Sudan," a group of countries[2] played in Sudan, it also seeks to more generally interrogate the ability of international actors to assist in recent democratic transitions. In addition to Sudan, the negative outcomes in Egypt and Tunisia, formerly viewed as the qualified successes of the 2011 Arab uprisings, raise questions about the viability of democratic transitions. Why have successful democratic transitions become rare, even with international support? Are international actors unable or unwilling to support democratic transitions?

3.2 Pacted Transitions

While some have read the failure of the international community in Sudan as a question of competence (Berridge et al. 2022) this paper argues that key international players were blindsided by events on the ground largely because of their faith in what has become a core tenet of the literature on democratization, pacted transitions. (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986; Huntington, 1993; Karl, 1990; Linz & Stepan, 1996; Stradiotto & Guo, 2014). According to O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986) a pacted transition is "an explicit, but not always publicly explicated or justified, agreement among a select set of actors which seeks to define (or, better, to redefine) rules governing the exercise of power on the basis of mutual guarantees for the 'vital interests' of those entering into it" (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986, 37). To further refine the concept I follow the definition of Gennadii Iakovlev (2021) in stating that pacted transitions are "(1) explicit negotiated

[2] France, Germany, Norway, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and the European Union were core members of the Friends of Sudan, a group intended to assist the democratic transition in Sudan.

agreements among (2) elites-in-power and elites-in-opposition that are (3) rule-setting and based on (4) mutual 'vital interest' guarantees." After establishing pacted transitions as the international community's chosen means of supporting Sudan, this paper will interrogate the wisdom of relying on pacts between military and civilian elites to further democratic transitions. What factors transformed Sudan's pacted transition, a form of transition meant to reduce violence, into the catalyst for civil war? How should Sudan's example affect the international community's support of pacted transitions among in the future? Below I will examine the scholarly work on pacted transitions before exploring the ways Sudan's transition subverted the expectations of the literature.

The study of pacts may begin as early as 1942 when Otto Kirchheimer identified a new type of compromises that were "based on complex exchanges between public and private groups, mutually guaranteeing their collective right to participate in decision-making and their respective privilege to represent and secure vital interests" (Kirchheimer 1941, 269). The tradeoff between vital interests for the regime elite and democratization is the essential problem that pacted transitions are intended to solve. Their ability to do so throughout the major democratic transitions of the 20th century established the new "post-liberal" pacts as one of four "generic modes of transition…(1) reform, (2) revolution, (3) pacted, and (4) imposed" (Schmitter 2014, 7). Pacted transitions create a situation where "conflicting or competing groups are interdependent, in that they can neither do without each other nor unilaterally impose their preferred solution on each other if they are to satisfy their respective divergent interests" (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986, 44). This balance between groups is why pacted transitions held particular promise for O'Donnell and Schmitter who wrote; "pacts are therefore not always likely or possible…we are convinced that

where they are a feature of the transition, they are desirable-that is, they enhance the probability that the process will lead to a viable political democracy" (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986, 44).

> Yet, if a pacted transition increases the probability of democracy, it does so in an unusual way: Ironically, such modern pacts move the polity toward democracy by undemocratic means. They are typically negotiated among a small number of participants representing established (and often highly oligarchical) groups or institutions; they tend to reduce competitiveness as well as conflict; they seek to limit accountability to wider publics; they attempt to control the agenda of policy concerns; and they deliberately distort the principle of citizen equality. Nonetheless, they can alter power relations, set loose new political processes, and lead to different (if often unintended) outcomes." (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986, 43).

Not long after publication, O'Donnell's and Schmitter's conclusions on the power of pacted transitions seemed to be born out through the fall of the Soviet Union and the birth of its successor states. Huntington's *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century* (1993) charts the transition of 30 countries from authoritarianism to democracy. The book, which falls short of producing a general theory behind the transitions, nevertheless endorses negotiated transitions which may or may not involve explicit pacts, extolling both softliners in the regime and moderates in the democratic opposition, "When in doubt, compromise" (Huntington 1993, 163).

Huntington was not alone in his support of negotiated transitions (including pacts). Gerardo Munk & Carol Leff (1997) and Josep Colomer (2000) also favor "transitions by agreement." Adam Przeworski (1991) who does write that "pacts are feasible only if the partners

extract private benefits from democracy; and note that they can extract such rents only by excluding outsiders from the competition," nevertheless adds that they have been "highly successful in organizing democratic alteration in office" (Przeworski 1991, 90) and allow members to deny outside influence to individual actors including the military. However, that pacts instead became a vehicle for the military to gain political influence in Sudan highlights a weakness others have addressed.

Some critics of pacted transitions have noted that the ability of pacts to diminish conflict can be a negative, leading to incomplete democratization (Casper & Tailor 1996). However, even successful pacted transitions often feature conflict between softliners and regime, and between coalition partners (Bitar & Lowenthal 2015), Linz & Stepan (1996) note the potential for undemocratic outcomes due to the exclusion of actors from specific pacts between the regime and the opposition. Yet despite objections to the undemocratic character of pacted transitions, a general consensus in the literature sees them as helping to avoid violence (Iakovlev 2021). Why was this expectation to fail so spectacularly in Sudan?

The record for pacted transitions and democratic transitions in general, has become more mixed since Huntington's "Third Wave." Recent attempts at democratic transitions, most notably Egypt and Tunisia after the 2011 Arab uprisings as well as Sudan's 2019 uprising, have either not transitioned or not consolidated democracy before suffering authoritarian reversal. While 2011 sparked a global "wave of protest" and 2019 saw a similar spike there has been no accompanying 4th wave of democracy.

How effective then have pacted transitions actually been? Assessing 45 attempts at signing a pact between the regime and the opposition during democratic transitions from Greece in 1974 through to Ukraine in 2014, Iakovlev (2021, 13) finds that some studies of pacted transitions have

effectively selected on the dependent variable by focusing on cases where such transitions were successful. When including nine unsuccessful attempts to reach a pact alongside 36 instances of successful negotiations Iakovlev (2021, 139) finds, that there are fewer attempted pacted transitions now and they are also less successful. Specifically, some cases that were strong candidates to lead to successful pacts and democratic transitions defied the expectations of the literature, "The two regimes that were more likely to undergo pacted transitions according to Geddes and colleagues' (2018) theory—the military dictatorships in Egypt in 2011 and Myanmar in 1988—have, in fact, even experienced failed negotiation attempts" (Iakovlev 2021, 136).

While Iakovlev (2021) critiques some of the core assumptions of the pacted transitions literature, he locates the cause for variation in the outcome of pacted transitions within the organizational structure of the opposition. The organizational capability of the opposition is important as the role of Labor Unions and the Catholic church shows, yet the sole focus on the capabilities of the pro-democratic side ignores their counterparts, and often opponents, in the regime. My contribution is in line with the growing literature on counter-revolution and attempts to explain the failure by dint of the success of the counter revolution. I argue that militaries with political and economic power are much more likely to break pacts. Further, for an already divided military regime like Sudan's pacts introduce instability that encourages violence.

The lack of democratic outcomes has been made easier by the international community's approach to recent democratic transitions as continuations of Huntington's "Third Wave." Much as generals are reputed to fight the last war, the pro-democracy international community has attempted to assist the last wave of transitions. In doing so the international community has employed the trusted tools of pacted transitions, and adopted a framework where, "mass revolts are merely a precursor to the real business of transition pacts conducted between opposition and

regime elites" (Allinson 2022, 10). This view, which the previous chapter has identified as deepening the transition trap in Sudan, found full support among the international community assigned to shepherd Sudan's transition along to democracy.

Why did ostensibly pro-democratic countries and organizations play a counter-revolutionary role in Sudan? As discussed in the introduction, The US, European countries, and the UN all had to balance additional interests beyond democracy promotion. For the US, working with the military to sign the JPA was another instance of working with a strongman "that can deliver on the agenda that we're putting in front of him" (Interview with International Sudan Expert 2025). The result, however, was disastrous for the prospects of peace:

> The result of the Juba agreement[3] is what is happening. We are living with 12 militias recognized as part of the government plus the RSF. 13 armies. Also, the Juba agreement states that the armed groups can maintain their forces for 40 months. The interim period is 39 months. The 40th month is the month where elections are supposed to be carried out. So, we are going to the elections, political parties, are we going to participate in elections with 13 armed groups? This is impossible. (Interview with Siddig Yusuf, 2023)

Commitments to civilian rule mattered little when the JPA enshrined the right of rebel movements to retain their arms. And the JPA taught the unfortunate lesson that those arms would ensure political power in the transitional government:

[3] The JPA

> Rather than providing an inclusive platform for both military and non-military actors from Sudan's peripheries, it rewarded rebel commanders who had dubious political legitimacy on the ground, installing them at the centre of government, as guns were once again leveraged for political power. Instead of enabling a civilian government to engage with questions of socio-economic justice in Darfur and the Two Areas (South Kordofan and Blue Nile states), the JPA became a lever that enabled the Sudanese military to undermine that very government, laying the groundwork for the October 2021 coup. (Craze and Khair 2023)

While members of the international community who materially assisted the counter-revolution will be discussed later in the chapter, those who pushed for a pact between the military and the democratic coalition functioned as a discursive arm of the counter-revolution (Allinson 2022, 179). By eschewing the aims of Sudan's democratic movement and enshrining the military at the heart of the transition, the Friends of Sudan matched the hollowing out of liberal democracy across the West that had reduced democracy "to a technical means of administration rather than contest between substantively different models of society" (Allinson 2022, 257-8). Among many in the international community in Sudan, there was acknowledgement of the shortcomings of some of efforts to support democracy. One international Sudan expert described a clash of views on the US side on how best to proceed, "There's a proxy war where we, the USAID, Hill side doesn't have a problem with messy coalitions and people who disagree as long as they don't kill each other. Where the state department is, like, give me one leader and deliver my agenda efficiently" (Interview with International Sudan Expert 2025).

The US conflict over how to proceed was matched by European countries' fear of mass migration, which led them to pay Hemedti $30 million a year.[4] So too UNITAMS, who could be expelled from the country by the military, had reason to think carefully about pursuing radical democracy. These conflicts of interest led to a compromise[d] approach in both meanings of the word. I have called that approach democratization instead of full democracy and its distinguishing characteristic was the pursuit of elite deals. A pacted transition was the natural choice of an international community that had to balance security interests against democratic aspirations. Though this project argues that the result for Sudan was neither democratic nor secure, Huntington's (1993, 163) admonition "when in doubt, compromise" was enough to impart confidence and paper over the increasingly dangerous rift within the military that threatened to permanently derail the transition. Already discomfited by the radical demands of Sudan's Resistance Committees (RCs), the international community also appeared ignorant of the military's treachery as, "From a vantage point inside the transitional process, counter-revolutions become impossible to see" (Huntington 1993, 10).

That blindness became clear to many inside Sudan. Al-Haj Warrag, a newspaper publisher and key strategist for the FFC describes trying to convince an incredulous Volker Perthes, the head of UNITAMS, that a coup was coming:

> Before the coup of the 25th of October, I went with a friend to Volker, ten days before the coup. I said to him, there is a coup, and we have to work so as to deter the coup before it happens. He said, 'a coup by whom?' I said to him 'Burhan and Hemedti'[5] he said to me,

[4] Marya Hannun, "At Any Cost—The War in Sudan and Europe's Flawed Migration Policies," MERIP, July 26, 2023, https://merip.org/2023/07/at-any-cost-the-war-in-sudan-and-europes-flawed-migration-policies/.
[5] Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the SAF and leader of the Sovereignty Council and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo known as Hemedti, head of the RSF and Deputy Chairman of the Sovereignty Council

> ‘Burhan? This is impossible. He is the President of the Sovereignty Council, and many civilians come to me here to tell me to allow him to complete the transition. Why would he wage a coup?’ I said to him, ‘because he is not rational like you, he is not German! He is a greedy general and he believes that the coup is in his interest.’” (Interview with Al-Haj Warrag 2023).

Why did Perthes of UNITAMS and Ambassador Godfrey, a well-connected career state department official, expect Sudan’s generals to go along with the democratic transition? One school of thought suggests that a combination of arrogance and incompetence was to blame. Slow moving aid from Washington was certainly an issue during the critical early days of the transitional government (Berridge et al., 2022) and the trust that was repeatedly given despite the military’s lies is hard to explain (Kurtz, 2024). Yet the problem is not simply that the international community didn’t see the military’s true intentions, but rather that the expectations of the pacted transitions literature helped blind it to the counter-revolution. Perthes, a respected German political economist and Godfrey, who was ABD at Michigan in political science, knew that following Geddes (1999, 2018) military regimes are more likely to negotiate a retreat from power as democratization does not threaten their careers and privileges. It is difficult to prove that Geddes' work and other political science research can claim sole credit for the actions of the US ambassador in Sudan and the head of UNITAMS. In fact, my contention is not so much that existing work on the role of militaries during democratic transitions led to the disastrous reliance on elite deals with the military in Sudan. Instead, I argue that the conventional wisdom of the field was enough to paper over the contradictions of an approach to democratization that the international community already decided to pursue due to its own interests.

The shock that greeted UNITAMS and US embassy leaders on the morning of April 15 when the civil war began was the result of a worldview that approached democratic transitions as transactional deals which needed to be brokered between rational parties, not an ideological commitment to a democratic state. Armed with the expectation of the military as a willing negotiation partner the international community expected the military would be happy to step away and continue its work behind the scenes. Why then did the military refuse to step aside in Sudan?

In short, the military in Sudan was no longer simply the armed forces, instead the SAF and RSF had become key economic and political actors. This additional role carried additional dangers to the democratic transition as empowered militaries (Grewal 2023) who have used their access under the previous authoritarian regime to capture immense swaths of the state's economy have much more to fear from democracy than expected in the regime change literature. The vital interests of the military, which should draw it to the negotiating table instead motivate the military to flip the table over. Just as the military in Egypt had controlled pasta factories and electricity generation, the Sudanese military had stakes in industries that a civilian government would seek to control, including the personal ownership of the country's gold by the head of the RSF.[6]

The extent of the military's political and economic influence as well as the support of regional actors like the UAE who facilitated the economic exploitation of the country's resources created powerful incentives for the military to oppose democratization. While the military and intelligence services had forced out the country's long serving dictator Omar al-Bashir, they had done so in consultation with regional powers when it became clear he was "bad for business" (Hassan and Kodouda 2019, 99). Democracy was also bad for business, a direct threat to the vital interests of the regime as the committees searched for plundered state resources to return to civilian

[6] Mat Nashed, "Sudan's Economy Dominated by Military Interests: Report," Al Jazeera, June 29, 2022.

control and the head of the RSF and SAF became targets due to their role in the massacre of protesters. That situation led to what Iakovlev (2021) identifies as a zero-sum game where negotiations could only harm the military's interests.

I argue that this zero-sum game led to the military coup of October 2021, where, as described in the previous chapter, only the dedicated protests actions of the democratic forces halted a complete military takeover. Yet Sudan's pacted transition suffered twice. First by the coup and second in a civil war that destroyed all prospects for a democratic transition. In addition to noting the failure of Sudan's pacted transition to avoid the military coup, I also claim that attempts to return to a pacted transition in the spring of 2023 contributed to the onset of civil war.

In transitions that involve an empowered military, any devolution of power to a democratic government threatens the military's vital interests and the armed forces will attempt to subvert the democratic transition (Grewal 2023). While this accurately describes the behavior of the RSF and SAF in Sudan through 2021 the civilian pushback against their coup prompted a change of tactics. While resistance in the streets continued, the international community worked overtime to allay the military's fears of democracy; an effort that bore unexpected fruit. Already divided into a parallel command structure, the split between the RSF and SAF grew after the coup foundered. Hemedti the head of the RSF publicly declared the coup a mistake, allied with the FFC in Sudan, hired lobbyists in Washington, DC who disseminated carefully worded statements on Twitter, and gave what seemed to be a series of campaign speeches.[7] Flush with revenue from his gold mines and personally charismatic, Hemedti began to be mooted as a presidential candidate. Even Perthes did not rule Hemedti out as a potential candidate despite his role in the massacre of protesters and the atrocities of Darfur, "If people are able to reinvent themselves in the transitional period while

[7] Nesrine Malik, "Sudan's Outsider: How a Paramilitary Leader Fell out with the Army and Plunged the Country into War," *The Guardian*, April 20, 2023.

reinventing the country so be it. Maybe there would be a cooling off period, but would you ban them for life? If Hemedti or Burhan takes time off and runs in four years I have no problem" (Interview with Volker Perthes 2023).

Only when democracy is emptied of its ideological content and reduced to elections does it become compatible with the vital interests of an empowered military. Then, as Hemedti foresaw, it can be used as a tool to secure the corporate interests of the military and indeed his own personal interests over those of his rival al-Burhan from the SAF. Beyond emptying democracy of any substance, this held an added danger in Sudan. There was not simply one military actor, but two, the RSF and the SAF, and the rivalry between them would tear the country apart.

In addition to issues with the approach of the US and UNITAMS in shepherding the democratic transition, another significant factor helped the counter-revolution succeed, the dedicated efforts of the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia among other regional powers. These regional powers had become increasingly powerful, and competitive, as Washington's influence in the region waned (Hazbun 2019, 24). While the US and UN were playing a "game of fetch with the NCP" over sideshow issues, "the real game has happened with the Gulf, Egypt, Russia, China, over the future of Sudan" (Interview with International Sudan Expert 2025). When the US decided to once again re-engage with the region including in Sudan it encountered, "Shifting alliances, established through a trio of counter-revolutionary axes, employed both direct military force and non-state proxies without regard to any of the norms of sovereignty or indeed the laws of armed conflict" (Allinson 2022, 251). In Sudan further splintering led to daylight increasing between the UAE and Saudi and outright rivalry between the UAE and Egypt.

Backing different sides of the military, the RSF for the UAE and the SAF for Egypt, both countries worked hard to ensure that any democratic transition would happen on their terms, if at

all. As negotiations teetered over the return to a transitional government via what was called the political framework deal, nomadic herders from the RSF's traditional recruiting grounds incited security crises in the south and west of the country, armed with RPGs rather than their traditional Kalashnikovs, weapons that a senior UNITAMS staffer claimed must have come from a nation state (Interview with UNITAMS Staffer 2023). While Egypt hosted parallel meetings insisting that any return to the political process would include the former regime's Islamist parties, the UAE flooded the country with weapons (Walsh, Koettle & Schmitt 2023). Though nominally part of the Friends of Sudan, the UAE appeared less committed to the survival of the country than that of the RSF. Indeed, The UAE has stoked the conflict while retaining access to the trade in gold and other items:

> The United Arab Emirates has sustained the relationship it nurtured with the RSF from 2015 to 2019, when it hired RSF troops to serve as mercenaries in Yemen. To secure an export corridor for Sudanese goods, Abu Dhabi has sent cargo flights full of powerful weapons, drones, and armored vehicles to the RSF via its client state (and Sudan's western neighbor), Chad. Egypt, meanwhile, seeks a sympathetic ally in Khartoum as it aims to secure influence over the Nile in the face of Ethiopia's efforts to exercise power over the crucial waterway. To that end, Cairo has sent military aid to the SAF and has allegedly engaged in airstrikes against the RSF. Egypt also relies on Sudanese resources—often smuggled—to help prop up its flailing economy. (Hassan and Kodouda 2025)

Through interviews with the international community and Sudanese political actors I will use the remainder of this chapter to track the failures that helped push Sudan to the brink of civil

war. These failures highlight issues with the elite pact focused approach of the international community in the era of empowered militaries, rising regional actors, and military coups. What role did UNITAMS, and the Friends of Sudan play and how could a democratic Sudan have been realized?

3.3 International Mediation in Sudan

Compared to the 2011 Arab uprisings and other 2019 cases, Sudan's uprising differentiated itself due to, as Grewal points out, "1) the differing level of organization among protesters; 2) the unity/disunity of the regime's security forces; and 3) international mediation" (Grewal 2021, 105). The "glorious revolution" of 2019 had not just been stunning in its scope, but it had effectively created a political coalition and sustained a weekly calendar of protest for much longer than previous uprisings. It had also attracted the attention of the international community including the United Nations. Conscious of the failures of 2011, the Security Council envisioned the creation of a transition assistance mission and established it in a resolution called by UN staff as "The most ambitious since Kosovo" (Interview with UNITAMS Staffer 2023).

In two separate Security Council resolutions, 2524 (2020) and 2579 (2021), the UN first established and then extended a United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS). The establishment of UNITAMS was supposed to usher in a new era for Sudan. Replacing the United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) the new mission was a political effort, not a peacekeeping operation. Its mission was designed around supporting four major pillars of the transition:

(i) Assist the political transition, progress towards democratic governance, in the protection and promotion of human rights, and sustainable peace

(ii) Support peace processes and implementation of future peace agreements

(iii) Assist peacebuilding, civilian protection and rule of law, in particular in Darfur and the Two Areas

(iv) Support the mobilisation of economic and development assistance and coordination of humanitarian assistance." (United Nations 2021)

There were serious issues from the start of UNITAMS' ambitious remit. The US moved too slowly to remove Sudan from the terrorism list causing huge economic issues for the transitional government (Lynch 2022). Furthermore, the millions pledged to UNITAMS from member states was slow to arrive. With only $700,000 in the agency's bank account despite nearly a billion in pledges, the work of supporting the transition was being managed from a ramshackle shipping container–village in the capital. In the words of one senior staffer, the approach was "Not serious" (Interview with UNITAMS Staffer 2023).

Yet it was not simply a lack of capital that limited the effectiveness of foreign support for Sudan's transition. A key issue for the protestors that had marched and camped out in the streets for weeks to pressure the regime was accountability for the murder of their fellow civilians. The protesters wanted justice for the massacre of June 3, 2019, when the RSF killed over 100 protesters to disperse the sit-in around the military's headquarters. Backed by the hundreds of local and decentralized Resistance Committees (RCs) that had sprung up in the capital since 2019, street protests routinely shut down the capital while presenting the revolutionaries' demands regarding

the military:[8] “no partnership, no negotiation and no legitimacy.” The “three no’s” were born out of the recognition that “Regimes across the Middle East and North Africa have had ten years since the Arab Spring to learn how to jettison their leaders and survive such uprisings without democratizing” (Grewal 2021, 103). Now as the RCs watched the UN hold workshops and meetings with the generals, they felt that the international community was legitimizing the generals as political actors instead of pressuring them to step down.

The international community saw it differently. A senior staffer in the US embassy claimed that despite leading the international efforts to support Sudan and coordinating with the main Sudanese political actors weekly at the ambassador's residence, the US was limited in its options: “We often get asked why we are not applying more pressure. We aren't in a position to do that. Any transition that is broadly supported needs to be Sudanese. We can offer thoughts and suggestions when solicited and do, but in the end it’s their country, their process” (Interview with American Embassy Staffer 2023). While the response minimized the role of the US in the process, extensive diplomacy was being conducted behind closed doors. In the opinion of a senior international observer, the problem was less a lack of US input and more a lack of strategic direction and clarity, “The ambassador is one guy. You need a structure around him. We’re not well suited for these types of moments in time. Especially dealing with a security sector that has co-opted the economy. It is very hard to do policy planning on the fly” (Interview with Senior International Observer 2023). Despite those difficulties, the shape of the political process was largely dictated by the international community.

There were also limits to the US and UN’s patience with the process. Branding many of the RCs as radical or difficult due to their decision-making process, they rejected the three no’s

[8] لا شراكة ولا تفاوض ولا شرعية

called for by the street, focusing almost entirely on the political parties and the current rulers of the country, the generals. Dr Perthes saw a deal that kept the military involved as the only option, "Yes, we are pushing for a deal since we are saying time is not on your side. You may lose your country. Get to a deal. But we are not pushing for an ideal deal. It's not democratic governance. It would be governance on the basis of an elite compromise" (Interview with Volker Perthes 2023). Perthes' focus on an elite compromise follows accepted wisdom on the importance of pacts in democratic transitions which, "move the polity toward democracy by undemocratic means" (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986, 43). In Sudan however, there was little sign that any pact would be honored by the military, no matter how undemocratically it was enacted. And the rush to secure an unenforceable pact both dismissed the political possibilities of the street and, in the words of one Sudanese political commentator, was yet another a "coddling" of the generals, who had already demonstrated their refusal to return to the barracks (Eltayeb 2023).

Given that the generals had proven that they could not be trusted to support democracy, the international community should have realized that they needed to be compelled. Indeed, as Ulfeder notes, "pacts succeed when they are self-enforcing, and to be self-enforcing pacts must do two things. First and most obvious, parties to the bargain must believe they are better off under it than not. Second, 'elites and their followers must be willing to punish those who seek unilateral defections from the pact'" (Ulfelder 2010, 38). While the military's ability to punish the civilian forces was apparent, only the RCs, who rejected any negotiation and employed non-violence protest, could muster any sort of punishment for the military. With the civilian forces facing a severe power deficit, the role of an international guarantor was crucial for the Sudanese context. The presence of a UN mission and the substantial economic and political expenditures by the United States and others were intended to accomplish just that.

If the US and the UN could serve that role, a political pact might stand a chance. In effect they could guarantee that the military would not withdraw for:

> When the commitment is not self-enforcing- the commitment can still be made credible by vesting monitoring and enforcement capacity in some third party not susceptible to the same temptations. For this arrangement to work, that third party must itself be regarded as credible and capable…If it is an outside actor, such as a foreign government or international organization, the players must believe that it is in that outside actor's self-interest to enforce the terms of the deal." (Ulfelder 2010, 39)

Yet the UN and US had already failed to enforce sufficient compliance in the past. The US had refused to enact targeted sanctions against RSF and SAF controlled companies that had financed the military coup. Worse, the arrival of UNITAMS meant that there were no more UN peacekeepers in the country who could monitor the situation and dissuade violence. At the very moment that Sudan needed a protector to guarantee the elite led pact that it had pushed for, the US and the UN were absent and unaware.

Instead of focusing on the threat from the generals the UN and US instead bemoaned the state of the protest movement. Perthes, in a statement later quoted by the US embassy staffer, also lamented the difficulties of working with the RCs stating, "there is not one street, there are many streets," (Interview with Volker Perthes 2023) which made dealing with their political demands more difficult. The statement, while it does capture the diverse nature of the committees, ignores that the multiplicity of views present in the streets was previously seen as a strength when it enabled protesters to gather a large ruling coalition during the transitional government and

continue to draw crowds to protest the military coup. Additionally, complaining about the multiplicity of democratic actors in a country with two separate militaries further emphasizes the blind spot of the US and UN.

Perthes and Ambassador Godfrey's push for a deal at all costs while excluding those who had made the democratic transition possible followed the logic of Huntington's (1993, 163) third wave of democratization: "When in doubt, compromise." Yet while this compromise pushed aside the RCs that wouldn't promise not to "press too insistently or immediately their claim to govern, nor seek sanctions against military officers for 'excesses' committed under the aegis of authoritarianism," (O'Donnell &Schmitter 1986 46) it also emboldened the generals who saw fit to suppress protests with lethal force and found themselves subject only to light scolding from the international community.

While Hemedti seemed prepared to accept Perthes' elite compromise version of democracy, he and his allies made clear it would be on his own terms. Shaikh Hashim Qarib Allah an ally of Hemedti's and Sufi sheikh who belonged to Sudan Call, an opposition coalition nevertheless made his view of democratization in Sudan clear, "If you bring a plant from England to Sudan, it will not grow and it will die. It is the same with democracy, Sudan is not the right environment" (Interview with Shaikh Hashim Qarib Allah 2023). Meanwhile, al-Burhan who had neither the charisma nor personal wealth to match Hemedti and thus was less likely to win an election, repeatedly threatened not to sign even the watered-down framework agreement. Simultaneously, both men began to move thousands of troops into the capital.

The US embassy staffer calculated that despite the generals not being "Jeffersonian democrats" the realization that "in the current situation there is no amortization of risk, they own it," (Interview with American Embassy Staffer 2023) should force them back to the barracks. Yet

the military had already shown its refusal to step back from politics during the 2021 coup. In fact, with no peacekeepers on the ground due to UNITAMS being a political mission, one of the few levers that the international community had to pull would have been international assistance. As Geddes writes, "A third party trying to help end a period of violent conflict in a dictatorship might be able to nudge a military or dominant-party regime toward democratization by cutting aid" (Geddes, Wright & Frantz 2014, 321). Unfortunately this lever had already been pulled following the coup.

Warning that aid would be cut was the exact message Jeffrey Feltman delivered to the head of the Transitional Military Council Abdellah Fatteh al-Burhan on October 24, 2021, only to hear of the coup when he touched down in Doha early the next morning (Berridge 2022, 203). Despite the American warning, "Others had apparently assured al-Burhan that they would cover his back," including Egypt's president al-Sisi, who had overseen his own coup of a transitional government (Berridge 2022, 203). It is uncertain whether Perthes relayed any similar warnings during his own dinner with General al-Kabbashi but the message was already clear; despite what the international community said, the Sudan's would-be democrats were on their own. Six months later Perthes had stepped down from his post after being declared persona non grata by al-Burhan and Godfrey was working from Jeddah on a ceasefire process that had borne little fruit.

Was a democratic Sudan possible? The military in Sudan would always have been a dogged adversary to the democratic transition, but almost all of the Sudanese respondents I interviewed believed their opposition could have been better managed, frequently pointing to Spain as a country that was able to carry out successful security reform (Bitar & Lowenthal 2015). If the international community had moved quicker to support the transitional government with resources and adequately evaluated and responded to the threat from the generals, perhaps the 2021 coup

could have been avoided. While the senior official at the American embassy claimed, "No one can identify a credible alternative that is workable at a strategic level," (Interview with American Embassy Staffer 2023) the international community simply excluded street protests and other forms of pushback against the military from consideration as strategic actions.

Beyond Sudan, the international community will need to become much more adept at spotting and stopping counter-revolutions in order to reverse the downward trend of democratic transitions. In practice, this requires adopting a different approach from the pacted transitions of the third wave of democratization. Compromises must be made in any democratic transition, but they should not be extracted solely from the most vital voices of democratization, in Sudan's case the RCs. Supporting rather than sidelining more radical democratic forces can in fact facilitate a more sustainable pacted transition. Instead of trying to make democracy unobjectionable to the military, the international community must emphasize that the military has much to lose if it does not support democratization. Additionally, in the case of an empowered military, any pact must also be adequately guaranteed, and regional actors should be pressured to add their support.

The next chapter will explore other risk factors that threatened Sudan's fledgling transition. Here I maintain that had the international community supported the RCs and put pressure on the military, the country's democratic transition might still be on track. Hopes of effective international support for the next democratic transition require strategic vision and engagement with the world that was lacking from Washington in Sudan (Interview with Senior International Observer 2023) and seems unlikely to return in the short term. The world's next would-be democrats may have to go it alone, an outcome that judging from the international community's performance in Sudan, might not overly harm their transition's prospects.

Chapter 4

When Democratization Kills Peace

4.1 Civil War

When civil war broke out in Sudan on April 15, 2023, it was a surprise to many, including major supporters of the country's democratic transition, but was it unusual? This chapter attempts to establish how likely the advent of civil war was by examining the risk factors for civil war onset present in Sudan during the democratic transition. What were the most relevant indicators for Sudan and how likely were they to lead the country to civil war?

After assessing the likelihood of civil war, I turn to examining the type of war visited upon the country. While previous civil wars in the country were fought along ethnic lines, the current war is between two armies who both served the former regime. Why did Sudan find itself trapped in a "war of the generals"[1] and what connection does the form of civil war have with the international supported political process that accompanied its outbreak?

This paper's contention has been that Sudan's democratic transition was derailed by a coordinated counter-revolutionary campaign (chapter 2) aided by a naive and ineffective international community (chapter 3). I follow the growing field of counter-revolutionary studies (Allinson 2022, Clarke 2023) in explaining the success of those seeking to roll back the democratic transition rather than the failure of the country's democratic aspirations. However, Sudan's democratic transition was complicated by numerous variables that increase the risk of civil war. Did economic, demographic, or institutional factors, or even the country's own history of civil wars doom its democratic experiment before it began? By assessing both the civil war risk and the outcome, I hope to evaluate whether the destruction wrought on Sudan was the inevitable outcome of two armies "set for war" (Perthes 2024) or if the hopes of millions for a democratic Sudan were justified.

[1]Ahmed Younes, "Sudan in 25 Years: One War Begets Another." *Asharq Al-Awsat,* https://english.aawsat.com/node/5095885, December 28, 2024.

By tracing the dominant theories of civil war onset, I will show that while there was an elevated risk of civil war in Sudan, the explosion of war between two former military allies does not follow the expected prediction for the type of civil war. Instead of an ethnic war, the conflict between two of the former regime's military forces points to bargaining failures as the root of the conflict. By examining the position of both the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in the weeks before the civil war I show that instead of putting the country on the path to democracy, the transitional period in Sudan drew the country closer to civil war.

My contention that Sudan's democratic transition increased the risk of civil war has implications beyond the country. Building on work that has identified democratization as a risk factor for the outbreak of war (Mansfield & Snyder 1995; Cederman, Hug & Krebs 2010; Bates 2008) I show the ways that bargaining led to rising instability in an already risky environment. Locating the failure of Sudan's transition in the way democratization was pursued produces generalizable insights that can be applied to future internationally supported democratic transitions. In short, this chapter helps address the question, under what circumstances can the prospect of democracy lead to war?

Before answering that question, I engage below with the literature on civil wars. I will first define key concepts before exploring leading explanations for civil war onset and potential connections with democratization. Finally, I explore theories based on Sudan's own experience with civil war to situate my argument's unique contribution.

4.2 Correlates of War

The field of civil war and conflict studies has undergone rapid expansion in the past few decades. That expansion has come about while conflicts around the world have tilted from

primarily interstate to intrastate (Cunningham 2013). This expansion, however, has resulted in debate over the object of study itself. What exactly is a civil war? In his 2004 article “What is Civil War, Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition," Nicholas Sambanis argues that coding issues from the Correlates of War project (COW), a widely used resource for scholars of civil war, have introduced definitional uncertainty to the concept asking (Sambanis 2004 815), “What threshold of violence distinguishes civil war from other forms of internal armed conflict? How do we know when a civil war starts and ends? How can we distinguish between intrastate, interstate, and extrastate wars?” Resolving these definitional issues is important to, “allow us to measure and analyze civil war as a distinct category with a "natural history" (cf. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), an “ontology” that is different from that of other forms of political violence” in order to claim that civil wars are different from other forms of violence (Sambanis 2004 815). However, problems remain in coding a variety of areas including the beginning and end of conflicts, distinguishing between intrastate and interstate war, and even establishing that conflicts reach the commonly agreed threshold of 1000 battlefield deaths (Sambanis 2004).

In order to resolve these difficulties, Sambanis (2004, 829-831) proposes an 11 part coding list that, while exhaustively addressing battlefield deaths and the beginning and endpoints of conflicts, does not provide an abstract definition of civil war. The lack of a definition is not unique to Sambanis, (Fearon 2007; Kalyvas 2006; Edmonds 1972; Keegan & Bull 2006) have all provided, “requisites of civil war rather than abstract definitions” (Gersovitz & Kriger 2013, 161). Such attempts have not all arrived at the same solution with the result that "there is still considerable disagreement about which armed conflicts should be classified as civil wars. Many wars are coded in only one out of a dozen data sets" (Sambanis 2004, 835).

One attempt by Gersovitz and Kriger (2013, 160) at such a definition describes civil war as "a politically organized, large-scale, sustained, physically violent conflict that occurs within a country principally among large/numerically important groups of its inhabitants or citizens over the monopoly of physical force within the country." While Gersovitz and Kriger suggest the additional term of "regional war complex" to better cover the internationalized and episodic nature of wars, particularly in Africa, their definition of civil war does capture the current dynamics in Sudan. For the last two years two armies have fought for control of Khartoum and the country at the cost of over 60,000 lives in the capital region alone.[2]

The complexities of the study of civil war do not end with settling upon a definition. The data issues that have persistently plagued the field extend to the causes of civil war onset with important implications. Coding rules can deeply affect predictions of where and when civil wars occur and coding decisions made regarding "manipulable" variables like income level will deeply influence estimates of the efficacy of policy interventions (Sambanis 2004).

Attempts to arrive at a set of accepted causes have yielded a few major buckets of explanations and there is agreement on a broad set of factors that are correlated with the occurrence of civil war. Poverty, negative income shocks, weak institutions, sparsely populated peripheries and mountainous terrain all make civil war more likely (Blattman & Miguel 2010) Despite identification of these factors, a theoretical mechanism that can, "best explain the incidence, conduct, and nature of civil war is still far from being realized" (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 22). By examining Sudan I do not intend to produce a grand unifying theory of civil war onset, but rather to add evidence on the side of some already identified correlates and question others.

[2] Maysoon Dahab et al., "War-Time Mortality in Sudan: A Capture-Recapture Analysis," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network, November 12, 2024).

To take the previously mentioned correlates as a starting point, this section will examine work on the connection between poverty, income shocks, weak institutions, sparsely populated peripheral regions, mountainous terrain, and civil war onset. In addition to these correlates I will add democratization, the presence of militias, and previous civil war occurrence as they are present in the case of Sudan and central to my argument. I will also examine the effect of oil and ethnic fragmentation as these are commonly explored correlates that I will argue did not lead to the current civil war in Sudan. After reviewing the evidence for each correlate, I will evaluate how the correlate may have contributed to the civil war in Sudan.

Poverty is often cited as one of the major causes of civil war. Referenced in key studies (Fearon & Laitin 2003, Collier & Hoeffler 2004) the relationship between low per capita incomes and higher chances of civil war is one of most well established in the field. Yet while poverty and civil war are correlated, the direction of causation is unclear. To wit, "Massive loss of life inevitably affects the economy. Warfare also destroys physical infrastructure and human capital, as well as possibly altering some social and political institutions" (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 5). Rather than low income producing civil wars, it has been suggested that civil war is one of the largest factors driving the income gap between the richest and poorest countries (Paul Collier et al. 2003).

Differences between how Fearon & Laitin (2003) and Collier & Hoeffler (2004) interpret the role of per capita income in civil war onset also cloud the issue. Collier & Hoeffler (2004) state that high income populations have more to lose during rebellions while a low loss of earnings could encourage conflict. This opportunity cost approach is different from the mechanism suggested by Fearon and Laitin (2003), who argue that per capita income is the key measure due to its ability to serve as a proxy for state administrative, military, and police capabilities. These

different explanations for the theoretical mechanism have led to calls for more detailed data (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 23) to better evaluate the claims of causality.

But the simple fact that wealthier states are less likely to have civil wars does not give much analytical insight as, "'become more prosperous' is not particularly helpful advice to policymakers" (Jeffrey Dixon 2009, 715). The unclear theoretical mechanism and lack of a clear prescription to mitigate civil war onset have encouraged a turn from focusing on income alone to shift instead to institutions as Djankov and Querol (2007) argue.

If simple per capita income is not the driver of civil war onset, could inequality instead be to blame? Inequality could lead to civil war if it creates incentives for a deprived group to try to take over the state (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 18). Yet this flattening of motivations to solely economic incentives neglects the role of grievances (Cramer 2002) which themselves are not static but instead update and change (Wood 2003). Cramer (2003) also points out that variations in the Gini coefficient, the standard measurement of inequality, are often down to variation in the way data is recorded, not actual differences in inequality.

Beyond measurement issues, there is also not one unitary definition of inequality. Stewart (2001) writes on the importance of horizontal inequality, between groups, rather than vertical inequality, between individuals. While Stewart shows some effect on social and civil conflict, a lack of variation in level of horizontal inequality causes it to fall short of offering a testable theory (Dixon 2009, 725). Failing that theory, the robust correlation of inequality with civil war onset, lacks a clear policy prescription, other than to work to make the country more equal, a task that becomes even more difficult thanks to persistent measurement issues.

Along with poverty and inequality I am including income shocks. Similarly to poverty, the correlation for income shocks and civil war is robust, but in which direction does the causality run

(Blattman & Miguel 2010, 25). Miguel, Satyanath, and Sergenti (2004) use rainfall in 41 African countries as an instrument to show the connection between shocks and civil war. Yet while shocks may have an effect in some settings, again context matters, for "if civil war is the result of a bargaining breakdown, there are good theoretical reasons to believe that events such as price shocks have differential effects on civil conflict depending on the local institutional setting, the number of already existing armed groups, and the future shifts in power across political groups likely to result" (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 18). Thus, despite robust correlation, the actual effect of shocks depends largely on the political context and is also likely to have a bigger impact in ongoing conflicts (Koubi & Böhmelt 2014).

With strong correlation, but an unclear mechanism, the presence of high poverty and inequality, and income shocks should be noted in countries where there is concern regarding the outbreak of civil war. In Sudan's case its GDP per capita PPP[3] was $2,470 in 2023 ranking 171 of 183 countries but above 11 other African countries including Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo[4] For inequality, the latest Gini coefficient measurement is 34.2 from 2014[5], displaying a relatively moderate level of income inequality. Finally, during the period of the Sudanese uprising, coup and civil war, a major income shock did occur, the Covid 19 epidemic. However, while Sudan was affected, so too was the rest of the world.

Combining two geographic correlates, sparsely populated peripheral regions and mountainous terrain, we again see strong correlation. Fearon and Laitin (2003) found that mountainous terrain more than doubled the chances of civil war onset for countries that are in the ninetieth percentile of mountain coverage. Collier and Hoeffler (2004) also find that dispersed

[3] Gross domestic product based on purchasing power parity. A more useful measure than nominal GDP for comparison that uses the relative cost of goods.
[4] The World Bank, World Development Indicators.
[5] The World Bank, World Development Indicators

populations increase the risk of conflict. The explanation for why both mountainous terrain and a geographically dispersed population correlate to increased civil war risk are often connected, that mountainous terrain or empty land makes it easier for fighters to hide (Koubi and Böhmelt 2014, 25). This advantage could lower the costs of rebellion making conflict onset more likely.

These correlations do hold true for previous civil wars in Sudan. Before the independence of South Sudan, Sudan was the largest country in Africa with nearly a million square miles and a geographically dispersed population outside of the cities of Khartoum and Juba. The mountainous regions of the country also played a significant role in the conflict, particularly the Nuba mountains where government massacres cost thousands of lives and displaced hundreds of thousands more. Yet in the current war between the generals, the dense streets of Khartoum became the primary battleground, far from the peaks of the Nuba mountains. While the country still retains mountainous and peripheral regions even after the creation of South Sudan, the civil war did not originate in those regions.

Some critics of poverty's role in civil war onset point instead to institutions. Fearon and Laitin (2003) themselves argued that per capita income could be a proxy for institutional strength and that a weak central government was a cause for civil war. The turn toward institutions was influenced by Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson (2001), who had written of the ways that extending the franchise helped elites stave off challenges from below. In the context of civil wars, strong institutions could help solve the commitment problem, which remains a key explanation for civil war (Blattman & Miguel, 2010, 19) while weak institutions would fail to avoid conflict, an outcome commonly seen in Sub-Saharan Africa (Herbst 2000).

But which institutions are most important and why do they matter? The answer is not readily apparent as, we don't adequately understand the particular legal and political institutions

legal institutions that can enforce commitments compromises (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 19). Competing answers have included institutions related to taxes, (Besley and Persson 2008), the rule of law (Garfinkel 2004), and frequently the military. However persuasive these institutions' ties to the outbreak of war are, the vastly different approaches means that the concepts require disaggregation and more consideration of measurement issues to be used effectively (Blattman & Miguel 2010).

Measuring the strength of institutions once again presents real difficulties. In Sudan, an inability to collect taxes was a hallmark of the transitional period before and especially after the coup when a politically important former warlord became finance minister as thanks for his support of the military. Rule of law also suffered with attempts to restore the judicial wing hinging upon the success of the political framework deal. Finally, as covered in chapter 3, the international institutions tasked with shepherding the country's democratic process were under-resourced and ineffective. Sudan's rule of law ranking in 2023 was 132 out of 142 countries according to the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index,[6] while its fragile state ranking, an index of 12 indicators measuring "corruption, economic decline, and social tensions" puts Sudan 172 out of 179 countries.[7] Sudan's institutional rankings had already suffered as a result of the 2021 military coup that abandoned development of the country's fledgling democratic institutions. The rankings show that in the event of a potential civil war, no institution existed in the country that could solve the commitment problem.

Often seen in conjunction with weak institutions, anocracies, or partly democratic countries, also enjoy a robust correlation with civil war. The evidence, drawn from both comparative and case studies, is strong enough to term them "incubators of civil conflict"

[6] World Justice Project, WJP Rule of Law Index, 2024.
[7] Fund for Peace, Fragile States Index Annual Report 2023

(Blattman & Miguel 2010, 27). The civil war danger that anocracies face has long been established in the literature (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Hegre et al. 2001), yet "recent work suggests such findings must be taken with caution. For instance, democracy and anocracy measures, commonly based upon the Polity IV dataset (Monty G. Marshall and Keith Jaggers 2006), explicitly use civil war and political violence in the coding of the data, thus mechanically correlating democracy and conflict by definition" (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 27-28). Despite the endogeneity issues, Goldstone (2010) finds regime type to predict civil war with anocracies the most frequent victim of civil war onset, more so than full autocracies or democracies.

The results show that at the extremes, both democracy and autocracy reduce the chances of civil war, but anocracy increases it (Dixon 2009, 718). After Sudan's military coup in 2021, the country's political rights and civil liberties plummeted, leaving it ranked 10/100 or "not free" according to Freedom House.[8] This ranking would put Sudan firmly in the category of autocracy.

What role does democratization itself have in civil war onset? While the relationship between democratization and civil war has been a frequent topic of study, the directionality has often been reversed. Focusing on the ways that civil wars affect democratization, arguments abound, along with often conflicting theories. Do wars that end in a negotiated settlement lead to democratization as Jensen and Wantchekon (2011) argue or do decisive military victories actually result in greater democratization as Toft (2010) claims? The connection between the relative costliness of civil wars and democratization is also up for debate with costly wars alternately expected to convince combatants to ""to agree to a democratic post-civil war order" (Gurses & Mason 2008, 322) or "hamper the trust, compromise, and accommodation necessary for democracy to take root" (Fortna & Huang 2012, 803).

[8] Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2023

Ultimately however, despite the contradictory expectations, civil war does not seem to drastically affect the prospects of democratization, for as Fortna and Huang (2012, 807) note, "democratization in postconflict societies looks much like democratization elsewhere…Rather than characteristics of the war just fought, postwar democratization hinges more on the economic structures of society, and thus, its determinants are much the same as those of peaceful societies." Sudan's transition had to reckon with the country's history of civil wars, but according to Fortna and Huang (2012), the legacy of those wars should not have doomed the transition to failure.

What effect though does democratization have on civil war onset? The theory that democratization might result in more conflict has been advanced since at least Mansfield and Snyder (1995, 80) found that "States that make the biggest leap, from total autocracy to extensive mass democracy — like contemporary Russia— are about twice as likely to fight wars in the decade after democratization as are states that remain autocracies." A counterpoint to the Clinton era's focus on the democratic peace theory, that democracies do not fight each other, and the wave of democracy assistance that followed, Mansfield and Snyder (1995, 79) cautioned that, "countries do not become mature democracies overnight. They usually go through a rocky transition, where mass politics mixes with authoritarian elite politics in a volatile way. Statistical evidence covering the past two centuries shows that in this transitional phase of democratization, countries become more aggressive and war-prone, not less, and they do fight wars with democratic states." Democracy brings peace, but the result of democratization could be war. Among the reasons for increased conflict during democratization, Mansfield and Snyder cite "Inflexible interests and short time horizons. Groups threatened by social change and democratization, including still-powerful elites, are often compelled to take an inflexible view of their interests, especially when their assets cannot be readily adapted to changing political and economic condition." (Mansfield

& Snyder, 1995, 90-91). This fundamental insight into the actions of elites during democratization seemed entirely forgotten by the international community charged with shepherding Sudan's democratic transition.

While Mansfield and Snyder were focused on the prospects for increases in interstate wars, subsequent research confirmed similar effects for intrastate wars. "We are able to confirm a strong effect of democratization on the outbreak of internal conflict while controlling for the influence of incoherent regime types and regime instability. Indeed, we also find that autocratization can induce civil wars, though its impact is more immediate than that of democratization" (Cederman, Hug & Krebs). This finding that moving towards democracy generates conflict lines up well with the dedicated anti-democratic actions of the counter-revolution covered in chapter 2 both in Sudan and during previous attempted democratic transitions.

The role of the international community in stoking conflict, even unintentionally, has also been captured by scholars. Bates (2008) argued that the international democratization push in Africa increased conflict. By shortening the amount of time the ruler had to extract rents and reducing aid flows, rulers were incentivized to loot the state (Blattman & Miguel, 2010, 19). Some have pushed back against this conclusion, noting instances of successful democracy assistance (Savun & Tirone 2011). Braithwaite and Licht (2020) have identified the presence of institutionalized civil society organizations (CSO) as the crucial variable determining the impact of aid. The actions of Sudan's military regime to divide and conquer its democratic opponents, including civil society organizations here, gains significance. Without the transitional government, international efforts to provide democracy aid fall into what Braithwaite and Licht call a problematic scenario "when CSOs are highly restricted, with limited participation and little chance to affect the policy process" resulting in a "dangerous" situation (Braithwaite & Licht 2020, 112).

The solution involves pressuring regimes to support CSO's a process that was largely abandoned in Sudan in favor of accommodation with the military.

The link between democratization and war has been disputed (Narang & Nelson, 2009), and measurement issues related to the level of democracy have introduced uncertainty (Cederman, Hug, & Krebs 2010). However, after fixing endogeneity issues introduced by the utilization of Polity indicators, Cederman, Hug and Krebs (2010, 387) were able to link civil wars to democratization as well as find a separate association between autocratization and civil war. Moreover the connection produces civil wars for the control of government, not merely territory Cederman, Hug, & Krebs 2010, 386), mirroring the outcome in Sudan's civil war. The dangers of democratization prompted Mansfield and Snyder to speculate on what a successful path might look like. The answer was not dissimilar from O'Donnell and Schmitter's (1986) advice on pacted transitions explored in chapter 3, "the process goes most smoothly when elites threatened by the transition - especially the military - are given a golden parachute" (Mansfield & Snyder 1995, 96). Yet Mansfield and Snyder's (1995, 96) advice didn't end there, "Not only do old elites need to be kept happy, they also need to be kept weak. Pacts should not prop up the remnants of the authoritarian system, but rather create a niche for them in the new system." Instead of keeping the military elites in Sudan happy and weak, the international community strengthened their hand while democratization, and the prospect of one general gaining the upper hand threatened their futures.

Perhaps the clearest cut correlate of civil war however is a previous conflict, for, "even when civil wars have been 'settled,' they often have continued potential for conflict. Nearly half of civil wars see violent conflict surrounding the same issue at a later date" (Cunningham 2013, 659). In fact, since 2000 9 out of 10 civil wars were repeat conflicts (Walter 2015, 1242). Dubbed

the conflict trap (Collier and Sambanis 2002) most recurrent civil wars are also occurring in two regions, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East (Walter 2015, 1243). This trap has been alternately explained as the result of economic destruction due to previous rounds of civil war (Hegre & Sambanis 2006) a result of the tendency for specific subsets of civil war to recur (Toft 2010), or in Walter's (2015) argument, bad governance and a lack of institutions.

If governments lack institutional accountability, enduring political settlements are harder to achieve as, "'Combatants' ability to negotiate their way out of war will depend on their ability to hold each other accountable to the terms of an agreement over time" (Walter 2015, 1245). Sudan's current civil war is not a repeat war, but the inability of the RSF and the SAF to agree was similarly hindered by the lack of institutions. This is largely because like many other government elites, they had were not incentivized to create strong institutions" (Walter 2015, 1246). The soon to be combatants had in fact combined to destroy those institutions during the military coup. As the RSF turned away from its former partner to ally with democratic actors in Sudan and pursue an electoral path to power unhindered by strong institutions, the SAF saw a threat to its survival. While the history of prior conflict in Sudan and the country's institutional weakness indicates the likely recurrence of civil war, the fact that it emerged between new combatants, and former allies is not captured by the existing theory.

Another correlate that has particular relevance for Sudan is the presence of militias. A common presence in civil wars, pro-government militias are present in "81 percent of all country-years affected by civil war between 1981 and 2007" (Jentzsch, Kalyvas & Schubiger 2015, 756). The role of pro-government militias challenges conceptions of the state as a unitary actor, echoing already established work on the fragmentation of rebel forces (Cunningham 2013 and Staniland

2014). Sudan presents an interesting case where the pro-government militia effectively becomes the rebels.

Militias are present in all types of civil war (Jentzsch, Kalyvas & Schubiger 2015, 757) and their participation has several distinct effects. Firstly, their presence can lengthen civil wars as additional groups that are not always in lock step with the regime can make settlements more difficult ((Jentzsch, Kalyvas & Schubiger 2015, 760). While they may be an effective tool, the use of militias can also undermine the regime and lead to increased conflict (Hughes and Tripodi 2005).

Beyond their effect on civil wars, militias can have a destabilizing effect on societies even after peace (Jentzsch, Kalyvas & Schubiger 2015, 764) including through their ability to affect electoral politics (Acemoglu, Robinson & Santos 2009). In Colombia, paramilitaries have used their power to, manipulate elections by using their coercive threat on rural elites (Lopez Hernandez & Avila Martinez 2010; Chaves & Robinson 2010). The RSF in Sudan aspired to play a similar role in Sudan's electoral process before the onset of civil war.

The presence of the RSF, an officially recognized militia, had important consequences in Sudan during both previous and current conflicts. The RSF's access to power and resources, won by its performance carrying out state sponsored ethnic cleansing in Darfur secured it a key role in post-war politics, especially after the fall of Omar Al-Bashir, the country's longtime ruler. Similarly to Colombian paramilitaries, the RSF flush with funds and arms could skew the electoral process, an outcome that threatened the SAF.

Finally, there are two correlates that, while significant in the literature of civil war onset, do not apply as clearly to Sudan's current civil war. Nevertheless, they remain relevant to prior

conflict and are worth exploring. These two correlates are the presence of oil and ethnic fractionalization.

Oil is explored as a subset of the resource curse theory of civil war, where greed drives conflict in order to control a lootable resource (Dixon 2009, 713). Oil stands out as the most significant resource leading Dixon (2009, 714) to claim, that it is dangerous and that countries that export it are at increased risk of civil war. These results are present across a range of surveys including Fearon and Laitin (2003). Some subsequent studies have found that oil encourages some types of civil war and not others, for instance, revolutionary conflicts (Buhaug 2006), or that it encourages civil war in specific regions like Sub-Saharan Africa (Krause & Suzuki 2005). Overall, the findings, "are consistent with the contest models prediction that insurgencies flourish in resource rich regions because of the existence of more rents to fight over and the availability of easy finance" (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 26).

Oil was an important factor in previous civil wars in Sudan. However, the secession of South Sudan in 2011 took with it three quarters of the country's oil reserves. While Sudan still refines and exports South Sudan's oil, production in both countries has stagnated.[9] The current civil war did not take the form of an insurgency seeking to control the country's oil wealth and the resource is not a primary factor in the conflict.

Ethnic fractionalization is a more divisive correlate. While there are mixed results regarding the connection between civil war and ethnicity (Sambanis 2004, 836), almost all studies of civil war onset address it as a cause (Fearon & Laitin 2003, Posner 2004). The prominence of ethnic fractionalization has produced concern as scholars "are wary of conclusions that might justify ethnic cleansing or other forms of discrimination" (Dixon 2009, 710). Conceptual and

[9]United States Energy Information Administration, Sudan's Energy Overview, 2024

measurement concerns (Posner 2004) should give equal pause. As Hegre and Sambanis (2006) highlight, the way diversity is defined produces different results on its civil war onset effect. Intriguingly, where fractionalization fails to predict civil war onset, a measure of polarization has performed better for Montalvo and Marta Reynal-Querol (2005).

Ethnic heterogeneity has been found to have an effect on specific types of civil wars. Sambanis (2001) finds an effect on ethnic wars only, while Buhaug and Rod (2006) find it significant in secessionist wars far from the capital. However, even in the case of ethnic civil wars, that a given conflict occurs along ethnic lines doesn't mean that ethnicity is what is causing the war. Instead, as collective action may simply be lower inside homogeneous groups the resulting ethnic division could be a result of the fighting rather than its cause (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 27).

Sudan's previous civil wars were ethnic civil wars fought for secessionary purposes far from the capital. Sudan's level of ethnolinguistic fragmentation (ELF) is high at .746 ranking 126th out of 149 countries in 2010.[10] However, the 2019 civil war did not erupt along the existing ethnic cleavages. Instead, the former tool of the regime that previously carried out ethnic cleansing turned against its former master.

In Table 4.1 below I list Sudan's outcomes for all the correlates of civil war explored above. Several highly correlated indicators have results that would put Sudan at higher risk for civil war onset. These correlates do not on their own determine the outbreak of civil war, and even some of the most concerning correlates, like a prior civil war, suggest the emergence of a different conflict than the current war of the generals. In the next section I look more closely both at Sudan's history of civil wars and the typology of the conflicts.

[10] Lenka Drazanova. 2019. "Historical Index of Ethnic Fractionalization Dataset (HIEF)." Harvard Dataverse.

Table 4.1 Correlates of Civil War in Sudan

Correlate	Status/Level
Poverty	High
Inequality	Moderate
Income Shock	Present
Mountainous	Moderate
Sparsely Populated	Yes
Institutions	Weak
Anocracy?	No
Democratization	Yes
Previous War	Yes
Militias	Present
Oil	No
Ethnic Fragmentation	High

4.3 Sudan's Correlates

Sudan's correlates of war tell a complicated story. Many of the correlates indicate the possibility of a civil war, but not the current civil war. How should we understand this result and separate signal from noise?

First, correlates like poverty and inequality are likely to have little predictive capacity on their own. As explained above, poverty alone is not seen as a sufficient indicator to predict civil war onset. The relatively low inequality result may point more to the lengths Sudan's economic elite have gone to hide their wealth rather than being an indication of an egalitarian society. Poverty and inequality as well as the third correlate, income shocks occur in many regions around the world

that do not experience civil war onset. Therefore, while this bucket of correlates yields indications that civil war risk is elevated, they do not possess predictive capacities.

The presence of mountainous terrain and sparsely populated areas yield a similar result. Mountains and open terrain do not alone predict civil war, yet civil wars have emerged from these areas in Sudan in the past. However, this is not the case with the current conflict which erupted in the capital. Similarly ethnic fragmentation, and the presence of oil have been key predictors of conflict in the past. However, after 2011 South Sudan gained control of most of the country's oil reserves, reducing the likelihood of oil sparking a civil war. Ethnic fragmentation has also been an engine for conflict in the past yet does not serve as the main cause of the current civil war. This "Challeng[es] simplistic narratives that cast Sudan's wars as disputes between Arabs and Africans, this conflict has transcended ethnic bonds" (Hassan and Kodouda 2025). This also means that despite a history of previous wars, the current war is not a reignited conflict.

The presence of weak institutions, and indeed the destruction of all democratic institutions after the military coup generates more predictive power. The RSF and SAF were unrestrained by domestic institutions as they exerted control over the levers of government. The complete military control qualifies the country as autocracy rather than anocracy, a condition that would have been met during the tenure of the transitional government. That democratization did persist during this period is a contradiction that this project has sought to highlight. With weak institutions, and the presence of dozens of militias, including one at the center of power, it was a dangerously unsettled time to push for elections.

The JPA, which let rebel groups into the government as long as they were loyal to the military, set up an untenable situation. Thanks to language added in the JPA, armed groups were not scheduled to disarm until after the election (Interview with Professor Siddig Tauer 2023). Nor

was the mechanism for Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) specified or funded. The last detail is of critical importance as the costs can range up to $10k per soldier. Democratization without civilian control of the military or demobilization of rebel forces involved both the bullet and the ballot.

As the civil war enters its third year, an additional correlate of war should be considered. The presence of international backers willing to continue sending support despite the destruction of the central government. Sudan's civil war has spun a complicated web of alliances with the UAE at the center for the RSF providing guns and other supplies to what is now a vast region filled with UAE proxies that spreads from Libya through Chad and into Sudan (Hassan & Kodouda 2025). Egypt plays a similar role for the SAF, but Saudi Arabia, Russia, and even Iran and Turkey have all played a role in the conflict.

What is shared between this diverse set of actors is a sense that a long, drawn-out war might not be against their interests. As both the SAF and RSF dig in, Hassan and Kodouda argue that:

> For these international partners, an informal stalemate is not so different from a negotiated peace. As long as each coalition's area of control remains largely set, the kinds of economic activities important to these patrons can proceed without the bother of negotiating a politically difficult resolution. And foreign backers can maintain lucrative supply lines without the burdens associated with doing business with a legitimate state (such as regulations and tariffs) or popular protests against resource extraction that benefits a small elite. (Hassan and Kodouda 2025)

The presence of international backers with business interests that can survive and perhaps even improve without the presence of a central state may be the clearest predictor of civil war onset.

4.4 Typologies of Civil War

The emergence of civil war in Sudan coincided with the country's independence. The south of the country, which was marginalized during British rule, found itself similarly ignored by Khartoum. From 1955, the year before independence, until 1972, a civil war between the central government and the south raged. Despite attempts to resolve the underlying issues, a second civil war between the north and south began in 1983 only ending in 2005 after setting a date for a referendum on the South's independence. For 40 of Sudan's 69 years of existence as an independent state the country has experienced civil war costing millions of lives.

Yet the current civil war in Sudan is not being fought by the same sides or over the same issues as the previous conflicts. Indeed, though many of the correlates of war discussed in the previous section indicate a substantial risk of civil war, the resulting conflict was not fought along ethnic lines, or in the mountains and rural provinces. Instead, the country now faces a war for control of the government fought between former allies. Why is the third Sudanese civil war so different from the previous conflicts?

Answering that question first requires examining the different varieties of civil war. The field of conflict studies has wrestled with how exactly to typologize civil war,

> Some have segregated wars by scale, distinguishing between 'conflicts' of 25 to 1,000 battle deaths per year, versus 'wars' of more than 1,000 battle deaths (Gleditsch, et al. 2002). Others, like Sambanis (2001), explore whether 'identity' (i.e., ethnic and religious)

> wars have different causes than ‘nonidentity’ wars. Kalyvas (2005, 2007) and Laia Balcells and Kalyvas (2007) suggest an alternative typology based on war origins and conduct, identifying four main classes: ‘conventional wars’ (featuring regular armies and defined frontlines); ‘symmetric nonconventional wars’ with regular armies fighting peripheral or rural insurgencies; ‘symmetric irregular wars,’ fought between weak national armies and insurgents; and the least common, ‘urban wars.’” (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 30)

While many authors agree on the need to disaggregate civil wars, there is not widespread agreement on how the range of conflicts would be typologized Instead, whether the conflict is motivated by identity is the key measure while others point to contests over control of the state vs. territory (Dixon 2009, 730). As a result a there is no established system of classification partially due to the fact that the type of conflict is endogenous to a number of variables including state and rebel capacity, grievances and more (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 31).

The push to establish a typology of civil wars is important however as a growing body of work shows that different varieties of civil wars seem to have different causes (Sambanis 2001; Buhaug 2006; Buhaug and Rod 2006; Suzuki 2007, Dixon 2009). Sambanis (2001) claims ethnic heterogeneity explains only ethnic wars, Buhaug (2006) however adds conflicts over territory as another, but ascribes the causes of revolutionary conflicts to the presence of oil and regime type, a conclusion supported by Suzuki (2007).

Competition for control over the central government is at the heart of one key theory that works to explain the prevalence of civil war in Sub Saharan Africa. Roessler (2016) describes the “Coup-civil war trap” faced by weak African states where, "accommodating rival Big Men in the central government is necessary to mobilize support from beyond the ruler’s own ethnic base and

extend the reach of the state. But doing so lowers the costs rivals face to usurp power in a future coup d'etat" (Roessler 2016, 6). If states instead exclude ethnic rivals from the government, they raise the risk of civil war. This trap has led to "political instability, ethnopolitical exclusion, and large-scale political violence" as "with rivals unable to credibly commit not to use force to lock in a larger share of power, each side must anticipate such a possibility, which can lead to the type of security dilemma and violent fallout seen [in South Sudan]" (Roessler 2016, 6). Roessler is not alone in identifying this as a key driver of civil war, there are multiple scenarios, "where credible commitments to peace or redistribution cannot be made even with complete information, that is, at least one side faces an incentive to renege once a settlement is reached" (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 13). In those instances, "waging war today can prevent one's opponent from gaining military strength in the future" (Blattman & Miguel 2010, 13). In Sudan, where both sides of the civil war were not merely fighting to improve their military strength, but also to expand their economic and political roles, the pressure was even higher as the shifts in the future distribution of power had the potential to be very large (Powell 2006).

Roessler's theory helps answer what he identifies as a major question: "what constrains rulers from making the concessions necessary to prevent the outbreak of large-scale political violence" (Roessler 2016, 6). Roessler's focus on the control of the state is important and relevant for the conflict in Sudan as well. However, while Sudan did see both a coup and civil war, it did not follow the blueprint of his coup-civil war trap. That is because the RSF and SAF were not fighting a conflict along ethnic lines. Nevertheless the "politics of civil war, by which bargaining over power ends in instability and largescale political violence," (Roessler 2016, 6) accurately describes the dynamics of the conflict.

The current civil war is not the first time that shortsighted political decisions have set the stage for future conflict. In his book on 2005 peace process that ended the second Sudan civil war and paved the way for the independence of South Sudan, Sharath Srinivasan (2021, 160) identifies "means-end logics" behind the deal that meant, "the world being made for politics through peacemaking can become more of a realm for force, not less." chapter 3 has made the case that the internationally supported democratization process had a similar outcome.

This chapter examined correlates of civil war onset and typologies of civil war to find out how high the likelihood of conflict was before April 2023. The result shows that while Sudan did face an elevated risk of civil war, the greatest danger came from bargaining issues faced by the rival generals during attempts to return to the democratization process. As explored in chapter 3, the lack of a security guarantee combined with the RSF's path to an electoral victory paved the way to war. While the security situation grew increasingly dire in the weeks before the war, it was the choices made by the international community in the democratization process, including its inability or unwillingness to check the military's political ambitions that heightened instability. Those choices were not inevitable.

Perhaps the most dangerous choice was to support the role of the two main generals in the political process. Not only were both leaders responsible for the deaths of protesters during the uprising, but they also represented heavily armed rival factions. International calls to combine their two forces threatened to elevate either the RSF or the SAF at the other's expense. That dynamic would encourage whichever side is likely to lose out to play the role of spoilers, using violence to sabotage attempts to make peace when it threatens their interests (Stedman, 1997, 5). To many in Sudan it was clear who the biggest spoilers were. Sitting in the Presidential Palace, El-Taher Hajar, Head of the Sudan Liberation Forces Alliance, a former rebel group, and member of the

Sovereignty Council pointed to Burhan's office and said "The Army is the biggest problem in Sudan, the essential problem" (Interview with El-Taher Hajar 2023). Six weeks later the Presidential Palace had turned into a battlefield as the RSF and SAF levelled the capital in their quest for control. In addition to the thousands dead and millions displaced, the war has also dashed near term hopes for a democratic Sudan, making democracy a casualty of democratization.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.1 Justice

"What is justice?" These words welcomed me to Amgad Faried's home office (Interview with Amgad Fareid Eltayeb 2023). A think tank director and former assistant chief of staff for Sudan's transitional prime minister, he spent his days attempting to get the country's democratic transition back on track. His question sprung not from recent political developments but rather the copy of Plato's *The Republic* on his desk, wherein Socrates and Thrasymachus debate the nature of justice. Yet, despite being written before the common era, the reference was far from dated. Amgad believed that reestablishing the transition and achieving the goals of the country's revolution, required serious conversations about justice and democracy. Was it just to hand political control of the country to two generals who had ordered the massacre of protesters during the uprising and later carried out a coup against the transitional government?

The answers may not have been found in *The Republic,* but Amgad argued that they were also absent in the Political Framework deal that was designed to return the country to its interrupted democratic transition. "Have you seen the deal?" Amgad asked, "It does not give us democracy and you cannot make a deal with the army and the militia, they will not respect it" (Interview with Amgad Fareid Eltayeb 2023). Amgad's comments mirror those of Kholood Khair, a political consultant in Khartoum who cautioned that she believed Phase II of the framework deal, initially signed in December 2022 was dead in the water (Interview with Kholood Khair 2023). The plan, which put civilians back in charge of the transition on paper, would not have diminished the military's political power.[1]

The international community and even the main pro-democratic political parties did not share Kholood's skepticism. A deal with the military must be signed at all costs or the Sudanese

[1] International Crisis Group. "A Critical Window to Bolster Sudan's Next Government," January 23, 2023.

might “lose [their] country” in the words of Perthes (Interview with Volker Perthes 2023), the head of UNITAMS. In his words, the political framework agreement was “not democratic governance” but instead “governance on the basis of an elite compromise” (Interview with Volker Perthes 2023). Democratization like Thrasymachus’ definition of justice had become “The interest of the stronger” (Plato, Republic I 338c-339a) bearing little resemblance to the democracy demanded by the Sudanese people during their revolution. Was there another way?

This dissertation has argued that it was the international community’s approach to democratization, including the centering of the military in the process, which led to the downfall of the transition and ultimately civil war. While a senior US embassy staffer claimed that “No one can identify a credible alternative that is workable at a strategic level” (Interview with American Embassy Staffer, 2023). I argue that this tunnel vision was a result of the US and UN pitching democratization as in best the interests of the military. What would have happened if instead of making democracy attractive to the military, a process that backfired spectacularly after the RSF aligned itself with the FFC, the international community more closely supported the definition of democracy demanded by the streets, with full civilian control and some measure of accountability for the military’s crimes?

Instead of a cynical assurance that only the most powerful and worst actors should get to make the rules of the new Sudan, Socrates lays out a challenge to the “interest of the stronger.” His response, which is essentially, “Justice is everyone having and doing what is appropriate to him” (Pitkin 2020, 170) reveals a disconnect that is recognizable in Sudan. Socrates and Thrasymachus “disagree *so* fundamentally that they do not really *disagree* at all. Rather, they seem to be addressing and answering different questions, and their arguments never really meet” (Pitkin 2020, 171). While Socrates defines justice, Thrasymachus is instead “making a kind of

sociological observation about the things which people call 'just' or 'unjust'" (Pitkin 2020, 171). In Sudan, those in the street demanded democracy, while the international community instead promoted democratization. Democratization, built upon elite compromise, was not intended to deliver the democracy called for by the streets as even its key proponents argued it was an expedient solution designed to stave off conflict.

Yet, as Chapter 4 argues, democratization fueled the conflict between the generals instead of defusing it. One reason for this outcome was that while democratization's sole democratic characteristic was a push for elections, it was never imbued with democratic substance. The international community followed the example of Thrasymachus who "somehow uses the word without making that claim or taking on the responsibility; it is as if he confines himself to the word's labeling function" (Pitkin 2020, 180). Democratization drew from the most limited proceduralistic conception of democracy void of ideological content.

Is it naive to criticize the international community for lacking any commitment to democratic ideals? After all, US interventions have much more frequently supported dictators than would be democrats, particularly in the Middle East and Africa (Brownlee 2012; Baissa & Cammett 2022). However, no amount of realpolitik analysis can paint the civil war in Sudan as a desired outcome for the US or EU. Massive ungoverned space and a flood of migrants threaten the security of European and American interests in the region and beyond.

However knowledgeable the proponents of democratization claimed to be of the limitations of the Sudanese political scene ("No one can identify a credible alternative that is workable at a strategic level" (Interview with American Embassy Staffer 2023), "there is not one street, there are many streets," (Interview with Volker Perthes 2023) they ignored the limits of their own approach. Without any ideological commitments to democracy, democratization

became a vessel that could be hijacked by the leader of a genocidal militia, which pushed the country into civil war. More is required to achieve democracy as well as justice, for "A concept like 'justice' includes, in all of us, both form and substance, both conventionalized, traditional social practices and an idea that is an ideal by which to measure them" (Pitkin 2020, 191). The international community was not dealing with "Jeffersonian democrats" (Interview with American Embassy Staffer 2023) when it sat down to negotiate a return to the transitional government with the generals, but that does not mean that democracy itself had to be abandoned. Could a commitment to democracy, and Sudan's democrats have changed the country's course?

5.2 The Arguments

Before giving my answer, I review below the main arguments made by this dissertation:

Chapter 2 (Escaping the Transition Trap) laid out the counter revolutionary playbook that confronted Sudan's would-be democrats. I detailed how the military activated, intensified, and exploited what were vaguely experienced pre-existing divisions (Wedeen 2019) in the fragile democratic coalition to weaken and eventually overthrow the transitional government. This dissertation has argued that the counter-revolutionary project worked very hard to derail the prospects of democracy in Sudan, thrusting the opposition in a sort of transition trap that thrived off division to keep it stuck. Similar to a finger trap, unless both the more radical democratic forces and the established opposition parties pushed against the military, they would be unable to free themselves. The chapter also emphasized the importance of street protests in pushing back against the military coup of 2023. However, the decision by the FFC to ally itself with one wing of the military prevented the civilians from escaping the trap leaving the future of the country's democracy hanging in the balance.

Chapter 3 (With Friends Like These) examined the international community's reliance on pacted transitions to "support" Sudan's democratic transition. While pacted transitions are seen as a relatively safe way to shepherd democratic transitions, they did not avoid conflict in Sudan. Based on elite bargains between softliners in the regime and the moderate opposition, the international community in Sudan failed to see the danger of additional division in a country with two militaries. The lack of a security guarantee due to the withdrawal of peacekeepers also gave the military free reign to renege on promises as it had done previously when carrying out a coup against the transitional government. Ultimately, the international community's support of the military as a political actor, despite having been repeatedly lied to by the generals, deeply compromised the country's democratic prospects.

Chapter 4 (When Democratization Kills Peace) asked how likely civil war was in Sudan. By examining major correlates of civil war, the chapter made the argument that though the country was at an elevated risk of civil war, the resulting conflict was not fought along ethnic lines as the literature would predict. Instead, the "war of the generals" was sparked by democratization, a known correlate of civil war that introduced a dangerous bargaining issue the generals chose to resolve with force.

Collectively these chapters have sought to answer the following questions asked in the introduction. What factors led Sudan's democratic transition to fail and why did that failure result in civil war? Under what conditions is a democratic transition possible when facing an economically and politically powerful military? Relatedly, how can the international community effectively support civilians in the face of military pushback? Did pursuing a pact with Sudan's fractured armed forces put the country on the path to democracy or set the stage for civil war? I sum up the answers below.

The factors that led Sudan's transition to fail were a dedicated counter-revolutionary strategy of divide and conquer from an empowered military and an international community that did not push back. At two critical moments, the signing of the JPA and the military coup of 2021, the international community failed to protect the transitional government. Pursuing democratization by means of a transition pact established the military as a political actor and the lack of a security guarantee left it free to overthrow the transitional government. The descent into civil war was due to the failure of democratization to address the bargaining problems between military factions, leaving the SAF threatened by the electoral prospects of its rival. A democratic transition could be possible when facing an economically and politically powerful military if both radical and institutional wings of the democratic forces act in concert to reject the military. This would have been made easier if there was strong international support to the point of providing a security guarantee via peacekeepers or some other mechanism. The military must have costs imposed upon it should it attempt to spoil the transition. Finally, transition pacts can introduce a dangerous level of fractionalization when the regime is represented by already-divided military forces. That division, when seized upon by the RSF, turned the intra-military rivalry between them and the SAF into an existential threat.

This dissertation extracts lessons from Sudan's democratic transition to fill gaps in several literatures. First, in keeping with the growing body of work on the counter-revolution (Allinson 2022; Clarke 2023), I reveal how utilizing the counter-revolutionary playbook including introducing economic and security instability to stoke discontent with civilian actors can derail a democratic transition, even one like Sudan's which had learned from past examples including Egypt and anticipated the attitude of the military. I highlight how pro-democratic actors must stay as united as possible to simultaneously pursue both radical and institutional

approaches to counter the regime. I also build on work on empowered militaries (Grewal 2023) to show their uniquely destabilizing role during democratic transitions.

In the realm of civil war, I offer an empirical example of democratization's effect on civil war onset. Building on work that shows democratization can increase conflict (Mansfield & Snyder 1995; Bates 2008; Cederman et al. 2010) Sudan reveals bargaining issues at the heart of the conflict that were exacerbated by the form democratization took in the country. I also contribute to work on militias and civil war (Hughes & Tripodi 2005; Acemoglu, Robinson & Santos 2009). Similarly to Colombia and Sierra Leone (Hernandez & Martinez 2010; Chaves & Robinson 2010), the RSF also was able to use its military might to affect electoral politics.

5.3 Further Research

This project also points at possibilities for further research. How should the international community approach democratic transitions occurring in countries with divided militaries? What methods can pro-democratic actors like the UN and interested countries use to shape bargaining issues so that they do not contribute to civil war onset? Can a set of democratic transition best practices emerge that draw from more recent democratic transitions rather than those which took place during the "Third wave" of democratization (which themselves may have been misunderstood)?[2] Are peacekeepers becoming more important to securing democratic transitions and what other options can help ensure counter-revolutionary actors don't resort to violence (Bastaki, Staniland & Popoola 2024)?

[2] Dan Slater argues that the third wave of democracy was in fact made possible by a wave of peasant resistance claiming, "democracy was practically irrelevant to the regime wave sweeping the globe in the mid-1970s" Dan Slater, "The Authoritarian Origins of the Third Wave." Journal of Democracy Volume 36, Number 2, April 2025, 125.

Sudan's derailed transition and ongoing civil war also give us reason to reflect on past instances of "successful" international mediation in the country. Indeed, Sudan's attempted democratic transition largely repeated mistakes made during the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan (before independence). There, "means-end peacemaking," a concept Sharath Srinivasan adapts from Hannah Arendt, resulted in an over emphasis on "fabricated objects over the actual goings-on in a non-violent civil political realm that must replace war and sustain peace." The push for a peace deal, any deal, by the US and other international actors failed to understand that it is only deals that "arise from genuine political action and are maintained through such action that will matter" (Srinivasan 2021, 14). Absent that genuine political action, "peacemaking can enhance rather than diminish, violence's value" (Srinivasan 2021, 128). Thus, the peace process between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/ Army (SPLM/A) over South Sudan encouraged the intensification of violence elsewhere in Sudan to gain leverage in the negotiations.

The means-end approach that had proved ill-suited for peacemaking turned out to be equally ineffective in restoring Sudan's democratic transition. Dissenting voices including original Declaration of Freedom and Change (DFC) signatories like the RCs and the Communist, and Baath parties were sidelined completely by the international community. Instead, negotiations took place in the military headquarters and the US ambassador's residence where the international ambassadors gathered weekly (Interview with Osman Hassan E. Bilail 2023). The situation again echoed the CPA where "The negotiating table - the privileged arena for dialogical political action on what peace should mean - [was] closed off, rigid in its agenda, reduced to bargaining logics and inflexible in its incorporation of plural views. By constraining the space

for words to constitute political action, peacemaking correspondingly raises the salience of brute force in making claims and defining agendas (Srinivasan 2021, 160).

The critique of democratization in Sudan is not simply that it reduced democracy to bargaining, but that it focused on the wrong bargaining issues. The RSF and SAF were primed for war due to the ability of one of the parties to exploit elections and marginalize its rival. Yet individuals involved in the political process claimed that sticking points between the two were largely confined to issues over promotions at the military academy "The two totemic things for the RSF are the formulation of who attends the Officers Academy and promotion practice. As well as more geographic representation in the military and in GIS (intelligence services)" (Interview with American Embassy Staffer 2023). This ignored the fact that as two empowered militaries the RSF and SAF were facing off over who would control economic and political resources as well as military prestige. Missing the potential for conflict between allies has been a failure of the international community in previous civil wars. As political scientists Atlas and Licklider write:

> Societies in civil war are often driven by a whole variety of conflicts. Outsiders typically do not get involved in conflict resolution until one or more of these divisions has resulted in large-scale violence. They focus on the particular conflict which seems to have produced war. In doing so, they privilege this particular conflict relationship on the not unreasonable grounds that this conflict, not others, has resulted in large-scale violence. But they may also assume that this conflict is the only one which will result in war and this is often a mistake. They may also tacitly assume that wartime allies will remain so indefinitely and that no new disputes or conflicts will arise after a successful settlement.

> These cases suggest that, even if the 'primary' conflict is handled, others may come to the fore- ground. To put it differently, outsiders should worry about conflict resolution and power-sharing among allies as much as among adversaries; even if this interferes with the seemingly immediate task of ending the violence, it may contribute to reduced violence in the future. (Atlas and Licklider 1999, 50)

Democratization in Sudan was based upon the logic that the conflict which needed to be managed was between civilians and the military. The international community neglected the conflict between the RSF and the SAF. By suppressing radical demands for democracy and insisting on a pacted transition the international community cleared the way for Hemedti, with his vast wealth and personal army to also win electorally. Allowing the head of the RSF to run the country imperiled the SAF and generated the familiar, "politics of civil war, by which bargaining over power ends in instability and large-scale political violence" (Roessler 2016, 6).

I return now to this dissertation's final question, was a democratic Sudan possible? I argue that it was. The transition was thought to be one of the most promising, learning from the mistakes of the 2011 uprisings and showcasing a political awareness and broad coalition that should have served it well (Chenoweth 2021; Grewal 2021). While the transitional government was done no favors by the slow actions of the international community (Berridge 2022) the military coup of October 2023 also indicates that the transitional government, however fractionalized it had become, was still a threat to the military's counter-revolutionary project. This dissertation does not chart a democratic experiment doomed to fail, but rather a counter-revolutionary project that succeeded in derailing a democratic transition before falling victim to its own violence.

I hope though that by centering the role of both militaries as massively powerful counter-revolutionary actors and revealing the steps they took to snuff out the country's democratic future the international community will avoid playing into their hands in the next transition. Sudan may also prove to be a glimpse into the future. An illustration, not just of the contradictions of the US empire, but also of what may become a common occurrence: the inability of the one-time global hegemon to restrain its former junior partners. While Sudan's former democrats and revolutionaries are unlikely to find the justice Socrates described any time soon, their fight to attain it will not be forgotten.

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Interviews

Written Interview with Resistance Committee Spokesperson, May 27, 2022, Khartoum
Interview with Al Yarmouk Resistance Committee, January 28, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with IGAD Head of Mission Osman Hassan E. Bilail, February 6, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with UNITAMS Staffer, February 8, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with Amgad Fareid Eltayeb, February 8, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with RC Coordinating Committee Member, February 8, 2023, Khartoum
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Interview with Siddig Yusuf, February 19, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with Resistance Committee Coordinating Committee, February 20, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with Kholood Khair, February 23, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with Professor Atta al Battahani, February 27, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with El-Taher Hajar, March 1, 2023, Khartoum
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Interview with American Embassy Staffer, March 9, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with Al-Noor Hamad, March 9, 2023, Khartoum
Interview with International Sudan Expert, May 26, 2025, Chicago
Interview with Maha Tambal, Senior Program Manager, DT Institute, May 28, 2025, Chicago

Appendix

A.1 Declaration of Freedom and Change 2019

- العربية

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Declaration of Freedom and Change
A Commitment to Build and Serve

DECLARATION OF FREEDOM AND CHANGE

Khartoum, January 1st 2019

We, the people of Sudan across cities and villages, in the north, the south, the east, and the west; join our political and social movements, trade unions and community groups in affirming through this declaration that we will continue the course of peaceful struggle until the totalitarian regime is removed and the following goals are achieved:

First: The immediate and unconditional end of General Omar Al Bashir's presidency and the conclusion of his administration.

Second: The formation of a National Transitional Government. This transitional government will be formed of qualified people based on merits of competency and good reputation, representing various Sudanese groups and receiving the consensus of the majority. Their role is to govern for a term of four years, until a sound democratic structure is established, and elections held. The transitional government shall be responsible for the following goals:

1. End Sudan's civil wars by addressing the root cause(s) of each and seeking remedies to their disastrous manifestations. These solutions will

have to incorporate the voluntary return of those displaced, and refugees to their domiciles.
2. Reach out to warring parties to address lingering issues, and security arrangements. These agreements should be fair, just and comprehensive.
3. Convene a Comprehensive Constitutional Conference to address key national issues, with the objective of forming a National Constitution Committee.
4. Apply the brakes on the current state of economic freefall, and work to improve the livelihood of all Sudanese citizens.
5. Oversee efforts to dismantle the structure of governance set up by a totalitarian one-party regime, and transition it to institutions based on a constitution and the rule of law. The goal is to create the conditions for a thriving state in which the people of Sudan elect their representatives freely; and to restructure civil services and the armed forces to be representative of the nation i.e. National, Diverse, and Independent.
6. Develop an independent judicial system. One based on a constitution, protection of human rights and the rule of law.
7. Empower Sudanese women and strive to end all forms of discrimination and oppressive practices against them.
8. Improve Sudan's image globally, and work on fostering regional and global relationships based on mutual respect and common interests. In that light, special attention will be given to the relationship with the Republic of South Sudan.
9. Ensure the state commitment to human development, social welfare, and the environment through programs and subsidies in areas of health, education and housing.

Third: Putting an immediate end to all violations against peaceful protesters, repealing of all laws restricting freedoms of speech and expression; and bringing the perpetrators of crimes against the Sudanese people to fair trials in accordance with accepted national and international laws.

By signing this draft declaration – which remains open to additions and amendments, especially regarding the tasks of the transitional government, accommodating all concerns and aspirations of the Sudanese people, and benefiting from previous relevant declarations of opposition groups – we affirm that we will continue taking to the streets and leading the nonviolent struggle, until our demands are met. We call upon our brethren in the armed forces to take the side of the Sudanese people and to refrain from supporting Al Bashir by participating in the brutalizing and killing of unarmed civilians.

Signatories:

1. Sudanese Professionals Association
2. Alliance of the National Consensus Forces
3. Sudan Call Forces
4. The Unionist Alliance (Opposition)
5. The Republican Party
6. The Liberal Party
7. The Centre Stream for Change
8. No to Women's Oppression Initiative
9. Girifna Movement
10. Change Now
11. Alliance of Civil Forces
12. Sudanese Resistance Committees
13. Congress of University of Khartoum Alumni
14. Confederation of Civil Society Organizations
15. Alliance of Jezira and Managil Farmers
16. Forum of Sudanese Tweeters
17. General Nubian Assembly
18. Revolutionary Council of Revival
19. Women of Sudanese Civic and Political Groups – MANSAM
20. The Broad National Front
21. Binaa Sudan Party
22. Association of the Families of Ramadan Martyrs

(Translated from the original, Arabic text)

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Acknowledgements