

SUDAN ON THE BRINK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Africa, African Union (AU) and India

When Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir was toppled on April 11 after a months-long popular uprising, the generals had two options before them. One was the Tunisian model in which the army allowed a smooth transition of power to a civilian government after Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was removed from power in 2011. The other was the Egyptian model in which the army, after losing power to a civilian ruler following Hosni Mubarak's ouster as President in 2011, staged a coup in 2013 and reinstalled itself at the helm. Unfortunately, the Sudanese generals chose the latter, setting the stage for a prolonged showdown. The protesters had demanded a transfer of power to a transitional civilian government, followed by free and fair elections. But the generals used the crisis to concentrate more powers in their own hands. They established a military council which took over governance, while angry protesters continued a sit-in in front of the Defence Ministry in Khartoum. As talks between pro-democracy activists and the military rulers collapsed, paramilitary groups unleashed deadly violence this week to break the sit-in, killing at least 100 people and injuring hundreds. The Rapid Support Forces, the paramilitary troops notorious for atrocities committed in the impoverished western province of Darfur in the early 2000s, reportedly threw the dead into the Nile.

It is evident that the military will not easily give up power. After the crackdown, Lt. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the military ruler, has offered to hold elections in nine months, upturning an earlier plan of a two-year transition. But there is no immediate plan to transfer power to a civilian transitional government, a key demand of the protesters. Unsurprisingly, they have rejected the military's offer. At present, Sudan's generals enjoy regional and international support. The UN Security Council couldn't even condemn the violence as China, backed by Russia, blocked the move. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which offered financial aid to the junta as soon as Mr. Bashir was removed from power, also support the generals. This gives the military rulers a sense of impunity even when they unleash murderous paramilitaries on peaceful protesters. This has to change. Arab countries as well as the UN should put meaningful pressure on the military council to pay heed to popular demands and hold those responsible for the June 3 massacre accountable. There is no easy solution to the crisis. If the military wants to keep its grip on power, there could be more bloodshed as the protesters are defiant. It will have to necessarily build a more oppressive regime, as in Egypt after the 2013 coup. The other, wiser option is to compromise, resume talks with the protesters and facilitate a quick and orderly transition to civilian rule. The choice the generals make will determine the future of Sudan.

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