



Statement

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By International Crisis Group

Nurturing Sudan's Fledgling Power-sharing Accord

Sudan's military junta and opposition have agreed to form a civilian-led administration to steer a transition toward free and fair elections. But the generals signed only under pressure. All Sudanese – and outside partners – will need to remain vigilant lest they try to restore autocracy.

On 17 August, four months after the most sustained protest campaign in Sudan's modern history swept Omar al-Bashir from power, the Forces of Freedom and Change opposition coalition signed a power-sharing accord with the ruling military junta. The deal is a milestone in the country's sometimes stumbling transition away from autocracy. If honoured in full, it will pave the way for elections at the close of a three-year period of reforms overseen by a civilian-dominated cabinet and legislature. Within the week, the opposition and the generals are expected to announce the members of a new Sovereign Council tasked with steering the transition. It will consist of five opposition representatives, five members picked by the security forces and a civilian jointly nominated by both parties. The opposition will then name a prime minister and a cabinet, though the military will assign the interior and defence portfolios.

Yet formidable challenges lie ahead. The generals who have monopolised power in Sudan for three decades will not share it easily. And the new administration will inherit an economy in deep distress.

To give the transitional authority the best chance at success, external actors, notably the

African Union (AU) and its partners, should act as guarantors of the agreement. They should help bridge gaps in trust between the parties to ensure that the accord's timetable stays on track. Meanwhile, both Western governments and Arab Gulf states should stand ready to offer substantial financial assistance to the new administration, contingent on the generals respecting the accord's provisions for civilian control, both in principle and in practice.

The achievements of the Sudanese people are remarkable, not just in ending Bashir's rule but also in standing up to the junta's series of schemes to seamlessly replace the ousted strongman with a like-minded lieutenant. Beginning in mid-December, in towns and cities across Sudan, a diverse coalition of protesters drawing in the urban middle classes, rural farmers and herders, traders, students and a cross-section of professionals, notably doctors, defied repression including the killing of dozens and arbitrary detention of hundreds to demand change. Women were often at the vanguard of the protests, presenting a pointed challenge to a regime that had long sought to still their voices. The four-day sit-in at the beginning of April that ultimately persuaded the military to turn against their patron Bashir was stirring as both a display of civil disobedience and a celebration of Sudan's ethnic, cultural and political diversity.

The protesters underlined the wide support they command from ordinary Sudanese at the 17 August ceremony. Ahmed al-Rabia, the man picked to sign the power-sharing

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agreement on their behalf, is a teacher who supplements his income by driving a taxi at night. Mohamad Nagi al-Asam, a 28-year-old doctor who was detained and tortured in January after he emerged as one of the movement’s early spokesmen, delivered one of the main speeches. It was such everyman figures who helped topple one of Africa’s most entrenched regimes. It is understandable, given the David-versus-Goliath story to date, that many Sudanese rejoiced long into the night after the endorsement of a deal they hope will turn the page on their country’s troubled past.

Caution is warranted, however. The junta signed the agreement only under intense external pressure from parties that included the AU, the U.S., the UK and the EU. Many of its members are beneficiaries of the patronage-based economic system that Bashir created. They accumulated vast wealth not only from extravagant budgetary allocations to the defence sector but also from controlling sectors such as gold mining and sending thousands of Sudanese to fight as mercenaries in foreign wars. They will be loath to let civilian authorities audit or control these two sources of foreign exchange. The junta has been unafraid to use deadly force to get its way. On 3 June, troops stormed the sit-in outside the military headquarters, then ten weeks old, killing more than a hundred protesters, raping dozens and reportedly burning some alive, in a burst of brutality that shocked the world.

The junta could henceforth confine soldiers to the barracks but still find ways to derail the accord. The 17 August agreement is carefully crafted to prevent the military from overriding decisions by other organs, including the prime minister and the cabinet. The Sovereign Council – whose duties include overall responsibility for defence and foreign affairs – must confirm

all the prime minister’s appointments but will enjoy no veto over these choices. Decisions the Council rejects are to be sent back to the appointing authority and, if the prime minister reaffirms them, they are to take effect immediately. The prime minister and cabinet will take effective charge of running the country, including managing the civil service, drawing up the budget and overseeing all state agencies outside the security sector. The cabinet will also report to a legislative council, two thirds of which the civilian opposition will appoint. A general will head the Sovereign Council for the first 21 months of the transition before handing over to a civilian for the remaining 18 months pending elections. Despite these safeguards, the generals could stall or block decisions, particularly as they control the country’s armouries and also have considerable funds they have already used to buy off opponents.

A further concern is that important constituencies have not endorsed the power-sharing agreement. Commanders of longstanding insurgencies in Darfur, Blue Nile State and South Kordofan rejected the accord, saying they were insufficiently accommodated in transitional structures. The junta has reached out to some of these rebel leaders, seeking to cut separate deals that would lie outside the scope of the transitional agreements and thus undermine the civilian-led authority. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have also been in touch with some of these groups, as has Cairo, which hosted some of the main armed group leaders shortly after they rejected the deal endorsed on 4 August in Addis Ababa. Given the junta’s desire to divide and rule, the civilian opposition cannot afford to be seen as excluding the rebels from the transition. They should, together with the security forces, continue to seek an accommodation with the insurgents that signals the new rulers’ intent to break with Sudan’s history of centralised power that neglects and abuses the periphery.

Maintaining the opposition coalition’s cohesion will be tough. Its members are inexperienced, and they were unable to muster

a united front in negotiations with the junta until the 3 June massacre galvanised them into action. Some political parties, including the Communists, rejected the accord, saying it did not go far enough in seeking justice for those killed during the protests. Opposition leaders, acknowledging that the hopes of millions of Sudanese rest on their shoulders, should be as inclusive as possible and avoid early own-goals, such as their decisions to include only one woman in their initial list of Sovereign Council nominees and only a handful of women in the cabinet – missteps that have already provoked protests. It will take time to revive normal political life after decades of authoritarian rule, diaspora flight and forced inactivity. In the interim, the coalition should avoid internal squabbling and keep its eyes on the prize of reform.

The opposition has taken an encouraging first step by tapping an experienced and well-respected economist, Abdalla Hamdok, as its nominee for prime minister. This choice illustrates its understanding that it needs a figure with the right credentials to tackle the country's most significant challenges, particularly retooling a rigged economy that has immiserated millions of Sudanese. A number of quick, early steps would help support the new team as it navigates this crucial transition:

1. The AU, which played a critical role in negotiating the deal, should stay at the helm going ahead. Experience in transitions elsewhere shows that power-sharing pacts often founder when there is no guarantor who can offer an avenue for talks if the parties become deadlocked. Given the mistrust between the opposition and the generals, the AU, backed by other parties – including the UN – should play this role for the duration of the transition leading up to elections. Accepting an outside guarantor would allow the junta to show its good faith to a sceptical public. A guarantor would also give the opposition coalition confidence and help redress the asymmetry of power between the two sides, given that the generals retain
- effective control over the security forces and much of the formal and informal economy.
2. The AU should also appoint a special envoy and expand its liaison office in Khartoum, given recent events. The UN can channel technical backing to the office-holder who, given Sudan's needs, should ideally be someone with a background in macro-economic management. The joint AU-Ethiopian mediation team that helped broker the deal deserves commendation but a more permanent arrangement will be necessary to help the transitional administration. The proposed envoy should report to the Chair of the AU and provide regular briefings to its Peace and Security Council, which ought to monitor the agreement's implementation. The Council should not lift its 6 June decision to suspend Sudan's AU membership until the country's new administration is fully operational.
3. The new cabinet and the generals will also need to seize the opportunity to end Sudan's long-running insurgencies. As a first step, the transitional government and rebel groups could observe a six-month ceasefire as suggested in earlier rounds of talks, allowing all parties – perhaps with the support of others, such as the AU – to address the roots of the insurgencies, including the concentration of power and resources in Sudan's wealthier centre.
4. External partners, including the U.S., EU and international financial institutions, could assist the civilian-led transitional authority's efforts to jump-start the economy. They should coordinate their work with Gulf countries, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have sent significant financial support to transitional authorities already and continue to compensate Sudan's military for several thousand troops fighting in Yemen. Thus far, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have spoken primarily to the generals, though they have

made overtures to the civilian opposition. The U.S., which enjoys relations with the Sudanese, their key Gulf backers and Egypt, can play a leading role in coordinating aid and ensuring that special interests do not capture or compromise financial assistance. Washington should demand that all funding, perhaps through the pooled coordination mechanism outlined below, be channelled through the central bank and not into individuals' pockets, to give the new administration the best chance of stabilising Sudan's finances and to avoid empowering spoilers. The U.S. also has the leverage of tying Sudan's progress toward complete civilian rule to its designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, which Washington could eventually lift. The U.S. should in particular demand reforms to public sector financing and consistently lean on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to end the practice of sending funds directly to their clients in the security sector. Following on its success in persuading Gulf powers and Egypt to push their military allies to the negotiating table, the U.S. might convene a meeting of potential funders to pool financial support for Sudan's transition. These could include the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the Saudi Fund for Development and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development. Historical allies of Sudan, including Turkey and Qatar, could also be invited to

participate in this joint mechanism as leaving out these past donors may risk further exposing Sudan to intra-Gulf competition. The funds raised could then be managed and disbursed jointly, perhaps under the auspices of the UN Development Programme, which has the requisite experience. The overriding message should be that with debt in excess of \$55 billion, sky-high inflation and widespread shortages of essential goods, no number of ad hoc cash infusions can resolve Sudan's economic woes. Instead, the country needs reforms championed internally and supported externally, including debt relief. Partners should offer this support only if the junta respects the wishes of the Sudanese people for a civilian-led transition. They should stagger the resumption of financial assistance to accompany various phases of the accord's implementation, including the naming of a cabinet and the formation of a legislative council, expected by the end of November.

It was the Sudanese people who brought the country to this moment of great hope mingled with anxiety, and ultimately, the task of consolidating the gains of Sudan's revolution will fall to them. With their repeated mass strikes and, particularly, their million-man march on 30 June, Sudan's citizens have shown that they will not accept superficial change, let alone a return to the old ways. They are the arbiters of their country's future – but they deserve all the support they can get from Sudan's friends.