

Bakry Elmedni, Ph.D

Associate Professor at the Roosevelt School, Department of Public Health, Policy and Administration at Long Island University, New York. Spokesperson in the Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (Taqaddum), a major anti-war, civilian-led coalition fighting for peace, negotiated end to the conflict and democratic rule.

Tobias Schäfer-Sell (Ev.-luth. Mission in Lower Saxony (ELM), Office for International Church Cooperation, Hanover in Germany)

Prof. Bakry, this war now started in April 2023, almost 2 years ago, and it was preceded by other wars and military conflicts in the region. What is the current situation in Sudan?

This is not just a competition over who controls the government. It's actually a war about the legitimacy of the state. People don't see themselves represented in the states. And when they start asking questions about economic development, cultural representation, opportunities to succeed, usually the answer is guns. But the real questions that make people to feel angry remain unaddressed.

In Arabic, there is a confusion between the term ruling and governing because they have the same meaning, but sometimes they are quite different. You could rule by force, but you cannot govern without understanding the issues and try to address them. So we never had a governor, what we had in the history of Sudan are rulers; whether they were colonial or post-colonial, all of them are into just controlling, dominating and making sure that no one challenges the authority.

And then we got these two armies as strong as they are, they agreed to remove the civilian government, but they couldn't agree on who's going to be the head of the state power and wealth and they started fighting.

There is no region in Sudan that has not been touched by the war. At this point about 14 million people are displaced internally, about 4.5 million people fled to neighbouring countries like Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Chad and Egypt. According to OCHA about 30 million Sudanese people are in need of dire food assistance. The health care system collapsed. There are no functioning state institutions. And of course there is deep division along ethnic lines and along geography and class.

So as of today, I have to tell you the situation is horrible. There have been many attempts to have a ceasefire, but they all failed. And at this point both sides think the other side should cease to exist, which makes it hard to negotiate. Of course, on top of this, you got a lot of foreign intervention in the country.

It is such a huge crisis; hundred-thousands have died, millions have fled to neighbouring countries; why is the Sudan-Conflict not much discussed in Europe?

There are lots of reasons for that. Actually, the Sudan crisis is bigger than Gaza and Ukraine combined in terms of the impact, in terms of how many people are dying and suffering. But in the international global system, not all conflict are the same. It's about who's dying, their location, their geography, the colour of their skin.

Ukraine is closer to Europe. The Middle East conflict has been around since 1948, and you have a generational connection to it. Sudan unfortunately happens to be in Africa. So in the view of many westerners, it is another war in Africa. People don't even want to dig into it.

Also, there is competition for awareness and we all have limited capacities. You have to choose where to focus your attention. It makes you feel like there is not much you can do to change the reality. I think that's part of the emotional fatigue and also the complexity of the situation. We don't like when things become complicated. People want to be able to choose the "good side". Unfortunately, the only good is what Sudanese people are trying to do to survive.

You have argued that foreign powers are intervening in the conflict. What is the role of Germany?

I don't think there is any evidence to suggest that Germany is supporting any side. But Germany has a good relationship with Egypt and they are part of the conflict in Sudan. Germany has good relationship with Saudi Arabia and they are part of the conflict in Sudan.

Egypt, Germany and EU have very good ties to Qataris and to UAE and all of these countries, you are importing oil and gas from them. And all these countries are involved in Sudan by various degrees.

I don't know how much European countries are willing to take a tough position against allies, against their own economic interests. So I get it. It's a compromise.

Without the US negotiating among these countries before they decide what to do in Sudan, Sudan will never find peace and it will remain a place for war. It could easily become a conflict lasting many years because of regional division.

What is the role of Ethiopia and the Great Renaissance Dam / conflict on Nile water?

That is another strategic element because Ethiopia decided to build the dam. In 1959 you got an agreement between Sudan and Egypt to divide the Nile water. Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania were not consulted.

Sudan is probably not going to be as impacted as much as Egypt. But the Egyptians started to see it as a strategic existential question for them, and rightly so. Instead of finding a way forward using diplomatic powers, now the Egyptians started intervening by weakening Ethiopia.

In addition you got Eritrea and they feel the only way to become complete independent is if Ethiopia is weak. So you got these ally alliance in the region.

What is the current take of the AU on Sudan, how should they respond?

The African Union cannot mediate, there is nothing they can do about it. In terms of ceasefire, in terms of negotiating, they don't have the means, they don't have the desire, they don't have the technical capacity and they don't even have the political will to do it because they are being pulled in different directions.

What role does Religion play in the conflict?

Well, religion is a big part of it because the hardcore of the groups that are supporting Burhan that are aligning with Egypt to some extent are still the same Muslim brothers or offshoot of that. They still control the economy, the civic service and the police.

Christians as a minority are to be found in Nuba Mountain and some parts of Blue Nile. Christians in Nuwa Mountain have been bombarded, we have seen churches being destroyed and in Khartoum we have seen mosques being attacked. Whether this is intentional by one side or it is just a casualty to the war is something that needs to be investigated. But unlike CAR, where religion did play a major role in a brutal conflict, the dynamics of ethnicity and geography are stronger than religion at this point in driving the positionality of Sudanese people.

Humans are very good at creating reasons to hate and make somebody the other, you know, otherization. Now in the beginning they said these are militias, are not Sudanese, they are from other countries, it's very much about geography. This makes it easy to dominate and to mobilize people against each other. That's what's happening all over the world.

Do you see a chance for the opposition to gather under the motto "Unity for Peace"? What is hindering them?

We don't define ourselves as opposition because there is no recognized government in Sudan. We are peace actors and as civilians we never believe that the war is the answer. As the biggest organized coalition we are not supporting any side.

There are a lot of people who are against the war, but they are not organized in any way. So what we need at this point is to bring the largest non aligned civilians to speak with one voice against the war and agree on a minimum agenda that the war is not the answer, that Sudan should remain united, that we should not allow hate speech and the idea of otherization to be among us, that we believe in equal citizenship. We just need these basics.

The next step is to reach out to civilians who ended up taking sides because the civilians who are supporting sites are more entrenched than military, because there is so much anger and hate and assumptions.

Hopefully, when we get a humanitarian truce, the dynamic will shift and eventually anger will subside. Eventually you can start slowly bringing people together around a peace narrative: We understand your pain, we understand that you're angry, but anger is not going to get you an answer.

The challenge is, people don't see peace as what it means, they see it as a way of stopping them from getting revenge, and that's why many of them speak negative about us. On both sides we are at extreme levels of polarization. If you are not with me, you are against me. That's a mantra.

From other conflicts it has been learned, that peace cannot come without justice. What would a just peace in Sudan look like, what are the people of Sudan expecting? Is South Africa's path out of Apartheid a role model?

I think what we really need to negotiate is an approach for accountability which is a pillar of transitional justice. Those who committed crimes, those responsible for ethnic cleansing, war crimes, crime against humanity, they have to be responsible. For that we need a combination of local traditional systems, modern systems and maybe even the international court of justice.

But there is so much pain and all of that cannot be adjudicated in court. So we need at some point to come to a place where there has to be a transition towards truth and reconciliation. We have a big project of asking people what restorative justice looks like to them.

So in a way South Africa functions as a role model. When they had the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with Desmond Tutu. For that to happen you need wise leaders. At the moment, we don't have that kind of mindset, current leaders are talking about revenge. There are no De Klerks or Mandelas in Sudan.

We can also learn something from Rwanda, how they at some point brought people together and talked about restorative justice. We can learn something from Argentina. We can learn something from Chile. We can even learn something from Europe. But in the end I think Sudan is going to come up with its own project. Sudanese people have a history of talking about remedies and reconciliation on their own. In Darfur there is Rakuba, in eastern Sudan there is something called Galad, in central parts there is Judea. So we have these traditional models that we can amplify and in addition learn from other experiences.

But right now, I don't even know how to get there. We are now thinking about getting medicine and food to people so that at least they can survive. Right now, justice is to stop the killing. Step one.