SUDAN CRISIS ANALYSIS

Sudan's Fragmented Governance and Implications for Humanitarian Actors

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This paper is the third in a series of Mercy Corps crisis analysis briefing papers on Sudan's conflict, which commenced in April 2023. It considers the implications of Sudan's fragmented rule and governance for humanitarian actors in Sudan. Fragmentation includes both factious military and paramilitary groups and extends to Sudanese state institutions and civil society. As the conflict continues, institutions and territory may become further divided, leading to significant coordination, access, and bureaucratic challenges. Faced with such difficulties, it is essential to prioritize existing local humanitarian action within the overarching response, working with institutions that centre the interests of local communities and observe reciprocal consent-based governance strategies.

Sudan's governance was fragmented prior to the eruption of the ongoing conflict on 15 April 2023.[1] Such fragmentation is now associated with the war-based and likely violent conflict-accelerated erosion of rule in Sudan. In contrast to when the 'basis of interaction between the rulers and the ruled is that of legitimate authority or reciprocity', Sudan's war-rooted strategies of rule are often reactionary, violent, and pragmatically oriented towards self-survival.[2] This briefing paper explores how patterns of fragmented governance simultaneously impede humanitarian action and present humanitarian actors with opportunities to innovate new ways forward in Sudan.

Recent examples of Sudan's fragmented and contested governance that may shape humanitarian action include Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo's (also known as 'Hemedti') X/Twitter announcement of the Rapid Support Services' (RSF) version of a Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), which was under Sudan government control prior to the conflict and continues to operate across the country. Another instance includes Hemedti's 27 August proclamation of 'Sudan Reborn: A Vision for a New State', which liberally borrows from the language and structure of the pro-democracy movement's charters, and claims an imaginary of 'inclusive national institutions based on democratic values'.[3] Hemedti's pronouncement resembles another that he made at the start of the war declaring the establishment of local courts to impose order, which also mimicked pre-existing public institutions like ousted President Omer Al-Bashir's Sharia courts from the early 1990s at the height of Bashir's imposition of Islamic rule. These cases illustrate that further fragmentation of rule in Sudan provides openings for self-interested attempts to exploitatively

Governance refers to 'all processes of governing, the institutions, processes and practices through which issues of common concern are decided upon and regulated' (UN OHCHR).

For more information about Mercy Corps' approach to governance, see: https://www.mercycorps.org/what-we-do/governance

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[1] Fragmentation is defined as a dynamic process in which the nature of a how a state is ruled breaks into a constellation of frequently competing interest groups.

[2] Barkan, J. (1992) 'The Rise and Fall of a Governance Realm in Kenya', in Hyden, G. and Bratton, M. (Eds.) *Governance and Politics in Africa*. London: Lynne Rienner, pp.167-192.

[3] https://twitter.com/GeneralDagllo/status/1695862717863608749

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recontextualize the nature of governance in the country to privilege men in arms and sideline civilians, in part by liberally borrowing from the civic uprising's charters.

As this paper explores, while fragmentation can contribute to the ongoing coercive and extractive nature of rule and governance, it also holds possibility for humanitarian actors to support Sudanese humanitarian initiatives that counter war-based logics. This is especially relevant in instances of resilient local forms of civic humanitarian action, such as the enduring proliferation of countrywide lifesaving community-based aid from Sudanese resistance committees and emergency war rooms, which are intentionally fragmented to subvert co-option. In contrast to rule by men in arms, these types of groups are by their very nature embedded in reciprocity and community-based forms of legitimacy and are entities that international humanitarian actors should support.

Fragmented Rule and Governance in Sudan

In addition to the fragmentation of military or paramilitary groups such as the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), headed by Abdel Fattah el-Burhan, and the Hemedti-led RSF, fragmentation in Sudan includes state institutions and civil society. Evidence of fragmentation can be found in Sudan's complex web of public finances. Even prior to the conflict, government budgets were scattered across different ministries, with the executive and legislative branches maintaining strongest control. This dynamic shaped the spatial geography of Sudan's inequitable rule, with all the country's subnational governments outside of Khartoum and Gezira states generally reliant upon financial handouts from the Khartoum-led government. Nor is this a novel feature of wartime rule in Sudan, as the pattern can be traced to at least British-led occupation of the region that is now Sudan from 1899 through to Sudanese independence in 1956.[4] As the political ethnographer Alex de Waal argues, proximity to the Khartoum-led state as a means for different communities to maintain preferential relations to extract resources has increased the risk of violent zero-sum competition to rule the country in the years after independence.[5]

Contemporary Sudan's vast security arena, which is a competing national security network that includes the RSF and SAF and Sudan's national security apparatus, maintains an elaborate decentralized financial network that likely continues to ensnare hundreds of lucrative businesses and financial institutions, including banks.[6] Particularly in the instance of Sudan's security arena, civilians had limited financial oversight or control of what might otherwise have been considered public finances. Geopolitical considerations impact these factors as entities within Sudan's security arena have previously received financial and military support from a range of regional and international actors including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. Other states or regional bodies

[4] Benson, M. and Alneel, M. (2023) 'The Everyday Politics of Sudan's Tax System: Identifying Prospects for Reform'. Conflict and Civicness Research Group, London School of Economics and Political Science. (https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/The-Everyday-Politics-of-Sudans-Tax-System-Benson-et-al-2023.pdf)

[5] de Waal, A. (2015) *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*. Cambridge: Polity.

[6] Hills, A. (2016) 'Security Sector or Security Arena?: The Evidence from Somalia', *International Peacekeeping*, 21:2, pp.165-180.; Global Witness (2019) 'Exposing the RSF's Secret Financial Network', *Global Witness*, 9 December 2019. (https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-minerals/exposing-rsfs-secret-financial-network/); Global Witness (2020) 'Beneath the Shine: A Tale of Two Gold Refiners', London: Global Witness.; Lanfranchi, G. and Hoffmann, A. (2023) 'To Stop the War in Sudan, Bankrupt the Warlords: Cutting Off Finance to Sudan's Generals Can Pressure them to Stop the Fighting', The Hague: Clingandael Institute: The Netherlands Institute of International Relations.; C4ADS (2022) 'Breaking the Bank: How Military Control of the Economy Obstructs Democracy in Sudan', Washington DC: Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS).;

such as the EU, the United States, China, and Russia, have also played vital roles and will likely inform Sudan's prospects.

Conversely, Sudanese civil society, particularly in the form of civicness-oriented groups such as neighborhood resistance committees are arguably fragmented by design, partially to respond to or subvert crackdowns by actors within Sudan's security arena. To avoid persecution, bottom-up forms of community-based support such as emergency response rooms and neighborhood resistance committees have at times intentionally remained anonymous or difficult to assess. Groups such as resistance committees have relied upon essentially 'crowd sourced' financial or material contributions, particularly from the diaspora, which is suspected to have contributed approximately $1 million USD per day at the height of the democratic uprising.[7] Nor are these concerns limited to resistance committees, Sudanese NGOs also face a host of similar challenges when navigating fragmented and violent rule in Sudan.

Possible Developments

Conflict entrepreneurs such as the RSF and SAF, and civicness oriented actors, which include but are not limited to resistance committees and emergency war rooms, generate concurrent fragmentation dynamics that hold implications for Sudan's future. Potential developments over the next 12-months include increased territorial fragmentation within Sudan, with Port Sudan, the Darfurs, and Khartoum emerging as key nodes with civic actors caught within and among these areas as people increasingly flow between them as the situation develops. This section briefly forecasts these patterns and informs the briefing paper's concluding advocacy points for humanitarians and donors.

Following the war's onset, Port Sudan has replaced Khartoum as the primary outpost for what remains of the Government of Sudan, and since April they and SAF have each established leadership positions in the city . For instance, Sudan's Ministry of Interior Affairs has recommenced issuing passports and other official documents from the city. Sudanese professionals and many international NGOs have similarly transferred most if not all their main operational bases to Port Sudan. While it remains to be seen, this suggest that what remains of the contested civilian-led state and SAF, which are not always in agreement, still nominally have control of the state bureaucracy that could be wielded to control humanitarian access. Other implications for humanitarian actors include a rise in the cost of rents for headquarters as increased demand contributes to higher prices.

In contrast to Port Sudan, Khartoum and the Darfur region can be expected to remain violently contested. Armed groups within Darfur are also likely to maintain strong links to illicit trade networks throughout the Sahel, which have enabled conflict actors such as Hemedti to smuggle weapons into Sudan and gold out of the country.[8] Even prior to the conflict, the country's gold producing regions were relatively well-controlled since gold exports are a valuable natural resource for financing Sudan's security arena and are likely to remain

[7] Shabaka (2021) Roadmap for Diaspora Engagement in Sudan. London: Shabaka. (https://shabaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Policy_Brief_2021_English_final.2.pdf)

[8] Brachet, J. and Scheele, J. (2019) *The Value of Disorder: Autonomy, Prosperity, and Plunder in the Chadian Sahara*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.; Ille, E., Salah, M. and Birhanu, T. (2021) From Dust to Dollar: Gold Mining and Trade in the Sudan-Ethiopia Borderland. Rift Valley Institute. (https://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/RVI.2021.04.27%20From-Dust-to-Dollar_Ille_Salah_Birhanu.pdf); Rift Valley Institute (2019) Security Elites and Gold Mining in Sudan's Economic Transition. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute. (https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Security-elites-and-gold-mining-in-Sudans-economic-transition-RVI-X-Border-Project-2019.pdf); Global Witness (2020) Beneath the Shine: A Tale of Two Gold Refiners. London: Global Witness.

carefully controlled and potentially contested as and when the battlefront shifts. Meanwhile, the RSF controls routes in and out of Khartoum and by extension rural areas where most of the populations who are internally displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance now reside. RSF-controlled access is frequently subject to pragmatic and self-interested whims of the paramilitary leadership such as checkpoints and other war-based logics, which do not meaningfully adhere to civilian control or SAF-bureaucracy. Additionally, in the absence of an official ministry or other state body, it is reasonable to expect that for as long as Hemedti remains a force his proclamations will continue via Twitter/X, likely in reaction to SAF and the remnants of Sudan's civilian led government, resulting in increased bureaucratic complexities for humanitarian actors operating in certain areas. As reconstruction will take time, these patterns should be expected to continue even if a hoped-for ceasefire and peace agreement are implemented.

Civic groups are caught amidst all of this and have so far reacted by becoming increasingly mobile to respond to emerging needs. For instance, many civilians have traversed to Port Sudan to obtain travel documents. However, those who remain in Khartoum and move between rural areas where communities are displaced, have engaged in survival-based tactics to travel somewhat safely. Displaced populations' livelihoods are increasingly under threat as the price of housing, food, and other essentials reportedly rises or becomes scarce. Some have returned to their homes in war-impacted Khartoum in a desperate measure to obtain shelter. These patterns pose extreme humanitarian access challenges that are likely to be constricted by the warring parties who maintain violently contested, patchy, and fast-shifting control within Khartoum and its surroundings. Cvic groups, particularly emergency war rooms, continue to provide lifesaving assistance under these circumstances. In contrast to the RSF, SAF, and the civilian-led government administration, civic groups do not yet appear to be establishing state-like entities. Civic groups are unlikely to impose state-like structures as decentralized control maintains vital plausible deniability when confronted by an often-persecutory SAF and RSF; fragmentation is therefore integral to many grassroots entities' survival.

The enduring fragmentation of Sudan's territory, institutions, and civil society will provide openings for both civic actors and coercive and self-interested actors to exploit. Returning to the example of Hemedti's call for an RSF-run equivalent to the Humanitarian Aid Commission: RSF, SAF, and any other armed groups that emerge are likely to continue to attempt to resemble the state or exhibit 'stateness' through the creation or suggestion of state-like institutions. These pragmatic attempts to mimic the state are intentional strategies of rule, and are likely to focus on securitisation and control, rather than concentrate on continuing or rebuilding much-needed state services. This may complicate further complicate access and increase bureaucracy requirements, whilst simultaneously contributing to humanitarian needs.Nor is this unique to Sudan; evidence from the Democratic Republic of the Congo strongly suggest that armed groups will actively exhibit stateness to extract revenue and other goods and control Sudan's ideological and political sphere, which is also contested within the on-going conflict.[9]

Navigating Fragmented Rule and Governance

The coercive strategies of rule and increasingly mobile consensus-based civicness-oriented fragmentation dynamics described in this briefing paper are unlikely to be resolved within the next year and subsequently hold significant implications for humanitarian actors in Sudan. Coordination and access challenges are foremost among these, and given the dynamics described above, Humanitarian action that is rooted in support of civic groups and activities are likely to be the most beneficial. Resistance committees and other civicness-

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[9] Hoffmann, K., Vlassenroot, K. and Marchais, G. (2016) 'Taxation, Stateness and Armed Groups: Public Authority and Resource Extraction in Eastern Congo', *Development and Change*. 47(6). pp.1434-1456.

oriented groups, including unions and NGOs are examples of 'islands of peace' in Sudan that should be supported rather than undermined or side-lined by international humanitarian actors. A crucial distinction for humanitarian actors seeking to 'do no harm' will be to carefully consider the extent to which civic initiatives center the interests of local communities and observe deliberative processes and reciprocal consent-based governance strategies.

Additionally, there may be a need to reconceptualize considerations around access. Ensuring impartiality towards organisations operating in different areas of the country may become a challenge, as may ensuring that bureaucracy requirements do not start to impede the work of local organisations. It must also be considered that the RSF and SAF's attempts to reconstitute order are fragmented forms of rule, with the aim of trying to perform 'stateness' to Sudanese publics and international audiences from whom they still require a degree of legitimacy, whilst civic actors fill gaps in service provision. It is essential to listen to these actors who are best placed to reflect the reality on the ground of what Sudanese publics are asking for, and how best to overcome access constraints. This will require ongoing monitoring as these fragmentation realities will inevitably inform the basis of post-war humanitarian and development reconstruction processes.

Beyond coordination and access challenges, there are also a range of other detrimental fragmentation drivers in Sudan that analysts of the humanitarian sector will need to carefully observe. Narratives of the conflict must carefully consider the fragmentation of rule in Sudan as a distinct phenomenon with diverse implications. While research briefs hold the potential to help incrementally shape new imaginaries of Sudan's conflict, lessons from previous international advocacy efforts in the country, such as the 'Save Darfur Campaign' of the early 2000s underscore the significance of nuanced analyses.[10] Valuable international examples also extend to narratives of the Rwandan conflict in 1990s, lessons from which call attention to the necessity of rejecting easy explanations for the violence.[11] This necessity is likely to expand if parties to the conflict continue to aim to influence the humanitarian space, requiring ongoing careful analysis of local-level developments and corresponding conflict-sensitive approaches..

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[10] de Waal, A. (ed.) (2007) *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
[11] Mamdani, M. (2001) *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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