

Sudan: 'Life-and-death battle'

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Professor of international relations at SOAS in London Gilbert Achcar explains that it would be simplistic to represent the conflict in Sudan as a proxy war in an interview with Dina Ezzat

On day nine of the conflict that has erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Gilbert Achcar, a close observer of the political and military challenges that have come the way of the Arab world for over a decade, reflects on a battle that he believes was inevitable due to the dual nature of military power in Sudan.

A professor of International Relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, Achcar told Al-Ahram Weekly his best and worst-case scenarios for the conflict, which has unfolded "due to the failure of the two military forces to agree over the new framework that was negotiated with international mediation between Sudan's military government and the Freedom and Change Coalition".

The agreement was supposed to be signed in the first week of April, when Abdel-Fattah Al-Burhan, leader of the SAF, wanted "a prompt inclusion of the RSF under SAF command."

He "wanted to end the status of the RSF as a force parallel to the army, whereas [leader of the RSF Mohamed] Dagalo was not willing to bring his troops under army command. It is a classic situation of unavoidable conflict between two armed powers deployed on the same territory: sooner or later, one of the two will try to subdue the other," Achcar said.

Established by Sudan's ousted former president Omar Al-Bashir, the RSF was built as an autonomous armed force parallel to the regular army. This was convenient for Al-Bashir's purposes of playing one power off against the other to shield his personal rule and of using the RSF for missions that the army could not get involved in, Achcar said.

Dagalo is originally the leader of a paramilitary force who was propelled into politics by Al-Bashir during the war waged by the ousted president in Darfur. "So, in essence, Dagalo owed it all to Al-Bashir, but this did not stop him from turning against the latter when he felt that Al-Bashir's time was over," Achcar said. The ousting of Al-Bashir was the moment when Dagalo started aiming for a much bigger political role, boosted by the RSF's decisive role in cooperating with the SAF in removing him, he added.

Al-Burhan was not blind to Dagalo's ambition, Achcar believes. He was just waiting for the right moment to subdue him. That moment, he argues, was prompted "after the coup of 25 October [2021] when Dagalo distanced himself from the SAF and declared that the coup had been a failure."

In October 2021, Al-Burhan thought that the split that occurred within the Freedom and Change Coalition would allow him to move successfully towards eliminating the power-sharing agreement between civilians and the military that had existed since 2019 and to reestablish unmitigated military rule.

"However, things did not go the way Al-Burhan hoped because of vigorous opposition in the streets and international, principally Western, economic pressure. He was forced to backtrack to negotiating with the Freedom and Change Coalition that he had ousted from government and, under the pressure of the international mediation, accept a new agreement that is actually more constraining for the military than that of 2019," Achcar said.

"This was indeed a clear manifestation of the failure of his coup." Al-Burhan became convinced that he needed to subdue the RSF in order to be able to manoeuvre in the new political game in the making. The SAF had to improve their chances to keep control of political power and with it of their economic empire in Sudan, and this required putting an end to the division of the country's armed forces.

It was no longer possible for the SAF to carry on working with an autonomous RSF, Achcar said. "Even though both Al-Burhan and Dagalo were moulded by the same political regime of Al-Bashir, they became rivals since the ousting of the dictator. Political power is based on the monopoly of force, and no duality is sustainable for long in that respect," he added.

Al-Burhan tolerated the co-existence with the RSF as long as the latter was working together with the SAF in countering the opposition's pressure for civilian rule, Achcar said. "But this is now irremediably over. This is why it is wrong to believe that both sides could be reconciled in any manner. It is now a life-and-death battle between them."

This is a very worrying situation, Achcar agreed. If the battle were to stop tomorrow without either side achieving a decisive victory, it would mean a division of Sudan into separate areas controlled by the SAF and RSF.

A renewed political agreement between these forces, he added, is very unlikely. "It would require that Dagalo accept the integration of the RSF under the wing of the SAF. Today, this seems very much to be out of the question unless some regional force manages to buy Dagalo's consent to leave the scene."

CIVIL WAR: According to Achcar, the conflict could turn into a protracted civil war or be frozen into a division of the country under the sway of the two rival powers.

"This is why there is so much worry over the developments in Sudan, especially for a country sharing a past and a border with it such as Egypt and a country fearing regional destabilisation such as the Saudi Kingdom," he said.

However, Achcar argued that the representation of the current conflict in Sudan as a proxy war between regional powers is simplistic and reductionist. "It is true that influential regional players have their preferences between the two forces fighting for the control of Sudan." But it is hard to think that any of these powers would have wanted this war that may turn into a quagmire with potentially dangerous regional spillovers.

"Egypt seems to take a neutral stance" on the current conflict despite its close relation with Al-Burhan, Achcar said. He added that it would be equally hard to think that the UAE would take the risk of getting openly involved in the war, "despite its well-known relationship with Dagalo and its willingness to play its own game against the Saudis, as it did in Yemen," because no one knows how this conflict could end.

The complexity of the situation in Sudan is not restricted to the rivalry between the SAF and the RSF, Achcar added. The civilian political forces that constituted the political opposition to Al-Bashir are also themselves split. They parted ways quite early on, he recalled, when a majority of the

Freedom and Change Coalition opted for the political compromise with the military in 2019, while the rest, along with the Resistance Committees and a majority of the Sudanese Professionals Association, rejected that deal.

Those who believed that the SAF would respect their pledge to hand over power to civilians under democratic conditions were proven wrong by the 25 October coup.

However, international pressure for a renewed agreement bore as much on the military as it did on the civilian opposition, continued Achcar. Those that Al-Burhan had ousted in 2021 re-entered negotiations with the SAF, leading to the recent Framework Agreement, which was rejected anew by the radical forces.

“Those who were not convinced about cooperating with the SAF in 2019 would certainly not change their mind after the 2021 coup,” he explained.

With the current armed conflict, the hopes for democracy in Sudan created by the Glorious Revolution (as it is called there) that started in December 2018 are at stake, Achcar argued. He explained that if the SAF were to win the battle, a protracted state of military control could follow that would squash the prospects for democracy.

On the other hand, if the RSF manages to stay put, the division of the country between the two belligerents could asphyxiate democratic prospects.

A best-case scenario would be that the battle between the two belligerents would lead to the weakening of the military as a whole, that the bulk of Sudan’s population would loathe them for the mayhem that they had created, and that the popular movement spearheaded by the Resistance Committees would manage to mobilise the people successfully in putting an end to military dictatorship and instituting democracy in Sudan.

“Let’s face it, the armed forces are the crucial obstacle to any revolutionary scheme, either in Sudan or elsewhere in the region,” Achcar stated. This, he said, was the issue overlooked by the political forces in all the countries of the Arab Spring, both in its first and second phases.

In order to succeed, they needed to win the hearts and minds of the army, as had happened in every case of radical change by way of uprisings in history, he said. Situations of war, especially in cases of defeat, could facilitate this scenario. Whether the ongoing battle in Sudan could lead to such an outcome remains to be seen, however.

An end to the current conflict that stifles hopes for democracy in Sudan is a danger that cannot be underestimated, Achcar said. After the 2021 events in Tunisia, such an end, he added, could suppress the last democratic space achieved by the two successive revolutionary waves of the Arab Spring in 2011 and 2019.

Still, he said, even with the failed chance for democracy in Sudan today, it would be wrong to assume that the revolutionary potential, either in Sudan or elsewhere in the countries of the Arab Spring, is quelled. “It has been only 12 years since the first shockwave of the Arab Spring. This is still quite early by the yardstick of long-term revolutionary processes,” he asserted.

Political, and also military, changes in the Arab world have their own dynamics. “This is why it was very wrong to draw parallels between the democratic revolutions of Eastern Europe [in the late 1980s and early 1990s] and the Arab Spring,” he said.

“In Eastern Europe, there was bureaucratic rule, states run by bureaucrats with relatively limited

privileges. But in the Middle East we are talking about groups with immense vested interests who regard the states as their private property and are willing to cling to power and with it to their huge privileges by all means necessary. Those are two very different situations,” he added.

Achcar is worried about the possibility of a defeat of the revolutionary dreams of democracy in Sudan. He is also concerned by the wider setback for democracy in the Arab region, which is manifest, among other signs, in the ongoing reintegration of Syria’s President Bashar Al-Assad in the Arab League and the current crackdown against the political opposition in Tunisia.

However, he insisted that this was a temporary phase of a backlash in a protracted succession of revolutionary cycles. According to Achcar, “the Arab uprisings were provoked by major structural – political, social and economic – problems. The blatant failure to get any of these problems resolved means that it is only a matter of time before the volcano erupts again, somehow, somewhere.”

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P.S.

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<https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/496402.aspx>

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