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Sudan's Power-Sharing Agreement: Towards Transition or a Game of Tajility?

→ Magdi El-Gizouli



Deputy Chairman of the Transitional Military Council in Sudan Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka Himeidti (R) and leader of the opposition movement Alliance for Freedom and Change Ahmad al-Rabie shake hands after signing a power-sharing agreement, in Khartoum, 17 July 2019. © EPA



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One particularly original Sudanese contribution to the political dictionary is the term “tajility”, a refashioning of the Arabic “tajil” meaning delay. The term was coined by Sudan’s colonial rulers to describe the art of prevarication and procrastination emblematic of Sudan’s elite politics. Depending on one’s perspective, “tajility” could be interpreted as a sly strategy to elude confrontation and allow the heavy-weight of the status quo to mould angry souls into compromise, or as the favoured political manoeuvring of an avaricious political class that rarely honours an agreement.

Regardless, tajility won the day on 17 July 2019 when the two main contenders of the post-Bashir dispensation, the ruling Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a wide alliance of political parties and professional associations, formally signed the broad outlines of a power-sharing deal that is supposed to govern a three years and three months transition towards elected government. The optics of the agreement are possibly more instructive than its content.

On behalf of the TMC came forward Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Daglo (aka Himeidti), the commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) while the FFC seconded Ahmed al-Rabie, a physics teacher and activist of the Sudan Professionals Association (SPA). The two men faced the cameras with glum faces to exchange a handshake after signing the document while the two mediators, the African Union’s Mohamed Al-Hassan Labbad and the Ethiopian envoy Mahmoud Direr, stood behind them clapping. Direr shed a tear or two to mark the emotional moment and the pro-Himeidti press said the RSF commander did the same. Behind the scenes were representatives of the powerful forces jostling to dictate the future of Sudan, the US envoy Donald Booth, who had met the TMC chairman Burhan a day before, UK and EU diplomats and the Emirati and Saudi ambassadors busy whispering to all sides.

Both Himeidti and al-Rabie are outsiders to Sudan’s political establishment proper. Himeidti is the commander of the formidable private militia that grew out of Khartoum’s counter-insurgency campaign on the cheap in Darfur and the SPA’s al-Rabie is a brave activist but a politician by circumstance without a political party to underwrite his adventure into the halls of power.



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Jubilations followed the signing of the power-sharing document, but as Himeidti headed out of the spacious hall in Khartoum’s Corinthia Hotel, the egg-shaped structure that dominates the city’s skyline where the last lap of negotiations took place, some among the press corps shouted “madaniyya” (Arabic for civilian) at his back. For months now, “madaniyya” has been the slogan of the protest movement that forced Sudan’s military and security bosses to oust President Bashir in a palace coup on 11 April and snatch power under the title of the TMC. Since then, the TMC and the protest movement spearheaded by the SPA and its allies in the umbrella FFC have been locked in a tug of wills over the nature of the post-Bashir era.

The protesters who dominate the streets and have guaranteed the FFC its position at the negotiation table with their lives, distilled the complexity of Sudan’s political scene into a primary demand for civilian over military rule. Expectedly, many were aghast to see their champions compromise on their main demand of civilian government and agree to an accommodation with the TMC and its strongman Himeidti. It was the same generals who just weeks ago ordered the violent dispersal of the massive sit-in around the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) headquarters on 3 June, for months a Mecca of emancipatory demands, urban creativity, and citizens’ solidarity, brutally killing over a hundred protesters. To address the grievances of the protesters, the deal offered a committee of investigation with the possibility of drawing on regional African support but no concrete procedure of accountability.

The 17 July document dubbed “The Political Agreement on the Formations of the Structures and the Institutions of Government in the Transitional Period between the Transitional Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change” fails to resolve key issues and in some ways it is easier to highlight what it lacks than what it includes, but to define it by its omissions risks becoming a normative judgment about its worth – when it is still too early to pronounce a final judgment. Besides lofty pronouncements regarding goodwill, a spirit of cooperation and commitment to dialogue, the deal provides for three main structures of government: a sovereign council, a council of ministers and a legislative council. In addition, it sketches the issues and duties to be tackled by the transitional authorities.

The sovereign council, a recreation of the all-powerful presidency minus Bashir, is



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to be composed of 11 members, five from the military to be chosen by the TMC and five civilians from the FFC in addition to an 11th civilian member to be agreed on by the two sides. Chairmanship of this body shall be in the hands of the military for the first 21 months after the signing of the deal while a civilian member shall assume the position in the remaining 18 months of the transitional period. The FFC shall nominate a prime minister and a maximum of twenty cabinet ministers barring the ministers of defence and interior who will be appointed by the military members of the sovereign council. The sovereign council, however, retains the authority to endorse the FFC's nominees.

This power-sharing formula basically encapsulates the content of the deal, islands of principal understanding in a sea of unknowns. The basic skeleton of the arrangement had been in place since late June and corresponds largely to the proposal put forward by Sudan's business moguls by way of backdoor mediation in the immediate aftermath of the 3 June massacre. Opaque and unsettled remain the prerogatives and authorities of the sovereign council and the cabinet and their decision-making procedures within and between them. Further, the composition of the legislature and its functions, which the TMC chairman Burhan had declared had no business legislating since it is an unelected body of representatives, remains a bone of contention. The agreement spells out to the FFC's demand of a two-third share of the house and the TMC unwillingness to abide thereby.

The unknowns of the Corinthia deal, its actual flesh, were surrendered to the traditional rationale of "tajility" and kicked forward to be negotiated in a future "constitutional declaration". The two sides initially announced Friday 19 July as their deadline for a final act. The FFC, shaken to the core by divisions over the document it just signed, has considerable homework to tend to in this brief eternity of political time. The Communist Party and its partners in the National Consensus Forces (NCF) had declared their rejection of the deal before it was actually signed and have since launched a barrage of spiteful accusations against their FFC allies. The Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), an umbrella of armed movements, which had been engaged with FFC representatives in talks in Addis Ababa, parallel to the Corinthia negotiations, seemed to be deeply disappointed and accused the FFC of replaying the standard Khartoum record of excluding Sudan's peripheries when political benefits are ripe for the pick. I thought I saw a



tear or two in their lonely press conference in Addis Ababa.

Much more significant is the discord and disillusion in the “neighbourhood resistance committees”, the novel and wildly successful organizational formula devised by Sudan’s protesters who continue to face the deadly wrath of the security establishment. While talks proceeded in the Corinthia Hotel, protesters in al-Suki, al-Diein and elsewhere were dodging bullets, not always successfully. Some committees announced the Corinthia accommodation a counter-revolutionary blow and affirmed their commitment to continue struggling for true “madaniyya”. Others argued that it was a first step in the right direction, words taken right out of Himeidti’s mouth. The greater of cynics said Bashir was glimpsed waving his trademark stick to the FFC-redux crowd that assembled on 18 July to celebrate the Corinthia deal in Khartoum’s Green Square, aptly renamed Freedom Square.

Ultimately, time will tell if the Corinthia deal was truly a step in the right direction or just another chapter in Sudan’s longstanding tradition of tajiility.



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