



# Africa Integrity Foresight (May 2023)

## Al-Burhan vs Hemedti: What Next for Sudan?

## Introduction

1. Less than a month ago, tensions between the head and deputy of Sudan's transitional authority boiled over into outright conflict between the two most powerful military bodies in the country. The two men at the centre of this conflict were both part of the former regime of President Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019) and played key roles in his removal from power. They dominated the planned transition to democracy and the feud between them has the potential to shape the future of Sudan for years to come. In this paper, we examine the background to the conflict, the different scenarios of how it could play out and what this will mean for the country.

## Background to the Conflict

### The End of al-Bashir

2. Just over four years ago, President Omar al-Bashir and the Islamist National Congress Party (NCP) were deposed by the Sudanese military after almost 30 years in power. The military's action was precipitated by months of anti-government protests over worsening economic conditions in the country. Initially headed by al-Bashir's defence minister, the new military authorities swiftly appointed a more palatable figure as head of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) – Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al-Burhan – who simultaneously became commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Unlike other military figures, al-Burhan kept a relatively low profile during al-Bashir's rule and managed to distance himself from the worst atrocities committed by the regime, especially in Darfur. Much like al-Bashir, al-Burhan belongs to the Arab community from the Nile Valley region, which has dominated modern Sudanese politics.
3. The next most influential position on the council was given to Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (widely known as Hemedti), who was appointed as Burhan's deputy. Hemedti is the commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF); a paramilitary force created by al-Bashir in 2013, which formalised the Janjaweed, a group of Arab militia units that fought on the side of the government in the War in Darfur (2003-2020). Hemedti is a member

of the Mahariya clan of the Arab Rizeigat community in Darfur. The Janjaweed and RSF have been accused of committing war crimes during the conflict in Darfur, but Hemedti was not amongst the officials charged by the International Criminal Court. Hemedti was a close ally of al-Bashir, gaining significant wealth and influence under the former president, and the RSF served as a powerful counterweight to the SAF and elements of the NCP during the final years of al-Bashir's regime. This was meant to protect al-Bashir from a military coup; however, it was dependent on Hemedti's continued support for the long-time president, which was unexpectedly withdrawn in April 2019.

### **A Civilian-led Transition**

4. Under the leadership of al-Burhan and Hemedti, the TMC initially resisted calls from protestors, civil society, and political parties – who coalesced under the banner of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) – for a civilian-led transition. This increased tensions between the TMC and FFC, culminating in the Khartoum Massacre on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2019, during which military forces led by the RSF killed over 100 protestors. Despite such repression on the part of the TMC, the two parties managed to reach a transition agreement in July 2019. This brought civilians into the transitional authorities with the creation of the Transitional Sovereignty Council and a transitional cabinet headed by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Under the agreement, al-Burhan and Hemedti maintained their influence, serving respectively as chairman and deputy chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council; however, this meant that they were ineligible to run in the election scheduled for the end of the transition period.
5. Despite the continuation of low-level protests across the country and tensions between the respective parties, including al-Burhan and Hemedti, the power-sharing agreement held for over two years and saw the expansion of transitional authorities in February 2021 to include representatives of rebel groups active in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile regions. Hemedti played a key role in brokering the agreement with these rebel groups (October 2020 Juba Peace Agreement), despite his previous involvement in conflicts against them. The inclusion of such groups, as well as Hemedti himself, in the transitional authorities was a significant development for Sudanese politics. This

was because it brought powerful players from the periphery into central government, which has long been dominated by the Arab elite from the Nile Valley region in central Sudan.

## **Coups and Unrest**

6. Nevertheless, although this inclusion of rebels from the periphery was welcomed in many quarters, it did little to ease the tensions within and between the civilian and military elements of the transitional authorities. This contributed to popular discontent with the transitional government, which had failed to enact promised reforms or noticeably improve the economic situation in the country. Such tensions were further heightened by an alleged coup attempt by al-Bashir loyalists in September 2021. Against this backdrop and with the planned transfer of power to civilians on the Transitional Sovereignty Council approaching – having been delayed by the Juba Peace Agreement – al-Burhan, with Hemedti’s support, seized power and dissolved the civilian sections of the government on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2021.
  
7. This decision backfired, reigniting the civilian protest movement and sending the Sudanese economy into freefall. In recognition of their miscalculation and under pressure from the international community, al-Burhan and Hemedti agreed to reinstate a civilian government led by Prime Minister Hamdok less than a month later; however, the FFC rejected Hamdok’s agreement with the military. Without the support of the FFC, and with the military adopting increasingly repressive tactics towards protestors, Hamdok resigned in January 2022. This led to a prolonged period of popular unrest and violent repression from the military, as resistance committees – which had played a key role in protests against al-Bashir – organised demonstrations across the country.

## **A New Transition**

8. While resistance committees rejected any further negotiations with the military, the international community facilitated dialogue between the Central Council of the FFC and military authorities. This led to the signing of a Political Framework Agreement on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2022 to relaunch the transition process, which was due to be finalised

with the appointment of a new government in April 2023. As part of this agreement, the military agreed to hand the management of the transition over to a fully civilian body and to step back from the political and economic spheres, whilst also committing to enacting reforms to the judicial and security sectors. Nevertheless, it faced opposition from across Sudan's political spectrum, including most resistance committees, other elements of the FFC, the NCP and some of the rebel signatories of the Juba Peace Agreement, which felt excluded from the new deal. There was also widespread mistrust of al-Burhan and Hemedti, and many felt that they should be held responsible for the violent repression carried out by their forces.

9. That said, the agreement assuaged much of the unrest in the country and, despite its critics, it appeared that progress was being made in early 2023. However, this was short-lived. After the miscalculated coup in 2021, Hemedti tried to distance himself from al-Burhan, the coup and the repression of protests, in spite of the RSF's key role. This was heightened by his misgivings about the apparent growing influence of Islamists from the al-Bashir regime in the military. Hemedti sought alliances with civilian and rebel groups, portraying himself as a democratic alternative to the authoritarian and Islamist-sympathising al-Burhan, creating a clear wedge between the two leaders.
10. This increasing distance between the two military figures, who had built an alliance on restricting civilian influence, was exacerbated by the challenging matter of security sector reform, specifically the integration of the RSF into the SAF. The army wanted the RSF to be integrated within two years, while the RSF wanted ten years and other military reforms to take place beforehand. This had long been a point of contention between al-Burhan and Hemedti, and it is suspected that Islamists within the military tried to use this issue to weaken Hemedti and derail the transition process. There were already signs of this happening in late March, when Burhan suggested that the military would only hand over power to an elected civilian body. This was followed by the final signing of the agreement being delayed twice in early April.

## Conflict Erupts

11. As tensions between the two men escalated, their respective forces – the RSF and SAF – were preparing for conflict, with the RSF mobilising across the country, and particularly inside and around Khartoum; a move which the SAF characterised as “a clear violation of law”. Attempts to deescalate tensions by the FFC and former rebel leaders failed and, on 15<sup>th</sup> April, fighting broke out between the RSF and the SAF at key military positions, with both parties accusing the other of firing the first shots. These positions included the residencies of both al-Burhan and Hemedti, which highlights the personal nature of the unfolding conflict. Al-Burhan has since declared the RSF a rebel group, and Hemedti has accused al-Burhan of leading a “radical Islamist” takeover of Sudan; an accusation that has gained traction following the escape from prison of prominent figures in the al-Bashir regime, who have gone on to call for the Sudanese people to support the SAF.
  
12. Thus far, fighting between the two forces has been concentrated in Khartoum and the Darfur region. Hundreds have already been killed and thousands injured in the conflict, and it is estimated that over 100,000 people have fled the country, with a further 334,000 displaced within Sudan. The international community has brokered several ceasefires, but these have had little impact, as the conflict continues to escalate.

## Scenarios

### Al-Burhan Victory

13. As Sudan’s formal military, the SAF would be expected to defeat its opponent in conventional warfare, with access to superior weaponry and air dominance. Moreover, although the international community has so far remained independent, al-Burhan is closely aligned with the leader of Africa’s largest military power – Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi – and, therefore, his forces are likely to remain well-equipped in a prolonged conflict. That said, Hemedti’s forces should not be underestimated. The RSF is said to have 100,000 members, many of whom have frontline experience in fighting various rebel groups across Sudan, and Hemedti has influential supporters in the wider

region, who could supply the RSF. Furthermore, as the clashes in Khartoum have shown, the more mobile nature of the RSF has been an advantage for the force.

14. Accordingly, a swift victory for the SAF looks highly unlikely. The only way that this could be achieved would be through the elimination of Hemedti. As the RSF essentially serves as Hemedti's private militia, it is unlikely that it would be able to remain as a cohesive force without his leadership, although sections of it would almost certainly continue to pose a notable security threat, especially in Darfur. Unless Hemedti's removal can be achieved, it is likely that the SAF will increasingly come to rely on the use of heavy artillery and air strikes to try driving the RSF out of Khartoum; an approach which would inflict immense damage on the local population, as well as Sudan's international standing. And, even if the SAF were victorious in Khartoum, it is likely that al-Burhan would have to contend with a sustained RSF-led insurgency in the Darfur region.
15. Should al-Burhan secure such a victory, he will almost certainly seek to impose himself as a military strongman in the mould of Egypt's el-Sisi, suppressing any civilian opposition and maintaining the military's control of Sudan's economy. It is likely that Islamists from the al-Bashir era will regain some influence, acting as a counterweight to the FFC; however, this will be tempered by al-Burhan's desire to maintain close ties with el-Sisi and other regional leaders. The lasting influence of the NCP in any future al-Burhan government will likely depend on the importance of their role in defeating Hemedti.

### **Hemedti Victory**

16. While the RSF is a battle-hardened force, which is currently in a deadlock with the SAF in Khartoum, it is highly unlikely that Hemedti would be able to achieve an outright victory. Despite the potential support he could receive from other groups and states in the region – most notably the UAE and Libyan General Khalifah Haftar – there is little to suggest that he would be able to overturn the military superiority of the SAF, which is estimated to have at least double the number of personnel. This will also be bolstered

by NCP-aligned Islamist militias. Moreover, unlike with Hemedti's force, the elimination of al-Burhan will not cause the disintegration of the Sudanese military.

17. As a leader from Sudan's periphery, there is potential for Hemedti to attract a wide range of allies opposed to Sudan's political and military elite; however, given the fractured nature of such opposition, it is unlikely that this would lead to a definitive victory. Rather, it is more likely to exacerbate communal tensions and ignite other conflicts. This can already be seen in Hemedti's home region – Darfur – where rival militias have been mobilised against the RSF.
18. Even if Hemedti's RSF was able to overcome the SAF's military superiority and seize control of Khartoum, it is unlikely that it would be able to impose its authority on the country. Hemedti will not be accepted by Sudan's political and military elite, and the RSF would face armed opposition from various groups, including those based in Hemedti's Darfur stronghold. The RSF would almost certainly respond in the manner in which they have in the past, committing widespread violence. Accordingly, a Hemedti victory is likely to provoke further conflicts, as more groups take up arms.

### **Protracted and Expanded Conflict**

19. Thus far, international mediation efforts between al-Burhan and Hemedti have largely failed, and there is little sign of progress being made on this front. South Sudan announced that the two sides had committed to a seven-day ceasefire between 4<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> May, to enable peace talks to take place; however, it appears that this was not observed, even for a day. Peace talks led by the US and Saudi Arabia still took place in Jeddah, with a lasting ceasefire being the primary focus, but neither side seems willing to compromise. It appears that both al-Burhan and Hemedti believe in their ability to secure an outright victory. Accordingly, a protracted conflict looks increasingly likely.
20. Sudan's history and geography makes a protracted conflict between the SAF and RSF a worrying prospect. Given the preponderance of rebel and militia groups in the country, it is highly unlikely that the conflict will remain confined to these two parties for very



long, especially as both al-Burhan and Hemedti appear to be keen to build alliances with such groups. As many of these groups are divided along ethnic and religious lines, their inclusion will almost certainly aggravate communal tensions and lead to more widespread violence, as the conflict evolves from a battle between rival military factions into a wider civil war.

21. Similarly, as a country with seven international borders – many of which are with countries that are also home to rebel and militia groups – the longer the conflict goes on, the more likely it is that violence will spill over into surrounding countries and non-Sudanese combatants will be drawn into the conflict. This is likely to be especially pronounced along Sudan’s western border with Libya, Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR). While the governments of surrounding countries are currently committed to neutrality, it is unlikely that this will extend to militia groups active in the border regions. This is due to cross-border cultural and political ties between such militia groups, as well as ongoing land disputes that will almost certainly be exacerbated. Moreover, the longer the conflict goes on, the less likely it is that governments in the region will remain neutral, with countries like Egypt and the UAE potentially acting as sources of weapons and funding for the opposing sides.

22. This will only serve to extend the conflict, which will have a ripple effect across the wider region. A protracted civil war in Sudan will aggravate pre-existing tensions in surrounding countries and severely disrupt regional trade and diplomacy. This will increase insecurity across the wider region and has the potential to spark other conflicts in, or even between, surrounding countries.

### **A Negotiated Peace**

23. While international mediation efforts have yielded very little thus far, it is significant that the international community, and especially governments in the region, have maintained their neutrality and appear to be committed to a peaceful resolution. Similarly, although al-Burhan and Hemedti have sought to build alliances, most of the larger rebel groups, such as the signatories of the Juba Peace Agreement, and civilian

political organisations have also remained neutral. This has prevented the conflict from rapidly escalating into a wider civil war, providing space for negotiations to take place. As a result, although unlikely, a negotiated peace is still a possibility.

24. For this to be a success, al-Burhan and Hemedti's key international allies, namely Egypt and the UAE, will almost certainly have to be involved in said negotiations and be willing to exert pressure on the two men. Representatives of these countries were not present at the negotiations in Jeddah, and it appears that they have been hampered as a result. The involvement of these countries in any future negotiations will increase the likelihood of a breakthrough on the current key issue: a lasting ceasefire. The longer it takes to make such a breakthrough, the harder it will become. This is because of the increased likelihood of other players in Sudan and the wider region, with their own demands, being drawn into the conflict.
25. Moreover, even if a lasting ceasefire is brokered, this will only be the start of a very challenging negotiation between al-Burhan and Hemedti. Neither side will be willing to cede power to the other, and it is unlikely that they will accept the authority of a civilian administration. Accordingly, a negotiated peace agreement will likely lead to another transitional authority dominated by these two individuals, with the tensions between them having the potential to spark future conflicts.

## Conclusions

26. At the time of writing, Africa Integrity assesses that the most likely scenario is a protracted and expanded conflict followed by an al-Burhan victory. However, given the fluid nature of the situation in Sudan and the various dimensions of the unfolding conflict, it is possible for this outlook to change quickly, especially if Egypt and the UAE engage with mediation efforts. Africa Integrity is closely monitoring developments in Sudan and is well-placed to assist any clients with exposure to the conflict and its potential consequences for the region.

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