

Sudan's conflict – civil society and the war between the generals

Key takeaways from a roundtable with Sudanese and international experts

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The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) is one of the world's leading teams of independent researchers and communications professionals working on humanitarian issues. It is dedicated to improving humanitarian policy and practice through a combination of high-quality analysis, dialogue and debate.



Key messages

Civil actors need to be part of the search for peace. Peace processes need to be based on the activist, pluralist, decentralised strengths of leading civil actors, such as the Resistance Committees. Their inclusion must go further than giving them a seat at negotiating tables dominated by state actors' interests.

Three different peace processes have made little progress and have not so far included civil actors. For many Sudanese observers, this marginalisation of civil actors reflects several years of international failure to address the necessity of demilitarising Sudanese politics.

So far, peace processes have reinforced the positions of the belligerents and have undermined broader political engagement. There is an opportunity with the IGAD process that appears to recognise the need to involve civic activists. But it may be that the two processes need to run in parallel, with legitimacy/guarantees being offered through the civic process.

Resistance Committees need resources and funding if they are to continue providing services and political alternatives. But any attempts to help the Resistance Committees to develop a common agenda or organise services in a more cohesive way need to understand and support their strengths: their combination of decentralised structures, political engagement and local legitimacy.

Outsiders must recognise the intimate connections between peace efforts and service provision. International humanitarian actors should try to learn from the Resistance Committees' grasp of local accountability, perhaps by giving them a role in monitoring humanitarian aid. The committees have profound systems of accountability that would be eroded if they are turned into implementing organisations.

Most international humanitarian actors have adapted slowly to catastrophic new realities within Sudan; they risk capture by security interests; and their legitimacy is undermined by the inadequate international response to Sudanese refugees. These factors may lead to Sudanese disenchantment with international processes.

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Purpose of the note

This note summarises the discussion points of a private online roundtable convened by the Humanitarian Policy Group at ODI on 26 June 2023. It brought together a group of Sudanese and non-Sudanese researchers and analysts working on Sudan to discuss the massive outbreak of violence that has engulfed the capital and overwhelmed the country, and the response of Sudan's complex and diverse civil society to the crisis.

Participants discussed the present and future role of civil society in local and international peace efforts, and in addressing the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict. Finally, the roundtable discussed how international actors could work with civil society in order to reduce violence, address the humanitarian crisis, and support peace.

Background: war and civil politics

Sudan's long wars date back to the nineteenth century, and the foundation of a colonial state headquartered in Khartoum. The state used war to extend its power over southern hinterlands and incorporate neighbouring western sultanates – including Darfur, by far the biggest. Merchants and soldiers from the centre of the state devised a toxic mix of coercion and racism to extract labour and resources from these peripheral areas, subordinating the development of these societies to the interests of centre.

Since Sudan became an independent country in 1956, it has endured many wars. None have ended in military victory, but each war reworks Sudanese society and shapes future civic possibilities. War was a key technique of rural governance, displacing millions of people from the peripheries to the diverse, Afro-cosmopolitan capital and the relatively wealthy regions surrounding Khartoum. At the centre, governance reached more deeply into society, using the capital's powerful political, social, cultural and economic institutions, as well as police repression. The numerous rural and urban modes of governance and repression shaped different rural and urban expressions of civil society.

In the cities, trade unions, universities, media houses and political parties led civil society, and for many decades were thwarted by compromised electoral systems and domineeringly militarised governance systems. But rather than being cowed by these pressures, a new kind of decentralised resistance emerged: neighbourhood committees led by young people practising direct democracy and improvising revolutionary tactics.

Sudan has a long twentieth-century history of urban civic politics. But the government of former president Omar al-Bashir repressed and fragmented these groups. In the six years before his 2019 ouster,

new decentralised structures emerged, which proved a match for the security services. They were led by an independent doctor's union and neighbourhood-based youth networks. These groups played a leading role in the 2019 revolution, but they were not much represented in the transitional civilian–military governments of 2019–2021, dominated by technocrats and politicians that were more representative of an older kind of Sudanese civil politics. These old-style civic actors were thwarted by the 2021 coup, but the doctors' union and the local youth committees have survived both the coup and the latest war.

The capacity of the Resistance Committees to provide services in local neighbourhoods became salient during the harsh economic measures which saw the elimination of food and fuel subsidies – the main state welfare measure surviving after the privatisation of health, education and other social services in the 1990s. This was particularly true in 2020 and 2021, when a combination of inflation, austerity and a range of other factors devastated food security. Their uncompromising approach to the military coup of 2021 only buttressed their legitimacy.

In many rural areas, civil society has been structured by new types of violence. Over the past three decades, military governments outsourced security to militias, which developed new, terrifying techniques for rural governance and resource extraction. The biggest of these militias, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), expanded its control over the gold and livestock sectors, which for the past decade have accounted for almost three-quarters of Sudan's export earnings. In the poorest rural areas, where much of this wealth originates, militias have parasitically configured themselves around ethnic differences. They used the Native Administration – the durable, malleable and low-cost rural governance system structured around colonial notions of the tribe and occupying an intermediate position between government and local societies – to organise rivalries between neighbours and recruit fighters from embattled communities. Opposition armed groups also used ethnicity as a recruiting agent, polarising relationships between neighbours in the process. The Native Administration is caught up in the militarised politics of rural Sudan, but nonetheless has sometimes contributed to local peace talks and temporary local ceasefires.

The current war threatens the very survival of civil politics. The war was an outcome of the decisions of Sudan's military rulers over the past four years. In 2019, street protesters forced different elements of the military – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces militia they created – to depose a former dictator and seek a compromise with civilian political leaders whose legitimacy depended on the resolve and sacrifice of the young protesters. The civilian–military government negotiated a peace deal with former armed movements from rural Sudan, and implemented a harsh

package of economic measures which pushed inflation above 400% and deepened the food crisis which had led to the revolution. But when the civilians tried to loosen the military's grip on the country's wealth, the SAF and the RSF organised a coup which ejected civilians from government. The putschists lacked legitimacy and lacked a plan to end the food and financial crises, and were not able to agree a way forward for the country.

In April 2023, they went to war against each other. War has eliminated many of the possibilities of civil politics, and both warring parties thus benefit from undermining their most credible opponents. But the war has also revealed the impossibility of continuing with military politics in Sudan: whatever the outcome of the crisis, civil actors are the only ones that can reorient Sudan towards peace and equity.

Engaging with civil society as humanitarian actors

Sudan's civil society is complex and reflects diverse and contrary political movements, as well as rural–urban differences. The roundtable focused on civil actors that have proved themselves capable of delivering services in areas where violence has caused a complete collapse of state function. In urban areas, the Resistance Committees, made up mostly of decentralised, revolutionary groups, have drawn the most attention because they have been able to keep damaged water and health systems working, bury the dead, search for the disappeared, and help people flee from violence.

They are present across Sudan, and their constituencies are mainly urban. Their ability to respond to humanitarian needs and maintain credible political alternatives to military violence mean that they are central to Sudan's present and future. The war has spread across rural Darfur, Kordofan and the Blue Nile regions. Some rural civil actors in these areas have been compromised by the militarisation of rural politics: 'Haven't they been feeding this war for years with recruits? Are they still respected?' asked one roundtable participant. But rural civil society actors – including those associated with the Native Administration – have played a role in reducing local violence, organising local truces, and facilitating the movement of goods in the middle of a supply crisis.

The roundtable discussion focused on elements of civil society that are still able to deliver assistance. International humanitarian actors need to engage with these civil actors. But two factors need to be taken into consideration.

First, there is a risk of military capture of humanitarian supplies and funds. Sudan is barely able to import and export goods at the moment – the currency actually appreciated against the dollar in June 2023, because of depressed import demand. If they start to

flow, humanitarian supplies will represent a much larger proportion of imported goods than they did before the crisis, and humanitarian funds will represent a much larger proportion of financial flows. Sudan's rival militaries will try to capture these funds and supplies now that they have destroyed so much of the country's productive capacity. Military actors may be tempted to dismantle, or even directly target, credible local organisations that are seeking to relieve suffering, in order to protect military interests. International actors thus need to be cautious about the risks that humanitarian aid will present to credible local humanitarian actors. These actors are decentralised – and switching to a decentralised mode of aid delivery will be a major challenge to global aid organisations.

Second, there are prevailing misunderstandings of the role of civil society actors in aid delivery. Roundtable participants working within the United Nations and large donor organisations recognised the tendency of their own organisations to force Sudanese civil society into the NGO form, and the linked tendency to measure the value of these 'NGO-ised' structures by their compliance with aid doctrines and efficacy in managing aid funds. Today, these large organisations need to understand and recognise Sudanese frameworks of political and moral authority, and in some cases discard their own.

One possible way round these risks and misunderstandings is to give civil society a monitoring role in the provision of international assistance. Developing local accountability mechanisms for aid might help international agencies deal with the risks and dilemmas of a collapsed state system – allowing aid delivery to take place away from centres of political power which can no longer organise basic state functions. The widespread destruction of infrastructure requires thousands of local assessments of the capacity of health centres or schools which ministries may no longer be able to conduct. And aid resources will be limited: donors pledged \$1.5 billion in aid for Sudan and the surrounding region at a June conference, but it is not clear if those funds are new, or when they will be disbursed.¹

Engaging with civil society in peace negotiations

Three main multilateral peace negotiations emerged after the start of the war in 2023. Competing, disjointed and stalled, they have not succeeded in halting violence or initiated a viable political process.

- The Jeddah process, sponsored by the United States (US) and Saudi Arabia, convened representatives of the SAF and the RSF in Jeddah and succeeded once or twice in bringing brief pauses to the fighting. Neighbouring states and civil society actors had no representation at the talks. On 31 May,

¹ 'International donors pledge \$1.5 billion in Sudan aid' *Reuters*, 20 June 2023 (www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-chief-urges-donors-step-up-aid-response-sudan-2023-06-19/).

the SAF withdrew its participation in the process and on 22 June, the US stated that the talks were adjourned.

- The Addis process, led by the African Union, has convened meetings of African states and international bodies and set up a Roadmap on the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan, and an Expanded Mechanism which aims to involve a range of Sudanese civil society actors, with the help of the US. But the political processes it envisages have not yet begun.
- The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) process, which aimed to send the presidents of Kenya, South Sudan and Djibouti to Khartoum to mediate between the SAF and the RSF. It was impossible for the mediators to travel, and the SAF rejected Kenya's leadership of the mediation, proposing South Sudanese leadership instead. However, limited South Sudanese leverage over the warring parties has led many powerful diplomatic actors to question their capacity to manage the process.

ODI's roundtable discussed the possibility of civil actors taking part in peace negotiations. The collapse of the state run by military politicians has given civil actors an indispensable role in any peace process. But what would that role look like? Some participants argued that what was needed was to promote a cohesive – or even a unified – civil proposal from different civil society actors. 'The Sudanese need to get their act together,' one roundtable participant said. Trade unions, Resistance Committees and political parties should, in this scenario, come together around a shared agenda that would maximise their negotiating power.

Others argued that pushing civil actors towards consensus would be misguided. The civil actors that have survived the crisis are decentralised actors, with local frameworks of accountability. Resistance Committees – seen as the most widely respected grouping – have demonstrated the ability to develop coherent joint positions. The Resistance Committees charters that appeared after the 2021 coup were drafted democratically, with disagreements on each draft logged in Excel spreadsheets. This demonstrable capacity would give the committees a primary voice in any political processes, whether humanitarian, ceasefire or broader political reconciliation.

However, this capacity for consensus within the Resistance Committees may not be possible to replicate amongst other elements of civil society (which in Sudan includes movements with a wide range of political viewpoints and affiliations – for example, political parties, religiopolitical organisations and ethnic associations, some linked to armed actors). And developing civil society consensus in order for them to have a seat at a negotiation table surrounded by military politicians and foreign diplomats might not be the best way

forward. 'The Resistance Committees are not the people who should have a chair, but the people who are building the four legs of the table,' said one participant. Rather than trying to force the Resistance Committees to lead a broad front and to adapt their ways of working to a limited and sterile negotiations format – a format that has reproduced and deepened the power of armed elites across Sudan and South Sudan – outsiders should think of ways in which the negotiating format could be adapted to the imperatives of a broad popular movement. 'The Resistance Committees need to be asked: how do you want to engage?'

Although participants accepted the need for common agendas, many were cautious about creating unified platforms. Instead, the diversity of Sudanese society needs to be a starting point: 'Better to have a variety of platforms, some will be useful, some will die.' In the current extreme violence, a unified civil society platform might run the risk of being seen as a proto-government – turning undefended democratic groups into targets of violence from delegitimised military politicians. International actors need shrewd and honest reflection on their capacity to help in the process of building civil society participation in peace processes. As one participant said:

The UN does not have the ability to do it, it's not in its instincts. You need credible actors, ideally Sudanese. Multiple tracks that can yield benefits, build projects in parallel, build credibility, build shared interests, over time.

Conclusion

Sudanese civil society brings enormous resources – democratic values and structures, activism, hope – to Sudan's enormous challenges. The Resistance Committees have shown themselves to be the custodians of these enormous resources, and the effective leaders of civil society. They are likely to develop an agenda for humanitarian intervention and for future political processes along multiple tracks. Although the process of developing an agenda is likely to be arduous and slow, it is also urgent, and Sudanese civilians are likely to bear the cost of delay.

When Sudanese civil society actors develop agendas for humanitarian relief and peace, outsiders need to find ways to resource them, without diminishing the strength, diversity and autonomy of civil society. Over the past four years, donors and diplomats have repeatedly demonstrated that they lack the instincts and intellectual frameworks to deal with decentralised resistance – they need to acquire those instincts and frameworks. And outsiders need to keep up advocacy for people in Sudan and refugees fleeing from it, as the Sudanese crisis slips from the crowded global news agenda.