



War, Displacement, and Sudan's Democracy Movement: The Impact of Forced Migration and Displacement on the Movement

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Executive summary

This paper explores the profound consequences of war and displacement on Sudan's pro-democracy movement. The ongoing conflict in Sudan, now in its sixth month, has wrought immense human suffering, claimed thousands of lives, triggered a dire humanitarian crisis, and led to the displacement of approximately 5.4 million people, both within and beyond the nation's borders. This mass displacement has disrupted not only the lives of Sudanese citizens but has also jeopardized the country's democratic transition and aspirations.

Sudan's post-war landscape is marred by an unprecedented level of internal displacement, with over 4.3 million people having been uprooted from their homes. The situation is particularly dire in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, which historically served as a safe haven for those fleeing conflict but is now in turmoil, disrupting essential services and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. Additionally, over 1 million Sudanese have sought refuge in neighboring countries, often facing perilous journeys and harsh conditions.

Sudan has a history of pro-democracy movements, with successful uprisings in 1964 and 1985 that led to the downfall of dictatorships. The 2018-2019 revolution marked another significant moment when Sudanese citizens ousted dictator Omer al-Bashir, raising hopes for democratic governance. The backbone of Sudan's democracy movement lies in resistance committees: the grassroots activist groups that have played a pivotal role in shaping the country's political landscape.

In the wake of the ongoing war and displacement, pro-democracy activists in Sudan confront dire humanitarian conditions and often become targets for warring factions. Those who have sought refuge abroad face displacement and uncertain futures, complicating their activism efforts. These challenges have shifted priorities away from advancing democracy, redirecting energy toward addressing immediate humanitarian needs.

Comparatively, the international community's response to Sudan's war stands in stark contrast to its support for Ukraine during the 2022 conflict. Ukraine received comprehensive policies and media attention, with a strong emphasis on democracy and human rights. In contrast, Sudan's struggle for democracy often goes unnoticed, despite its undeniable connection to the broader democratic aspirations of the nation.

Moving forward, it is imperative that the international community prioritizes support for Sudan's pro-democracy actors. These activists require assistance in resettlement, financial support, and capacity-building programs to effectively resume their crucial work. Engaging democracy activists in Sudan's political processes is equally vital, providing them with the platform to advocate for their demands and contribute to shaping Sudan's future. Ultimately, the promotion of democratic governance, marked by justice and accountability, is indispensable for securing sustainable peace in Sudan.

In conclusion, Sudan's pro-democracy movement faces unparalleled challenges in the face of ongoing war and displacement. Nevertheless, it perseveres with a resolute determination to advance democracy within Sudan. To bolster this crucial movement, the international community must extend resources, protection, and opportunities for activism to flourish once more. The revitalization of Sudan's democracy movement is fundamental to achieving enduring peace and justice within the nation.

Introduction

With the brutal fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces in its sixth month since mid-April, Sudanese citizens continue to face devastating circumstances inside and outside the country. The intensified hostilities and fighting across the country have claimed the lives of [thousands](#) of Sudanese civilians and caused a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. Around [5.4 million people](#) have fled their homes and sought refuge in safer states in Sudan or neighboring countries. Furthermore, the ongoing war has undermined the country's already troubled transition and halted the popular aspirations for democracy. Nevertheless, there are no prospects for an imminent peace deal, particularly with the [failure](#) of mediation efforts. This piece will investigate the impacts of the ongoing war and the subsequent displacement and migration on Sudan's democratic movement.

Post-war displacement and migration trends

Sudan's ongoing war has inflicted unprecedented numbers of mass displacement, both internally and externally. The situation has recently reached a grim level where the country now holds the [highest number](#) of internally displaced persons (IDPs) on earth. At least 4.3 million people have been displaced internally, fleeing conflict zones to almost 4 thousand locations that

are relatively safer, according to the International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM DTM) [Weekly Displacement Snapshot](#). These numbers are still increasing at extraordinary rates. Around 70 per cent of these are originally from Khartoum, Sudan's capital city and urban center. Khartoum was traditionally a safe haven for those fleeing conflict in other parts of the country. It was also the center of civil politics and the democracy movement over the years. Hence the outbreak of conflict in Khartoum has caused epic disruptions in ways that the country has not dealt with before. As Khartoum, where all the services are centralized, became inaccessible, other states have started facing serious difficulties in other states in terms of service provision. The shortages are even further exacerbated by the influx of IDPs. Living conditions in areas hosting displaced populations are [deteriorating](#) and people are facing severe challenges in accessing food, water, shelter, electricity, education and health care. [Half of Sudan's population](#) is currently vulnerable and in need of urgent humanitarian assistance and protection. Furthermore, the war and displacement have essentially paralyzed the political and civic life in-country, which is largely contributing to the protraction of the war.

Additionally, over 1 million people have crossed the borders seeking refuge in neighboring countries since the eruption of the conflict. According to the [UN Refugee Agency](#) (UNHCR), the largest number of those have crossed to Chad, followed by Egypt, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Central African Republic. However, these [journeys across borders](#) are incredibly dangerous and extremely expensive. Sudanese people escaping the war are often met with inhumane circumstances at the borders and harsh displacement conditions once they arrive at their respective destinations. While Sudan's neighboring countries are dealing with their own economic and political challenges, there is limited support provided to Sudanese seeking refuge in these countries. There is also a huge gap in aid provided by humanitarian organizations. For instance, in Chad where public services and resources are already extremely stretched, Sudanese refugees are facing [appalling living conditions](#). Those who arrived in Egypt are also facing [difficult economic circumstances](#), to the extent that many have been returning to Sudan. Although some of the neighboring countries have kept their borders open, Sudanese civilians are broadly left with no safe routes for migration and resettlement.

Source: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/card/1F3rKQXF1P/>

Overview of Sudan's democracy movement

Sudan's post-independence history has been largely shaped by endless series of instability, civil conflict, and economic impasse. Yet, throughout all of these hardships, there have been strong aspirations for democracy, a [striving civil movement](#), and a deeply rooted tradition of nonviolent civic action. Long before the Arab Spring, the Eastern European revolutions, and other popular democratic uprisings which caught the world's attention, the Sudanese had toppled dictatorships in both 1964 and 1985 through massive civil resistance campaigns. More recently, the country witnessed another pro-democracy uprising in December 2018, where the dictator ruler Omer al-Bashir was ousted in April 2019.

These uprisings were successful in toppling dictatorships but failed in establishing sustainable democracies. Nevertheless, Sudan's latest pro-democracy movement, which emerged following the 2018-2019 revolution, has managed to remain active in the face of epic challenges. Following the nationwide popular uprising, Sudan started navigating a rocky transitional period with wide hopes that these monumental events would offer a genuine opportunity to set a strong foundation for democratic governance. However, Sudan's transition to democracy hit a first wall when the military launched a coup in October 2021 and now the ongoing war is jeopardizing the fate of the entire country. Throughout all of this, the pro-democracy movement managed to play significant roles in the country.

In the context of Sudan, the pro-democracy movement can be used to refer to a broad set of people, organizations, and associations. It broadly [encompasses](#) various civilian entities, including civil society organizations, trade unions, political parties and resistance committees. However, it is widely agreed that the resistance committees have been the soul of Sudan's democratic movement. The resistance committees are thousands of activist movement groups that have emerged in neighborhoods across Sudan, as new political agents [arguably](#) the most instrumental actor in Sudan's political spheres. These committees have become a new source of public authority operating at the neighborhood level and play an important role in many aspects of everyday life. They engaged in a variety of activities including organizing protests, supporting victims of abuse and injustice, working to coordinate resistance and advocacy efforts with local governments, and human rights campaigns. Moreover, they have been active in providing services to their respective neighborhoods, where they used to source and distribute bread and cooking gas during shortages, organize queues at petrol stations, and rehabilitate local health centers and schools.

Following the October 2021 military coup, they have organized and sustained relentless opposition to the coup through weekly protests across the country. They also produced [political charters](#) that outline their vision for Sudan's democratic transition. After the outbreak of war in Sudan, the resistance committees have played crucial humanitarian roles where they established "emergence rooms" to provide social protection and humanitarian relief to citizens, as well as continuing their [efforts](#) to forge a collective political roadmap. While the conflict in Sudan rages on, resistance committees, and the broader pro-democracy movement, continue to find ways to remain active and maintain their legitimacy, and they continue to prioritize and emphasize the need for sustainable democracy as the only guarantor of peace in Sudan. Nevertheless, despite these groups' outstanding ability to adapt and operate in very difficult situations, their activities are currently facing unprecedented difficulties.

Sudan's democracy movement in the wake of war and displacement

The path to democracy is often fraught with serious challenges. Wars and displacement are two significant factors that can profoundly affect democratic movements by eroding civil liberties, exacerbating societal divisions and polarization, and disturbing the mechanisms of collective action. Within this context, the challenges that Sudan's democracy movement is currently enduring are [exceptional](#), coupled with serious uncertainties concerning the country's political, social, and economic future. Sudanese pro-democracy activists have found themselves caught in a war that they did not ask for and continuously warned against. Nevertheless, they quickly [transformed](#) themselves into Sudan's humanitarian first responders, aiming to provide the vanished services of Sudan's collapsed state. They continue to scramble to aid Sudanese caught in the war.

On one hand, the members of Sudan's democracy movement who remain in Sudan are facing a dire humanitarian situation, as well as targeting by the warring parties. On the other hand, the members who have fled for safety abroad, are facing harsh displacement circumstances and uncertain futures. The displacement of prominent activists has made it [difficult](#) to coordinate their efforts and maintain a unified front. Yet, despite significant obstacles, they have continued to leverage their grassroots networks and organizing capabilities to address the pressing needs arising from the crisis. With very limited resources, the [emergency rooms](#) that they established have been providing social protection and humanitarian relief provisions to citizens on the

ground impacted by fighting between SAF and RSF. Notably, the grave violence and dire humanitarian situation have [diverted](#) attention and resources away from the pro-democracy movement's primary objectives, shifting them instead toward the demands of immediate survival, the provision of humanitarian aid, and addressing the urgent needs of displaced people.

For the purpose of this paper, seven prominent activists^[1] were interviewed to share their insights on how the ongoing war in Sudan and the consequent forced displacement have affected their activism and engagement with the democracy movement. They all overwhelmingly corroborated that the challenges they are currently experiencing are unmatched and are different from all the obstacles they faced pre-war. Given the gravity of the humanitarian crisis and the gap in aid provided by international organizations, pro-democracy groups on the ground have been mostly focusing on supporting citizens caught in the crossfire. Their priorities have changed, and while they believe that the democratization agenda should not be dismissed, they have very limited mind space to think beyond the immediate humanitarian needs.

Furthermore, the element of displacement has taken a toll on them. All of them have lost their sources of income and are struggling to make ends meet. Whether they are displaced internally or externally, finding jobs or establishing private businesses at their current temporary locations has been quite challenging. In such circumstances, it becomes very difficult to think about advancing the democracy movement. One of them said: "The war has pushed back to a place where we can merely think about putting food on the table and ensuring that our loved ones are safe. They [the warring factions] have deprived us of our dreams and aspirations. We are forced to choose between focusing on surviving or continuing our efforts to advance freedom, peace and justice in Sudan".

For those displaced inside Sudan, the challenges are even greater. In addition to the difficult humanitarian conditions that they are living in, activists are often targeted, detained, and tortured by both warring factions. This has limited their ability to remain active and engaged. It has become almost impossible to organize in-person meetings or forums to discuss political matters. Additionally, intermittent internet services made it difficult for them to communicate and coordinate via online platforms. Moreover, the war has created tense political polarization. Activists are finding themselves having to choose sides and stances, which has subsequently torn the democracy movement. The continuation of the war will unfortunately lead to further divisions.

While there is uncertainty about the future of Sudan, all of them stated that discounting the democratization agenda will not bring about sustainable peace. They reiterated that advancing the democracy movement in Sudan must be one of the priorities. Many suggested that activists displaced outside Sudan can play a role on that front, as they are in relatively safer locations. However, they cannot do that without having some financial security. One of the interviewees stated: “We lost everything when we fled Khartoum. [we lost] our lives, our belongings and on top of all: our dignity. I am currently working on becoming financially secure, so that I can reclaim some of my dignity and the ability to think about the future of my country”. Despite the current challenges, most of them are hopeful that there is still a chance to revive the democracy movement in Sudan and push it forward. Yet, this will need strong support from the international community. One of the interviewees stated that all forms of support should be extended to grassroots groups and resistance committees, in the same Sudanese political elites are being supported to engage in different discussions. They also warned that if the democracy movement in Sudan does not get supported to regain momentum as soon as possible, there is a great risk that it will get lost forever.

How the world failed Sudan’s democracy movement

Various scholars and analysts have continued to [argue](#) that the international community have failed Sudan and its democracy movement. There were numerous opportunities to empower the movement, and in some ways avoid the current war, but they were missed. This issue has happened again after the war, and it is demonstrated in the way policies have been enacted by the international community in response to Sudan’s war, as well as the way the war is being framed and narrated.

To look at the gaps and contrasts, one could look at the response to another recent war; the Russo-Ukrainian war. In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the international community was very vigorous and agile in enacting policies and taking action in support of Ukrainians in general, specifically, activists and civil society, and largely adhered to principles of human rights and humanitarianism. For instance, the European Union (EU) established a [Ukraine Facility](#), with a key pillar to support civil society and activists. The [Temporary Protection Directive](#) was activated to provide protection in the EU to displaced individuals from Ukraine. Additionally, the United Kingdom (UK) provided a range of support mechanisms for Ukrainian

people and activists, including [resettlement programs](#) and visa options for Ukrainians seeking refuge where around 300,000 visas have been issued for Ukrainians to leave their war-torn country.

In contrast, no such support was extended to Sudanese war survivors, civil society and activists. Many of Sudan's pro-democracy activists remain trapped in the crossfire with no safe routes out. Although Sudan has been a crucial partner in the [EU's migration policy](#) toward Africa and with speculations that EU funds might have ended up in the RSF pockets, the EU did not open any safe migration routes for Sudanese war survivors. Similarly, the UK did not provide support to Sudanese civilians and activists fleeing the war, despite UK activists [calling](#) on the government to recreate some of the Ukrainians' resettlement programs for Sudanese counterparts. When asked whether the UK government would set up routes for Sudanese asylum seekers, similar to the ones put in place for Ukrainians previously, the UK's Secretary of State for the Home Department [suggested](#) that the situation is "very different". Accordingly, the UK was [accused](#) of adopting a segregated immigration policy and operating and operating a "racist" refugee system.

The responses of the international community to the Ukraine War and the Sudanese war reveal stark differences in their approaches to accommodating war survivors, activists, and civil society. The Ukraine War has elicited more comprehensive and supportive policies, reflecting a commitment to human rights, humanitarianism, and democracy. In contrast, the Sudanese war has seen a more limited response, with a greater focus on conflict resolution and humanitarian aid. Neither Western countries nor other countries in the Arab and African regions have initiated programs to resettle Sudanese war survivors.

This divergence in the responses to the war in Ukraine and the war in Sudan highlights the differences in narratives and in the way each conflict is portrayed. The Ukraine war is being [framed](#) as a struggle for democracy and democratic values. The [narrative](#) is frequently dominated by democratic rhetoric and phrases like "defending democracy". Additionally, the international media worked to [humanize](#) Ukrainian refugees and ensured that populations across the world were aware of their plight, and even held to account governments who were too slow or inefficient in helping them. This has not been the case for the victims of the conflict in Sudan. Furthermore, Sudan's struggle for democracy is often overlooked and the democratic origins of Sudan's war are underrepresented in the current narrative and in the global discourse. It is true that Sudan has a complex history of civil wars and authoritarian rule. It is also true that

Sudan's current conflict started as a power struggle between the warring factions and neither of them is fighting for democracy. Nevertheless, this conflict cannot be separated from Sudan's long-standing struggle for democracy. In essence, this conflict is yet another crackdown on Sudan's civil politics and democracy movement. As one of the interviewed activists stated: "They [warring faction] are fighting two wars in parallel, one war is a power struggle between themselves, and another war where they are collectively fighting against us [democracy movement]. None of them want to see civilian democratic rule in Sudan".

The way forward: Revitalizing Sudan's democracy movement

Moving forward, there is a pressing need for the international community to prioritize supporting Sudan's pro-democracy actors and empowering them to play a key role in shaping the country's future. While Sudan's pro-democracy actors have diverted to responding to the humanitarian needs of citizens across Sudan, they would benefit greatly from support that would help them revive the democratization agenda. Activists are in crucial need for resettlement, financial support, and capacity-building programs. This support would allow them to carry out their activities effectively and make meaningful contributions to nation-building activities and political processes. Additionally, there is a need to engage Sudan's democracy activists in the prospective political process, to give them space to advocate for their demands.

Sudan's ongoing war is a critical juncture for the country's democratic future. Hence, it is crucial to mainstream the democratization agenda and to adopt a more nuanced and equitable approach to addressing the democratic aspirations of the nation. It is evident that sustainable peace in Sudan cannot be sought without a democratic governance system that would deliver justice and accountability. Therefore, Sudan's democracy movement must be revitalized and supported.

[1] Identities of those interviewed are not published to protect their safety. Interviewed activists are members of resistance committees and/or civil society organizations. 1 is displaced within Khartoum, 2 fled to other cities (Wad Medani and Port Sudan), and 4 fled to other countries (Egypt, Kenya, Uganda, and France).