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# An Unstable Transitional Period: Transformations of the Hybrid Coalition in Sudan\*\*

## فترة انتقالية مضطربة: تحولات التحالف الهجين في السودان

**Abstract:** This study analyses the transitional period in Sudan after the December 2018 uprising, focusing on shifts within the hybrid coalition that was formed to oversee the transitional period. This coalition consisted of three components: the military establishment, the civilian coalition, and the armed movements. The study argues that contentious politics dominated the political process and shows that this hybrid alliance underwent several schisms, prompting the formation of new coalitions and the reproduction of old ones, thus exacerbating instability in the transitional period. It explores the mechanisms and processes that influenced political actors in a dynamic political climate, and further examines the mechanisms of conflation, multiple targeting, zero-sum engagement, and ideology in the process of building and dismantling alliances.

**Keywords:** Transitional Period; Sudan; Contentious Politics; Alliances; Hybridity.

**ملخص:** تتناول الدراسة الفترة الانتقالية في السودان، بعد انتفاضة كانون الأول/ ديسمبر 2018، وتركز على تحولات التحالف الهجين الذي تكوّن لإدارة الفترة الانتقالية، والمؤلف من ثلاثة أضلاع: المكوّن العسكري، والمكوّن المدني، والحركات المسلحة. وتفترض أنّ السياسة التنافسية غلبت على العملية السياسية، وأنّ هذا التحالف الهجين مرّ بعدة تحولات أنتجت تحالفات جديدة أو أعادت إنتاج تحالفات قديمة؛ ما أسهم في عدم استقرار الفترة الانتقالية. وأولت الدراسة الآليات والعمليات التي أثّرت في الفاعلين السياسيين في بيئة سياسية متحركة وفاعلة اهتمامًا خاصًا، وركّزت على وسائل التجميع ومخاطبة فاعلين متعددين في الوقت نفسه، والتفاعل الصفري وتوظيف الأيديولوجيا في عملية بناء التحالفات وتفكيكها.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** الفترة الانتقالية؛ السودان؛ السياسة التنافسية؛ التحالفات؛ الهجنة.

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## Introduction

When Omar al-Bashir's authoritarian regime was overthrown by the December 2018 uprising, a broad alliance was formed to lead the transitional period. The alliance included the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), a civilian coalition of more than 100 political organizations, parties, and groups, and a military wing made up of two competing parts: the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). After the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement, armed movements in Darfur also joined the alliance. The latter was predicated on a base level of consensus; some of its constituent groups had helped to bring down the Bashir regime, while others rode the wave of change. The coalition approved a hastily drafted constitutional document and a three-year transitional government. However, within a few months, cracks began to appear in the alliance. Withdrawals were announced, as the Sudanese Professionals' Association (SPA) and the FFC became divided. The military wing of the alliance turned against its previous allies before it was itself riven by the fierce conflict between its two constituent parts.

Sudan witnessed a unique transition, based on a military-civilian alliance that brought together extremely diverse groups with conflicting interests, especially within the military wing of the alliance. This transition is also noteworthy for the rapid, sudden internal shifts linked to external and internal factors. This study analyses the shifting alliances of the transitional period in Sudan, and the schisms and new alliances that emerged and resulted in the explosion of violence. It proceeds from the premise that Sudan's politics have been contentious for at least three decades, highlighting the dynamics between different actors in a fluid, vibrant political environment. The study traces the shifts within the umbrella transitional alliance and categorizes the coalitions that grew out of it based on their political identity. It looks at coalitions that were not part of the grand alliance but were spawned by the political environment in which it operated. It posits that one of the shifts within the coalition leading the transition constituted a critical juncture that led to the war in Sudan, "in which the influence of structural factors – economic, cultural, ideological, and organizational – on political action weakens for a relatively short period, expanding the choices of powerful political actors over this brief window".<sup>1</sup>

The study uses process tracing, which analyses the trajectories of political change, determines its causes,<sup>2</sup> and helps identify the critical junctures in Sudan's transitional period.<sup>3</sup> Sequence analysis, based on what David Collier called "intensive description",<sup>4</sup> is also used to explain the events that unfold over time and in reference to the sequence of associated causal factors.<sup>5</sup> I also rely on mechanistic explanation, which goes beyond correlation,<sup>6</sup> and holds that mechanisms are not causes but are rather causal processes operating on the link between cause and effect,<sup>7</sup> and can be measured by the frequency with which they occur.<sup>8</sup> Based on this, the study examines the alliances that emerged during the transitional period in Sudan that produced various mechanisms. This approach has previously been used in studies of coalition formation,<sup>9</sup> a factor that this study finds to have contributed to the transformations observed during Sudan's transitional period.

<sup>1</sup> Hassan Elhag Ali Ahmad, "Marāhil Intiqāl al-Thawrāt al-'Arabiyya: Madkhal Mu'assasī li-l-Tafsīr," in: *Aṭwār al-Tārīkh al-Intiqālī: Ma'āl al-Thawrāt al-'Arabiyya* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2015), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> David Collier, "Understanding Process Tracing," *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 44, no. 4 (2011), p. 823.

<sup>3</sup> For more on process tracing, see: Giovanni Capocchia & R. Daniel Kelemen, "The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism," *World Politics*, vol. 59, no. 3 (April 2007), pp. 341-369.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 824.

<sup>5</sup> James Mahoney, "Process Tracing and Historical Explanation," *Security Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2015), p. 204.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the discussion about research design in case studies using mechanistic data and studies of multiple cases that rely on statistical variables, see: Hassan Elhag Ali Ahmad, "al-Qudra 'alā al-Istidlāl: Ishāmāt al-Taḥlīl al-Tattabbu'ī fī Buḥūth Dirāsāt Ḥāla," *Siyasat Arabiyya*, vol. 7, no. 41 (2019), pp. 89-120.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Beach & Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods Foundations and Guidelines*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow & Charles Tilly, "Methods for Measuring Mechanisms of Contention," *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2008), p. 308.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 311.

It also borrows Ann Mische's notion of "conflation mechanism", encompassing "multiple targeting", in which the discourse targets several actors at the same time by focusing on shared issues and downplaying differences to attract the largest number of members.<sup>10</sup> Two additional mechanisms contributed to coalition cleavages or the emergence of oppositional alliances: zero-sum engagement, and ideology;<sup>11</sup> which can be traced through discourse.<sup>12</sup>

## Contentious Politics and Hybrid Political Coalitions

The study's analytical approach draws on three concepts: contentious politics, hybridity, and political alliances or coalitions.

### 1. Contentious Politics

Contentious politics refers to every contentious engagement between political actors making claims, their allies and competitors, the government, the media, and public opinion. The ebb and flow of contentious politics reflects the arc of mobilization and demobilization amid interactions of these groups.<sup>13</sup> The term was first used in the study of social movements, but some scholars apply it more broadly to other arenas of conflict. For some researchers, it refers to the interaction among collective actors or those who represent them, whether or not they are constituted as social movements. A contentious politics approach holds that revolutions, civil wars, ethnic conflicts, social movements, and other forms of contention arise from similar causes, which can be divided into mechanisms and processes, but that their mode of interaction, sequence, and initial conditions are different.<sup>14</sup>

McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly define mechanisms as "a delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations".<sup>15</sup> In other words, there are similar causes underlying different events (revolutions, civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and social movements) that change relationships between actors. These causes can be divided into recurring mechanisms and processes. Examples of mechanisms include radicalization, political brokerage, and coalitions. All actors in contentious politics are in a constant state of flux, aiming to persuade, block, defeat, punish, or cooperate with others, and this constitutes the dynamic of contentious politics.<sup>16</sup> There are various types of mechanisms, but this study focuses on relational mechanisms, meaning those that shape and change relationships between actors or groups. Mechanisms do not operate in isolation, but rather in tandem with other mechanisms within broader processes.<sup>17</sup> The processes of contentious politics, on the other hand, are regular sequences of the mechanisms that "produce similar (generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements". Processes are thus a sequence of causes and a set of mechanisms.<sup>18</sup>

### 2. Hybridity

Research on hybridity in transitional periods has focused on hybrid regimes. While definitions of hybridity diverge,<sup>19</sup> one school of thought defines hybrid regimes as those that combine authoritarian and democratic

<sup>10</sup> McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, "Methods for Measuring Mechanisms of Contention," pp. 318-319.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the use of ideology in coalition building around specific issues, see: Kathleen Bawn, "Constructing 'Us': Ideology, Coalition Politics, and False Consciousness," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 43, no. 2 (April 1999), pp. 303-334.

<sup>12</sup> Tuen A. van Dijk, *Ideology and Discourse: A Multidisciplinary Introduction* (self-published, 2012), p. 5, accessed at: <https://tinyurl.com/2byhyapb>

<sup>13</sup> Sidney Tarrow, "Contentious Politics," in: Donatella della Porta & Mario Diani (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 86.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow & Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Tarrow, pp. 78-88.

<sup>17</sup> McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-27.

<sup>19</sup> Andrea Cassani, "Hybrid What? Partial Consensus and Persistent Divergences in the Analysis of Hybrid Regimes," *International Political Science Review*, vol. 35, no. 5 (2014), pp. 542-558.

elements.<sup>20</sup> Other studies use it to refer to the presence of militias and paramilitary organizations participating with civilian and military government elements in post-conflict peace arrangements, in what has been called “hybrid peace”.<sup>21</sup> Drawing on these definitions, which associate hybridity in transitional phases with the presence of a military or armed component in political arrangements, this study uses hybridity to refer to a political alliance that includes both civilian forces and some military component, whether the regular military establishment or armed movements. Hybridity within this alliance is even more striking given that it existed during what was ostensibly a period of transition toward a democratic political system, superseding decades of authoritarianism in Sudan.

### 3. Coalition Studies

Research has looked at shifts in alliances from a regional perspective. May Darwich, for example, has examined the cohesion of Middle Eastern coalitions after 2011 and approached the various Arab uprisings from the perspective of regional axes, looking at the extent of linkages between them and domestic political forces such as Hamas and Syrian Kurds, and how international relations research can contribute to an understanding of the transformations in regional alliances and the desire of non-state actors to ally and associate with them.<sup>22</sup> This study, however, focuses on domestic coalitions and the influence of regional or international forces on their formation. Some coalition research has focused on divided societies. For example, Berriane and Duboc believe that alliances and social division are inextricably linked. Studying them as a single entity enables us to examine processes of differentiation and classification. This integrated approach provides a better understanding of how alliances contribute to social division, perhaps by reinforcing existing divisions and creating new ones. It is thus important to take a long-term view of coalition formation and its social and political implications, focusing on both pre-and post-coalition processes.<sup>23</sup> Berriane and Duboc hold that alliances are temporary in nature, and as such they are not an aberration, but rather an ordinary part of contentious politics. Internal disagreements are an essential feature of an alliance, especially when it includes groups with diverse cultural and ideological orientations, identities, and legacies of political action. Approaching the subject from this perspective allows researchers to understand how differences crystallize and how they are reconciled or reinvented.<sup>24</sup>

## Coalition Dynamics in the Transitional Period: From Expansion to Hybridization

It has been nearly four years since the constitutional document was signed on 17 August 2019. Initially, it was hoped that the transitional period would end in 2023, after which general elections would be held, followed by the formation of an elected civilian government. But none of these expectations were fulfilled.

### 1. Contentious Politics and Coalition Tensions

Since the beginning of the transitional period, political forces have been fragmented, leading them to enter into coalitions in a bid to shore up their strength. Alliances have thus become an active factor in politics.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example: Mariam Mufti, “What Do We Know about Hybrid Regimes after Two Decades of Scholarship?,” *Politics and Governance*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2018), pp. 112-119.

<sup>21</sup> Adam Day, *Hybrid Conflict, Hybrid Peace: How Militias and Paramilitary Groups Shape Post-Conflict Transitions* (New York: United Nations University, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> May Darwich, “Alliance Politics in the Post-2011 Middle East: Advancing Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives,” *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 26, no. 5 (2021), pp. 635-656.

<sup>23</sup> Yasmine Berriane & Marie Duboc, “Allying Beyond Social Divides: An Introduction to Contentious Politics and Coalitions in the Middle East and North Africa,” *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2019), p. 401.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

But in the climate of contentious politics that characterizes political behaviour in Sudan, the formation and dissolution of coalitions has become the dominant feature of political action. Coalition building began with the formation of the FFC, which is the umbrella coalition in light of the diversity of parties and organizations affiliated with it during the December 2018 uprising. It was also the biggest coalition formed during the transitional period. Composed of civilian forces, the military establishment, and armed movements, it was not a stable coalition. It experienced various schisms that affected its composition and identity, and other coalitions were formed in opposition to it.

The first coalition emerged before the fall of the salvation regime led by Bashir. This was the FFC, a loose alliance of more than 100 parties, movements, and organizations. The first group that formed the FFC used conflation as a mode, addressing the broadest audience possible. It functioned as an umbrella coalition, bringing together a broad spectrum of political organizations with divergent goals, united in their agreement on one objective – namely, the overthrow of the Bashir regime. The FFC issued a declaration of general principles, including the immediate resignation of Bashir and his regime, the formation of a transitional government, the cessation of war, an end to economic decline, and action to reach a just, comprehensive peace agreement.<sup>25</sup> The African Union mediator for Sudan after Bashir's ouster, Mohamed El-Hassan Ould Labbat, noted the great diversity within the FFC, manifested in the ever-changing composition of the delegations meeting with international mediators due to the inability to agree on a unified leadership.<sup>26</sup> This type of coalition raises general public issues and broad-based slogans, is ad hoc and transitory, and tends to disintegrate once the goal that brought the alliance together has been achieved. However, for some members, it may continue to provide a degree of political solidarity in a fragmented, polarized political system. This happened to the FCC, as will be discussed below.

## 2. Internal Shifts in the Umbrella Alliance

The first signs of tensions caused by ideological and political differences in the FFC appeared shortly before the political agreement was signed. The Sudanese Communist Party criticized the draft agreement and the constitutional decree on 15 July 2019, arguing that the accord would not allow for the achievement of the revolution's goals, that it was leading toward the implementation of the counterrevolutionary project, and that it had been drafted to achieve a soft landing; in short, the party saw it as a flawed agreement that reeked of conspiracy.<sup>27</sup> As soon as the transitional government was formed, the FFC's identity and objectives shifted significantly, as various political forces withdrew for different reasons. Once the alliance had achieved the sole objective that united its constituent parts – the overthrow of Bashir's salvation regime – clashing visions and goals surfaced. In a study of the logic of violence in civil wars, Stathis Kalyvas pointed to the role of alliances as an effective mechanism. Kalyvas believes that violence is not the outcome of civil war, but rather a process linking central fault lines to local actors in peripheral regions. The core mechanism that connects the center to the periphery is not a general social cleavage, but rather a very loose, diffuse alliance between the center and the periphery.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, as Kalyvas has pointed out, such coalitions as in Sudan are inherently fragile because they are formed in a context of conflict characterized by polarization and suspicions and because the overriding feature of this context is fluidity and negotiation. Since the sub-alliances that make up the umbrella coalition consist of elements that share only minimal common objectives, such as political representation, the factors fuelling tension within the alliance outweigh factors for stability.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> For more on the declaration of the FFC, see: Ahmed Ibrahim Abu Shuk, *al-Thawra al-Sūdāniyya (2018–2019): Muqāraba Tawthīqiyya-Tahlīliyya li-Dawāfi ihā wa-Marāhilihā wa-Taḥaddiyātihā* (Doha/Beirut: ACRPS, 2012), pp. 410-412.

<sup>26</sup> Mohamed El-Hassan Ould Labbat, *al-Sūdān 'alā Ṭarīq al-Muṣālaḥa* (Khartoum: Dar Izza Publications, 2020), p. 189.

<sup>27</sup> For more details, see: Sudanese Communist Party, "Bayān Tafṣīlī min al-Lajna al-Markaziyya li-l-Ḥizb al-Shuyū'ī," Facebook, 15/7/2021, accessed on 18/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/54nrhet4](https://tinyurl.com/54nrhet4)

<sup>28</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 383.

<sup>29</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas, "The Ontology of 'Political Violence': Action and Identity in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 1, no. 3. (2003), pp. 475-494.

Tension within the FFC mounted, ultimately leading to defections for reasons related to political control and influence over the group. The SPA, which played a significant role in mobilizing against the Bashir government, split into two wings after one wing accused the Communist Party of controlling the association in the wake of the election of its new secretariat on 10 May 2020. The ability to influence the coalition and obtain greater representation in its organs was a contentious issue for the National Umma Party, which suspended its activity in the FFC on 22 April 2020; it was followed by the SPA, which suspended its membership in FFC structures on 23 July 2020. The SPA believed that the FFC Central Council did not fairly reflect the size of the political forces constituting the council and lacked a comprehensive strategic vision.<sup>30</sup> In addition to the lack of fair representation, the National Umma Party said that the constituent parties of the coalition were dissatisfied with the lack of a clear political vision, and the party called for a new social contract.<sup>31</sup> Other withdrawals soon followed. On 7 November 2020, the Communist Party withdrew from the National Consensus Forces coalition and the FFC citing political reasons, among them the restriction on freedoms and the fact that elements within the FFC were making dubious, covert deals at home and abroad that were leading the coalition toward a coup against the revolution.<sup>32</sup> The Sudanese Baath Party withdrew from the FFC on 9 November 2020, followed by seven other political organizations,<sup>33</sup> for political reasons as well, most importantly that the FFC was not a reliable political incubator.<sup>34</sup> Subsequently, the civilian umbrella coalition became a minority coalition.

### 3. Hybrid Coalition

The FFC entered into negotiations with the Transitional Military Council. It was subsequently recognized as the representative of both the armed forces and the RSF and the military figures were recognized as representatives of the Sudanese people.<sup>35</sup> Out of these negotiations, a hybrid alliance emerged between civilians, represented by the FFC, and the military, represented by the Transitional Military Council. The two parties signed a political agreement to establish governance structures and institutions on 17 July 2019, followed by the constitutional document to govern the transitional period, signed on 17 August 2019. This coalition was hybrid not only because it brought together military personnel and civilians, but also because it joined together politically diverse political forces. This hybridity was not of trivial significance. To survive, the coalition had to possess a high degree of political sophistication to maintain the balance between the conflicting interests of its constituent parts and to hedge against organizational disintegration. The potential for internal political conflicts and organizational disintegration within this civilian-military alliance was far more acute than for other political coalitions.

The hybrid alliance began to operate in the executive state apparatus amidst a political atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust between its two main components (civilians and military personnel) and discord among FFC constituent organizations. In this regard, African Union envoy Ould Labbat notes that the significant differences he found among the forces of the revolution were “not all political or ideological,

<sup>30</sup> Ahmed Fadl, “Ayyūnāt al-Thawra fī Khaṭar: al-Inqisāmāt Tuḥaddid Tajammu‘ al-Mihanyyīn al-Sūdāniyyīn,” *Aljazeera*, 7/6/2020, accessed 14/7/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3TNRkNM>

<sup>31</sup> For more details, see the party statement issued on 22 April 2020, at: “Ḥizb al-Umma Yujammid ‘Uḍwiyatuh ‘bi-l-Ḥurriyya wa-l-Taghyīr wa-Yabḥath ‘an Iṣṭifāf ma’ Quwā Siyāsiyya wa-Madaniyya Jādda,” *Altaghyeer*, accessed on 18/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/bdz2dcmb](http://tinyurl.com/bdz2dcmb)

<sup>32</sup> Sudanese Communist Party, “al-Lajna al-Markaziyya li-l-Ḥizb al-Shuyū‘ī al-Sūdānī: Bayān Jamāhīrī,” Facebook, 7/11/2020, accessed on 17/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/yv48tk46](http://tinyurl.com/yv48tk46)

<sup>33</sup> The seven organizations that withdrew in late November 2020 are the Sudanese National Alliance, the Unionist Party, the Centrist Assembly Party, the Resistance Committees Movement, Veteran Fighters, the Civil Society Initiative, and the Assembly of Claim-Making Bodies.

<sup>34</sup> “al-Sūdān: Khurūj 8 Tanzīmāt min Qḥt: Hal Hiyya Nihāyat Ḥuqbat al-Ḥādina al-Siyāsiyya?,” *Al-Murasil*, 30/11/2020, accessed on 14/1/2024, at: <https://2u.pw/IXqD4Jn>

<sup>35</sup> “Muḏāharāt al-Sūdān: al-Majlis al-‘Askarī Yushakkil Lajna ma’ Quwā ‘I‘lān al-Ḥurriyya wa-l-Taghyīr’ li-Baḥḥ al-Khilāfāt,” *BBC Arabic*, 25/4/2019, accessed on 15/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/3xx85ytm](http://tinyurl.com/3xx85ytm)

but also sociological and psychological”.<sup>36</sup> A sense of doubt began to prevail among the civilian wing of government, centred primarily on suspicions about the military’s future behaviour and its commitment to the success of the democratic transition.

Process tracing the expansion of alliances and their political-military hybridization demonstrates that there was a contradictory dynamic involving the formation and dissolution of alliances, the striking of political agreement and the coup against it, collective action coupled with suspicions about allies, and the declaration of political principles while harbouring the intention to renege on them. Most of these coalitions were only minimally aligned, remaining fragile and ineffective in achieving their stated objectives, features that indicate the deep rootedness of contentious politics among Sudanese political forces.

## Political Coalitions and the Juba Peace Agreement

The Juba Peace Agreement, signed on 3 October 2020, brought about a significant shift in the political balance of forces, welcoming the armed movements that signed the accord as new actors into the government. The Juba Peace Agreement created new institutions, including the Council of Partners, which, though not mentioned in the constitutional document, was formed by a decision of the chairman of the Sovereignty Council on 30 November 2020. The council consists of 29 members representing the Sovereignty Council, the FFC, the Cabinet, and the Sudan Revolutionary Front, which signed the peace agreement. The Cabinet, as well as political forces and members of the Sovereignty Council, disagreed with the prerogatives of the Council of Partners. Aisha al-Said, a member of the Sovereignty Council, sharply criticized how it was approved, seeing its establishment as a coup against the state apparatus with its defined structures.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, the alliance was short-lived, although the composition of the council was inclusive of civilians, the military, and armed movements. The Sudanese Congress Party issued a press statement in which it announced that its president was withdrawing from the Partners’ Council and demanded the defence minister, interior minister, attorney general, and governor be held accountable for the shooting of people taking part in the commemoration of the dispersal of the sit-in at the Army General Command headquarters. A year after the formation of the Council of Partners, the interests of its constituent groups diverged and their political positions were at odds, fostering a state of anxiety among the members of an ever more hybrid alliance and a preoccupation with the formation of sub-coalitions.

### 1. Sub-Alliances: The Fragmentation of Organizations and the Ramification of Hybridization

Faced with the general fragmentation of political life, parties tend to form coalitions.<sup>38</sup> Loose, umbrella-type alliances cannot withstand internal divergence, especially against the backdrop of shifting contentious politics. Forming sub-alliances thus strengthens the bargaining power of small organizations while also providing a foundation to build on if the umbrella coalition fails, thus laying the groundwork for the next big-tent coalition. In the Sudanese case, two sub-alliances are noteworthy. The first was among armed forces, sought by the head of the government delegation in the Juba peace negotiations, General Mohamed

<sup>36</sup> Ould Labbat, pp. 285-286.

<sup>37</sup> For al-Said’s full statement, see: “Bayān al-Ustādha ‘Āysha ‘Uḍw al-Majlis al-Siyādī Ḥawl Tashkīl Majlis Shurakā’ al-Fatra al-Intiqāliyya,” *Sudanile*, 4/12/2020, accessed on 21/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/72h5rjbs](https://tinyurl.com/72h5rjbs)

<sup>38</sup> For more on the drive by small parties to join larger coalitions and those in a context of polarization, see: Sona Nadenichek Golder, “Pre-Electoral Coalition Formation in Parliamentary Democracies,” *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 36, no. 2 (April 2006), pp. 193-212; Anna Grzymala-Busse, “Coalition Formation and the Regime Divide in New Democracies: East Central Europe,” *Comparative Politics*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2001), pp. 85-104.

Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti). Hemedti covertly sought an alliance with the armed movements involved in negotiations against the *Jellaba*,<sup>39</sup> an offer conveyed by representatives of the armed movements to the UN Panel of Experts on Sudan.<sup>40</sup> The second example is the quest to form a sub-alliance similar to that concluded between the Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army-Transitional Council, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army-Alliance, and the Sudanese Congress Party on 12 January 2021. At the signing ceremony for the memorandum of understanding between these organizations, Omer al-Digair, the head of the Sudanese Congress Party, said that the memo addressed cooperation between the signatories, and action to achieve the objectives of the revolution and implement the terms of the Juba Agreement.<sup>41</sup> Despite this announcement, this sub-alliance was also a hybrid.

A few months after the Juba Peace Agreement, tension surfaced within the umbrella alliance of civilians, the military establishment, and armed movements. These were first made apparent in statements by Hemedti attacking civilian parties in the coalition. Speaking at the graduation ceremony for a group of his forces, Hemedti said, “The country is collapsing, politically, security-wise, and socially [...] We said this and they targeted us, they denounced us when we told them we would not permit anarchy”.<sup>42</sup> After the formation of the Council of Partners, tensions emerged between some armed movements and the civilian wing of the coalition, represented by the FFC Central Council. Some armed movements accused Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok of obstructing the implementation of the peace agreement and hindering the establishment of a provincial system in Darfur.<sup>43</sup>

In an attempt to mend rifts, inject the FFC-Central Council (i.e., the remnant of the civilian umbrella coalition) with new momentum, and reproduce and expand the FFC, the Political Declaration for the Unification of the Forces of Freedom and Change was signed on 8 September 2021 in Khartoum by 37 movements, groupings, and parties. The Justice and Equality Movement, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army-Minnawi (SLM-M), and the Communist Party were notably absent from the signing. Most importantly, the declaration provided new mechanisms to unite FFC forces such as the General Conference, the General Assembly, the Central Council, and the Executive Office; underscored the need to not involve the regular army in political conflicts; and pledged to work with the military establishment to ensure a full civil, democratic transition.<sup>44</sup>

Amid the country’s volatile contentious politics, the government reported a failed coup attempt – seen as an insurrection by other political forces – on 21 September 2021, which accelerated the rupture between the military and civilians.<sup>45</sup> The president of the Sovereignty Council publicly accused the civil wing of the coalition of negligence,<sup>46</sup> while from the other side, a civilian member of the Sovereignty Council, Mohamed al-Faki Suleiman, said in an interview with state television on 24 September 2021: “Through the debates underway in the political arena between the military and the political components, the military aims

<sup>39</sup> The *Jellaba* refers to the Nile-based elite of northern Sudan or people who come from this region.

<sup>40</sup> For more on the offer, see: “Letter Dated 14 January 2020 from the Panel of Experts on Sudan Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” *UN Security Council*, 14/1/2020, p. 17, accessed on 25/4/2021, at: [tinyurl.com/w2a9a73p](https://tinyurl.com/w2a9a73p)

<sup>41</sup> Najat Salih Sharaf al-Din, “Akhbār al-Yūm Tarṣud Marāsim al-Tawqī ‘alā Wathāqat Tafāhum bayn Quwā Siyāsiyya,” *Akhbar al-Youm*, 13/1/2023, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> “Ḥamidī Yashhad Takhrīj Dawrat al-Sa’iqa wa-Quwwāt Dir’ al-Salām wa-Yu’akkid Ahdāth al-Junayna Fitna Dākhiyya wa-Lā ‘Alāqa li-Tshād bi-hā,” *Akhbar al-Youm*, 20/1/2021, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Ibrahim Abd al-Raziq, “Ittiḥāqiyat Salām Jūbā: Nīrān min Dākhl al-Sundūq,” *al-Youm al-Tali*, 11/9/2022, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Mohammed Abd al-Hamid, “Iktamal al-Tawqī ‘ams: al-I’lān al-Siyāsī al-Jadīd: Hal Yu’id al-Intiqāliyya li-l-Ṭarīq al-Ṣāḥih?,” *al-Intibaha*, 9/9/2021, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> “Mustaqbal al-‘Alāqa bayn al-Madaniyyīn wa-l-‘Askariyyīn wa-Taḥaddiyāt al-Marḥala al-Intiqāliyya fī al-Sūdān,” *Situation Assessment*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 19/10/2021, p. 2, accessed on 8/1/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/47uamOp>

<sup>46</sup> “al-Burhān wa-Ḥamidī Yattahimān Quwā Siyāsiyya bi-l-Mas’ūliyya ‘an Muḥāwalat al-Inqilāb fī al-Sūdān,” *BBC Arabic*, 22/9/2021, accessed on 13/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/ye7bb37](https://tinyurl.com/ye7bb37)



to change the political equation".<sup>47</sup> He added that comments by the president of the Sovereignty Council and his deputy were more dangerous than the failed coup attempt itself.<sup>48</sup>

Another crack in the hybrid alliance appeared when the gulf between some of the armed movements that had signed the Juba Peace Agreement and the FFC Central Council widened. FFC defectors released a new charter, the National Charter for the Unity of Freedom and Change, attributing their defection to political marginalization and the monopolization of power by certain parties. Believing that the charter offered a long-term vision, the governor of the Darfur region, Minni Minnawi, said that the people had been paying the price of this marginalization for 30 years and had been further embittered by the previous two years.<sup>49</sup> The charter set forth general principles that no political force could reject to preserve a baseline consensus and also employed multiple targeting, invoking the territorial unity of the nation, the establishment of a state of justice and social welfare, a federal system, and a smooth, secure transition to democracy.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, the Central Council of the FFC believed that the purpose of the declaration was to foment a legal and constitutional crisis over who represents the FFC.<sup>51</sup> To ease tensions between civilians and the military, Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council, General Abdelrahman al-Burhan met with Prime Minister Hamdok on 27 September 2021 for a second time.<sup>52</sup> The military wing of the alliance then conditioned reconciliation with the civilian wing on the removal of Mohamed al-Faki Suleiman from the Sovereignty Council.<sup>53</sup>

## 2. The Breakup of the Hybrid Alliance and the Formation of a De Facto Alliance

The hybrid alliance collapsed after tensions between civilians and the military peaked on 25 October 2021. On that date, General Burhan declared a nationwide state of emergency and dissolved the Sovereignty Council and the Cabinet. While he declared his commitment to the Juba Peace Agreement and the constitutional document, he suspended some of the provisions of the latter. He also terminated the mandate of state governors, dismissed deputy ministers while tasking general managers to run the ministries, and suspended the operation of the Empowerment Removal Committee pending a review of its work methods and composition.<sup>54</sup> Burhan's discourse also employed multiple targeting, addressing the armed movements that had signed the Juba Agreement while reassuring both parts of the military wing of the alliance, as well as forces concerned about seeing the transitional period through. Even so, his decisions were rejected by political forces, including the FFC Central Council, the Communist Party, and the resistance committees, which saw them as a constitutional coup, terminating the hybrid alliance.

In this context, another alliance was born between the military establishment, the armed movements that had signed the Juba Peace Agreement, and a group of technocrats. The military establishment focused on running the government while the signatories to the peace accord focused on implementing the agreement. Members of the alliance occupied various government positions, from seats on the Sovereignty Council to state governorships. A de facto government was formed, filled by ministers from the Hamdok government and minister designates, drawing political support from the military establishment and supporters of armed movements. This new coalition was a de facto hybrid alliance.

<sup>47</sup> "Muhammad al-Fakkī: al-Sijāl al-Ladhī Yadūr fī al-Sāha Yarmī li-Taghyīr al-Mu'ādala al-Siyāsiyya," *Sudan News Agency*, 24/9/2021, accessed on 13/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/mvm3f4h5](https://tinyurl.com/mvm3f4h5)

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Randa Abdullah & Mohammed Abd al-Hamid, "Itlāq Mithāq Siyāsī Jadīd Yuhaddid bi-Azma Dustūriyya," *al-Intibaha*, 3/10/2021, p. 1.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>51</sup> Hiba Mahmoud, "al-Ḥāḍina al-Siyāsiyya al-Jādīda: Sināryuhāt al-Iqṣā' wa-l-Idkhāl," *al-Intibaha*, 29/9/2021, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> "Liḳā' al-Burhān wa-Ḥamdīk li-l-Marra al-Thāniyya li-Takhfīf al-Iḥtiqān," *al-Intibaha*, 28/9/2021, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> "al-Burhān wa-Ḥamidī Yashtarīṭān Ib'ād al-Fakkī li-Ikmāl al-Muṣālaḥa," *al-Intibaha*, 4/10/2021, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> To listen to Burhan's speech, see: Extra News, "Qarārāt Hāmma li-Ra'īs Majlis al-Siyāda al-Intiqālī al-Sūdānī al-Farīq Awwal 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Burhān," YouTube, 25/10/2021, accessed on 18/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/yv867nud](https://tinyurl.com/yv867nud)

The new hybrid alliance that followed the 25 October 2021 coup did not last long. It, too, reflected a contentious politics characterized by a dynamic fluidity and incessant bargaining. Nevertheless, these shifting arrangements altered the identities of political forces. On 21 November 2021, General Burhan and Hamdok reached a political agreement, with the most important provision being a commitment to the constitutional document of 2019 and a pledge to amend it only by consensus. This was an attempt to revive a previous coalition, but it also used multiple targeting. It underscored the civilian-military partnership, the formation of a competent civilian government, action to build a unified national army. It also guaranteed the timely transfer of power to an elected civilian government, the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement, the release of political detainees, the revocation of the decree dismissing Hamdok from the premiership, and the launch of a dialogue with all political forces that would lay the groundwork for a constitutional convention.<sup>55</sup> Despite all these measures, the alliance had simply resurrected an old hybrid alliance, as evidenced by the involvement of the acting chair of the National Umma Party, Fadlallah Burma Nasir, in the arrangement between Burhan and Hamdok. Nasir's participation reflected a lack of consensus within the National Umma Party. One party leader, al-Siddiq al-Sadeq, said that Nasir had erred in attending the signing of the agreement without first presenting the draft agreement to the party's organs.<sup>56</sup>

Due to the opposition of the FFC Central Council and other political forces, the attempt to revive the hybrid coalition that had formed the transitional government failed. Hamdok announced his resignation from his position on 2 January 2022 during a speech given on independence day, stating that he had failed to achieve a national political consensus "necessary to achieve the security, peace, justice, and averting of bloodshed that we promised citizens".<sup>57</sup> With his resignation, the revival of the old hybrid coalition was temporarily foreclosed, and the military wing of the coalition and its de facto allies in the armed movements dominated the government. It is clear from the political movement that accompanied the 25 October coup that substantive political issues were not the crux of the problem. Rather, the drive to bar political opponents from positions of power and limit their capacities for political action took precedence over the political process in line with the logic of zero-sum engagement adopted by the FCC Central Council.

## Jockeying to Form a New Hybrid Coalition

Following the resignation of Hamdok and the announcement by General Burhan, on 5 July 2022, that the military establishment would withdraw from the dialogue managed by the Tripartite Mechanism, various civilian parties vied to form a hybrid alliance with the military or armed movements, undeterred by Burhan's announcement. This resulted in new hybrid coalitions, or attempted coalitions, discussed below.

### 1. Hybrid Alliance with an Alternative Civilian Component

The quest for a new hybrid alliance was initiated by parties that had broken with the FFC. Forming the Freedom and Change National Charter alliance, this coalition released the National Accord Charter for the Unity of the Forces of Freedom and Change, demanding reunification, and a return to the old FFC platform. The main objective of the new coalition was to supplant the civilian force represented by the FFC Central Council. Parties and organizations that were not part of the Central Council joined this rival coalition, citing

<sup>55</sup> To read the political agreement, see: "al-Sūdān: Bunūd al-Ittifāq al-Siyāsī bayn al-Burhān wa-Ḥamdūk," *Aljazeera*, 22/11/2021, accessed on 19/7/2023, at: <https://2u.pw/BYViOi3>

<sup>56</sup> "al-Ṣiddīq al-Ṣādiq li-l-Taghyīr: Saḥḥaḥnā Mawqif Ḥizb al-Umma al-Ladhī Arbak al-Mashhad al-Sīyāsī," *Al-Taghyeer*, 2/12/2021, accessed on 18/7/2023, at: <https://2u.pw/nGgPG5L>

<sup>57</sup> Yezid Sayigh, "Sudanese Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok Has Resigned," Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Centre, 7/1/2022, accessed on 21/7/2023, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mtuct382>

the political disregard shown by their groups. In a speech given at the signing ceremony for the updated framework of the Juba Peace Agreement on 7 February 2023, Minnawi referred to the Central Council's style of zero-sum engagement with the political forces that became part of the National Charter coalition: "The political forces that seized power devoted their time to antagonizing and minimizing others, causing them to resist. This conflict spurred each party to dig in to confront the other, opening the door that allowed the military to intervene on 25 October 2021".<sup>58</sup>

The National Charter used conflation to address public issues, with the aim of expanding the coalition by bringing in new members, and the technique was successful. On 3 November 2023, it was announced that the coalition would be expanded and renamed Forces for Freedom and Change-Democratic Bloc, which this study refers to as the rival civilian alliance to the FFC Central Council. After the expansion, the coalition released the draft amendment to the 2022 constitutional document for the transitional period.

## 2. Tacit Hybrid Alliances

Amid the drive to form new hybrid coalitions – which demonstrates the centrality of the military and armed factions in politics in the transitional period – political forces formed tacit alliances with one of the two wings of the military establishment or armed movements. Three such hybrid coalitions were evident. The first, known as the Radical Change and Unity of Revolutionary Forces coalition, encompasses more than ten professional and factional bodies and is the most politically and ideologically homogeneous. Announced on 24 July 2022, it consists of the Sudanese Communist Party and the organizations it controls. The alliance adopted a political and ideological discourse directed at specific political groups and advocated for an alternative state model based on secularism and the civil state, seeking to transition from a religious to a democratic state inclusive of all beliefs and religions.<sup>59</sup> The alliance is a tacit hybrid coalition because the Communist Party, its main driver, signed a political agreement with two armed factions, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (the Abdulaziz al-Hilu wing) and the Sudan Liberation Movement (the Abdul Wahid al-Nur wing), to form a tripartite leadership to coordinate action.<sup>60</sup> The coalition rejects a hybrid alliance with the military establishment, and because it is ideologically homogeneous, it is the most stable.

The second type of tacit hybrid alliance is the Sudan People's Call, a transitory coalition. Although most coalitions in the transitional period were short-lived, transitory coalitions were even more unstable. "Transitory" here does not mean that the alliance ceased to exist after a short time, but rather that after a brief period of activity, it became largely ineffective. The Sudan People's Call emerged in opposition to the FFC as various political actors coalesced, some of them parties that were marginalized by the tripartite movement, another group that supported the military institution, and another group made up of actors involved in the former regime, civil administrations, and Sufi orders, as well as Islamists.<sup>61</sup> Judging by its constituent parts, it appears to have been a reaction to exclusion from the umbrella hybrid coalition. It aimed to broaden the base of participation in political power and rejected political exclusion, and it focused on multiple targeting to attract new members. Most importantly, it advocated for national accord for the sake of national interests and the renewal of partnership by forming a non-partisan government,

<sup>58</sup> "Kalimat al-Qā'id Minni Arku Minnāwī Ra'īs Ḥarakat Jaysh Taḥrīr al-Sūdān wa-Ḥākīm Iqlīm Dārūr fī Ḥafl al-Tawqī' 'alā al-Maṣfūfā al-Muḥdatha," *Alayam News*, 19/2/2023, accessed on 24/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/mtyt4445](https://tinyurl.com/mtyt4445)

<sup>59</sup> "al-Shuyū'i Yataza' 'am Taḥāluf al-Taghyīr al-Jadhīr wa-Yatamassak bi-Isqāt al-Ḥukm al-'Askārī," *Sudan Tribune*, 24/7/2022, accessed on 24/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/2h96et6j](https://tinyurl.com/2h96et6j)

<sup>60</sup> "al-Shuyū'i Yu'lin 'an al-Taḥāluf ma' Ḥarakatayy al-Hīlu wa-'Abd al-Wāḥid Nūr," *Elmasar News*, 23/5/2022, accessed on 1/12/2023, at: <https://2u.pw/RMJbspR>

<sup>61</sup> The coalition included: The Alliance of Forces of the National Movement, Umma Party (Mubarak al-Fadil), Sudan Justice Alliance, Democratic Unionist (Ishraqa Sayyid Mahmoud), Revolutionary Awakening Council, Islamist Current, the coordination bodies of eastern Sudan, the heads of communal administration, Sufi sheikhs, and public figures.

combating hate speech, and strengthening the authority of state institutions, including military and security institutions. The initiative formed a tacit hybrid alliance with the armed forces. Burhan spoke well of the coalition, saying, “We welcome the initiative of the well-known cleric, Sheikh al-Tayeb al-Jid Wad Badr, to overcome the current impasse, as he is a trusted, respected figure”.<sup>62</sup> Although the initiative created some momentum, especially during and in the wake of its conference in mid-August 2022, it was unable to maintain it following the withdrawal of some political forces and opposition from the RSF.

A third tacit hybrid alliance emerged in the form of a broad coalition that included civilian parties and armed movements. It was both overtly and tacitly hybrid, receiving the tacit support of the armed forces, as evidenced by the fact that the leaders of the armed movements continued to occupy senior government positions after the formation of the alliance. It was also supported by the Egyptian government, which bridled at being marginalized by the regional and international powers that formed the Quartet<sup>63</sup> despite Cairo being closer to Sudan and bound to the country by interests greater than those of the Quartet states. The Egyptian government took action, arranging a meeting in February 2023 attended by various political forces, including parties belonging to the civilian rival coalition of the FFC Central Council and another group from the transitory alliance; the FFC Central Council did not attend.<sup>64</sup> Using multiple targeting, the meeting organizers focused on general issues. Participants in the meeting issued the Political Consensus Document and the National Document Governing the Transitional Period and announced the formation of the Coordinating Body of National Democratic Forces.<sup>65</sup> Drawing attention to the marginalization and political exclusion of the transitional period – that is, the zero-sum engagement – the statement released by the new coalition asserted that no single faction or bloc of the Sudanese body politic could unilaterally lead the transitional period.

### 3. The New Hybrid: The Amalgamation of the Zero-Sum Hybrid and a Cartel

A zero-sum outlook believes that a given party can only make gains at the expense of another party,<sup>66</sup> while a cartel restricts competition and divides the spoils of political power among its members. As Adam Przeworski puts it: “Democracy would then turn into a private project of leaders of some political parties and corporatist associations, an oligopoly in which leaders of some organizations collude to prevent outsiders from entering”.<sup>67</sup> This alliance, which combined zero-sum engagement with a cartel, began with the workshop organized by the steering committee of the Bar Association, titled “Dialogue on the Transitional Constitutional Framework”, held on 8-10 August 2022, to discuss a new transitional constitution. The workshop laid the groundwork for a new alignment of political and military forces, from which emerged a new coalition made up of the FFC Central Council, armed movements, and the RSF.

The zero-sum alliance sought to frame the zero-sum hybrid in new terms, most prominently by championing democratization and the return of the military to its barracks. This was articulated in a political discourse that differed from the old FFC discourse and also justified and promoted these shifts. In cases of acutely contentious politics, the move from one alliance to its opposite is coupled with a similar shift in the

<sup>62</sup> Mazdalfa Othman, “al-Burhān Raḥḥab bi-Hā: Nidā’ Ahl al-Sūdān Mubādara Jadīda li-Inhā’ al-Azma al-Siyāsiyya,” *Aljazeera*, 31/7/2022, accessed on 24/7/2023, at: <https://2u.pw/OgbtyZP>

<sup>63</sup> The Quartet consists of the United States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>64</sup> The political forces that took part in the dialogue workshop were: FFC-Democratic Bloc, National Consensus Alliance (led by Mubarak al-Fadil al-Mahdi), Alliance of Forces of the National Movement (led by al-Tijani al-Sisi), the Tamajuz Movement (Mohammed Ali Qurashi), and the Revolutionary Front (led by Mohammed Sayyid Ahmed al-Jakomi).

<sup>65</sup> For more details on the meeting, see: “Warshat al-Qāhira Tu’lin ‘an Takattul Jadīd wa-Taqtarih Ta’ dīlāt Tamnaḥuha Tashkīl Hukūmī,” *al-Intibaha*, 7/2/2023, accessed on 21/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/mryprsr](http://tinyurl.com/mryprsr)

<sup>66</sup> For more on zero-sum thinking in the context of political division, see: Sahil Chinoy et al., “Zero-Sum Thinking and the Roots of U.S. Political Divides,” *Working Paper*, no. 31688, National Bureau of Economic Research, September 2023, accessed on 24/11/2023, at: <http://tinyurl.com/yyb7y8k3>

<sup>67</sup> Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reform in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 91.

content and orientation of political discourse. This study discusses two examples of the transformations that accompanied the zero-sum hybrid and cartel alliance. The first was the change in attitude toward the RSF, which became a prominent party in this new hybrid coalition. Previously, the RSF had been framed as a rogue militia made up of criminals and mercenaries with no regard for the law. For example, Yasir Arman, a leader in the FFC Central Council, launched a fierce attack on the RSF in 2014, telling an interviewer that Bashir, along with his Defence Minister Abdel Rahim and the director of his security apparatus, Mohamed Atta, recruited and trained more than 29,000 Janjaweed. He explained that this militia included 4,600 personnel from the Chadian opposition, more than 2,000 from Mali, while the rest were Hemedti's militia. This militia, known as the RSF, "are mercenaries and war criminals who have nothing to do with society and its values, and they were brought in by Bashir, Abdel Rahim, and Mohamed Atta".<sup>68</sup> Arman then called on the army to intervene before it was too late. A new framing of the nature of RSF, which turned Arman's words in 2014 on their head, was later articulated to enable it to be an active part of the new coalition. In a symposium in September 2022, Arman said: "We want to support the military establishment. The national army is experiencing so many complications, which are well known. We also consider the RSF a force for the construction of the national army in specific ways and with specific security arrangements. We are against the strife of the old regime, and to survive, it is sowing strife between the RSF and the army".<sup>69</sup> The second shift in identity and political discourse is embodied by Hemedti himself. Whereas previously the RSF was used by the former regime to suppress armed movements and their supporters in Darfur and Hemedti had attacked the FFC leadership in the early part of the transitional period, here he pivoted to attacking supporters of the old regime.<sup>70</sup>

## The Road to War

The armed forces withdrew from the security and military reform workshop because the integration of the RSF into the national army was not part of the final agreement. This threw up a roadblock to the formation of the zero-sum alliance. RSF support for the framework agreement signed by the zero-sum alliance was conditional on RSF autonomy, but this cost the alliance the support of SAF. The issue of how and when to integrate the RSF thus impeded the zero-sum alliance's objective of forming a government to oversee the transitional period. Army commanders insisted that the institution into which paramilitaries like the RSF would be integrated was the armed forces. As Lieutenant General Shams al-Din Kabbashi, the deputy commander-in-chief of the armed forces, said:

There is no alternative to the armed forces except the armed forces [...] Any talk of dismantling [...] of restructuring, all the talk about reform – these terms are constantly evolving and they come up with new terms. We do not care about the term, we care that the armed forces persist [...] There must be one army, a single army whose foundation is the armed forces. In the security arrangements that need to be undertaken, the RSF must be integrated into the armed forces.<sup>71</sup>

The first bone of contention for the armed forces was the 10-year timeline for the integration of the RSF, as outlined in the Agreement on the Principles and Foundations of Security and Military Reform that

<sup>68</sup> "Yasir 'Armān Yad'ū al-Jaysh li-l-Taḥarruk Didd Milishiyā al-Da'm al-Sarī' wa-Yuḥadhdhir min Taḥawwūl al-'Āšima li-Dārfūr Ukhra," *Dabanga Radio*, 22/5/2014, accessed on 21/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/2hhnxcjt](http://tinyurl.com/2hhnxcjt)

<sup>69</sup> "Yasir 'Armān: al-Da'm al-Sarī' Quwwa li-Binā' al-Jaysh al-Waṭānī," *Aljazeera Sudan*, 3/9/2022, accessed on 22/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/356dmph6](http://tinyurl.com/356dmph6)

<sup>70</sup> To read Hemedti's speech in full, see: "Hamidī Yuwajjih Risāla Khāṣa ilā 'Anāšir al-Nizām al-Bā'id: Naṣṣ al-Khiṭāb," *Rakoba News*, 19/2/2023, accessed on 22/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/m68nshyc](http://tinyurl.com/m68nshyc)

<sup>71</sup> Tayba satellite channel, "Shams al-Dīn Kabbāshī: Yajib Damj al-Da'm al-Sarī' fī al-Quwwāt al-Musallaḥa," YouTube, 6/2/2023, accessed on 23/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/5n79p47b](http://tinyurl.com/5n79p47b)

came out of the security and military reform workshop held in March 2023.<sup>72</sup> The armed forces wanted a more rapid integration of the RSF not to exceed two years, which was the proposed duration of the new transitional period.<sup>73</sup> The second objection concerned the composition of the Military Command Authority pending integration.

## 1. The Splintering of the Military Wing of the Coalition

The military wing of the umbrella coalition had maintained a united position toward civilians, especially since the RSF was facing criticism and demands for its dissolution from political forces, first and foremost certain parties and a group associated with the resistance committees. It continued to be dogged by accusations that it was responsible for the dispersion of the sit-in at the General Command headquarters. Burhan and Hemedti formed a tacit alliance: Burhan sought to neutralize any army movement against himself by strengthening the RSF, while Hemedti aimed to shore up his legitimacy and consolidate the RSF as a strike force that would be difficult to liquidate. But cracks emerged in this tacit military understanding. Like the civilian wing, the military wing of the coalition fell prey to the dynamics of contentious politics and the shifting political identities and alliances it engendered. This shift in RSF politics and subsequently its alliances, was evident when Hemedti declared his support for the draft transitional constitution prepared by the steering committee of the Bar Association, although by his own admission, he did not read the text: “The draft constitution is a window of hope to build trust between all Sudanese parties in order to reach a comprehensive agreement to resolve the Sudanese crisis,” he said.<sup>74</sup>

The disagreement within the military part of the coalition was exacerbated after the signing of the framework agreement that formed the zero-sum hybrid alliance on 5 December 2022. The agreement was signed by 37 parties and organizations, in addition to the military component. The RSF gave its backing to the agreement. Hemedti acknowledged the error of the coup of 25 October 2021 and retracted his support for it, stating that “the framework agreement is the country’s way out of the current crisis, and it is the only basis for a just, fair political solution”.<sup>75</sup> By granting the RSF independence from the armed forces, the framework agreement that deepened the differences between the two parts of the military wing of the coalition was that it.<sup>76</sup>

## 2. External Support for the RSF

Some Western states’ attitudes toward the RSF shifted as well. These states’ early reservations about establishing relations with the RSF in light of its actions in Darfur were dispelled by domestic political changes in Sudan, and regular contacts were established with the RSF leadership. Western envoys’ meetings with Hemedti reflected their states’ support for the new role of the RSF, seeing it as a reliable military partner within the zero-sum hybrid coalition after the armed forces withdrew, on 29 March 2023, from the security reform workshop, which was part of the final phase of the political process between civilians and the military. On 3 April 2023, he met with the French Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Frederic Clavier, informing him that he was striving to bring the non-signatories into the political process. About a week later, on 10 April 2023, Hemedti met with the EU envoy for the Horn of Africa, Annette Weber, to discuss efforts to stabilize the country. He held a joint meeting by telephone on

<sup>72</sup> For details on the text of the agreement, see: Ahmed Younis, “Damj al-Da’im al-Sarī fī al-Jaysh al-Sūdānī ‘Āliq ‘Ind Tashkīl Hay’at al-Qiyāda wa-l-Mudda,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, 3/4/2023, accessed on 23/7/2023, at: <https://2u.pw/Ivsvvcyp>

<sup>73</sup> “al-Şirā’ Bayn al-Quwwāt al-Musallaḥa al-Sūdāniyya wa-l-Da’im al-Sarī: al-Asbāb wa-l-Tadā’iyāt al-Muḥtamala,” *al-Araby al-Jadeed*, 20/4/2023, accessed on 23/7/2023, at: <https://2u.pw/2xsu6QH>

<sup>74</sup> Umniya Makkawi, “Yuraḥḥib Hamidī bi-Mashrū’ al-Dustūr al-Intiqālī: Mādhā warā’ al-Khaṭwa?,” *al-Youm al-Tali*, 18/9/2022, p. 5.

<sup>75</sup> Imad al-Nazif, “Kḥiṭāb Ḥamidī: Rasā’ il li-Man?,” *al-Intibaha*, 20/2/2023, accessed on 22/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/yc559emb](https://tinyurl.com/yc559emb)

<sup>76</sup> “Kashf Tafāṣīl al-Khilāf Bayn al-Burhān wa-Ḥamidī,” *al-Intibaha*, 15/3/2023, accessed on 21/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/264e8yxw](https://tinyurl.com/264e8yxw)

12 April 2023 with the US envoy for East Africa, Sudan, and South Sudan, Peter Lord; the UK special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan, Robert Fairweather; and the Norwegian special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan, Jon Anton.

### 3. The Crystallization of the Zero-Sum Hybrid

The signing of the framework agreement on 5 December 2022 marked the beginning of the second phase in the crystallization of the zero-sum hybrid and cartel alliance (the first phase was initiated by the draft transitional constitution proposed by the steering committee of the Bar Association). Statements from coalition leaders affirmed the cartel nature of the alliance, saying that the coalition was closed and would not be expanded with new members. According to Mohamed Hassan al-Mahdi, the head of the political bureau of the National Umma Party: “There is no way to open up the framework agreement. There are agreed-upon parties and they are the signatories”.<sup>77</sup> Mahdi stated in the same press interview that the signatories did not want to be swamped by opening up the agreement to additional groups.

Strong external backing strengthened the zero-sum alliance. It was supported by the Quartet, which threatened opponents of the framework agreement, warning against “any attempt to undermine the political process now underway in Sudan or provoke further instability [...] This agreement is a foundation for the resumption of international aid and investments and closer cooperation between the government of Sudan and international partners”.<sup>78</sup> The Tripartite Mechanism also welcomed the framework agreement.

The conflict between the two wings of the military part of the coalition rapidly slid toward armed engagement when the Sudanese Armed Forces announced in a statement on 13 April 2023 that the RSF had deployed in areas of the capital and the states. This move, in violation of its mandate and charter and without the approval of or even coordination with the armed forces, came after the RSF forces were sent in to occupy the Merowe airport in northern Sudan. The statement said that armed forces from other areas had been called up to deal with the situation and that the armed forces had demanded that the RSF withdraw from Merowe within twenty-four hours; if not, they would be forced to do so.<sup>79</sup>

Media reports and video footage indicate that weeks earlier, the RSF had been mobilizing its forces in the capital, preparing to seize power on 15 April 2023 and that it had initiated an attack on the armed forces headquarters that morning.<sup>80</sup> The RSF offensive set off fierce battles in the three cities of the capital, Darfur, and some areas of Kordofan. It was the culmination of the rising polarization between competing camps, which the RSF had decided to resolve militarily, but it sent the country into a spiral of violence whose consequences will reshape politics in Sudan. Whatever the outcome of the armed violence, the current evidence suggests that instability will persist indefinitely. This war constitutes a critical juncture that will lead to political arrangements different from those of the transitional period.

<sup>77</sup> Mohammed Jamal Qandil, “Ra`īs al-Maktab al-Siyāsī li-Hizb al-Umma al-Qawmī Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-Mahdī: Lan Yaftah al-Itari wa-Hunāk Aṭrāf Muttafaq ‘Alayhā Hiya al-Ma`niyya bi-l-Tawqī’,” *al-Intibaha*, 14/2/2023, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> “al-Āliyya al-Rubā`iyya Tuḥadhdhir min Ayy Muḥāwala li-Taḥqīd al-‘Amaliyya al-Siyāsiyya al-Jāriya al-Ān,” *al-Youm al-Tali*, 8/1/2023, accessed on 19/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/mrx9hah2](https://tinyurl.com/mrx9hah2)

<sup>79</sup> “al-Jaysh al-Sūdānī Yattahim al-Da`m al-Sarī` bi-Tahrīk Quwwāt fi al-‘Āṣima wa-l-Wilāyāt Ḍun Ikhtārih,” *Aljazeera*, 13/4/2023, accessed on 24/7/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3tNExCn>

<sup>80</sup> Ariel Cohen, “Russia’s Fingerprints are on Sudan Coup Attempt,” *The Hill*, 4/18/2023, accessed on 23/7/2023, at: <http://tinyurl.com/2hz6r3jf>; Colin Poitras, “Yale Humanitarian Research Lab Monitoring Conditions in Sudan,” *The Sudan Conflict Observatory*, 10/6/2023, accessed on 23/7/2023, at: <http://tinyurl.com/4v7adbjx>; Arab Television, “Ta`zīzāt ‘Askariyya li-Quwwāt al-Da`m al-Sarī` Tadhkhal al-‘Āṣima al-Sūdāniyya al-Kharṭūm,” Facebook, 13/4/2023, accessed on 23/7/2023, at: [tinyurl.com/5b8eh5wf](https://tinyurl.com/5b8eh5wf)

## Conclusion

The transitional period in Sudan was overwhelmed by a contentious political process characterized by fluidity and incessant jockeying, altering the relationships between actors, who, as a result, used coalition building as a mechanism of political action. This furthered the instability of the transitional period, ultimately bringing the country to a critical juncture that plunged Sudan into a catastrophic war. While coalition building became an effective mechanism to demonstrate political power and negotiate and pursue interests, the rapid shifts in political alliances and identities became a polarizing mechanism that fuelled tensions in the transitional period. Most alliances, except for the radical change alliance, were big-tent coalitions bringing together disparate political forces around a minimum point of consensus. Tensions within alliances therefore outweighed harmony, leaving most alliances transitory and short-lived. This confirms Kalyvas's assertion that coalitions in civil wars are loose alliances with many internal divergences.<sup>81</sup> This study finds this pattern in coalitions built in the context of contentious politics in rapidly shifting, acutely polarized transitional periods. While hybrid civilian military alliances had the greatest impact on the political system were also the most vulnerable to internal tension, given the substantial disparity in politics and organizational interests. The shifts in the last iteration of these hybrid alliances led to a critical juncture – namely, the eruption of war – as the political and legal foundations of the transitional period were weakened.

Multiple targeting dominated the mechanism of coalition building, while conflation, zero-sum engagement, and ideological discourse were limited to specific alliances. One finding of this study – that zero-sum alliances contribute to tensions in the transitional period – conforms to Davidai and Ongis's conclusion that a partisan tendency to see life in zero-sum terms exacerbates political conflicts. Addressing the relationship between political ideology and zero-sum thinking, they found that both liberals and conservatives view life in zero-sum terms when they gain ground, which makes it difficult to strike bargains.<sup>82</sup> The dynamic of contentious politics altered relationships within the broad military camp, which split politically into two wings. The identity of the RSF shifted as it became part of the zero-sum alliance. The convergence of a zero-sum alliance and a military force in a highly polarized, contentious political system facilitated the explosion of armed violence. The interaction between internal dynamics and external influences contributed to the formation of coalitions with divergent political orientations, degrees of exclusivity, and overlapping memberships, and this was under the influence of regional rivalries.

As Tarrow argues, contentious politics is characterized by a continuous state of movement aimed at persuading, blocking, defeating, punishing, or cooperating, which aptly describes the constant state of flux in which the Sudanese political actors exist.<sup>83</sup> Hence, using approaches from contentious politics to study democratic transitions in divided, polarized societies can contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of transition, especially the role of coalition building as a mechanism for managing shifts in the political process. When hybrid alliances seek to monopolize politics in a polarized transitional period, it may fuel political tension and violence, in contrast to the stability induced by expanded political participation. Furthermore, foreign intervention can both support a smooth transition and fuel violence and civil war. In Sudan, the influence of external powers in the transitional political process, propelled by the interests of the intervening states, contributed to resentment and polarization.

<sup>81</sup> Kalyvas, "The Ontology of 'Political Violence'."

<sup>82</sup> Shai Davidai & Martino Ongis, "The Politics of Zero-Sum Thinking: The Relationship between Political Ideology and the Belief that Life Is a Zero-Sum Game," *Science Advances*, vol. 5, no. 12 (December 2019), pp. 1-10.

<sup>83</sup> Tarrow.



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