

Resolving the Sudan Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces conflict in Sudan: Issues and challenges

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Abstract

This paper sought to highlight and discuss the issues and challenges surrounding the resolution of the ongoing SAF and RSF conflict in Sudan. The preferred theoretical framework for the study is Power Theory (PT). Documentary research design which involves extensive search and extraction of data from extant records and documents is adopted for the methodology. The study relies on secondary data sourced from textbooks, scholarly journals, communiqué of international organizations, as well as other relevant literature from the internet. The findings reveal that demilitarization of the polity, containment of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, management of foreign interest and their internal alignment, management of humanitarian challenges, and checkmating massive human rights' abuses are the issues and challenges surrounding the resolution of the conflict. It is therefore imperative for the Sudanese civil society sector to galvanize its members and work towards the resolution of these issues and challenges.

Keywords: Sudan, SAF, RSF, conflict, Sahel, Africa

Introduction

The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) has been the central institution behind the successes and failures of the Sudanese State from 1956 till date. SAF played a prominent role in the first Sudanese Civil War in 1962; it staged a military coup in 1969; fought in the second Civil War in 1983; overthrew Jafara Nmeiri in 1985, led in the Darfur conflict of 2003, fought for Sudan in the battle against its breakaway South Sudan in 2011, ousted Al-Bashir in 2019; and is currently leading an onslaught against Rapid Support Force (RSF) of the Republic of Sudan since 2023. Sudan has been a theatre of violent conflicts since its independence; much has not changed, even with the secession of South Sudan in 2011 (Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012; Johnson, 2021).

The RSF is a paramilitary outfit formed from numerous ethnic militias by Al Bashir, as a praetorian guard to protect his regime from possible coup by the SAF. It however bowed to popular demands for removal Al Bashir. Many thought the end of Al-Bashir's dictatorship in 2019 would herald the rebirth of Sudan and a credible democratic regime in the country; but the coup in 2021, organized by SAF and RSF betrayed the hope of the people and set the tune for the current conflict in the

country. Firstly, SAF's leadership has its own plan of a possible elongation of military rule in Sudan and the manipulation of the electoral processes to its advantage. Secondly, the RSF's leadership does not want to be outplayed by the SAF in sustaining its relevance in the emerging dispensation (Kostelyanets, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2023).

The current conflict in Sudan neither serves the general interest of the Sudanese people nor has any potential to add value to the wellbeing of the citizenry. It rather serves the interests of the military and paramilitary leadership, as well as their foreign partners (Abdul-Jalil & Kameir, 2023). These realities and the destructive impact of the conflict have led to the formation of multi-layer initiatives to timeously resolve the conflict by the United Nations (UN), the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Agency for Development (IGAD), the League of Arab States (LAS), the European Union (EU), the United States (US) and other global actors (UNSC, 2023). Regrettably, the conflict continues to ravage the country despite the initiatives, as both warring parties seek to subdue each other on the battlefield. Given the failure of previous attempts at obtaining a ceasefire which is the basic step to the resolution of the

conflict, it is necessary to highlight the issues and challenges constraining the timely resolution of the conflict. This is the fundamental objective of this study which seeks to answer the question: what are the issues and challenges surrounding the timely resolution of the SAF and RSF conflict in Sudan? The study is divided into the following sections: introduction, literature review, methodology, theoretical framework, analysis of the conflict, discussion of findings, and conclusion.

Literature review

Sudan is a Sahelian State along the eastern part of the north African region. It shares common boundaries with Egypt and Libya to the north, Ethiopia and Eritrea to the east, the Central African Republic to the west and south-Sudan to the south. It is a link between, the Maghreb, Horn of Africa and eastern Africa, leading to central Mediterranean route. It is a predominantly Muslim country; the secession of the Christian and animist dominated southern part about a decade ago, reduced the heterogeneous religious character of its population (McCauley 2017; Natsios 2012). The country has an estimated population of about 50 million, with an impressive annual growth of 2.75%. Children below 14years of age account

for about 41% of the population. The country has high fertility rate among its women with an estimation of 4 – 5 children per woman. More so, it is a polygamous friendly society, where marriages are contracted according to Islamic injunction and values (Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012; Care International, 2023; IOM, 2023).

Historically, Sudan has been part of the ancient Kush and Ottoman Empires before 1889 when it became a British colony, jointly administered with Egypt till independence in 1956. The country was deeply divided into northern and southern regions (Sorbo & Ahmed, 2013). The northern region is dominated by Arabs and exposed to Islamic religion, while the south, is populated by animist and was exposed to Christian religion by the Christian missionaries for redemption and civilization. This division generates the dynamics of Sudan modern history, as it accounted for the two civil wars between the north and the south in 1962 and 1983–2005; the ethnic conflict between Arabs and non-Arabs in Darfur in 2003 and the eventual secession of South Sudan from old Sudan in 2011 (Ottaway and El-Sadany, 2012; Deng, 1995; Natsios, 2012).

Sudan is socially heterogeneous with over 300 languages which can be subdivided into Arabs, Nilotic and black Africans. This points to several centuries of interactions between people of different human races as facilitated by Sudan's connection with the River Nile – shared with Ethiopia, Uganda, and Egypt amongst others (Hamed, 2020; Mills 2014). Indeed, Sudan is one of the countries with strong historical ties with Arabic and Islamic States in the Middle East, and minimal relationship with sub-Saharan Africa on the African continent. Thus, Sudan is located in Africa, but belongs to the Arab world (Collins, 2008; Dean, 2000; International Crisis Group, 2023).

The dominant theme in the Sudanese political space is authoritarianism, irrespective of the psychological variables in power and the genre of government in place. This is common in most African states (Johnson, 2021). Sudanese leaders have never been accountable to the people; the leaders behave like rulers and emperors, whose decisions have to be forcefully foisted on the people (Meredith, 2011; Wyk, 2007). The colonialists forced a one-country option on a heterogeneous groups to become Sudan at independence (Hamed, 2020; Khalid, 2003). For instance, Jafara Nimeiri

unilaterally imposed Sharia law on the multi-religious state of Sudan and abolished an elected assembly in the south for ease of manipulation by the northern-dominated central government in 1983 (Dean, 2000; Warburg, 2007).

Sudan is a third-world country, as such, its economy exhibits all the features of a peripheral stratum of the world economy. The economy depended heavily on the production of primary products, and agriculture before the recent discovery of crude oil (Mahgoub, 2014; Rodney, 1972). Crude oil was discovered in 1978 in Sudan, and by 1999, the country joined the league of oil exporting countries. Before the secession of South Sudan, Sudanese oil exports hit 490,000 barrels per day and therefore constituted about 70% of government's revenue. The impact of the new-found wealth was immediate: it led to the neglect of agriculture which hitherto was the major source of government revenue. (Mahgoub, 2014). The sectoral growth of agriculture nose-dived from 10.8% to 3.6% between 2000 and 2010, and the pattern has continued till date. Unfortunately, the sector employs about 80% of the Sudanese workforce, contributing about a third of the country's GDP output (Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012,8). However, the secession

of the South Sudan in 2011 reduced the oil fields and revenue of Sudan by 75% (Natsios, 2012). The net impact of these among others, is the shrinking of the economy, and galloping inflation which reduce the income of the citizenry and increase poverty. It is estimated that about 65% of Sudanese are living below the poverty line (EPRS, 2023; Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012; Siddig, 2012).

Another recurring decimal in Sudan is the occurrence of violent conflicts. These conflicts can be traced to the country's state formation and state building which were done arbitrarily. The first major conflict took place in 1962, and was resolved with the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement of 1972 which provided for secularism and federalism in Sudan (Niblock, 1987; Young, 2019; Johnson, 2021). However, another round of civil war was sparked by President Nemeiri, when he introduced the Sharia legal system to replace state secularism and federalism in 1983 (Sidahmed, 1997; McCauley, 2017). This conflict lasted till 2005, when a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed by the warring parties leading to the secession of South Sudan in 2011 (Natsios, 2012; Sorbo & Ahmed, 2013). Also worthy of note is the ethnic conflict in the Darfur region since 2003, between Arabs and

non-Arabs. (International Crisis Group, 2023; Natsios, 2012). The current standoff between SAF and RSF is therefore, one in a series of violent conflicts in Sudan. Its nature however, does not defy the prospects of African traditional conflict resolution methods, if not for colonialism and the vested interests of so many powers beyond the continent (International Crisis Group, 2023; Okpevra, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The preferred framework for this study is the Power Theory (PT). The major proponents of PT include Morgenthau (1967) Frankel (1973) and Wolfers (1962). According to Wolfers (1962), power lies in one's ability to impose their will on others. In other words, power is a function of getting individuals or groups to act contrary to their will. It also involves the ability to influence others to act in a required direction, in line with one's own ends (Frankel, 1973). Dahl (1969) simplified the framework of PT in a few words, thus: 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (p. 80). The basic assumption of PT includes a relational model whereby one exercises power over the other. This is done through the possession of more tangible or intangible assets to force the

weaker entity to comply with the decision of the stronger. Power manifests in three forms – hard power, soft power and smart power. Hard power is sourced from tangible assets such as military capability and technological advancement; soft power is derived from superior culture, values system, and foreign policy; while 'smart power' is a product of the creative combination of hard and soft power (Morgenthau, 1967; Nye, 2004; Wilson, 2008). Indeed, in PT lenses, the strong always have their way, and the weak have their say (Akinboye & Otttoh 2007). The usefulness of PT in this discourse is grounded in its capacity to explain how the tussle for supremacy by SAF and RSF in Sudan highlights the issues and challenges constraining the resolution of the ongoing conflict in the country.

Methodology

Documentary research design was adopted in this study. This design involves

extensive search and review of data from existing documents stored in libraries, archives and the internet. The design has the advantage of utilizing valid and reliable data collated, analyzed and stored by other scholars, and policymakers over time (Kothari, 2004). It is also useful in helping researchers to weigh the opinions and findings of previous studies, and their relevance to current studies. This study relies solely on secondary data, sourced from relevant scholarly journals, textbooks, communiqué of international organizations, as well as other relevant records. The use of secondary data saved time and energy and reduced the risks associated with field research in a fragile state as Sudan. The data was qualitatively presented and analyzed thematically. This enhanced the smooth discussion of findings and the conclusion of the study.

Table 1: **Analysis of SAF and RSF Conflict in Sudan**

Profile of the conflict
The core issue surrounding this conflict is the struggle for dominance of the Sudanese state security apparatuses, and monopolistic control of political power by the belligerent leaders in the post-Al-Bashir era.
The Actors in the conflict

This conflict has featured several actors in four concentric cycles within Sudan, neighbours of Sudan, regional actors, and the global involvement. The first concentric cycle has General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemeti) who are the commander and deputy commander-in-chief of the Sudanese Armed Forces and the leaders of SAF and RSF respectively.. Both men are contesting for supremacy in the power game within the security and political realm of the country. This cycle includes the belligerents from both divides, as well as ethnic militias who are active in some parts of the country outside Khartoum. We also have youth civil society organizations and leaders of thought within Sudan, who are doing much to de-escalate the conflict and support citizens through volunteer service since most institutions are negatively affected by the war.

The second cycle of actors consists of Sudanese neighbours, most of whom bear the burden of the conflict by accepting and supporting refugees in their territories. These include South Sudan, Chad, Central African Republic, Libya, Ethiopia and Egypt. The last is suspected to be giving tacit support to the SAF. The eight-nation economic bloc in the Horn of Africa, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), belong to this cycle. IGAD is the first pillar of the trilateral mechanism for the resolution of the SAF and RSF conflict known to the United Nations. It has been working assiduously to secure a ceasefire from the belligerents through its 3-member high-level committee led by President Salva Kiir of South Sudan. The organization has also proposed the deployment of Peace Support Operations (PSOs) to the conflict zones in a manner that would contain the violence and enhance peaceful resolution of the conflict. The third cycle of actors is regional organizations. The African Union (AU) is one of the pillars of the trilateral mechanism to coordinate the resolution of the conflict. The AU and its Peace and Security Council (PSC) chairperson, Moussa Faki are working hard in collaboration with other actors in the trilateral mechanism to resolve the conflict. The AU has issued a roadmap that consists of six elements toward the restoration of peace in Sudan and the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement. The AU also supports the deployment of PSO to Sudan as proposed by IGAD.

The League of Arab States (LAS) is also part of this cycle and has issued statements condemning the conflict. It is also working with other actors to de-escalate the conflict. However, some of its member states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are suspected of giving support to the RSF due to their historical ties in the Yemeni war. The European Union (EU) has also condemned the conflict in Sudan; its special representative in the Horn of Africa is consulting and collaborating with IGAD and AU towards the resolution of the conflict. The EU was also instrumental in the successful evacuation and airlift of its citizens and other nationals from the troubled zones in the country. It is also working as part of the multilateral mediation team in the resolution of the conflict.

The fourth cycle of actors includes globally relevant actors. The UN is the third pillar of the trilateral mechanism for the resolution of the SAF and RSF conflict. Before the escalation of the conflict on April 15, 2023, the UN had established the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) in 2020, to assist the Sudanese government in coordinating activities leading to a timeous transition to civil rule in the country. UNITAMS was part of the team that midwived the Juba Peace Accord of December 2022. UNITAMS has been deeply involved in peacebuilding activities, which include the coordination of conferences on transitional justice and the release of political prisoners. It also collaborates with other members of the trilateral mechanism to ensure the implementation of the agreement signed by all parties, and to defuse tension within days to the violent outburst. The United States on the other hand, has been leading in diplomatic activities to resolve the conflict. Its joint effort with Saudi Arabi led to the Jeddah Peace Talk which resulted in a failed cease-fire in June 2023. The US, alongside UAE, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom also formed the 'Quad Team' which facilitated the December 2022 Agreement on the conflict. Indeed, Western entities and nations have been working hard towards the resolution of the conflict, as well as the provision of support for IDPS/refugees, and evacuation of stranded civilians in Sudan.

Causes of the conflict

The immediate cause of violent outburst revolves around the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement, signed in December 2022. Specifically, the timeline for

the integration of RSF into the SAF; and the position of SAF and RSF leaders in the post-transition security architecture are the core issues in the conflict. While General Hamadan prefers an immediate return to civil rule, RSF submission to civil authority, and ten years of gradual integration of the armed services, Al-Burhan demands the immediate integration of RSF into SAF under his leadership within two years, and indeed before the end of the transition period. In sum, both men are battling to be in charge of the Sudanese security apparatus, in a manner that could keep them in power in the nearest future.

The dynamics of the conflict

The conflict is a bad omen, not only to the Sudanese but the entire Sahel, Africa and the wider world. A failed Sudanese state is a danger to humanity because it would provide a safe-haven for extremist groups and human traffickers. It would also produce so many vulnerable people for extremists' radicalization, as well as provide a training ground for extremist groups. It could also become a transit camp for extremists in the Western Sahel, Central Africa and the Horn of Africa, to and from the Mediterranean and Europe. The current conflict has the potential to increase the circulation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Sudan, as well as their trafficking across national borders. The impact of such situation on the internal security of neighbouring states is enormous. More so, the continuous flow of IDPs and refugees from Sudan to elsewhere in the sub-region may trigger another round of conflict, arising from the paucity of resources, and competition over available resources. The best solution demands the cooperation of all stakeholders in the peaceful resolution of the conflict and the transition to multi-party democracy, through the paraphernalia provided in the Juba Peace Agreement. A stable and vibrant Sudan is an asset to regional and global security. Worst still, the conflict may continue and probably degenerate into a civil war to be won by either party to the conflict. On the other hand, the assertiveness of the civil society sector on the demands for multi-party democracy may make it difficult for any authoritarian ruler to stay in power. Hence, none of the rival military blocs may retain power beyond a short transition period in the future. Therefore, it is a win-win for all parties to resolve the conflict, and implement the Juba Peace Agreement according to its letters and spirit. In all, the Sudanese need to

encourage a national dialogue on every issue that affects their nation. They must display the willingness to accommodate one another according to the dictates of fairness, equity and justice.

Source. The authors' compilation.

Discussion of findings

This section discussed the findings of this study on the issues and challenges surrounding the resolution of SAF and RSF conflict in Sudan.

(1) Demilitarization of the Sudanese society

The Sudanese nation has been a theatre of prolonged conflicts. Indeed, almost every generation in post-independent Sudan has witnessed a violent conflict and militarization of the daily living of the citizenry. This started with the first Civil War which lasted more than ten years before ending in 1972. Within this period, the country also witnessed a military coup in 1969 which further solidified the utility of the military as an instrument of statecraft in Sudan. By 1983, the second Civil War broke out due to the reversal of the terms of the agreement which ended the first Civil War (McCauley, 2017; Harir & Tvedt, 1994). This was done with military fiat and with the backing of the military institutions, which were used to suppress southern Sudan. The formation and

flourishing of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) by the perceived backward south was an illustration of the Sudanese people's belief in militarism as the best instrument for resolving socio-political conflicts. The success of SPLM/A in challenging the central government for about twenty-two years, and the eventual success in getting the CPA signed in 2005 to end the Civil War is instructive in this regard. This was done in an era, when the unholy alliance between the military and Islamists was very strong under Omar Al-Bashir, and the impunity of the state was largely unchecked by any institution within the state (Kostelyanets, 2021; Warburg, 2003; Elnur, 2009).

Another source of militarism was the Darfur conflict which broke out in 2003. Its ethnic dimension featured attacks on non-Arabic ethnic groups by Arabs across the region. The intense nature of the attacks and the ethnic cleansing by the Arabs exposed the vulnerability of other ethnic groups in the country (Natsios, 2012). The inability or refusal of the Al-

Bashir's government to contain the Arab marauders from these attacks illustrated the government's support for the Arabs. The unfolding 'Arabization' policy of the administration through the complicity of the government led to the formation of ethnic militia groups across Sudan. (Deng, 1995; Young, 2019).

Indeed, the Al Bashir government sponsored ethnic militias across the country, including the Janjaweed armed group to promote division between Arab and non-Arab populations in the country at the height of the Darfur conflict. By 2013, prominent militia groups were integrated to form the Rapid Support Force (RSF). The central task of the RSF was to play the role of a praetorian guard capable of containing threats of a military coup by the SAF. Hence, RSF was equipped with sophisticated weapons and training. Besides, this paramilitary outfit had combat experiences in the Yemeni war and other theaters of conflict in the country, thus sharpening its tactical and operational skills before the ousting of Al Bashir, and the outbreak of the current conflict between them and the SAF (International Crisis Group, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2023).

The aftermath of these developments is the reckless militarization of civil spaces

across Sudan, and the internalization of militarism as a culture. The eruption of several attacks outside Khartoum by ethnic militias in the ongoing conflict is illustrative of this fact (ACAPS 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023). Hence, resolving the conflict requires the demilitarization of the psyche of the Sudanese people; and this should be done by assuring and demonstrating to every community that the era of self-help is over. This could be done through good governance and state penetration, as well as a genuine integration policies.

(2) Checkmating the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW)

Closely related to the militarization of the state is the proliferation of SALW in Sudan. The country is located at the heart of the Sahel where several wars have been fought and many are ongoing. The porous and fluid national borders in the Sahel facilitate arms smuggling into the region (Witzoski, 2021; Caparini, 2015). Instances abound to illustrate this. The death of Muammar Gaddafi and the looting of the Libyan armory in Libya, a neighboring country with Sudan increased the flow of illicit arms into the country and other parts of the Sahel. Similar activities took place during the recent insurgency in Chad, where rebels took up arms against the state and

eventually killed President Idris Debby. Chad is a southwestern neighbor of the Sudanese state (Shihundi & Thurston, 2020). In addition, Ethiopia an eastern neighbor is about ending a civil war in its Tigray region where illicit arms were handy to the rebels.

These new wars are responsible for the flourishing of illicit trade in SALW and for so many unaccounted weapons in the region. Some of these weapons are in circulation in Sudan, which encourages the proliferation of armed groups across the country. The availability of these illicit weapons is responsible for some provoked and unprovoked attacks by armed groups, and the escalation of latent conflicts into armed struggles (UNODC, 2022; Arieff, 2019; Caparini, 2015). Apart from the numerous wars in the Sahel region, the Sudanese state tacitly supports self-help and the proliferation of armed groups in the country through the government failure to respond to security threats facing the citizens. The Darfur issue was very instructive to the citizenry on the need for communities and entities to procure arms for the security of its members either against state-sponsored gun attacks or against other communities' hostility due to contested land or pasture (Natsios, 2012).

Moreover, the Sudanese state lacks the capacity to recover all the arms issued by the Sudanese Armed forces to their personnel during the protracted civil war, as some went missing due to the death of combatants on the battlefield, and others were stolen and sold out by unscrupulous elements in the SAF (Wisotski, 2021). Similar to these scenarios is the emergence of state-sponsored armed entities in Sudan. The emergence of RSF itself is an instance of this, during the inglorious era of Omar Al-Bashir. There is no justification for the creation of a paramilitary entity parallel to SAF in command, and fully armed to counter both SAF and any other armed service in the country. The flourishing of RSF, Sudan Liberation Army - Minni Minawi (SLA/MM), and Sudan People Liberation Movement/North (SPLM/N) are instances of the state-induced proliferation of armed groups in the country (International Crisis Group, 2023; UNSC, 2023). A major challenge in resolving the Sudanese conflict includes the mopping up of illicit SALW across the country in a manner that could weaken the operations of armed groups. There is also the need to integrate all armed groups into SAF or other armed services in the country. The above challenges constitute the immediate cause, and sustaining logic of

the ongoing conflict between SAF and RSF.

(3) Management of foreign interest and internal alignment in the SAF and RSF conflict

Foreign actors have been active in Sudan right from independence since it is not a 'pariah' state. The ongoing conflict between SAF and RSF has attracted more foreign entities to Sudan as traditional socio-economic and political partners, facilitators of humanitarian intervention or mediators in the conflict. The UN, AU, EU, IGAD and LAS have been working hard to resolve the conflict which started with the ousting of Al-Bashir in 2019. The major interest of all these entities is the peaceful and credible transition from the military-backed government of the Sovereign Council to a democratically elected civilian government. However, the desire of these entities and some Western partners may be parallel with other actors currently involved in the conflicts. Specifically, some entities may not want the transition to a democratic Sudan to succeed. Egypt is said to be a partner that backs the SAF in the ongoing conflict, same with Islamist groups and elements within the ex-Darfur rebel in the country. The proximity of Egypt to the conflict zone is worrisome since it has the capacity to finance and support several

militia groups in the country. Egypt may be afraid that an antecedence of a smooth democratic transition in Sudan would stand as an indictment on its shady transmutation of General Al-Sisi to a civilian president (EPRS, 2023; International Crisis Group 2023; Sany & Stigant, 2023). Besides, Egypt loathes the influence of UAE and Saudi Arabia in its neighborhood.

On the side of RSF and General Hamadan Dagolo, are the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Libya amongst others. The UAE has an abiding business partnership with the RSF leader, and the latter also deployed troops to fight on the side of the UAE in the Yemeni War. Dagolo is also said to enjoy the support of the Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, who has illicit business partnerships in smuggling and investment with General Dagalo. The business partnership has provided funds for Haftar to finance his empire, and it is a payback time for Haftar to support Dagolo. On the other hand, Russia and China have not shown direct interest in the conflict, but they have a vested interest in Sudan. Their interest in Sudan is traced back to Omar Al-Bashir's era when Western mining companies pulled out of Sudan in the aftermath of the pro-Islamist policy of the government. The two Eastern giants are currently doing business in the

country (Patey, 2014), and Russia's Wagner Group provides security for goldmines in Darfur, controlled by Dagolo. Wagner Group may as well provide military and technical assistance to the RSF in the conflict between it and SAF. Within Sudan are democrats who support RSF and Dagolo due to their preference for a timeous return to civil rule and the submission of military institutions to civilian leadership in Sudan (Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2023; Rondos, 2023; EPRS, 2023; UNSC, 2023).

The major challenge in this context is how to harmonize the interests of these foreign entities viz-a-viz the demands of the major constituencies in Sudan. Egypt believes that the continuation of a military rule is capable of pushing back the interest, and influence of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the country. This does not sit well with RSF, which prefers continuous ties with the Gulf states. Sudan's relationship with the UAE and Saudi Arabia has been mutually beneficiary, in that Sudan has a fighting force available for deployment in support of the duo's interests. Similarly, the Gulf States are generous enough to give grants and other financial support to the Sudanese state. Besides, Sudan remains a dangerous terrain for Western companies

to operate in, therefore investment from China, India, Gulf States, Malaysia, and other non-Western blocs remains a viable option for the troubled country (Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012; Patey, 2014). This makes it very unlikely for Sudan to drive them out. It is therefore obvious that the majority of foreign interests prefer the timely return of Sudan to a peaceful and democratic entity, but the challenge lies in the success of such a project without the support of the SAF. The challenge of civil-military relations must be resolved in a manner that guarantees military support and submission to civilian authority as obtained from other established democracies. Such resolution is an issue and challenge in the current efforts at resolving the conflict between SAF and RSF. (Sany & Stigant 2023, pp.3-4; AUPSC, 2023; p.2; EPRS, 2023, p.2; International Crisis Group 2023, p.9).

(4) Management of humanitarian challenges in the conflict

The conflict has thrown up several humanitarian challenges within the Sudanese state and neighbouring countries. Such challenges include the management of IDPs, refugees, food insecurity, access to water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), and health facilities. It is estimated that Sudan had about 1.4 million refugees from the

neighbouring countries as of September 2022; this made it the host to the second largest population of refugees on the continent. Among these refugees were Syrians and Yemenis considered as Arab and Muslim brothers with considerable rights and privileges in the country. These refugees included men, women, and children with diverse needs (Care International, 2023). Therefore, the ongoing conflict has affected their capacity to lead a normal life in a strange land. Similarly, the ongoing conflict has resulted in the internal displacement of about 843, 000 people in the first month of the conflict. The figure is estimated to have reached 8 million in the month of July 2023. These include 2.2 million IDPs and about 615,00 asylum seekers, refugees and returnees, who have migrated into the neighbouring South Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, Chad and the Central African Republic. Of this figure, about 1.5 million were displaced from Khartoum – the epicenter of the conflict, and 670,000 from the Darfur region. Besides, thousands more in Khartoum, Darfur and Kordofan are stranded, as they are cut off from the supply of food and basic items in their homes because of heavy fighting by the belligerents. (IOM, 2023; OCHA, 2023).

One of the major impacts of forced migration is food insecurity. It is estimated that about 2.5 million people will slid into hunger if the conflict continues. This may increase the figure of those affected by food insecurity to about 19 million people. The increase is due to acute food shortages and rises in food prices in the country, where about 65% of the population were living below the poverty line before the outbreak of the current conflict (EPRS, 2023; IOM, 2023). Sida (2023) reported that about 3 million Sudanese children suffer from acute malnutrition, according to the integrated food security phase classification's (IPC) report of June 2022. This confirms UNICEF's (2023) observation that about 3 million children are suffering from Wasting –a severe stage of malnutrition that is life-threatening in children under the age of five; and many more may be affected as the conflict escalates. Getting food to those affected by the conflict is very risky since there are no adequately defined humanitarian corridors in the conflict zones. Besides, most of the warehouses and stores of aid workers have been looted by belligerents, and about 15 aid workers have been killed in the conflict (OCHA, 2023; UNSC, 2023).

The water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) subsector has been identified as

one of the worst-hit areas in the conflict (ACAPS, 2023). It is estimated that about 17.3 million people do not have access to a minimum standard of drinking water in the country. This is attributed to the crawling of WASH facilities in the country. Also, almost 24 million people do not have access to adequate sanitation. Again, about 11 million are still practicing open defecation. (Care International, 2023). UNICEF (2023) observed that 11.5 million people (5.6 million males and 5.9 million females) require urgent WASH intervention in the home. Besides, an assessment of 189 localities in Sudan, revealed that 151 of the localities face critical water scarcity challenges. This is compounded by the susceptibility of these localities to flood and other natural disasters. The destruction of WASH facilities by the conflict has further increased the number of individuals affected by their deficits, which has forced women and children to trek long distances in search of water, possibly from the River Nile. Water from the River Nile and similar water bodies are not safe for drinking, they may cause diarrhea and other water borne diseases (Care International, 2023). More so, a chunk of the population in Khartoum and other conflict zones are confined to their homes because of heavy fighting. They

have very little water for cooking and waste management activities. This may trigger health challenges, especially in overcrowded areas (ACAPS, 2023).

Unfortunately, the current conflict between SAF and RSF has also led to the closure of health facilities in Khartoum, Darfur and other regions where widespread fightings are reported. Looting of hospitals as well as attacks by the belligerents have made the facilities unsafe for both health workers and patients. Those adversely affected are women and children. Pregnant women are in danger of increased maternal mortality as there are inadequate facilities for Basic Emergency Obstetric, and New-born Care (BEmONC) and Comprehensive Emergency Obstetric and New-born Care (CEmONC) even before the conflict (Care International, 2023). It is estimated at the time of this study that 2.6 million women and girls of reproductive age need urgent medical attention in the country, and about 262,880 are heavy with pregnancy, with more than 90,000 having their Expected Date of Delivery (EED) within the next three months (OCHA, 2023). Access to medical facilities is the key to their survival and for the maternal mortality rate in the country (295 out of 100,000

live births) to change for the better (Care International, 2023).

Furthermore, humanitarian operations are costly and require adequate funding for all aspects of such operations. For instance, OCHA (2023) estimated that 27.7 million people need assistance in Sudan in 2023 which required about 2.6 billion dollars, and only 22% of the money has been raised from donors. The implication of this narrative is that the humanitarian mission in Sudan is grossly underfunded, and this is part of the challenges and issues in resolving the ongoing conflict.

(5) Checking of human rights abuses

One of the greatest challenges in armed conflict is adherence to international humanitarian laws and human rights laws which regulate the activities of belligerents on and off the battlefield. The essence of the rule of engagement given to combatants during a battle is to reduce or eliminate human rights abuses (United Nations, 2011). Such rules are hardly kept by combatants, especially militias in theatres of conflict. This was displayed during the Sudanese Civil Wars and the Darfur conflict in the country. Al-Bashir and the Sudanese Army were accused of genocide and crime against humanity due to ethnic cleansing in

Darfur (Acled, 2023; Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012). The current conflict bears some trademark of the Darfuri conflict due to the emerging ethnic dimension. Acled (2023) observed that there has been deadly fighting in Darfur where RSF activated its militias. This is reminiscent of turning the Janjaweed against members of the Movement for Equity and Justice during the Darfur conflict twenty years ago. For instance, in El-Geneina, the capital of West Darfur, the battle has assumed an ethnic dimension with Arabs and Masalit militias killing each other (Acled, 2023). In such bitter and zero-sum engagement, bizarre activities are recurring decimals. UNSC (2023) reported that of 27 alleged incidents documented by UNITAMS on human rights violations and abuses involving 101 victims, 25 were verified, the verified incidents showed that only 5 were traced to government security operatives, accounting for 6 victims. The remaining 20 incidents were committed by armed militia groups and movements, with about 93 victims. The documented incidents are just a few, but revealed the general trend in the country. More so, many victims in the country are not willing to report their cases to any authority, for fear of reprisal attack, victimization and stigmatization by the

culprits, their groups and the society (Care International, 2023). This was illustrated by the abduction and killing of the West Darfur governor, Mr. Khamis Abakar, a Masalit, by elements suspected to be Arab Rezeigat- the same ethnic group as the RSF leader, General Hamadan. RSF and Arabs Rezeigat are trying to take total control of the region. Besides, refugees fleeing from Darfur to neighboring countries complained of many atrocities committed against their people by RSF militias (International Crisis Group, 2023). UNITAMS has also reported an increase in sexual harassment by violent men in RSF uniform and other Arab armed groups (UNSC 2023). OCHA (2023) has reported the rising of gender-base violence (GBV) as well as incidents of family separation and abuses of children's rights. Such incidents are not restricted to one ethnic group or armed group; it is a common occurrence that must be checked, and culprits brought to book.

Further, the closure of schools and limited access to social services arising from the conflict has exposed children to armed groups. Some of the children are traumatized by the violence; while others are forced to join armed groups as child soldiers (UNICEF, 2023). A similar report

by Care International (2023) identifies the disruption of safety nets and the compromise of the rule of law during the conflict as the harbinger of GBV and child abuses. Also, these abuses are under-reported due to fear of repeated violence and the reaction of male family members who may resort to forced expulsion from the community, tribe, and other forms of social exclusion. Besides, there have been similar incidents in previous conflicts in the country, in which culprits have not been punished. Therefore, many victims do not have confidence in the system to do justice to their rights abuses in this conflict (Care International, 2023). It is therefore imperative to establish an international and independent body to monitor, collate and preserve evidence, as well as report serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law in the ongoing conflict in Sudan. (Amnesty International, 2023).

Finally, the major challenge lies not only in getting the belligerents to adhere to global best practices as enshrined in international humanitarian law and international human rights law but also in reporting and documenting all abuses. Avoiding genocide and crimes against humanity in Sudan is a very serious challenge in the ongoing conflict.

Conclusion

This study sought to highlight issues and challenges surrounding the resolution of the current SAF and RSF conflict in Sudan. It tabulated a brief analysis of the conflict, actors in the conflict, causes of the conflict and dynamics of the conflict. The findings revealed that demilitarization of the Sudanese society; mopping of illicit SALW and harmonious integration of every armed group into a unified national security architecture; creative management of foreign interest and their internal alignment in the country; effective management of humanitarian issues; and checking and documenting human rights abuses are key issues and challenges in resolving the conflict. From the discussions, it is very obvious that SAF, dominated by Islamists is not eager to follow through with the transition program except, on its terms, which include; immediate disarming and

integration of RSF into its command. Similarly, although RSF is favorably disposed to a quick return to democratic rule, it does not subscribe to its immediate integration into the Sudanese Armed Forces. This is indeed a power game between two symmetric forces, with ethnic and regional dimensions. The conflict is also complicated by foreign interests and support on both sides. Given the dual stalemate at the battlefield and diplomatic realm, it is desirable for all parties to cease hostility and return to the negotiation table. Further discussion on the peaceful resolution of the conflict should be done with an expansive mechanism, covering the four concentric circles highlighted in this study. Above all, the Sudanese civil society space needs to be united; they demand unconditional ceasefire from the belligerents, as well as insist on a timely end to military dictatorship of any kind in their country.

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