

## The Sudanese Military's Interests in Civilian Rule

*Joseph Siegle*



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*Proactive management of the transition to civilian rule would afford the Sudanese military more stability, budgetary support, and professional benefits.*

Military governments have led Sudan for all but ten years since independence in 1956. Widespread popular protests in 2019 brought an abrupt end to former president Omar al-Bashir's thirty years of repressive rule and raised hopes for a new trajectory, but a fragile, civilian-military transitional government formed in August 2019 does not constitute a clean break with the past. The military leads the Sovereign Council while a civilian prime minister runs the day-to-day operations of government, with a mandate to transition to a fully civilian-led, democratic government by January 2024. As an interim step, a civilian is to lead the Sovereign Council in February 2022.

Questions remain over how committed military leaders are to the transition. The military has become accustomed to playing a [dominant role](#) in the government and economy. The security services are estimated to control [over 250 companies](#) in a range of sectors, including gold mining, livestock, arms, telecommunications, banking, and construction. In Egypt, Mali, Myanmar, and Thailand, the military has shown a [reflexive impulse to maintain control](#), but there are six reasons why a transition to full civilian rule is in the interest of the Sudanese military.

## Interests in Civilian Rule

First, the protests that led to the overthrow of Bashir were massive and sustained. Hundreds of thousands of people, representing a cross section of Sudanese society, took to the streets across dozens of cities and towns from December 2018 to August 2019, calling for fundamental change in the political system. Given its ties to the Bashir administration, if the military were to try to stay on, the public would mobilize new protests, placing the military in the same untenable position as that of Bashir.

An attempt by the military to retain power would also overlook the original drivers of the protests. Years of economic mismanagement and structural challenges have made basic necessities expensive and jobs scarce. The economy has contracted sharply since 2015, with national debt [projected to balloon six-fold](#), to \$1.2 trillion, by 2025. With an inflation rate of 167 percent in December 2020, Sudan faces a pressure cooker of socioeconomic tensions. By holding onto power, military leaders would own this economic time bomb, making it wise to hand this basket of troubles over to civilians.

Second, some in the military may believe that the United States' lifting of the State Sponsor of Terrorism designation in late 2020 has opened the door to international support beyond the military's allies in the Arabian Gulf. But lending and investment at the levels that Sudan needs are only going to be forthcoming if there is a credible, civilian government in place. The dismal economic track record of military governments elsewhere shows that the sooner the Sudanese military transfers power fully to civilian leaders, the quicker these leaders can restore credibility in the country's economic institutions and negotiate support. Likewise, militaries that [proactively manage the process](#) are better able to safeguard their institutions afterwards, but militaries that transition under crisis tend to emerge with far less autonomy.

Third, a civilian transition would enhance security in Sudan. The country's most prolonged and destabilizing security threats are domestic—armed rebel groups in the west and south. Under civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, Sudan has negotiated a peace agreement with many of these groups and is well-positioned to facilitate peace with the others. This would allow the military to focus on protecting Sudan's expansive borders, controlling illicit trafficking, and preventing the reemergence of violent extremist groups.

Fourth, removing the military from Sudan's complex politics would free it to begin re-professionalization. Over the years, the integration of armed groups into the military has resulted in highly varied skill levels and command structures. There is not one but multiple Sudanese armed forces. The transition provides an [opportunity for military professionals](#) to regain control over and rededicate the armed forces to

[protecting the state and its citizens](#), with a unified command structure and uniform standards for training, discipline, recruitment, and merit-based promotion.

Fifth, a growing economy would create a more reliable, state-based revenue stream for the military, translating into regularized salaries for army officers on par with other skilled professionals. An attractive pension and retirement package would enable senior officers to step down at the end of their careers and confidently transition into the private sector. Personnel who are decommissioned during the restructuring should be supported with training and assistance to reintegrate into society.

A final incentive for a transition to civilian rule is that military governments tend to be fragile. Bashir's alliances with Islamists and booming oil revenues allowed him an extended hold on power, but military regimes typically [experience shorter tenures](#) than other authoritarian governments or democracies. The prospect of a coup is never far away, making democratic civilian rule a form of life insurance for military leaders.

### **Stepping Away Is Hard**

Stepping away from power is never easy. However, militaries have done so in Argentina, Benin, Brazil, Chile, Ghana, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Peru, among others. By proactively managing the transition to civilian rule, Sudan's military leaders have an opportunity to emerge as a rebranded, professional, and respected force.

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