

Sudan opposition leaders form government with the army

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The Force for Freedom and Change (FFC), an umbrella group of opposition groups, have signed a power-sharing agreement with the Transitional Military Council (TMC), Sudan's military junta.

The agreement reached on Saturday August 17, was initialed just days after the TMC gunned down school children in El-Obeid. It gives free rein to the military and security forces, which ousted long-term dictator President Omar al-Bashir in April to prevent the overthrow of the entire regime, to rule Sudan under the guise of a civilian "government" but on behalf of the tiny venal elite that has controlled the country since independence in 1956.

The agreement was met with a palpable sense of relief in Western and regional capitals that eight months of mass protests may now finally be over. It is a shameless betrayal of the movement which brought cities across the country to a virtual standstill demanding a fundamental transformation of the entire social order.

Heads of state, prime ministers and dignitaries from several countries, including Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and South Sudanese President Silva Kiir, attended the signing ceremony. The agreement, the subject of months-long talks that stalled repeatedly amid the junta's violent and bloody crackdowns on hundreds of thousands of protestors, was brokered by the butcher of the Egyptian revolution, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, in his role as the chair of the African Union (AU), and Ethiopian envoy Mahmoud Dirir.

All this took place under the watchful eye of Washington and its junior partner in London, Sudan's former colonial master, determined to ensure that the uprising does not spread to its regional allies, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, without whose support the junta would not have survived.

Signing the deal on behalf of the TMC was deputy chief and de facto leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, and Ahmed al-Rabie for the FFC.

The power-sharing agreement establishes a joint military and civilian sovereign council to rule until elections are held

in 39 months. General Abdel Fattah Burhan, the TMC leader and commander of Sudan's armed forces and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) will head the 11-member sovereign council for the first 21 months and be able to veto the council's decisions before handing over to a civilian leader for the next 18 months.

The council is to consist of four further military members, including Dagalo and Lieutenant General Yasser Al-Atta, with two additional members to be named later, as well as five members appointed by the FFC, Aisha Mousa, Siddig Tower, Mohamed Elfaki Suleiman, Hassan Sheikh Idris and Taha Othman Ishaq, and a civilian member to be agreed by both sides.

While there will be a government and 20-member cabinet nominated by the FFC, the TMC's members on the council will nominate the crucial defence and interior ministries.

The FFC nominated 61-year-old economist Abdullah Hamdok as prime minister, the first civilian prime minister since al-Bashir seized power in a coup in 1989. Hamdok, who also holds British citizenship, previously worked at the African Development Bank and was chief economist in the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. Sacked from his position in the finance ministry in 1989 because he wasn't affiliated to al-Bashir's Islamist movement, he turned down the dictator's invitation to head the finance ministry in 2017.

Hamdok is tasked with rescuing Sudan from bankruptcy under conditions where \$3 billion in aid from Saudi Arabia and the UAE has provided only temporary relief. At least 80 percent of Sudan's 40 million people live on less than US\$1 per day, with some 5.5 million in need of humanitarian assistance in 2018, an increase of 700,000 compared to 2017, and where some 2.47 million children suffer from acute malnutrition, while a tiny clique control Sudan's wealth.

There will be a 300-member legislative council, with at least 40 percent of seats reserved for women. The FFC will appoint two thirds of the members, with other political groups not associated with former ruler al-Bashir and his

National Congress Party (NCP) appointing the rest.

Al-Bashir, who has admitted to receiving \$90 million from Saudi Arabia and an undisclosed sum from UAE President Khalifa bin Zayed, faces charges of corruption, illicit possession of foreign currency and accepting gifts illegally. His NCP controlled some \$31 billion of assets, including a fleet of 5,000 cars, 3,000 companies exempted from tax and customs duties, 1,500 real estate holdings, and a headquarters office built at a cost of \$50 million, not to mention cash and deposits in its accounts.

The deal also includes the establishment of an “independent investigation” into the crackdown on protesters by the security forces. According to the Sudanese Doctors Committee, at least 250 people have been killed by the security forces and 400 wounded since the start of the protests in December, with at least half killed on June 3 when military and paramilitary forces, including Dagalo’s hated RSF, cleared the sit-in outside the military’s headquarters in the capital. Six people were killed, including five school children, and more than 60 injured, in El-Obeid in North Kordofan at the end of July, as well as four protestors in Khartoum.

The military and paramilitary forces had sought absolute immunity from prosecution, after an official investigation into the June 3 massacre completely exonerated the TMC and singled out some “rogue” forces in Dagalo’s RSF, which it refused to name. The report vastly underestimated the numbers killed and injured and denied that there was any evidence of rape, despite widespread reporting by local medics of rape, a means of war and repression widely used by Dagalo’s RSF in Darfur.

In the end, the junta accepted a “procedural immunity” whereby all members of the three-tier transitional government have immunity unless they are voted out of office by two-thirds of the legislative council, ensuring that none of the military officers in the transitional government will be investigated or prosecuted.

The agreement has been met with disappointment in Darfur, North Kordofan and Blue Nile, regions that have been beset with unrest, with protests erupting in camps for internally displaced persons in Zamzam, Kalma, Abu Shook and elsewhere in North and South Darfur states. While the disparate rebel groups had implemented a de facto ceasefire with the TMC after al-Bashir’s ouster in April and had joined the FFC, the two most important groups, the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army-Hilu, based in the Nuba mountains, and the Sudanese Liberation Movement, based in Darfur, refused to negotiate with the TMC or sign the accords.

Above all there is deep hostility to Dagalo and his RSF, previously known as the Janjaweed, notorious for their

brutal suppression of the uprisings in Darfur and the east of the country, which al-Bashir incorporated into the army and National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) in 2007 and dispatched to fight a proxy war in neighbouring Chad the following year.

Seen as the real power in Sudan, Dagalo’s RSF operates as both a business and a military enterprise. He provides mercenary forces to fight in Saudi Arabia and UAE’s dirty war in Yemen against the Houthi rebels and to support their man in Libya, General Khalifa Hiftar. In April, Dagalo announced that he was donating \$1.03 billion to the Central Bank of Sudan and the Ministry of Finance and National Economy from money that came from the “salaries of our soldiers and from gold mining operations we run.” This was a tacit admission that he had kept the salaries of RSF mercenaries fighting in Yemen off the government’s books and in his own accounts.

The “goldmining operations we run” refers to the Al-Junaid Group of Companies, owned by Dagalo and his brother, who is also the RSF’s deputy commander. Their commercial empire encompasses iron and steel, transport, construction, engineering, media, and tourism, while their gold and minerals exploration company controls much of Sudan’s artisanal gold deposits, discovered in North Darfur in 2012 just as South Sudan was seceding from Sudan, taking with it 75 percent of the country’s oil revenues.

With the Central Bank of Sudan the sole buying agent for the gold, paying sky high prices to Al-Junaid, and printing money to do so, inflation skyrocketed, triggering the protest movement last December.

It is this wealth that enables Dagalo to dispense cash to police to get them back on the streets, pay electricity workers to restore services and secure security and political deals in order to derail the long running protest movement. These are the forces that the FFC, the middle-class leadership of the mass movement, now seeks to legitimize.



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