

SLOW AND STEADY PROGRESS TOWARDS A NEW SUDAN

By Donnelly McClelland



Sudan's hard-won transition to civilian rule has fallen behind schedule just days after the new prime minister delayed the formation of the first government since veteran leader Omar al-Bashir was removed. Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, a seasoned United Nations economist who faces the daunting task of rescuing his country's moribund economy, was supposed to unveil a cabinet on Wednesday [28 August] under a post-Bashir plan. But he is still considering the candidates, causing a knock-on delay to the first meeting between the government and the joint civilian-military ruling body overseeing the transition which was supposed to have been held on Sunday [1 September]. **(AFP)**

Slow and steady progress

In recent days, there has been a collective 'sigh of relief' in Sudan after several months of political upheaval, protests and violence. The protests began in December 2018, saw the ouster of Omar al-Bashir in April (after a 30-year-long authoritarian rule) and continued until demands for democracy and civilian rule were met in August with the swearing-in of a joint civilian-military transitional council.

On 21 August, Sudan swore in the new ruling body to steer the country through a three-year transition period. Abdalla Hamdok, an economist and technocrat who worked for the African Development Bank and the UN Economic Commission for Africa, was sworn in as prime minister on the same day. The 11-member sovereign council includes two women (among six civilian appointees) and five military generals. Mr Hamdok said on Tuesday 27 August that he had received a list of candidates for the interim cabinet from the FFC (Forces for Freedom and Change), including 49 nominees for 14 ministries, and confirmed that selection would be based on "competence". Mr Hamdok is expected to select the majority of cabinet members, with key exceptions being the interior and defence ministers, who will be chosen by the military members of Sudan's ruling body. General Abdul Fattah Al Burhan (previous head of the Transitional Military Council) was also sworn in as the sovereign council's chairman for the first 21 months, after which a civilian leader appointed by the FFC will take over for the next 18 months. The landmark agreement also included a pledge to forge peace with armed groups within six months.

On Saturday 31 August, a Sudanese judge publicly questioned Omar al-Bashir for the first time since his overthrow and formally indicted him for corruption and possessing illicit foreign currency, charges the ousted leader challenged. His prosecution is seen as a test of how far the new military and civilian authorities will go to counter the legacy of his 30-year rule. He is also charged with the killing of protesters during the April uprising, and the International Criminal Court has accused him of war crimes and genocide linked to the Darfur conflict in the 2000s.

Key challenges

Much progress has already been made in establishing an agreed way forward for Sudan's ruling authority until elections can be held. Some key challenges need to be addressed sooner rather than later, particularly with regard to lingering conflicts. Rebel groups from marginalised regions including the Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan states waged long wars against the government through the years, with hundreds of thousands killed and millions displaced. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese are still living in sprawling camps. Mr Hamdok has vowed to "end war and bring about sustainable peace" in Sudan.

The overthrow of the former government came at a time of extreme economic crisis, and these economic challenges have not disappeared, so economic recovery is also high on the agenda. Two decades of US sanctions (lifted in 2017), together with the 2011 secession of the oil-rich south, dealt devastating blows to Sudan's economy. Spiralling inflation and acute economic hardship were the main triggers for the anti-Bashir protests that erupted in December 2018. Much-needed foreign investment remains hampered by Sudan's designation by the US as a "state sponsor of

terrorism”, but Mr Hamdok indicated that he is holding talks with US officials to remove the country from Washington’s blacklist.

Promising signs

Despite the enormous challenges, Sudanese are eyeing the new government with cautious optimism. An initial promising sign has been the inclusion of two women to the transitional council, one of whom is a Coptic Christian. Sudan is also in the process of appointing the country’s first female Chief Justice, Nimaat Abdalla Mohamed Kheir. The representation raises expectations that women will be granted additional rights and minority groups of all types will be given a voice in a new Sudan.

In an interview with *Voice of America*, Raja Nicola Issa Abdul-Masseh, the Christian member of the sovereign council, said the process will be slow but the new leaders are determined. “We shall try to rebuild our country, we shall try to rebuild our economy, we shall begin to stop all the armed movements and work for peace and justice for all Sudanese on an equal basis regardless of race or religion or any political opinion or any affiliation,” she said. “What happened in 30 years cannot be rebuilt in three years. But we shall try our best to do whatever we could.” Some observers hope she can be a voice for the many ethnic and religious minorities who were persecuted under Bashir.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Christians are estimated to comprise about 4.6% of Sudan’s population of 43 million, according to the World Christian Database. Under Bashir, Christians faced persecution and harsh treatment. Open Doors ranks Sudan sixth in its list of nations where it is hardest to be a Christian. After South Sudan gained independence in 2011 – taking with it most of Sudan’s Christians – Bashir led a crackdown on those remaining in the country, with many churches burned and dozens of others demolished by the government as “unlicensed buildings”. No licences were granted for new churches after 2013.

On 10 April 2019, the day before the military arrested Bashir, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) called on Christians to take part in the protests, saying they had suffered “sectarian and psychological restrictions for years”. A few days later, several Protestant leaders began showing up at a sit-in outside the military headquarters, urging both Christians and Muslims to sing hymns and to maintain a peaceful protest. The decision to include a Christian woman in the ruling council could be viewed as a nod to the role Christians played in the protest movement.

The constitution adopted for the three-year transition notably omits Islam as one of the characteristics defining the state. That, and the wind of democratic change in Sudan, have given Christians and other minorities hope that religious plurality would be better protected in the future. “We hope there will be change. Christians were also in the protests, they had good reason ... I think the darkest days are over,” said Reverend Yousef Zamgila, a Lutheran pastor in Khartoum. Another church leader, Mata Boutros Komi, was equally upbeat: “At least now, our rulers are acknowledging Christians as part of this country. Christians have prayed for this change for decades, we are happy because this change has come.”

Ezekiel Kondo, the Anglican Bishop of Khartoum, also hopes the new administration will ease pressure on Christians, but argued that bringing peace to Sudan should take priority. “A document alone does not alleviate people's suffering. For this transition to work, peace has to happen. Then all the other important things will come more easily,” he said.

PRAY

- **For Sudan’s new leadership body as they build on what has been established and tackle the various national challenges**
- **For godly wisdom for believers in key leadership positions**
- **For the Church in Sudan in this new season, that they will seize the opportunities the Lord presents them, in order that His Kingdom may be advanced**

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