

Sudan's brutal war has become many wars, making peace even harder to reach

Saturday 19 October 2024, by [SRINIVASAN Sharath](#), [WILLIS Justin](#) (Date first published: 14 October 2024).

The conflict in Sudan is the world's biggest hunger and displacement crisis.

Sudan's war runs grimly on. The two main protagonists (though there are others involved) are each claiming local victories. The Sudanese army appears to be [slowly regaining](#) control of the ruined capital, Khartoum, and has recovered some ground it lost [elsewhere in Sudan](#). And the rival Rapid Support Forces (RSF) continues its brutal siege of the western city of [El Fasher](#).

But, while the army seems to have the upper hand at present, neither they nor the RSF looks likely to win outright. Instead, the two sides keep up a mutual battering with [ill-aimed barrages](#) of artillery fire and bombs that [destroy markets](#), wreck hospitals, and each day add to [the grim toll](#) of civilian death and misery.

Abdel-Fattah al Burhan, the general who seized power and derailed what was supposed to be a transition to civilian rule after the revolution of 2019, [still insists](#) he is the head of Sudan's legitimate government, and that the army will win the war.

The RSF's leader, Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, who is referred to as Hemedti, had initially been willing to play deputy to Burhan, but is now his bitter enemy. He [makes a show](#) of being willing to negotiate, but relentlessly pursues a military victory.

It is tempting to point the finger at actors outside Sudan for their part in the spiralling violence. There are multiple credible allegations that the governments of the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia and Russia have all helped [arm or finance](#) one side or other in pursuit of regional influence or economic gain. Libya's eastern – but not internationally recognised – government has also been [accused of complicity](#).

Some would say there are sins of omission as well as commission. The US, EU and others [have all called](#) for an end to this war. But they could be doing more to stop the flow of weapons and money that helps keep the fighting going, and to mobilise more concerted action to protect civilians.

The world stands accused of turning its back on Sudan, despite being its biggest [hunger and displacement crisis](#). But external actors did not start the war, and they cannot simply end it.

Despite their common cause in a [counter-revolutionary coup](#) in 2021, the war started when Burhan and Hemedti fell out over who would have military and political primacy – and the associated economic benefits – in Sudan.

They've already decided the country isn't big enough for the both of them, so it's nigh-on impossible to negotiate the usual kind of deal that shares power between foes.

Burhan is intensely sensitive about the fragile sovereignty of his government, and views external

mediation as foreign meddling. He has always [insisted](#) that the army can win an outright victory, and now he is encouraged by recent gains. Yet he is a long way from regaining control of the whole country.

Hemedti, who craves the status that would come from negotiations, makes grandiloquent offers of ceasefires, coupled with promises to respect human rights – all while the RSF [continues to murder, rape and loot](#). Hubris and hypocrisy make poor bases for negotiation.

A precarious balancing act

This is also not a war simply being waged between two individuals. Neither the army nor the RSF are coherent or well disciplined – the RSF, in particular, is a messy constellation of armed men, mostly from western Sudan (and, allegedly, further afield). They share a distinctive style of camouflage dress and a sense of long-term exclusion, but are not under close or effective control.

The army has more formal structures – too many, perhaps – but these are also fragmented. Strong on generals and air firepower but weak on fighting forces, the army is adapting the government's old playbook of mobilising local militias.

The war has become several wars, drawing in [other armed groups](#) whose [alliances](#) with either the army or the RSF are contingent or opportunistic.

Since independence in 1956, Sudan has mostly been a militarised state, where power was won by force. Those who ruled it feared their fellow soldiers and so created alternative forces, hoping these would back them against potential coups. Some of these groups had distinct social bases in particular regions or ethnic groups.

This fragmentation had been happening since the 1970s, but [it became endemic](#) during the long reign of Sudan's former president, Omar al-Bashir. Bashir stayed in power for 30 years by dividing possible rivals within the ruling elite, and used the multiplying, competing arms of the "security forces" to fight rebels on the margins.

What seemed like a powerful, authoritarian system was, in fact, a brutal but precarious balancing act. After Bashir [fell in 2019](#), the transitional government floundered. The soldiers seized power, then the complex rivalries and institutional fragmentation [proved unsustainable](#). The core institutions that held Sudan together have shattered.

So who, if anyone, can put Sudan back together again? Burhan and Hemedti are in no mood, and may anyway lack the control of their followers needed for any deal to stick.

Civilian politicians were discredited by the bickering of the transition, and the most prominent of them seem confused between claiming to be a government-in-exile or trying to build a bigger anti-war coalition.

At present, Sudan faces either the long-term absence of central authority or, more dramatically, an effective division into two or more states, whether or not these are internationally recognised. Some might say we should not mourn this – Sudan was a colonial creation, made by violence and predation. But this is an outcome that may only increase misery and misrule.

However, there is still resistance amid the ruination. Sudan's post-Bashir transition to democracy, as envisaged by the UN and others, is long dead. But in some vital ways, the popular revolution that

toppled Bashir lives on.

Grassroots [emergency response rooms](#) organise whatever lifesaving support for desperate communities that they can. And women and youth – the revolution’s vanguard – continue to organise, agitate and debate Sudan’s future among themselves, as well as [demand a role](#) in making it. They deserve our solidarity.

Many, both Sudanese and non-Sudanese, refuse to let go of the idea of a better Sudan that has never yet been realised, but just might rise up from these ashes.

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- The Conversation. Publié: 14 octobre 2024, 19:10 CEST.

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- Justin Willis’ work has been largely concerned with identity, authority and social change in eastern Africa stretching back over the last two hundred years. He has published widely on the history of Kenya, Uganda, Sudan and South Sudan.

- Sharath Srinivasan. I am an interdisciplinary and applied researcher currently working on issues at the intersection of digital technology and politics in Africa. This research has been awarded funding by UK-DFID, ESRC, Wellcome Trust, Isaac Newton Trust, university-related research funds and private foundations. It has yielded numerous publications, supported six early career researchers, built international research collaborations and had notable research impact. I am co-founder and the first executive director of a non-profit spin-out from this research, Africa’s Voices Foundation (a registered charity in the UK). Now with over 25 staff in Kenya, Africa’s Voices applies digital social research methods to deliver governance programmes in East Africa worth £1+ million annually.

Grounded in political theory on civic republicanism, democracy and constitutionalism, my long-term research interest lies in unravelling how political ideas, values and interests that are embedded in the ‘built’ world – for example in digital technology applications but also institutions built by peacemakers – enable or constrain political action and the public realm. I am committed to praxis; applied interdisciplinary research collaborations that enable critical thinking and collaborative innovation. My current work with Cambridge Computer Laboratory colleagues combines political theory and human computer interaction to reimagine socio-technical systems that can be built to serve civic democracy.

I regularly contribute to wider policy and public forums, and to date have accepted close to 30 speaking invitations for university conferences, the media and policymaker/public events.

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