Sudan’s military oust transitional civilian-military government

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General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the Sovereign Council, the joint civilian-military body that has governed the country since August 2019, ousted Prime Minister Abdulla Hamdok’s government Monday.

Hamdok was running the supposed transition to full civilian rule scheduled for 2023. The move comes just weeks before al-Burhan was due to hand over his position to a civilian.

Al-Burhan ordered the arrest of Hamdok, his wife and several cabinet members who have not been seen since. He went on television to announce the dissolution of Hamdok’s government, declaring a nationwide state of emergency, and shut down the internet. Members of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the militia widely hated for its brutal operations in the Darfur conflict and that is commanded by his rival and deputy, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (also known as Hemedti), took up positions on the bridges over the Nile and other key infrastructure in the Khartoum conurbation.

Hamdok condemned al-Burhan’s power grab as a “rupture” of the 2019 deal setting up the transitional civilian front for continued military rule and urged Sudanese to “resist” peacefully. The Sudan Professionals' Association and Resistance Committees, part of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) that led the country-wide protests that broke out at the end of 2018, called for mass protests and a general strike, as did the Umma Party and Sudan’s Stalinist Communist Party.

Al-Burhan had sought to dampen down opposition by signalling that the coup was just a temporary measure with the promise of elections in July 2023. But thousands took to the streets of Khartoum, the capital, and other towns and cities chanting, “The people are stronger, stronger” and “Retreat is not an option!” Troops fired tear gas and live bullets at the crowds, killing seven, injuring dozens more and bringing commercial life to a standstill.

Al-Burhan came to power in April 2019, with the support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, ousting long-term dictator President Omar al-Bashir. The aim was to prevent the overthrow of the entire state apparatus in the face of months-long protests against al-Bashir’s Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated military regime in which he played a leading role.

A few months later, Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), an umbrella group of 22 bourgeois and petty bourgeois opposition organisations, signed a wretched deal with the military. The military would be fronted by a transitional “technocratic” government, to be headed by Dr Hamdok, a former economist at the African Development Bank and later the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

This betrayal ushered in a government that maintained the power of the tiny venal elite that has controlled the country under the military boot since independence in 1956. In practice, the country has been ruled by Dagalo, al-Burhan’s deputy, whose Rapid Support Force is more powerful than the Sudanese army and controls most of Sudan’s towns and cities.

Monday’s coup follows months of mounting unrest over the government’s failure to bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of 1,800 protesters at the mass sit-in in Khartoum in June 2019, inflation that is running at 400 percent, countrywide shortages of food, fuel, and medicine, mishandling of the pandemic and the recent flash flooding. This is in a country where in 2018 at least 80 percent of the 40 million population were living on less than US$1 per day, with 5.8 million in need of humanitarian assistance, an increase of 700,000 on 2017, and more than 2.7 million children suffering from acute malnutrition.

Hamdok had sought debt relief from the US-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF), whose political price was an agreement to hand over al-Bashir to the International Criminal Court for war crimes and genocide

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in Darfur, investigate the role of other senior officials and sign up to the normalisation of relations with Israel, as part of a broader anti-Iran alliance. The IMF's economic price included the ending of fuel subsidies, doubling prices at the pumps, abandoning Sudan's fixed exchange rate and moving to a floating currency, stoking inflation now running at more than 400 percent, up from 144 percent a year ago. But the IMF's demands for the privatisation of 600 state firms, many controlled by the military and intelligence apparatus, strike at the heart of the junta's financial interests.

It is the fear of these measures that would strip the generals of their access to state funding and practical immunity from prosecution for war crimes that led them to oppose the Hamdok government.

The Transitional Military Council (TMC), made up of a disparate alliance of warlords, military commanders, militia leaders and al-Bashir loyalists who have repeatedly switched sides, is riven with dissent. The two men at the top, al-Burhan and Dagalo are rivals, with the former close to Cairo and the latter to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

While the TMC had signed the Juba Peace Agreement, bringing five of the seven armed rebel groups on board in October 2020, the two largest groups based in Darfur in the west and South Kordofan and West Nile in the south, refused to sign. The deal angered the tribal leaders and impoverished ethnic groups based in East Sudan, allied with former leader al-Bashir, who feared their position would be further diluted by the greater representation given to the rebel groups and their regions.

They mounted a blockade in Port Sudan, Sudan's main port on the Red Sea, and the roads leading to Khartoum, leading to drastic shortages of basic commodities, including oil, in the capital. Leaders from the Forces of Freedom and Change accused the military of encouraging the blockade to sow ethnic divisions. Last month, the military mounted an attempted putsch, seen as a dress rehearsal for Monday's coup. It incited pro-military demonstrations in the capital calling for the overthrow of the civilian government, with many people bussed in from outside Khartoum and security forces protecting government buildings and staff withdrawn.

Al-Burhan's coup comes the day after the visit to Khartoum of Jeffrey Feltman, US envoy to the Horn of Africa, to demand Sudan continue to adhere to the IMF's political and economic demands. Washington's primary concern is to ensure that rising social tensions, replicated across the region, do not spread to its allies, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which fear their own working class and poor peasants. The last thing the US and Europe want is instability in Sudan, strategically located in the Horn of Africa, alongside the Red Sea and the entrance to the Suez Canal through which much of the region's oil passes, and a new wave of refugees heading for Europe.

The United Nations and the Arab League say they are "deeply concerned" about the coup, calling on "all sides" to respect the 2019 accord. The Inter-Governmental Association on Development (IGAD), the main regional organisation, currently chaired by Sudan, condemned the coup. Their statements follow US and European Union condemnation, with Washington demanding that the Sudanese military immediately release civilian leaders and restore the transitional government and announcing it would suspend its $700 million aid programme to the country.

The generals believe they have the support of Egypt's President Abdel Fatteh el-Sisi. Cairo wants a government in Khartoum that will oppose the Ethiopian government's plans to fill the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile and start electricity production, potentially restricting flows into Sudan and Egypt in the event of a drought. But el-Sisi has refrained from openly backing Burhan's putsch. Tensions have risen as talks to resolve the crisis, which Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry has described as an "existential threat" to his country, have stalled.

Workers' opposition to al-Burhan's power grab takes place amid growing militancy throughout the Middle East and North Africa, including protests and strikes in Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon and Iran against corruption, poverty and social inequality.

The only way to establish a democratic regime in Sudan is through a struggle led by the working class, independently of and in opposition to the liberal and pseudo-left forces, to take power and expropriate the regime's ill-gotten wealth in the context of a broad international struggle of the working class against capitalism.

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