

## Position Paper

### Sudan: Security Crackdown Puts Dialogue at Risk

*This paper was originally written in Arabic by: Al Jazeera Center for Studies*

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**Sadiq al-Mahdi's recent arrest by the Sudanese government puts national dialogue initiative at risk [Reuters]**

### Abstract

Arrests of leading opposition figures, including Sadiq al-Mahdi, head of the National Ummah Party and imam of the Ansar sect, and Ibrahim Sheikh, chair of the Sudanese Congress Party, have cast doubt on current transformations in the Sudanese political landscape. The government recently resumed restrictions on press freedoms and suspended the newly launched al-Saiha newspaper which had waged a widely-publicised media campaign after exposing extensive corruption in government agencies. Perhaps the most important development casting doubt on the political landscape is the expanding pivotal role played by security forces and the National Intelligence Service in politics and the military. These incidents raise questions about the government's commitment to change and further complicate the country's political landscape. The likely repercussions may be a paper reshuffle in the political game, with a reshaped balance of power as an alternative to escalation during a time the public is hoping the Sudanese National Dialogue Initiative will succeed.

### Introduction

Sudan has recently witnessed a series of political and military developments which have added greater complexity to an already convoluted situation. The likely repercussions include reshuffled priorities in the political game and a reshaped balance of power according to a new agenda. Should either happen, it will be in the context of a public hopeful for the success of the Sudanese National Dialogue Initiative, launched by

President Omar al-Bashir in January when he called on civilian and military opposition forces to join the quest to end the country's crisis.

Among the most important developments that cast doubt on the ongoing transformations in the Sudanese political arena are the government's arrests of leading opposition figures, including Sadiq al-Mahdi, head of the National Umma Party and imam of the Ansar sect, and Ibrahim Sheikh, chair of the Sudanese Congress Party. The government also recently resumed restrictions on press freedoms and suspended the new al-Saiha newspaper which had resonated with the public by exposing extensive corruption in sensitive government agencies. Perhaps the most significant development is the expansion of the pivotal role played by security forces and the National Intelligence Service in politics and the military. This paper discusses the implications of these developments on dialogue and possible future scenarios.

### **Silencing the moderate opposition**

Al-Mahdi's arrest was surprising and significant in the Sudanese polity. It is contrary to the path of recent political developments in the country since Bashir's call for all parties in the Sudanese conflict to agree on new rules to compete for power and compromise on the new constitution to be drafted by all Sudanese parties before a general election.

Leftist and liberal parties snubbed the president's invitation and instead demanded the implementation of interim measures to create an atmosphere of dialogue, including abolishment of laws that restrict freedoms and the formation of a transitional government. Armed opposition movements refused to join the initiative; however, al-Mahdi, leader of the opposition Umma Party, was one of the prominent leaders who responded to Bashir's call without preconditions, even prompting an outcry from within his own party by the secretary general, Ibrahim al-Ameen. Al-Mahdi consequently dismissed al-Ameen from his position.

Even after all of this, the security apparatus unexpectedly issued a statement announcing al-Mahdi's indictment, charging him with undermining the state's prestige, discrediting regime forces, threatening public peace and inciting the international community against Sudan. Security announced it had filed a criminal case with the state's security prosecutor against al-Mahdi under provisions that criminalise publication of material causing complaints among government forces, the dissemination of false information, breach of public peace and public defamation.

According to the prosecution's memorandum, the charges included "giving false, unfair and abusive information" in a press statement about the security apparatus' Rapid Support Forces (RSF). It said al-Mahdi had accused the forces of "committing war crimes in villages, rape, looting, recruiting non-Sudanese to fight and operating outside the

scope of regular forces". The security agency considered this "deliberate and intentional abuse of the state, a detraction from its prestige and a threat to the country's public peace".

Al-Mahdi issued a statement rejecting the accusations against him as false and said he would stand by his demand for a fair investigation in Darfur and in the country's south. "I am ready for fair accountability in which the complainant is not both the judge and the jury. I demand a fair and public trial with a guaranteed right of defence undertaken by every person of national, righteous, and vibrant conscience. The issue is not personal nor partisan, but national", he said.

Soon thereafter, the situation escalated and al-Mahdi was questioned by the State Security Prosecution and released on personal recognizance until the trial. He again criticised the security apparatus, resulting in two further charges carrying the death penalty and a second arrest. The authorities insist the case against al-Mahdi is purely legal; however, they have also failed to remain silent and allow justice to take its course. They allowed Mohammed Hamdan Hemeti, RSF's controversial commander, to attack al-Mahdi, and there have been frequent statements by government officials and the ruling party to justify the move, with some representatives of the ruling National Conference going so far as to accuse al-Mahdi of treason.

Observers have been intrigued by these events because the criticisms advanced by al-Mahdi, while controversial, were not sufficient to justify such severe punitive measures, especially considering that the former governor of North Kordofan, Ahmed Haroun, made similar accusations against these government troops. Haroun had asked for their departure from his province following atrocities which angered citizens who protested against the troops. Similar charges were also mentioned by deputies in parliament and by the head of UNAMID (African Union-UN Hybrid Mission in Darfur). Newspapers even criticised these forces when they were under the direct control of the security apparatus.

This leaves the question of why these forces have suddenly become untouchable and why authorities chose to test this new position on al-Mahdi even though the manner of his arrest would be a major blow to the already faltering dialogue initiative, one that was significantly bolstered by his participation. There is also the question of why authorities were willing to embarrass al-Mahdi, who has displayed only peaceful opposition towards the regime. Furthermore, his eldest son, Abdul Rahman, is Assistant President of the Republic while his other son works as an officer in the security apparatus.

## Iron fist

Key to reading these developments is the Rapid Support Forces' (RSF) role. Its roots date back to Arab tribal militias formed at the beginning of the 2003 Darfur civil war. These forces played a pivotal role in supporting government forces during the racially-charged civil war against rebel armed movements of tribes of African origin. The widespread abuses and serious violations of human rights in that war led to international intervention and the UN Security Council referred the matter to the International Criminal Court in 2005. The court issued an indictment against Bashir and the minister of defence, General Abdul Rahim Hussein. International pressure led the government to try to distance itself from these militias, known as "Janjaweed", by integrating them into the armed forces as "border guards". However, these forces continued their controversial practices, operating beyond the army's control and discipline, increasing the government's embarrassment and forcing it to dissociate from these militias. Militia leaders resented the government's position and saw it as repudiation of their role and services in support of the regime. They then forged alliances with former enemies of the armed movements. In this manner, Sheikh Musa Hilal, leader of the Mahameed tribe, controlled large parts of North Darfur state. He defied local government authorities while still attempting to retain links with the national government, considering himself an advocate of reform in the ruling party.

With the government's increasing need for fighters in light of widening insecurity in Darfur and the new south of the country, and the decline in the armed forces' ability to recruit members, it was inevitable the government would return to using these militias. The military establishment's leaders refused to repeat the previous experience because of the negative consequences. This led security and intelligence forces to assume that task and include those militias in their operations under the leadership of Salah Abdullah Mshar despite the fact that armed forces regarded this as interference in their combat duties and felt the security apparatus was overreaching its role of collecting and analysing information.

The security apparatus, leveraging the regime's urgent need for combat troops, was able to annex these militias into its ranks. Militia leaders were given military ranks and the troops were formed under the name of Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Brigadier Mohammed Hemeti. Their number is estimated at about 10,000 fighters characterised by their swift movement. They operate from Darfur to South Kordofan, but have not deviated from their past abuses and human rights violations.

The most prominent development in the history of these forces is their movement from conflict zones into the capital, Khartoum, where they have become active players in the political landscape. This role emerged for the first time during the September 2013 protests when authorities responded with unprecedented violence, killing 200



demonstrators. Recent developments prove the RSF has become a powerful force on which the regime depends for imposing control. Army and police silence raise questions about their position towards this issue. The concentrated media focus posits this new force as a safety valve for the regime in its battles against the rebels in the provinces and against opponents in the capital.

### **Future tracks: possible scenarios**

These rapid developments have created an environment that could result in any one of the following scenarios:

#### **1. Game of militancy and escalation**

The likelihood dialogue will succeed has declined after the serious damage caused by al-Mahdi and Sheikh's arrests and by restrictions on freedom of the press. Although al-Mahdi declared from prison that he maintained his commitment to the dialogue, his party has adopted an aggressive tone, calling for the overthrow of the regime and ignoring its former stance that called for consensus on an alternative regime. Indeed, the Umma party is attempting to reach an agreement with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) which is locked in a war against the Sudanese government. In a joint statement, the two groups called for a united front of the forces of change to restore democracy in accordance with international conventions of human rights, achieving just and comprehensive peace, justice in the division of power and wealth, and equal citizenship without discrimination. This would contribute to the formation of a broad front against the regime in Khartoum. Moreover, these arrests have fatally damaged the government's credibility, which was already shaky in the view of groups that had boycotted the dialogue. It also embarrassed the Popular Congress Party led by Hassan al-Turabi, which had tried to convince everyone of Bashir's sincerity in the quest for national reconciliation. Therefore, the dialogue initiative no longer has momentum as the only political game in Sudan.

This failure of the dialogue will cause the regime to abandon its attempt to retain power through the dialogue initiative. It will now have to return to using force as the major means to achieve and reinforce its goal of maintaining power. In real terms, there has been promotion of the RSF and legitimisation of their presence and role within the capital, with three of their brigades deployed to Khartoum. This scenario includes the facade of continuing with the dialogue initiative in order to buy time and access to the elections next year.

Should this happen, there will likely be new alliances between parties that do not necessarily agree on goals but are pushed together by the regime's intransigence. The current opposition alliance has suffered from division because of the al-Mahdi's refusal to

overthrow the regime by force. This position was not properly appreciated by the government and has pushed his party to now adopt an option that was previously rejected. Thus, the position of the revolutionary front, including the armed opposition coalition, will be enhanced and could lead to armed confrontation in the capital.

## **2. Popular uprising**

The state of tension and stalemate on the political horizon, the prolonged deterioration of economic conditions that are not prioritised in the government agenda, the high unemployment rate among young people who make up the majority of the population and the fading hopes of reaching a peaceful settlement for the ongoing Sudanese crisis may all lead to a popular uprising similar to protests that occurred twice during the past two years. However, it is not expected that authorities will succeed in suppressing such an uprising by force this time, in light of the increased likelihood of armed opposition intervention to support the scenario of a “protected uprising”.

This makes Sudan vulnerable to an escalated civil war that moves the conflict zone from peripheral areas across the country to the centre of power in Khartoum.

## **3. Military intervention**

This scenario depends on the reaction of the military establishment to recent developments. The possible consequences are alarming as they may embroil Sudan in a state of total chaos and prolonged war. In particular, the RSF's new role has raised questions about the extent of the scaling down of the role and influence of the armed forces, depicting them as incapable of performing their duties, and prompting the call to replace them with other forces. Thus, it is possible that a military intervention could occur under conditions that include a popular uprising and receiving external support.

## **4. Continuation of dialogue**

This scenario depends on the ability of those individuals and groups who are betting on the dialogue to tilt the balance of power to their advantage. There are a number of factors that support this track. Al-Mahdi himself – from his prison cell – clings to the path of dialogue. Hassan al-Turabi's Popular Congress Party also insists that the dialogue process can be a success, and even parties that had suspended their participation in it have expressed willingness to participate again if the authorities release al-Mahdi. This scenario is further strengthened by the support it receives from influential international powers such as the US and Britain.

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