

## The Blue Wave in Sudan: How India Rides the Tide?

*By Saira Banu*

The blue wave sweeping the Internet in solidarity with Sudan reflects the support of the international community following the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir after nearly four months of protests, and multiple deaths and casualties at the hands of the security forces. Bashir's rule of three decades was characterised by war and famine, multiple civil wars and the secession of South Sudan in 2011. His stint as the President of the vast nation of Sudan witnessed protests over the rise in prices of bread, among other grievances experienced by the people residing in the country. Elation that sprouted upon the removal of Bashir from rule quickly gave way to dismay and then frustration, upon learning that the military were to now helm the nation. This was accompanied by a two-year transitional period led by the military, immediate suspension of the Constitution and the imposition of curfews upon the state, followed by restricted Internet access.

Discussions among the civilian faction and the military were at a compromised tangent with dignitaries suggesting parity between the two sides in the presidential council and a third national security council whose reigns lay exclusively in the hands of the military. Negotiations between the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the civilian-led Sudanese Professional Associations (SPA) quickly came to a halt, culminating in the deadly protests on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, and a military ordered crackdown on civilians that left 120 people dead, with 40 bodies being retrieved from the Nile. There are unreported rapes, attacks on hospitals and multiple forms of restrictions including the shutdown of Internet. All these violations of basic human rights can be attributed to the TMC's deputy chairman 'Hemeti's' meeting with Saudi Arabian officials where he was heralded as the head of the state. Lt. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo aka 'Hemeti' heads the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) considered as the core of the Janjaweed that was responsible for the genocidal violence in Darfur. Members from the RSF were also deployed to fight the Saudi war in Yemen, thus establishing close ties with Saudi and Yemen leaders. The Saudi and the UAE's assistance to the TMC has been in the form of a \$3 billion aid package intended to "prop up Sudan's economy". Aiding the military was not merely by exercising their hard power, but also by using soft power with leading Emirati newspaper *Gulf News* characterising Hemeti as of 'Professional bearing', and operating with 'civility', and the UAE Foreign Affairs Minister Anwar Gargash defending the extended support by claiming it is to maintain stability in the region. The aftermath of widespread conflict in Sudan is the coming together of the ruling generals and protest organisers under the umbrella group Alliance for Freedom and Change. As of July 16, the two parties have agreed on a power-sharing agreement, one that may culminate in a civilian government after the mutually agreed upon period of 39 months.

In an international context, most African and Western nations have supported the protesters and the SPA, while Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to back the junta. The African Union had suspended Sudan over the military crackdown on June 7, and Ethiopia stepped up mediation efforts to bring an end to the crisis and pave the way for a civilian-led regime.

**What does this Mean for India?**

India-Sudan relations can be traced as far back as Nilotic and Indus Valley civilisation, with the Sudanese language containing traces of Prakrit. Sudan has an Indian diaspora of 1500 people settled in the country over the past 150 years. The first Sudanese parliamentary elections in 1953 were conducted by Sukumar Sen, India's former Chief Election Commissioner. Further gestures of camaraderie were subsequently displayed at the Bandung conference of 1955 where Sudan did not have a flag, and the then Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru fashioned a makeshift one out of his handkerchief for the Sudanese delegation. Bilateral relations with Sudan have always been thriving, with India having made a significant investment of \$1 billion in the oil industry and acquiring 25 per cent of shares of Sudan's biggest oil consortium, and a line of credit of \$100 billion has been granted. However, most of India's oil interests were concentrated in South Sudan, which became an independent state in 2011, thereby reducing the influence of Sudan. Indian interest in Sudan has grown significantly since the turn of the millennia, but the caveat of peace in the nation is vital to successfully address Indian interests. As per the Bank of Sudan statistics as of June 2018, India is the second largest exporter to Sudan. India primarily exports food stuff, petroleum products, manufactured goods, machinery and equipment, chemicals including pharmaceuticals and textiles, and imports gold, sesame seeds, gum, cotton, hides and skin from Sudan. A total bilateral trade of \$776.70 million was recorded in 2018, a figure that is indicative of the necessity of healthy trade relations between India and Sudan for both states. The largest thermal power plant in Sudan, the Kosti Thermal Power Plant, was built by Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited. Healthcare is another sphere of mutual cooperation between India and Sudan, where India offers capacity building programmes to Sudanese health professionals, and Sudanese patients approach India to avail medical treatment.

In this manner, India has established itself as a constant ally of Sudan and its progression. India is also renowned for being the world's largest democracy, but what do we make of her deafening silence in the wake of protests for democracy that were orchestrated in the very same manner through which India attained independence. It can be speculated that the international communities' heterogeneous approach to supporting either the oppressive junta or the democracy desiring civilians has left India unsure of a position to take. India's ties with GCC nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE are exceedingly important for the country, and in a scenario where they have extended their implicit support to the junta, fearing such a revolt in their own monarchies, India may be uneasy about extending support to the civilian faction supported by most Western liberal democracies. It is still early to predict the success of this power-sharing agreement, and the ensuing bilateral relations are still premature. However, considering India's interests in increasing engagement with the African subcontinent due to the expansion of its security interests, India needs to employ a strategic, holistic approach to peacekeeping. In this manner, the African Union's response, which was one of mediation and an attempt to restore civilian rule in Sudan, is one that aligns with India's interests in the region. Conflict prevention and mediation needs to be incorporated into India's foreign policy strategies, given its invested interests in Sudan, and the wellbeing of the Indian diaspora in the state.

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