

AFRICA POLICY BRIEF
SUDANS WORKING GROUP
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PART 4

How to support Sudanese civilian efforts to form an effective bloc that will advocate for peace, humanitarian assistance and inclusive democratic governance in Sudan?

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INTRODUCTION

The Wilson Center's Sudans Working Group (SWG) is conducting a four-part discussion series aiming to ensure a diverse range of civilian voices are taken into consideration by the United States and other international actors as they develop and implement policies regarding Sudan. The fourth session focused on the recent efforts of civilian representatives to agree on principles that would unite them in advocating for cessation of hostilities, promoting an effective response to Sudan's humanitarian crisis and charting a path toward inclusive, civilian, democratic governance of Sudan.

Civil conflicts have been resolved in two ways, military victory (U.S. civil war, Nigeria 1970, Rwanda 1995, Angola 2002) or via a negotiated settlement (Sudan 2005, Colombia/FARC 2016, South Sudan 2015/18). In the former manner, the armed combatants determined the outcome on the battlefield. A military victory by either the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and its allied militias or the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is highly unlikely as long as both are receiving outside support. History also indicates that a military victory is unlikely. The SAF never "won" any of Sudan's previous civil wars nor did any armed opposition "defeat" the SAF.

A major criticism of negotiated settlements is that the combatants reach agreement among themselves for their own benefit and the civilian population that must live with the outcome have no say in it. Another criticism is that peace deals between armed actors tend to be pauses in hostilities as underlying grievances remain unresolved and/or ambitions unfulfilled. The proposed answer to these shortcomings of negotiated settlements is to include independent civilian participation in the negotiations in order to give any resulting agreement greater popular support/legitimacy.

Securing civilian inclusion in negotiations is easier said than done. There are several obstacles that need to be overcome. First is the unwillingness of one or both armed actors to allow civilians into any negotiations, particularly ceasefire negotiations. SAF commander Burhan has stated his opposition to participation of civilians who do not support the SAF participating in future government, so it is hard to see him agreeing to their participation in peace negotiations.¹ In the 2014-15 South Sudan peace negotiations, the IGAD (Inter-Governmental Authority on Development) mediators, backed by the African Union and other international actors, including the U.S., tried but failed to secure an independent seat at the negotiating table for civilians. One problem was that civilians brought to the negotiations were co-opted by one armed side or the other and were thus unable to serve as independent advocates for civilians. Civilian interests can be effectively interjected into peace negotiations only if they are represented by an inclusive but cohesive bloc drawn from civil society, professional and labor organizations and political parties who all agree on a common set of principles.

The Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), which appointed the civilian members of the 2019-21 transitional government, led the creation of "Taqadum" to represent civilian interests. But Taqadum has struggled to become inclusive of non-FFC parties, grassroots civil society and Juba Peace Agreement signatories among other legitimate civilian political actors. International NGOs have facilitated a number of meetings of Sudanese civilian groups in an effort to achieve an inclusive but unified civilian group. Recent meetings held in Stockholm, Berlin, Paris, Montreux and Helsinki have brought a disparate group of Sudanese civilians together as individuals and secured agreement on a few core principles, including, "a legitimate constitutional democratic governance for a united Sudan, respectful of diversity" as the "common goal."² They have yet to agree on inclusion of armed actors in any political process and on inclusion of the National Congress Party (NCP) of the Bashir regime and its "Islamists facades."³

Sudans Working Group co-chair, Ambassador Nureldin Satti attended the Paris, Montreux and Helsinki meetings. He noted that they included participation by individuals from Taqadum, the Democratic Bloc (non-FFC),

1 "Sudan Tribune" April 10, 2024 – "Burhan Excludes Unsupportive Political Forces from Future Sudanese Government"

2 Montreux Outcome Document 4/20/2024

3 Montreux Outcome Document 4/20/2024

resistance committees, civil society organizations, Communists, Baathists and Juba Peace Agreement signatories. The challenge now is to move from engagement as individuals to engagement as organizations/parties, to agree on the above issues of inclusion, and to agree a common position on key issues such as civilian role in ceasefire monitoring, accountability and future role of the security sector in governance and the economy.

HOW CAN INTERNATIONAL ACTORS BETTER FACILITATE CIVILIAN UNITY?

There is widespread agreement in the United States and other Western countries that the conflict in Sudan needs to be resolved through negotiations, and that Sudanese civilians need a robust role in those negotiations if stable governance and lasting peace is to be achieved. As a result, numerous Western NGOs and governments have been encouraging Sudanese civilians to achieve sufficient unity in order to be taken as necessary and serious partners for peace by Sudan's armed actors and the regional powers supporting them. The formation of Taqadam in mid-2023 was an important first step, but it has not been accepted as the umbrella organization by many, including local resistance committees, non-FFC political parties, political wings of Juba Peace Agreement signatories and hold-out groups such as the SPLM-N (Al-Hilu) and SLA/M (Abdul Wahid). Western NGOs have focused on helping Sudanese civilian actors develop a broader consensus group. In the past two months, Western NGOs have organized at least five meetings with a broad spectrum of Sudanese civilians. These efforts have not been coordinated and risk undermining the very civilian unity they are trying to achieve. They also risk creating workshop dependency.

Recommendations

- Western NGOs and their government funders should coordinate their efforts, with one focusing on helping Sudanese agree on a sufficient range of agreed principles that can unify them into an effective negotiating voice.
- Other Western NGOs might best help by holding coordinated issue specific meetings to help civilians prepare for engaging on key issues like accountability, security sector reform, ceasefire monitoring and economic re-structuring.
- Others might focus on trying to bring important "hold-out" groups into the civilian bloc.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP INCLUDE CIVILIANS IN PEACE NEGOTIATIONS?

Beyond helping Sudanese forge an inclusive and cohesive civilian negotiating bloc, the major hurdles to its inclusion in formal negotiations lie in three areas: 1) the armed belligerents, one of which – the SAF – has rejected any role for civilians that are not supporting it; 2) the regional backers of the belligerents who remain skeptical of quietly hostile to civilian (aka democratic) governance; and 3) the mediators, some of whom share the views of the belligerents' supporters regarding civilians (civil society, political parties and grass roots movements). All three will need to be convinced that Sudan's civilians are sufficiently organized and serious, and that their participation can help – or at least not hinder - the outside actors' interests in Sudan. If this is achieved, the outside actors can then press the belligerents to accept civilian participation in negotiations.

Recommendations

- In facilitating civilian efforts to agree on common principles and in direct engagement with civilian leaders, the U.S. should stress that civilians need to take into account the interests of the key regional states and vice versa.

- In its engagement with regional states (and co-mediators) the U.S. needs to try to persuade them that their political and economic interests in Sudan cannot be achieved if the country fractures or instability continues, and that is the likely outcome unless civilian aspirations are seriously taken into account. For stability, Sudan needs a new national compact that enjoys broad support.
- In engagement with the belligerents, stress that legitimacy of any government rests with the people and thus their voices, via an inclusive civilian negotiating bloc, need to be present in negotiations for Sudan's future.

HOW CIVILIANS CAN HELP ADVANCE PEACE NEGOTIATIONS AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP THEM DO SO?

Negotiations in Jeddah and other fora have, to date, focused on securing a cessation of hostilities to allow for provision of humanitarian assistance and to give space for political negotiations on the future governance of Sudan. What has been missing is serious discussion about the endgame. Military leaders are unlikely to eschew use of violence unless they have a clear picture of their role post-conflict. It will be important for any civilian negotiating bloc to be able to address the fears and expectations of belligerents by offering a sufficiently attractive endgame scenario – not a take it or leave it proposition, rather one that offers room for serious negotiation. Regional actors will also have a keen interest in any endgame scenario.

Recommendations

- The U.S. could facilitate development of a civilian endgame scenario by sharing experiences from resolution of other conflicts around the world and by not encouraging civilians to advance non-starter positions on accountability, security sector reform and economic liberalization.
- The U.S. should coordinate with other key partners to set realistic expectations about what could be provided post-conflict so civilians can avoid the pitfall of past negotiations where agreement contained unfulfillable commitments that undermined their implementation.
- Encourage any civilian bloc to engage mediators to ensure any negotiating format requires the Sudanese parties to address an endgame rather than just intermediate steps like ceasefire and humanitarian access.
- Encourage civilians to resolve key differences, particularly issues of inclusion of the National Congress Party/radical Islamists in the civilian side of negotiations and the role of armed actors in any transitional government.

The Sudans Working Group

The Sudans Working Group (SWG) engages US, African, and international policymakers and stakeholders in inclusive and forward-leaning policy dialogue aimed at advancing the prospects for peace, security, and development between and within Sudan and South Sudan. The SWG serves as a space for key stakeholders to share analyses and perspectives and provide policy options for addressing critical issues related to the two countries. The SWG is currently co-chaired by Ambassador Nureldin Satti and Ambassador Donald E. Booth.

The Africa Program

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The Wilson Center's Middle East Program serves as a crucial resource for the policymaking community and beyond, providing analyses and research that helps inform U.S. foreign policymaking, stimulates public debate, and expands knowledge about issues in the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.







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