

Toward A UN-Assisted National Project for Sudanese Renaissance Civil Democratic Peace

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Abstract

Sudan has been devastated by a high intensity factional military conflict since almost two years with no end in sight. Unfortunately, the worst is still to come should it escalate into a large scale long-duration ethnic war. Indeed, the country's highly fractionalized society is already providing the pretext for ethnic war mongering. An extended ethnic war will not only exact huge economic cost and untold human suffering, but could very well pose an *existential* threat for the country and its territorial integrity. Moreover, the increasing externalization of the war is becoming a threat to regional peace and security. Therefore, ending this war is an absolute imperative not only for Sudan, but for the regional and international communities. This requires a robust political settlement, leading to a transformative civil-democratic transition. Given the war-ravaged social capital and diminished domestic capabilities, sustainable peacebuilding requires a multi-dimensional UN-Regional peacekeeping operation for Sudan, guided by a broad civilian democratic coalition. While UN missions could help improve the "quality" of peace building, longer-term sustainability requires sustained, transformative, broad-based economic growth. The emerging political order, therefore, should be accountable for achieving development and prosperity, not just majorities in the electoral competition.

In this article I present six pillars of the envisaged UN-assisted Sudanese national project, articulating three main agenda for achieving renaissance civil democratic peace:

- Power-sharing agreements between successive governments and armed opposition movements as an approach to peacebuilding and their disastrous results;
- External support as an indispensable factor in stopping the current war and to build sustainable peace in light of the weakness of local capacities and the erosion of social capital due to the war; and,
- The features of the social contract and its national narrative for a civil, peaceful, democratic, and renaissance transition.

However, this national agenda is premised on achieving consensus from all components of society on building a broad national front to restore Sudan. The cornerstone of shared vision is one that believes in people's choice of freedom, peace and justice (the iconic slogan of Sudan's December Revolution). The immediate goal is to stop the war and create the foundation for sustainable democratic civil peace.

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Firstly, what does a “participatory” approach to peacebuilding mean for the Jeddah Platform, IGAD and other regional initiatives?

In critically reviewing the experiences of power-sharing agreements, we have shown that these agreements not only failed to build peace, but led to disastrous results, despite regional and international support in the form of three UN/regional missions. For example, the “Comprehensive Peace Agreement” between the Sudanese People Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Salvation Regime in 2005 led to the eventual partition of the country, while the Juba Agreement that was forged after the December Revolution turned out to be not a broad-based peace process that would empower civil society in conflict-affected areas of the country, but rather a totalitarian counter-revolutionary deal between the leadership of the Sudanese military and the rebel movements. As such, this agreement impeded the constitutional path to democracy during the transitional period after the December Revolution, which helped pave the way for the current factionalized military war. The flaw in these agreements, which contributed to their failure, was that they were limited to the military elites and the warring armies under their command.

The moral of the Sudanese peacebuilding story is that ending wars and rebuilding peace must be a “participatory” process with Sudanese civil society and civilian democratic forces at its center. Given Sudan's rich democratic legacy, albeit repeatedly hampered by military coups and civil wars, providing a space and voice for civilian stakeholders would be a significant lever for civilian democratic peacebuilding. In this context, the sponsors of the current peace initiatives, now centered around the Jeddah platform, have announced that there are three phases of the peace process, beginning with ceasefire and separation of forces; then the opening of relief and humanitarian corridors; and finally transitional arrangements and reform of the military-security system. However, the success of peace efforts through these regional initiatives depends on providing space for civilian stakeholders, such as political parties, youth associations, civil society organizations, and local communities, which can be important levers for the success of the peace process:

- As a third party that stands at the same distance from both military parties to the war, credible civilian forces can help bridge the enormous gap between the two sides of the war and alleviate the hostility between them
- As an actor in peace initiatives, democratic civilian forces can push for a national narrative to adopt a concept and approach to military and security reform in accordance with international standards to build a national army and professional regular forces under the supervision of a civilian transitional authority and end the militarization of politics and the economy.
- The participation of civilian forces will promote the adoption of the inclusive “National Conference” as a platform for peacebuilding as an alternative to power-sharing agreements and factional military quotas, thus cutting off the way to any potential arrangements that return the country to the legacy of totalitarian deals and their disastrous effects.

Secondly, but why is there still a need for a multidimensional UN peacebuilding and peacekeeping operation in Sudan?

Drawing on Doyle and Sambanis's “peace triangle” model and the solid evidence that follows from it¹, Sudanese political and civil society forces must address the challenge of restoring the war-damaged social capital and depleted institutional capacities that make up the two sides of the triangle. This requires building a broad-based coalition for civil-democratic peace, represented by a broad national front, as noted earlier. However, it can be argued that the scale of destruction caused by this war and the intense fighting between the two armies², the escalatory rhetoric and extremist war agenda that dominates the scene, as well as the horrific war crimes taking place, are all reasons why there is no prospect of ending this war, let alone rebuilding a sustainable peace, without external support. The Jeddah Platform and the initiatives of the African Union, IGAD, and neighboring countries are particularly important.

However, given the appalling fragmentation of the social fabric and unprecedented identity fissures, as well as the deep-rooted factional rentier-economic interests of the parties to the conflict and their association with the militarization of politics and the economy, peacebuilding efforts will not be easy even with a strong national front and a strong regional will. Therefore, we believe that securing a real chance for peace may require considering underpinning current regional initiatives with active UN participation, so that the third leg of the peace triangle is complemented by a transformative, multidimensional peacekeeping operation led by the UN and, of course, with regional participation. Such a hybrid operation would not only help impose and maintain peace, but would also enable Sudanese civilian and military stakeholders to adopt and implement security reforms to rebuild a depoliticized and professional armed forces that are completely free from commercial or any form of economic interests. We arrive at this position from a point of view that we argue is informed by a large body of literature on peacebuilding experiences, which includes rigorous studies of peacebuilding processes from World War II to the present.

In this context, it should be noted that there are national initiatives calling for the adoption of a request to the United Nations to support the project of ending war and building peace. In their statement issued on November 16, 2023 in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, the Sudanese Experts Against War called for the establishment of a “National Front to Stop the War,” stressing the fact that

“All state organs and institutions concerned with justice and law enforcement have either been eroded or have become an active party to the war, which makes them unable to achieve security

¹ Doyle, Michael W. and Nicholas Sambanis. 2000. “International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis.” *American Political Science Review*, 94 (4):779- 801

Doyle, Michael W. and Nicholas Sambanis. 2006. “Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations.” *Princeton University Press*.

²See Elbadawi, Ibrahim and Federico Fiuratti. (2024). “Sudan’s Future between Catastrophic Conflict and Peaceful Renaissance Growth Trajectories: Long-term Growth Model Simulations,” ERF Working Paper No. 1708, Economic Research Forum, Cairo, Egypt: June. (<https://erf.org.eg/publications/sudans-future-between-catastrophic-conflict-and-peaceful-renaissance-growth-trajectories-long-term-growth-model-simulations/>).

and incompetent to achieve law and order.” Recognizing these facts, the participants emphasized that achieving lasting peace, sustaining security, imposing stability and justice requires the international legitimacy represented by the United Nations and its Charter to support the Sudanese people and enable them to exercise their legitimate right to maintain the integrity of their national territory, safeguard their independence and exercise their national sovereignty without compromise or infringement, and that Sudan deserves this solidarity from international legitimacy for the sake of peace and justice.

In a letter to the UN Secretary-General dated October 18, 2023, a Sudanese group of 16 political parties, trade union and civilian forces called on the Security Council to:

“Immediately initiate the establishment of a comprehensive UN sustainable peace support operation to enforce peace and security throughout Sudan and for the Council to keep the matter under active consideration to ensure that the parties to the war comply with the Council's requests for measures related to sustaining peace and ensuring a democratic civilian transition. We also urge the Security Council to establish an international commission of inquiry to investigate reports of war crimes and violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed by both parties to the fighting and to identify the perpetrators of such violations to ensure that those responsible are held accountable. We very much hope that Your Excellency will respond immediately to our call and request the Security Council to convene an urgent session to take the necessary effective measures to stop the war and end its extremely dangerous repercussions on regional and international peace and security.”

Based on the analysis and evidence regarding the erosion of social capital and the collapse of local capacities, realism and intellectual honesty should lead such a front to explicitly call for a neutral, multidimensional UN peacekeeping operation. Such a mission would complement the Jeddah Platform and other regional efforts, which in turn would pave the way for UN approval for such an operation, given that the ceasefire agreement that is hoped to be finalized under the Jeddah Platform is a prerequisite for such approval.

The role of a fully equipped and adequately mandated multidimensional UN peacebuilding operation will be crucial. It is appropriate to emphasize that the operations in question do not allow for unilateral, non-neutral external interventions by individual countries, as appropriate UN peacebuilding operations operate under a very strict mandate that ensures neutrality, impartiality and subordination to the sovereignty of the country in question. Therefore, UN peacebuilding operations are in line with the reference of the National Inclusive Front, which lends the required legitimacy to the mission to help end the war and impose peace, allowing the national stakeholders to launch the security reforms and political and economic governance required to put the country on the path of renewal and sustainable peace.

Thirdly, why is a Renaissance Growth Project needed for sustainable peace in Sudan?

Humanitarian aid and funding for demining and demobilization and reintegration, for example, are certainly critical for peacebuilding, especially in the short term. However, according to the literature, transformative economic growth can effectively support cooperation between societal identities by promoting transnational economic progress and social well-being at the national level;

thereby calming animosities and curbing “subnational” rhetoric, which fuels destructive primordial instincts. Moreover, growth is not only a key driver of sustainable peace, but also one of the most important levers of sustainable democracy.

The renaissance growth project rests on a strong political settlement, leading to a civil, peaceful, and democratic transition. In turn, these political preconditions must be underpinned by fundamental changes, such as effectively ending the militarization of Sudan's politics and economy, and building a unified, depoliticized and professional armed forces. This involves implementing security reforms in line with international standards that are usually recommended for countries emerging from civil wars. These reforms would be overseen by a transitional civilian authority. Furthermore, a national peace conference should be convened to bring together all civilian and military stakeholders to promote reconciliation and unity. Also, the renaissance growth project entails ending the destructive Sudanese syndrome and embarking on a comprehensive social, political, and economic renaissance, guided by a social contract inspired by the “iconic” principles of the “glorious” December Revolution: Freedom, Peace and Justice. The imperatives of a peaceful, democratic renaissance require that the envisioned social contract respect both economic and political legitimacy. Future governing elites must be accountable for development and prosperity, not just for winning electoral competition.

Fourthly, toward a strong social contract: Why the need for an alternative federal political system?

In the context of approaching the political agenda of the social contract, we explained the need to reconsider the dysfunctional Westminster democracy in the Sudanese context and consider adopting a mixed parliamentary presidential system with a bicameral legislature, which in our opinion would be more capable of achieving stability and providing appropriate checks and balances for a polarized and divisive political landscape like Sudan.

Addressing the disastrous federal legacy of the defunct salvation regime is also one of the most important entitlements of the political part of the social contract. Under this regime the federal rule is centered around states, which became the base of political clientelism between the center of power in Khartoum and the tribal elites in the states, making them hotbeds of polarization and tribal conflicts in the context of the struggle for influence and the resulting rents. In this context, we recommend abolishing the states system and returning to the original six regional governments - Darfur, Kordofan, East Sudan, Khartoum, Blue Nile, and Northern Sudan - while rationalizing the localities and limiting them to major cities and their rural areas in all regions. There is also a vast literature that states that a federal system with three levels of governance - federal, regional, and local around major cities - would be an important lever for a renaissance economic project based on productive cities and growth hubs around them to accomplish a structural transformation in the rich and diverse Sudanese agricultural sector, which has been and still is the main pillar of the Sudanese economy.

Based on the above-mentioned federalism, we believe that the goal of moving away from clientelistic centralization, as was prevalent during the salvation era, requires repositioning the

societal dialogue on levels of governance in the context of productive developmental federalism, away from clientelistic regionalism.

Fifthly, toward a strong social contract: Why do we need national unity governments to realize the renaissance project?

Lessons learned from the experiences of the Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and Sudanese salvation regimes suggest that “developmental authoritarianism” has a better chance of survival than outright kleptocracy. However, the lessons of the former's failure to maintain peace in deeply socially divided Ethiopia are no less important, where a recent civil war and ongoing political instability threaten to undo two decades of impressive economic achievements.

The equally socially divided Sudan, still reeling from the legacy of devastating kleptocratic rule in the form of abysmal economic collapse, severe political instability, and most recently the current factional military war, is in urgent need of a cessation of war and peacebuilding. However, as we have shown above, even this achievement is not enough to achieve a sustainable, peaceful and democratic civilian transition. To build a solid democracy that achieves peace and development, transitional and subsequently elected elites must choose to “bet on development” and seek “economic legitimacy” and not just electoral “political legitimacy.” To ensure that most, if not all, political actors have a stake in the success and stability of the democratic system, the political establishment will also need to form national unity governments for the post-war era, including the transitional period as well as for the subsequent two democratic governments, following open and free elections. Such a government will, of course, reflect the relative weights of the contenders in the elections, but it should not be based purely on electoral competition.

As we have shown in other studies, under a national front government spanning nearly two decades, and under a broad national consensus on a solid social contract, a profound economic transformation project, beginning with reconstruction and culminating in sustained annual growth rates of around 10 percent, could be achieved, leading to an eightfold multiplication of the Sudanese economy within a generation. This achievement will not only lead to the modernization of the middle class and the consolidation of democracy in general, but will also be effective in promoting ethnic and regional cooperation and integration in Sudanese society, which has been suffering from polarization and identity fissures and their political and military employment by totalitarian elites.

Sixthly, toward a Strong Social Contract: Why is there a need for an effective national narrative to engineer the national project?

The engineering of the national project depends on the ability of democratic civilian forces and other stakeholders in Sudanese society expressed in the context of the National Inclusive Front to develop an open political marketplace of ideas to foster a meaningful and transparent societal dialogue, leading to a viable “social contract” to support the national project. An important tool for strengthening the social contract is a compelling and unifying “national narrative.” The literature suggests that national narratives are most effective when they are “culturally specific” and “credible”. Based on the Sudanese economic and political context, we discuss the building

blocks of the social contract, taking into account the economic and political agenda to promote political settlement, renewal, and national construction. We emphasize that the successful implementation of the social contract must be a living process of social learning and mutual interaction between key actors: Society, political-economic and military elites.

In this context, lessons learned from the experiences of other countries can be useful not in terms of trying to replicate them, but in terms of understanding the processes behind the transformation they were able to achieve. Regardless of differences in political ideology, the processes behind China's massive economic transformation are very important to consider and learn from. As explained by Professor Paul Collier, China's "scaffolding" for its transformation had four building blocks (Collier, 2019: pp. 6-7)³:

"The first was the overarching narrative that permeated the population: rebuilding a prestigious and proud China. The second was political leadership that encouraged intensive and rapid social learning to understand what would work in the local context. The third was evaluating the performance of those in positions of power and holding them accountable for success and failure. The fourth was decentralization, which was used to promote normative competition across regions, encouraging initiative and experimentation at the local level."

As Sudanese people in the shadow of this tragic war, we must first dive into the depths of our personality, its psychological and social strength, its religious and popular heritage, and reflect on what has happened to us and what role we, as a society and elites, played in creating it. The genius of the academic and novelist Dr. Sami Hamed Tayyib al-Asma in his novel "The Sister of the Beginning" is perhaps the best depiction of this situation. The author described Abdul Jalil, the protagonist who chose to flee the country rather than face his fate after a crime he committed in ignorance, even though he was known for his bravery and courage, as "he was not unique in his generation."

"Generations addicted to running away. We turned our backs until the homeland turned its back on us and now we are reaping the fruits of our escape, this diaspora that we live in and the loss that embraces us, we can hardly agree on an idea until we disagree about it, nor gather around a flag until we look for another one. Yes, the sister of the beginning is a novel or a story, but rather a tale woven by the threads of imagination and dressed in the body of a reality full of great events that changed the face of history, which we remember well and did not benefit from it."

On the intellectual level, the late leader and thinker Imam Sadiq al-Mahdi kept warning the Sudanese elites after the glorious December revolution about the danger of intellectual and political arrogance and the need for a consensual approach to the success of the revolution, as he wrote in the context of a vision "to awaken the country from a failed state to a renaissance glory" (August 13, 2020):

³ Collier, Paul (2019). "Ideas, networks and jobs: rebasing growth in the Middle East and North Africa", ERF Working Paper # 1331, Economic Research Forum, Cairo, Egypt, August: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17938120.2019.1664843?journalCode=rmdj20>

“Political and intellectual pluralism is an integral part of the democratic system. However, there are tendencies based on the negation of the other rather than coexistence with it. This exclusionary view is linked to the issue of religion and the state. The Sudanese political movement has ample ammunition on this issue and the peaceful equation requires three things: Ensuring equality in citizenship, freedom of belief, and the freedom of religious authorities to advocate for their demands while adhering to the rights of citizenship for all and the democratic approach. There are Islamic, Arab nationalist, African, secular and communist intellectual trends that are guaranteed freedom of expression, but they should review their positions to allow for the acceptance of the other, otherwise they become a threat to democracy and a gateway to fascism.”