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The Tragedy of Transition in Ethiopia and Sudan

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One of the great African tragedies of the past decade has been the collapse of the twin political transitions in Ethiopia and Sudan. Between 2018 and 2019, the Horn of Africa's two largest states witnessed the fall of entrenched autocratic orders, as mass protests—animated by deep-seated political and economic grievances—swept incumbents out of power. Despite the immense challenges that lay ahead, this was a euphoric moment for a region that, with some exceptions, had labored under decades of repression, exclusion, and violence. But the Horn's “Spring” would soon play out much like its Arab predecessor, descending into brutal armed conflicts and resurgent autocracy.

The tale of what happened in Ethiopia and Sudan is complex. To be sure, these were two very different transitions, encumbered by their own distinct historical inheritances and dynamics. Relative to Ethiopia, Sudan had a greater, albeit checkered, history of democracy in practice, including several periods of democratic rule, a vigorous trade union movement, and resilient civilian political parties. Sudan's transition upended the existing constitutional framework in favor of transitional structures; in Ethiopia, there was less of an institutional vacuum, with the transition remaining nominally anchored in the country's 1995 federal constitution, which organized the country into nine ethnic states.

At the time of transition, Ethiopia was considered the pillar of regional order in the Horn of

Africa, while Sudan was struggling to escape international isolation. And in Ethiopia, transitional dynamics were shaped by the singular force of one man, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, whereas no equivalent existed in the Sudanese context.

But the Ethiopian and Sudanese transitions were also part of the same story. Both transitions were top-down processes driven by segments of the old regime; alternative forces were too divided to compel more inclusive outcomes. Ethiopia and Sudan were also victims of similar regional and international dynamics: some external actors intervened in ways that drove conflict and authoritarian retrenchment; others failed to take decisive steps that could have prevented the slide. And both transitions were highly interdependent, with turmoil and collapse in one case reinforcing crises in the other.

TRANSITIONAL ITINERARIES

The Ethiopian and Sudanese transitions unfolded at roughly the same time, though Sudan's transition began slightly later and its key turning points tended to follow those in Ethiopia. Ethiopia's transition was initiated by the ruling party's selection of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister in March 2018, which occurred in the context of popular protests that the outgoing prime minister—Hailemariam Dessalegn—was unable to contain. Abiy initially assumed a reformist posture, moving to liberalize the country's politics, gesture at market reforms, and end Ethiopia's long hostility with neighboring Eritrea. These measures and others were greeted with popular euphoria—“Abiymania” as it was called at the time—and earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019.

Yet the transition soon began to unravel. Escalating power struggles, with distinct ethnic

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dimensions, led to a sharp decline in security across the country. Key events included the Guji–Gedeo conflict of 2018–19, which displaced an estimated 1 million-plus Ethiopians; the start of a rebellion by the formerly exiled Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in 2019; the June 2019 assassinations of the president of the Amhara region and other key officials, including the country's highest-ranking military officer, General Seare Mekonnen; and ethnic riots that followed the assassination of Oromo musician Hachalu Hundessa in late June 2020.

The coup de grâce came in November 2022, when open conflict broke out between federal authorities and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)—the formerly dominant wing of the old ruling coalition, which administered the Tigray region. The resulting civil war killed an estimated 600,000 people and threatened to cause the total collapse of the Ethiopian state. Brutal tactics were deployed by both sides, including extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, forced displacement, and humanitarian blockades.

A peace agreement between the TPLF and Abiy's government was signed in November 2022 in Pretoria, South Africa, ending the worst of the violence, but key provisions have yet to be implemented. The deal failed to address the OLA insurgency, which continued unabated, and triggered another rebellion by the Fano Amhara militia. As insecurity worsened, political space across the country closed. The ruling party implausibly secured over 90 percent of parliamentary seats in the 2021 general election. Opposition parties and civil society have been harried and coerced.

Sudan's transitional itinerary began with the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir by his own security apparatus in April 2019. As in the Ethiopian case, this move occurred in the context of anti-government protests that the regime had found difficult to suppress. The legitimacy of the military council that replaced Bashir was challenged by the protesters, who remained mobilized and demanded a transfer of power to a civilian apparatus. The resulting crisis came to a head in early June 2019, when security forces rampaged through a civilian sit-in outside military headquarters, killing over 100 pro-democracy protesters in what became known as the Khartoum Massacre. Security forces also launched assaults on hospitals and clinics that were treating the wounded.

With the country spiraling, African Union and Ethiopian negotiators brokered an end to the impasse in August 2019. The effort was backed

by the United States and other Western partners. The resulting agreement created a civilian-military power-sharing arrangement that would oversee a 39-month transition to an elected government. But the entire endeavor was hamstrung from the start, with the military blocking pursuit of the political and economic reforms necessary for a full democratic transition. Economic difficulties—including catastrophic levels of inflation—and new waves of violence in peripheries like Darfur added to the sense of national drift. In October 2021, the military launched a coup against the transitional authority, disbanding its structures and arresting its civilian members.

In the aftermath of the putsch, civil disobedience proliferated in the form of protests and strikes. When security crackdowns failed to contain the unrest, the military was forced to strike a preliminary framework agreement with civilian leaders in December 2022. The pact called for the generals to relinquish much of their political power. But that arrangement accentuated divisions within the security apparatus, between Sudan's professional army and the militia known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Clashes in mid-April 2023 in Khartoum and at bases in the north precipitated a brutal war between the army and the RSF that has yet to be halted. As in Ethiopia, the human toll of the transition's descent into full-blown conflict has been horrific, with over 150,000 killed and nearly 11 million displaced—the largest displacement crisis in the world today.

STRUCTURAL DEFECTS

The collapse of the Ethiopian and Sudanese transitions was partly due to structural defects they shared. Both were top-down affairs managed by fractious elements of the old regimes, which placed the reins of transition in the hands of actors who had little interest in genuine political reform and whose own rivalries would prove destabilizing. To make matters worse, alternative political forces that could have compelled more inclusive outcomes were too divided to play such a role.

Abiy himself was a member of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF). His emergence as prime minister was backed by its insurgent Oromo and Amhara wings, who leveraged civil unrest and Dessalegn's resignation to engineer a takeover of the prime minister's office through intraparty elections in 2018. Upon taking office, Abiy's primary goal was not so much democratic transformation as it was wresting

control of the ruling party and the state from the previously dominant Tigrayan faction, the TPLF. Abiy's career trajectory had been molded by the EPRDF's authoritarian political culture—long enforced by the TPLF's heavy hand. Abiy is also known to view his leadership in singular and messianic terms.

During the “transition,” Abiy aggressively worked to consolidate power. Many of his early liberalizing reforms were designed to build the popular support necessary to accomplish this task. But the power-consolidation effort eventually provoked resistance, sharpening personal, ethnic, ideological, and economic tensions within the ruling party.

The contestation between Abiy and the TPLF rapidly escalated, driving the latter to exit the ruling party in December 2019 and retreat to Tigray, where it remained openly defiant. There was also a major rupture between Abiy and some of the Oromo elements of the party that had brought him to power, a break most clearly signaled by the removal of Lemma Megersa as defense minister in August 2019. Amhara segments of the ruling coalition grew similarly disaffected, concerned by the perceived pro-Oromo orientation of the prime minister's agenda—Abiy is himself an Oromo—and the growing military and economic power of the Oromo elite that remained loyal to him. Together, these dynamics drove much of the violence that would grip the transition and send the country into a tailspin.

Acrimony between Abiy and political groups outside the ruling party also contributed to widening instability. A critical turning point came in the summer of 2020, during the deadly riots following Hachalu Hundessa's murder. Leading politicians like Jawar Mohammed and thousands of others were arrested by security forces. In Oromia, the crackdown had the effect of pushing many youths into the arms of militias, including the growing OLA. Government critics insisted that widening tensions required an inclusive national dialogue to establish a consensus on a “road map” for transitioning to a new, more democratic political settlement. But Abiy rejected this call, interpreting it as an effort to create transitional structures that would diminish his authority.

This rising tide of opposition was hamstrung by a lack of cohesion. Ethiopian politics has long revolved around a three-way rivalry among the

Oromo, Amhara, and Tigrayans. These groups have historically competed over political and economic power. They hold different assessments of the country's history, and divergent ideological convictions about the proper structure of the Ethiopian state. Rather than work together to force Abiy and his camp into the kind of pacted transition that could have stabilized a deteriorating national situation—with negotiated bargains on the path to elections, constitutional reform, security sector reorganization, and a host of other divisive issues—they feuded and allowed themselves to be divided.

Powerful groups like the National Movement for Amhara were unable to make common cause with Oromo actors like Jawar Mohammed, the Oromo Liberation Front, and the Oromo Federalist Congress. When the TPLF was in open rebellion in 2021, it struck a tactical alliance with the OLA, but that arrangement was short-lived. The federal government effectively mobilized a broad cross-section of Amhara society to wage war against the TPLF, leaving the powerful northern highlands, which

had been the fulcrum in the emergence of the modern Ethiopian state, deeply polarized along ethnic lines.

Sudan's transition suffered from similar challenges. The generals that had ousted Bashir in the context of wide-

spread protests had little intention of ceding power to a genuine civilian-led transition. Their willingness to accept the arrests of senior Bashir-era officials and the abolition of the ruling National Congress Party in November 2019 was an offering to the pro-democracy protests that masked their real interests. The security apparatus was embedded across the country's political economy, and it was keen to protect its interests in sectors like agriculture, banking, medical imports, and minerals. The generals also feared accountability for past abuses, concerns that no doubt grew after their role in the June 2019 Khartoum Massacre.

Sudanese transitional structures granted the recalcitrant security sector ample opportunity to thwart movement toward democratic governance. The executive function of the transitional government rested with a Sovereign Council, evenly divided between military and civilian members, but the presidency was occupied for the first 21 months by the chief of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. The defense ministry remained in the hands of the generals,

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leaving them in control of the country's vast security and intelligence network. From these perches, they consistently used the formal and informal powers of the security apparatus to obstruct many of the political and economic reforms pursued by the technocratic cabinet of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok—which ranked below the Sovereign Council—including the critical task of transferring national economic assets to civilian control.

The military also worked behind the scenes to foment violence and instability in Sudan's periphery, notably in Darfur in the spring of 2021 and when SAF-allied tribal leaders blockaded Port Sudan in September and October of that year. The generals operated a shadow foreign policy that served their narrow interests, ignoring the civilian-controlled Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As the political stalemate deepened and economic conditions worsened, and as the mandated transfer of leadership of the Sovereign Council to civilians approached, the military launched its October 2021 coup. Its stated justification was the transitional government's impotence, which the generals themselves had ensured.

As in Ethiopia, divisions within Sudan's ruling elite exacerbated the country's transitional troubles. In coup-proofing his regime, Bashir had created several security organs to balance against his professional military. The most important was the RSF, a pro-state militia with origins in Darfur, established by decree in 2013 and headed by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti. The group had ignominious beginnings, emerging out of the Janjaweed militia that had been implicated in genocidal violence in Darfur.

The RSF and the SAF joined forces to topple Bashir, ending his three-decade reign. Their rivalry initially created space for the civilian protest movement to bargain for power-sharing concessions in the transitional structure. But rising tensions between the security forces soon complicated the picture.

A particular challenge was that both military factions—but particularly the SAF—worried that transitional reforms would have asymmetric impacts, increasing the power of one over the other. The backdrop to this concern was the accelerating military and financial ascent of the RSF during the transition. By 2020, it operated a multibillion-dollar transnational business empire that stretched from the Sahel to the Persian Gulf, allowing it to support a militia force of tens of thousands of soldiers.

The October 2021 coup worsened these fissures. Hemedti blamed the coup on the SAF, despite his own role as a co-conspirator. Tensions finally boiled over when efforts to reinstate a civilian-led transition in late 2022 bore fruit in the signing of a framework agreement between the military and civilian actors in December 2022. The agreement reflected the belief of many civilian stakeholders and international interlocutors that avoiding a repeat of the first transitional government's gridlock required merging Sudan's parallel security services. But the SAF and the RSF deadlocked on the terms of their integration and descended into war before a civilian administration could be reinstalled.

As the security apparatus undercut the transition, the divided civilian opposition provided no real counterbalance. The civilian bloc nominally coordinated through an umbrella structure called the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), but this was an ideologically diverse group whose membership constantly shifted. It included the relatively liberal Sudanese Professionals Association, which had played a key role in the protests; Arab nationalists like the Baathists; Communists and social democrats like the Congress Party; and relatively conservative legacy opposition parties, like the National Umma Party. Outside of, but aligned with, this formal political alliance was an unwieldy constellation of grassroots local resistance committees, which had organized and sustained the protests that were at the heart of civilian power.

The disparate agendas of these groups often mapped onto strategic differences about how to confront the military's obstructionism. This was further complicated by the inclusion of armed opposition groups from Sudan's periphery in the FFC and the transitional government. (Their inclusion in the latter was made possible by the Juba Peace Agreement of October 2020.) A year later, these armed groups chose to back the military's October 2021 coup against their own FFC partners.

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DYNAMICS

Transitional dynamics in Ethiopia were shaped by external interventions. Abiy's power consolidation project, which fueled destabilizing internal conflicts, was enabled by material support from neighboring Eritrea and the United Arab Emirates. Asmara sought to leverage relations with Abiy against the TPLF, with which it had a feud dating back to the era when the Tigrayan party dominated the Ethiopian state. The 2018 peace agreement between Eritrea and Abiy's government

facilitated this approach. From that point on, Asmara encouraged Abiy to deal muscularly with the TPLF and deter its efforts to recoup lost influence across Ethiopia. When federal authorities and the TPLF went to war in November 2020, Eritrean strongman President Isaias Afwerki jumped into the fray with vigor, sending almost half his army across the border into Tigray with the aim of eradicating the TPLF.

The UAE's support for Abiy was anchored in his personal friendship with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed. One of Abiy's first overseas trips as prime minister was to the UAE, and just two months into his tenure Ethiopia received \$3 billion in Emirati aid and investment. Off-the-books political, financial, and security assistance soon followed, allowing the new leader to develop security structures that provided alternatives to the army and intelligence services still connected to the TPLF. Then, during the early phase of the Tigray war, the UAE deployed drones to back the government's early offensive. When TPLF and OLA forces surged toward the capital, Addis Ababa, in the latter half of 2022, a UAE air bridge supplied federal authorities with armaments and drones that turned back the rebel offensive.

International actors that might have bridged the gap between Abiy and a widening constellation of domestic opponents largely failed to act until it was too late. Despite disagreements over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam—it was sympathetic to Egyptian concerns—the Trump administration viewed Abiy as a reformer who could elevate the US–Ethiopia strategic relationship. US policymakers encouraged the government's consolidation efforts and dismissed regime critics. When the Tigray war broke out, Washington gave Abiy strong diplomatic backing, going so far as to echo his rejection of a ceasefire.

Regional multilateral actors were similarly uninterested in serving as neutral brokers. The Horn's regional organization, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), had long been subject to Ethiopia's controlling influence; its executive secretary, a former Ethiopian foreign minister, was a political ally of Abiy. The African Union, led by South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, appointed three peace envoys two weeks into the Tigray conflict, but dropped the initiative when rebuffed by Ethiopian authorities. Not long after

that, AU Chairperson Mousa Faki further undercut the organization's position when he publicly characterized federal military action in Tigray as “legitimate.” With its headquarters in Addis Ababa, the AU has traditionally been wary of running afoul of its host nation.

To their credit, the United States and the AU eventually did change course. Upon taking office in early 2021, the Biden administration appointed a special envoy to mediate an end to the violence in Tigray. The AU followed suit, appointing another envoy, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. But the momentum of war meant that it took almost two years for the US and AU envoys to negotiate an end to the Tigray conflict. By that point, Ethiopia's transition had incurred irreparable damage.

External dynamics undercut Sudan's transition in eerily similar ways. Well before the outbreak of direct hostilities between the SAF and the RSF, they were backed by competing external actors: Egypt and Saudi Arabia supported the SAF, and the UAE sided with the RSF. This web of external patronage became more complicated as tensions heated up.

Neighboring Chad emerged as a chief conduit for Emirati military aid to the RSF, whereas Eritrea trained and supplied pro-SAF militia forces in eastern Sudan. Iran also entered the fray, providing the SAF with arms that allowed it to roll back RSF gains in eastern Sudan and regain ground in Khartoum. Russia played both sides of the SAF–RSF divide, initially leveraging the Wagner Group, the Kremlin-aligned mercenary force, to partner with the RSF in illicitly exploiting Sudanese gold mines, then pivoting its allegiance toward the SAF in 2024 to reinvigorate its bid for a Red Sea naval base and block expanding Ukrainian security ties to Sudan's professional army. This regionalization of Sudan's transition and civil war also intensified centrifugal forces within the civilian opposition.

As with Ethiopia, the United States and African multilateral organizations again failed to provide a counterbalance to the destabilizing interventions of regional authoritarians. At times, US policy seemed more concerned with pressing Khartoum to join the Abraham Accords and normalize diplomatic relations with Israel—which it did in January 2021—than with keeping a civilian-led transition to democracy on track. Washington also took too long to facilitate the flow of much-needed

Ethiopia and Sudan were victims of similar regional and international dynamics.

economic and development assistance, allowing deteriorating economic conditions to undercut Hamdok's government. In the name of pragmatism, US officials were too willing to accept the military's prominence in transitional structures, as well as the generals' insistence that the legacy United Nations peacekeeping mission in Darfur be terminated. Meanwhile, Washington failed to make a serious effort to rein in the interference of its Arab partners—an omission that had also been notable in the Ethiopian context.

The AU and IGAD approaches to Sudan were likewise beset by problems. Intra-African rivalries proved to be a severe challenge, particularly once the war began in April 2023. The SAF in July 2023 rejected IGAD's mediation quartet (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and South Sudan) under Kenyan leadership, citing Kenyan President William Ruto's perceived proximity to the RSF. Egypt then launched its own rival negotiation track, undercutting the IGAD effort. Where serious multilateral initiatives to stabilize Sudan emerged—the Jeddah process, for instance—the United States and the very Arab states fueling the Sudanese conflagration were in the driver's seat. Unsurprisingly, these talks have failed to stop the war and rehabilitate Sudan's transition.

NEGATIVE INTERDEPENDENCIES

The transitional failures in Ethiopia and Sudan fed into and reinforced one another. Under better circumstances, Ethiopia and Sudan would have been well positioned to serve as mediating forces in each other's transitions. The two are among the largest countries in the Horn of Africa, share long land borders, and have an extended history of political, economic, and social interaction.

Ethiopia was the region's closest equivalent to a hegemon, and had experience playing the role of mediator in South Sudan and Somaliland, in addition to serving as a peacekeeper in the Sudans and Somalia. This is partly why Abiy's government was tapped to join the AU in brokering Sudan's power-sharing transitional government in 2019. For its part, Sudan lacked Ethiopia's regional standing, but its generals had good political and intelligence relations with the TPLF, the party whose

conflict with Abiy was at the center of so many of the Ethiopian transition's troubles.

As they both descended into transitional turmoil, however, each country lost the capacity to help stabilize its neighbor. Both were too distracted by their own internal crises to take the diplomatic initiative. International partners became unwilling to treat either Addis or Khartoum as a credible regional interlocutor. A few months into the Tigray war, Abiy's international reputation had been badly tarnished, and SAF and RSF dominance of foreign policy made Sudan an unattractive conduit for Western engagement.

Transitional crises also pushed Ethiopia and Sudan into a diplomatic rupture on two issues: the Tigray war and the disputed border zone of Al Fashaga. In late 2020, Sudan's military resorted to escalating the Al Fashaga dispute to mobilize flagging public support. Abiy's fragile alliance with the Amhara—who live in Al Fashaga—required him to remain firm.

A second negative interdependency was that counterrevolutionary efforts in one context emboldened similar forces in the other, creating a vicious cycle of impunity from which neither country could escape. The failure of international actors to rein in Abiy's consolidation of power and reconcile his government with its fragmented opponents no doubt encouraged some of the worst excesses of Sudan's military. Human rights violations in Tigray, Oromia, and Amhara became a template used in Sudan, and vice versa. And the external actors that fueled transitional breakdown and violence in Ethiopia certainly learned lessons they could apply to their proxy interventions in Sudan.

How will the Horn of Africa's derailed twin transitions evolve from here? The road will be hard. Rehabilitating transitions to democracy is much more difficult than keeping them on track. Nor is there a clear path to overcoming the forces that have encumbered the Ethiopian and Sudanese transitions thus far: their structural defects, the tough international context, and negative cross-border interdependencies. But perhaps the passage of time, and the deep trauma of the present moment, will create an opportunity for reviving the magic and optimism of 2018–19. ■