



SUDAN RAPID RESPONSE UPDATE #1

What next for the Juba Peace Agreement?

X-Border Local Research Network

The 25 October coup in Sudan saw the military component of the transitional government assert itself over its civilian counterpart. In the weeks since, attention has mostly focused on events in Khartoum, but the coup, which was actively or tacitly supported by several of Sudan's opposition groups, reveals much about how the military has successfully managed the political relationships with elites in the country's conflict-affected peripheries and borderlands. In the first in a series of rapid response updates on the changing political and security situation in Sudan, we consider what impact recent events may have on the Juba Peace Agreement and, more generally, peace and security in Sudan's conflict affected regions. This update is a product of the UK government's [XCEPT programme](#) (Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends).

Key Points

- The success of the 25 October coup was partly down to the support, or participation of leaders of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF). In the months before the coup, the military component of the transitional government (Mil-TG) built good relations with SRF members and was able to persuade some that it would be to their political advantage to support its power-grab.
- Previously, Mil-TG had succeeded in taking control of the Juba Peace Process, which resulted in the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) in August 2020. Mil-TG's control of negotiations signaled to the SRF that it was the military that could grant them access to political power, rather than the civilian component of the transitional government (Civ-TG).
- Mil-TG leaders were also able to build relationships with leaders at the state level, including the SRF-appointed governors of West Darfur, North Darfur, and Blue Nile. Mohamed Hamdan Daglo 'Himedti'—leader of the powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—has played an important role in this due to his prior relationships with governors, and other significant figures.
- Mil-TG has also benefitted from divisions between the SRF and the Civ-TG, as well as intra-SRF rivalries—actively working to exploit them. This included the creation of a rival FFC—the FFC 'National Charter'—by the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minnawi.
- The future of the JPA is now in serious doubt. However, even before the coup, the JPA was a problematic agreement which had already caused instability in some regions. It had also failed to gain the signatures of the SPLM-N al-Hilu and the SLA-Abdel Wahid, who had shown concern over the Mil-TG's control over the peace process.
- Despite its flaws, the JPA does include a number of important measures on land and security sector reform, and political representation. While the politics of the JPA are imperfect, these things are worth preserving. However, the deal between the Mil-TG and Sudan's periphery elites is not conducive to the inclusive peace process that the JPA could become, and the country needs.

Introduction

The 25 October coup in Sudan, which saw the military remove Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok and several civilian allies from power, succeeded in part because of the overt participation, or tacit support, of the leaders of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF). The SRF—a coalition of Sudanese opposition groups founded in 2011—formally joined the military-civilian power-sharing government in January 2021, after signing the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) the previous August.

Throughout the peace process, the military component of the transitional government (Mil-TG) cultivated relationships with SRF leaders that worked to its advantage when it seized power and ousted its civilian counterpart (the Civ-TG). Two SRF leaders—Jibril Ibrahim and Minni Minnawi—directly participated in the coup’s joint force, while others either joined the new government in order to protect their personal political interests or refrained from commenting publicly. Taken together, the responses of SRF leaders helped undermine unified opposition to the power grab.

The JPA is a problematic document. It bestowed political power on the SRF without taking into account the desires of other groups in regions of Sudan that have seen years or decades of conflict. It also did not include two major rebel movements, the SPLM-N of Abdelaziz al-Hilu and the SLA of Abdel-Wahid al-Nur. Still, the JPA does include a broader spirit of democratic transformation that now appears in jeopardy. Furthermore, the broader requirements for sustainable peace, whether achieved through the JPA or not, run counter to the interests of the Mil-TG. The junta’s new government is thus likely to contribute to rising instability across Sudan.

Mil-TG advantages prior to the coup

Given the SRF’s ostensible position as a revolutionary, anti-NCP regime movement, many members of the pro-democracy movement, along with their international supporters, expected that the SRF would help tip the balance of power towards the Civ-TG when it joined the transitional government in January 2021. This was, however, not to be the case. Instead, the Mil-TG’s ability to take early control of the Juba Peace Process, combined with ongoing tensions between the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) and SRF and divisions within the SRF, worked to the Mil-TG’s advantage in the months prior to the coup.

The Mil-TG’s de facto control over the peace process resulted in a closer alignment between many SRF leaders and the Mil-TG than was expected. The Mil-TG cemented its leadership over the peace talks early in the process by forming the High Peace Council (HPC), chaired by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan—Chair of the Transitional Sovereignty Council—which was not mandated by the 2019 Constitutional Declaration. The HPC superseded the work of the Peace Commission, which was created by the Constitutional Declaration to ostensibly lead the TG’s approach to the peace process, by appointing the transitional government’s negotiating team and overseeing all aspects of the peace process. While both the HPC and the negotiating team included civilian members, both bodies were directed by the Mil-TG. Furthermore, peace talks initially focused on technicalities related to a ceasefire and other military matters. This allowed the Mil-TG to set much of the peace process’s early direction. Discussions with those close to the Civ-TG reveal that at the time they believed that the Mil-TG had good intentions and that they either did not feel the need to push back on Mil-TG control or by the time they realized the problem with this control it was too late to correct it. All of this allowed the Mil-TG to establish both dominance over the peace process and signal to the SRF that it was them who could grant access to political power. This signaling was followed up by months of relationship-building, which allowed the Mil-TG to further cement a relationship with some SRF leaders.

Furthermore, residual tensions between the SRF and the FFC, dating to a falling out in July and August 2019, continued during the peace process and helped prevent the formation of a close working relationship between the SRF and FFC as the peace process commenced and after the SRF joined the transitional government.¹

1 These tensions were first related to the FFC’s organizational structure and later a disagreement of provisions within the Constitutional Declaration. In July 2019 Minni Minnawi stated that the SRF might be better off negotiating directly with the TMC and bypass the FFC, while in August 2019 after the Constitutional Declaration’s signing Minni and other SRF leaders reiterated their disappointment with the FFC saying that the revolution had been hijacked. See ‘Sudan’s armed groups threaten to hold separate talks with military junta’, *Sudan Tribune*, 2 July 2019. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190704093449/https://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article67709>); ‘Sudan Revolutionary Front rejects Constitutional Declaration’, *Dabanga*, 5 August 2019 (<https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudanese-revolutionary-front-rejects-constitutional-declaration>); ‘Minawi holds military parade, says Sudan’s Revolution was hijacked’, *Sudan Tribune*, 26 August

This helped the Mil-TG stay on relatively good terms with most SRF leaders. Compounding the situation was that Mil-TG links were not only with SRF leaders present in Juba, but extended to those at the state level as well. This included the SRF-appointed governors of West Darfur, North Darfur, and Blue Nile. In West Darfur Mohamed Hamdan Daglo ‘Hemedti’, leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group, developed a strong relationship with Governor Khamis Abdallah Abbaker. Abbaker was an early Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) leader who Hemedti helped to create the Sudanese Alliance just prior to joining the Juba peace process.

In North Darfur, Hemedti also has a good relationship with Governor Nimir Abdelrahman, the SLA-TC’s former chairman.² Finally, in Blue Nile Burhan and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) more generally have sought to cultivate a good relationship with Ahmed al-Omda, appointed by Malik Agar’s Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N) faction. The Mil-TG also built relationships with SRF leaders of the northern and central tracks.³ These relationships would come back to help the Mil-TG later during the coup.

Divisions within the SRF also worked to the Mil-TG’s advantage. Disputes between Minni Minnawi and his allies Al-Tom Hajo and El-Amin Daoud and the rest of the SRF that worsened during the peace process continued once the SRF joined the transitional government.⁴ When tensions emerged in early 2021 between other SRF leaders and the Mil-TG over the latter’s reluctance to implement the JPA’s security provisions, which include comprehensive security sector reform, differing opinions within the SRF over the source of the problem weakened the movement’s ability to push for implementation.⁵

The Mil-TG not only benefited from existing SRF-FFC and intra-SRF tensions, but actively worked to exploit them in the months preceding the coup. Prime Minister Hamdok announced new attempts to unite the FFC and SRF in June and August 2021 at a time of growing animosity and competition between the transitional government’s civilian and military wings. Hamdok had hoped that by uniting the FFC and bringing it and the SRF into agreement on how to implement his reform agenda he would stand a better chance of succeeding in this endeavor. Likely sensing the danger to their interests if this were to occur, the Mil-TG had continued to cultivate relationships with some SRF leaders—most notably, Minni Minnawi (leader of the Sudan Liberation Army-Minnawi faction)—with the intent to prevent the civilian forces from uniting against them.

Personal rivalries played to the Mil-TG’s advantage. Minnawi’s long-standing feud with Yasir Arman became public when the former stated that he was against Hamdok’s actions because they were Yasir’s idea.⁶ As Yasir attempted to implement Hamdok’s initiatives, competition for leadership within the SRF increased and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and SLA-TC (Transitional Council) leaders also had a falling out.⁷ JEM then aligned with Minnawi and they announced a new FFC, called the FFC-National Charter (NC), in late September in conjunction with a number of smaller political parties and the Mil-TG’s support.⁸ In mid-October, the FFC-NC organized public protests against the mainstream FFC and the Civ-TG, and then formed a sit-in style protest outside the presidential palace. No attempts by the security forces were made to disperse these protests or the sit-in. When the Mil-TG carried out their coup on October 25, the new FFC-NC supported their efforts.

2019 (<https://sudantribune.com/article66134/>).

2 Nimir is a Fur from north Jebel Marra area and was an early SLA leader before splitting and forming the SLA-Transitional Council with other Fur dissidents. He was its Chairman until his capture in May 2016.

3 Mohammed Ahmed Sir al-Khatim (Northern Entity), who signed the Northern Track, and al-Tom Hajo (opposition DUP) who signed the Central Track, both later supported the Mil-TG’s coup.

4 Al-Tom is the leader of a DUP splinter and part of the central track. El-Amin was ousted as leader of the UPFLJ during the eastern track peace process.

5 During a public forum in June 2021, Yasir Arman criticized SAF Military Intelligence in particular for blocking the security arrangements and funding other security forces (likely meaning the Tamazuj militia, which was essentially formed during the JPA). The JEM representative was critical of SAF in general for delaying the security arrangements, while the SLA-MM representative laid much of the blame with the FFC and the C-TGoS for not pushing the M-TGoS hard enough to carry out security sector reform.

6 Yasir Arman was an adviser to Hamdok at the time. He was previously Secretary General of the SPLM-N. When the SPLM-N split in 2017 Arman joined the faction loyal to Malik Agar, previously the chair of the SPLM-N.

7 Additionally, during Yasir and Hamdok’s attempts to reunite the FFC, Hamdok held a meeting in which he commented something to the effect of “I do not see Minni and Jibril here, but we hope that they will join us.” Discussions with some close to Minni and Jibril indicate that they interpreted this as a statement saying that Yasir and Hamdok had already decided and that Minni and Jibril should come and join what they had created. It is unlikely that this was Hamdok’s intention, but the misinterpretation likely helped convince Minni and Jibril to take a firm stance against Hamdok and the rest of the SRF and FFC.

8 ‘Alliance forces of the declaration of freedom and change announced its refusal to hijack the revolution and speak in its name by what it called the group of four’, *As-Sayha*, 26 September 2021. (<https://www.assayha.net/79125/>)

SRF Responses to the 25 October Coup

The 25 October coup forced SRF leaders to choose between returning to a revolutionary and anti-regime stance or aligning with the coup plotters in order to preserve their access to political power. Most eventually chose the latter, though with varying degrees of support ranging from overt to tacit. Minni Minnawi and Jibril Ibrahim (leader of JEM) openly participated in the coup and continue their close alignment with the Mil-TG. After some public dithering, Malik Agar, al-Hadi Idris, and al-Taher Hajar accepted their reappointment to the Sovereignty Council—their motivation is much more of a pragmatic calculation to protect their personal political power, through which they support their patronage networks, than it is an ideological approval of the coup. For al-Hadi Idriss and Malik Agar, this calculation is due in large part to the close relationship between the Mil-TG and others in their movements.

As stated above, Hemedti and Nimir have a good relationship, while SLA-TC Chairman El-Hadi Idriss views Hemedti's relationship with Nimir as a threat and fears that he could be sidelined by the Mil-TG in favour of Nimir or others from the SLA-TC with similar grievances against El-Hadi. The same is true for Malik Agar who is also vulnerable from within his own movement. For instance, while Ahmed al-Omda is Malik's close relative and longtime deputy, he also has his own interests that are separate and distinct from Malik's, and the two are often in political competition. Thus, while these SRF leaders on the Sovereignty Council may not be enthusiastic supporters of the coup and the newly formed government, their personal political agendas and desires to stay politically relevant took precedence over any other concerns.

Other SRF leaders who signed the JPA and sided with the Mil-TG are Mohammed Ahmed Sir al-Khatim (Northern Entity), who signed the Northern Track, and al-Tom Hajo (opposition DUP) who signed the Central Track. So far, the SRF leaders who signed the eastern track have not spoken publicly. Sources close to these leaders state that they are in talks with the Mil-TG about renegotiating the contentious Eastern Track. Mohammed Daoud Bandaq from the Sudanese Kush Liberation Movement, which signed the Northern Track, also has not spoken publicly. Yasir Arman, the only SRF leader arrested at the start of the coup and the most likely to be against it, broke his silence on 22 November, and commented on the deal signed between Burhan and Hamdok.⁹ While Arman criticized the deal and stated that Hamdok's decision to sign it has created more distance between him and the FFC, he did not comment on the fact that the SPLM/A-N (Agar) has silently condoned the coup when Agar agreed to keep his position in the Sovereignty Council.

JPA post-coup

The coup and the subsequent formation of a new government, and its tacit or implicit acceptance by most SRF leaders, has cast doubt on the JPA's future. The JPA is a problematic document—it was negotiated exclusively between the transitional government and the SRF and grants the SRF political power in regions where it lacks a true constituency. As a result, the JPA began causing instability in multiple regions of Sudan before it was even signed. At the same time, the JPA includes important measures such as land reform, security sector reform, and increased political representation that are worth preserving. These provisions directly threaten the core interests of the Mil-TG and its supporters. There is also the danger that the Mil-TG and the SRF will selectively implement small parts of the JPA in order to appease international stakeholders and maintain their alliance, but without contributing to positive change on the ground. The Mil-TG's interests and the elite arrangements necessary to keep new post-coup transitional government together both run counter to requirements for a genuine comprehensive peace process and are likely to increase instability in Sudan's peripheries.

Two Areas

In South Kordofan and Blue Nile, the biggest challenge to the JPA and the new government will be how it approaches the ongoing peace process with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu). Since the start of the peace process with the transitional government, the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) has maintained a cautious approach amid concerns that the Mil-TG had too much influence over the peace process and would not be willing to implement the reforms necessary to bring about real democratic transformation in Sudan. The coup validated these concerns, and the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) will likely be even more cautious in approaching a renewed peace process. At the same time, the Mil-TG was always wary of

⁹ 'Burhan's deal widened rift between Hamdok and Sudan's FFC: Arman', *Sudan Tribune*, 7 December 2021. (<https://sudantribune.com/article226568/>)

the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu), especially its vision for security sector reform that would completely remake the structures of the security forces. This would not only put the jobs of SAF and RSF leaders at risk, but the loss of military power would also undermine their political power—without which the security elites could not protect their other interests, including control over their business empires, as well as long-term protection from criminal liability. These dynamics will likely make it much more difficult for the new government and the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) to come to agreements during a peace process. Overtime this could lead to increased tensions between the two sides and a renewed interest by SAF and RSF hardliners (including the Mil-TG) to pursue a ‘security response’ to weaken the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) during negotiations in the hopes of making it more compliant to government demands. Thus, the risk of a return to war between the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) and Khartoum is now higher than at any point since June 2016, when a series of cessations of hostilities first took hold.

Darfur

In Darfur, the new government will have to grapple with the competing interests of its supporters when it comes to whether or not to implement JPA provisions. Violence in some areas of Darfur has already increased since the coup, especially in the areas between al-Fashir and Jebel Marra, in the Jebel Moon area north of al-Geneina, and in the Dar Masalit area of West Darfur. At its core, the conflict is over access to land between different communities, but it is also more broadly a competition over political representation. At the moment, the groups instigating much of the violence form part of the Mil-TG’s political base. This is especially true of Hemedti, whose main supporters in Darfur are the northern Rizeigat communities, who now expect his support regarding their land claims and interests in increased political representation. The Zaghawa supporters of Minni and Jibril, some of whom are in competition with northern Rizeigat communities over land, will expect the same. This could put their supporters on a collision course, and force Minnawi and Jibril to choose between losing legitimacy among their main support base or coming into conflict with the Mil-TG. These tensions within the new government will make implementing the JPA’s land provisions very difficult. Finally, in Darfur, as in the Two Areas, the new government will have to decide how it approaches the SLA-AW.

Eastern Sudan

In eastern Sudan, the Mil-TG and the new government will have to grapple with ongoing communal tensions related to access to land and competition over political representation, which were exacerbated by the JPA’s Eastern Track. In the run up to the coup, the Mil-TG looked to gain the allegiance of the Beja community by promising to renegotiate the Eastern Track. While it was relatively easy for the Mil-TG to make promises to the Beja community prior to the coup, actually responding to their concerns and grievances could prove much more difficult. This will be especially apparent when it comes to addressing competing land claims between the Beja and Bani Amer communities. If the Mil-TG sides fully with the Beja, it risks alienating the Bani Amer and further inflaming communal tensions and violence. But if it does not meet Beja aspirations, the Beja could resume their protests and blockade Port Sudan.



Credits

This briefing is a product of FCDO’s Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) programme. XCEPT brings together leading experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the factors that shape violent and peaceful behaviour. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government’s official policies.

The Rift Valley Institute works in eastern and central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.