

# COUPS UPEND WEST ASIA'S NASCENT DEMOCRACIES

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India- West Asia

The democratic systems in Tunisia and Sudan constitute the bookends of the Arab Spring uprisings in West Africa and North Africa over the last decade. The [uprisings had begun in Tunisia in December 2010](#) and culminated in the country giving itself a democratic constitution in January 2014. The system worked until July 25 this year when the country's President, [Kais Saied, staged a "constitutional coup"](#) by suspending the Constitution and its democratic institutions. Several Ministers, politicians, media persons and activists have been detained, with some being tried in military courts.

Sudan's nascent democratic order emerged in 2019, in the second wave of the Arab Spring uprisings, when demonstrators across the country demanded the [removal of the entrenched President, Omar al-Bashir](#). This led to a [transitional arrangement](#) in which power would be shared for about four years between the armed forces and the civilian administration, to be followed by free elections and civilian rule. At the head of the country would be a "Sovereignty Council" which, in the first instance, would be headed by the Army chief, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, supported by a civilian Prime Minister.

On October 25, a month before handing over the council to a civilian leadership, Gen. Burhan declared a state of emergency, suspended the Constitution and the Sovereignty Council, [placed the Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, under house arrest](#) and arrested several Ministers and activists. However, a month later, on November 21, in the face of massive public protests, Gen. Burhan [released Mr. Hamdok](#) and agreed to restore the transition process, though there are serious concerns across the country about the military's sincerity in implementing this agreement.

Tunisia's political order has lurched from crisis to crisis over the last few years due to the parlous state of the economy and the mishandling of the novel coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has wreaked disaster in the country — Tunisia, with a population of 12 million, has experienced 600,000 infections and 18,600 deaths, giving it the dubious distinction of having the highest pandemic-related infections and deaths per capita in Africa.

The pandemic has also wrecked the economy; its GDP fell by 8.6% in 2020, compared to the previous year, unemployment went from 15% to 17.8%, inflation is at 6.2% while poverty increased from 14% to 21%. The country [needs \\$5 billion to finance the estimated budget deficit and repayments](#).

President [Kais Saied had obtained a landslide victory](#) in 2019, but soon began to express his unhappiness with the paralysed political system and his "disgust" at the pervasive corruption among Assembly members, referring to them as "monsters" and "birds of prey".

On July 25, the President dismissed the Prime Minister, suspended Parliament, and announced he would rule by decree. The next day, he declared a nationwide curfew for a month. On September 22, he [issued a presidential order giving himself full legislative and executive authority](#), and suspending the Constitution and the Assembly indefinitely.

Though the President's coup was initially welcomed, as weeks passed with no initiative to improve economic conditions, the popular mood has turned hostile; opposition parties and trade

unions are now [organising themselves](#) to take to the streets to restore the revolution and the Constitution.

The military takeover in Sudan on October 25 was preceded by increasing concerns among the armed forces about the imminent handover of power to the civilian leadership in November, particularly on account of the agenda being driven by Prime Minister Hamdok. He had spoken of getting the former President, Omar al-Bashir, tried by the International Criminal Court (ICC), where the generals feared their own role in perpetrating human rights abuses in Darfur and during the 2019 uprisings would also be exposed.

Editorial | [Coup in Sudan](#)

But the larger issue that agitated them was Mr. Hamdok's insistence that the military give up its control over business — it is believed that the armed forces control about 200 companies, valued at \$2 billion. Some generals, like Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, who heads the notorious Rapid Support Forces, are said to control gold mines in Darfur.

On November 10, Gen. Burhan announced a new Sovereignty Council headed by him, with General Dagalo as his deputy, signalling the end of Sudan's encounter with a democratic order. However, Gen. Burhan did not anticipate the country-wide popular protests led by civil society organisations whose agitations had brought about the transition arrangements of 2019. These demonstrators braved police bullets, which, over a month, killed 40 of them and injured over 100.

Two days after the killing of 15 protesters, Gen. Burhan released Mr. Hamdok from house arrest, on November 21, and, on state television, signed an agreement with him to head a new “technocratic” government. The 14-point deal commits Gen. Burhan to the transition arrangements of 2019 and the release of all political prisoners. Mr. Hamdok has said he had accepted the agreement to end “the bloodbath” of recent weeks, while Gen. Burhan has said it would pave the way towards “a transparent, democratic election [till] total civilian government and total democracy” were realised.

Sudanese call for mass anti-coup protests as death toll rises to 40

Most of the country's activists are not impressed. Given the low credibility of the armed forces, they are insisting on “no negotiation and no partnership, and no legitimacy” for the armed forces. With Gen. Burhan and Gen. Dagalo still controlling the Sovereignty Council, these fears are well-founded.

Several commentators have seen the hand of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt in engineering the overturning of the democratic processes in Tunisia and Sudan, as they view a successful democratic order as an existential threat. Media comment in these three countries has been particularly celebratory: in relation to the Tunisia events, the Saudi paper, *Okaz*, headlined, “Tunisia revolts against the Brotherhood”, while the Egyptian daily, *Al Ahram*, said that these events were a “loss for the last Brotherhood stronghold in the region”.

In Sudan, both Gen. Burhan and his deputy, Gen. Dagalo, have been close to the UAE and Saudi Arabia for some years. Gen. Burhan provided Sudanese troops as part of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and ensured they were not withdrawn later despite Mr. Hamdok's wishes. Gen. Burhan also backed the UAE's outreach to Israel last year by secretly meeting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Uganda in February 2020 and then joining the UAE in normalising diplomatic ties with Israel later that year.

In Tunisia, which saw the elevation of the Islamist Ennahda to power, the UAE is believed to have funded social media campaigns to criticise the democratic revolution and back politicians who support the old authoritarian regime. The Saudi and UAE role in undermining the democratic systems in Tunisia and Sudan recalls their similar role in arranging the overthrow of the democratically-elected Morsi government in Egypt in 2013 and the accession of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to power.

The Egyptian leader now has a more immediate concern as well; one that also agitates his partners in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi — the democratic order in Tunisia and its nascent shape in Sudan have been inspirations for Arab people living under authoritarian rule for several decades. Now, as recent developments in Tunisia and Sudan again entrench autocracy, there are fears that the beacon of reform could be extinguished across the region — for years to come.

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