

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Military Coup in Sudan: Implications for Human Rights

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Statement of Kholood Khair
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Good afternoon, Chairman McGovern, Chairman Smith, members of the commission, ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Kholood Khair and I am a Managing Partner, researcher and analyst at Insight Strategy Partners, a think tank we founded to support the democratic transition in Sudan.

Before I start, I would like to express appreciation for this timely discussion on Human rights in Sudan and to welcome greater international attention on this issue at this particular political juncture in Sudan.

The 25th October coup was, in many ways, a natural consequence of the failures of the civilian-military partnership. We've been here before: throughout successive transitions in Sudan's history – and this is the third – the winner takes all, transactional politics that is a key feature in the Sudanese political landscape has meant that true partnership between civilian and military forces, and even within these forces, is a challenge.

Following the 21st November agreement, there is little to indicate that this time round, there is a chance of a successful civilian-military venture, if anything, this is now more elusive. Again, we've been here before: mass detentions, killings, appointments of Islamist to key positions such as Chief justice, and across the security organs, are reminiscent of the aftermath of the 1989 coup by ICC-indictee Omar al Bashir. That this rule book is being so diligently followed today, with little space for civilians in government to counter this, means that state repression looks set to intensify and diversity, not diminish.

The resistance committees, the remarkably resolute and durable pro-democracy movement, knows this. They have kept domestic pressure on the military and borne the brunt of state repression, they have evolved from a mobilising force to a movement where the most meaningful politics takes place, away from the well-worn transactional, zero-sum approach towards building tools of consensus and coalition building. By cultivating agile, enduring, and responsive political

resistance, in the face of political in-fighting, violent suppression and economic decline, they have evolved to become the best safeguard against the closing - and policing - of civic space.

In Sudan's fluid political situation, amorphous, broad civic movements such as the resistance committees are hard for policy-makers to read, and the urge is to trust in agreements: no matter how poorly they support civilian bodies, no matter how much they embolden the aggressors, no matter how much they delay or erase potential for accountability, all seemingly in the name of stability.

But what is increasingly clear is that stability cannot take root while the public continue on a determined quest for full civilian rule, but more importantly, while the predatory and extractive power structures of Sudan, chief of which is the military, remain in place.

Relatedly, military government will only increase resistance through armed means and actors. Fuelling conflict and instability in Sudan's peripheries is a longstanding strategy from the narrowly defined elite in Sudan's centre, allowing them to continue extracting resources.

Similarly, the current overwhelmingly peaceful nature of the resistance movement may not last, if it reaps few rewards and former rebels turned putschists may soon realise that their long-term objectives and that of their new military partners put them on a collision course.

The release of the prime minister was predominantly an international demand, met in order to please international actors and restore financial support. The military have followed-through with this bare minimum, with the expectation that they will not be asked to proffer more. The prodemocracy groups have always called for and continue to call for freedom, peace and justice through the pursuit of full civilian rule – that such demands were not factored into messaging by the international community to the military after the coup may have been a missed opportunity to get more concessions and support a process of managed withdrawal of the military from political life.

Instead, we currently have an agreement that takes us back to military hegemony. In the meantime, political stability for PM Hamdok can only be possible through a stronger civilian bloc, which currently does not exist, leaving him exposed to pressure from his military partners.

The experience of state-building in Afghanistan shows that international support for a civilian leader with little domestic support, is the surest weapon Islamists can have to reengineer a comeback. That is what Sudan is experiencing today. It behoves the US and other international stakeholders to support grassroots efforts as a means of engendering lasting stability in Sudan as well as put the country back on track towards civilian-led democracy.

The international community is planning on setting benchmarks for the transition. This needs to be done independently of the 21st November agreement, whose framework only serves to entrench the Islamo-military regime. More importantly it needs to be done with political groups

on the ground: parties, unions and resistance committees, with these domestic groups taking the lead to ensure that the broad swathe of civilian priorities can be met, from the outset.

In addition, strong monitoring systems of transitional priority areas, particularly peace, economic reform and adherence to human rights, and accountability mechanisms for transitional justice and money flows, placed in direct relation to international support, will engage the regime by leveraging key pressure points.

The US is currently not well-positioned to engage meaningfully on Sudan – it could be. This would require, first and foremost a Sudan Strategy that links together the efforts of Congress, the State Department, The White House, the National Security council etc. Secondly, a larger, stronger team at the embassy in Khartoum is vital if the US is to meaningfully engage with myriad prodemocracy forces and undo the crisis of consultations that persists. In the interests of time, the last thing I'll mention for now is the urgent appointment of an ambassador, one that is well-versed in political complexity or transitions and that will bring patience and principle to the role, away from a security approach currently favoured by regional supporters of the regime.

The US, and the international community have an opportunity to be on the right side of history on Sudan's future. I sincerely hope this opportunity is taken.

Thank you.