



Event Report

Democratic Transition in Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities

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مركز دراسات النزاع والعمل الانساني
Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies

1. Summary

On Sunday, 31 July 2022, the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Doha hosted Mr. Khaled Omar Youssef, Minister of Cabinet Affairs in the former transitional government, a leader in Forces of Freedom and Change, and a member of the Political Bureau of the Sudanese Congress Party, in a lecture entitled: “Democratic Transition in Sudan: Challenges and Opportunities”. The lecture and discussion were moderated by Dr. Ghassan Elkahlout, Director of the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Doha.

The lecture began with an opening speech by Dr. Ghassan Elkahlout, and introductory remarks about the speaker and the topic of the lecture. This was followed by the lecture delivered by Mr. Khaled Omar Youssef, who discussed the experience of the Sudanese transitional government in the process of democratic transition and the challenges it faced within the framework of his experience as Minister of Cabinet Affairs of the previous transitional government. His intervention was followed by a question-and-answer session with the live audience.

The lecture is aligned with the mission of the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies to uphold humanitarian standards, promote dialogue and collective participation, and build peace during stages of conflict and transition processes.

2. Biography of Speaker

Mr. Khaled Omar Youssef holds a bachelor’s degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Khartoum, and a Higher Diploma in Development and Public Policy from the same university. He entered student politics in 1999 at the University of Khartoum by organizing the Independent Students' Conference, and was elected a member of the University of Khartoum Students' Union in which he occupied the position of financial secretary in 2003. That Union was the first student union that the Sudanese opposition ran outside the control of the former regime's students since the 1989 coup.

After graduation, Mr. Khaled Omar Youssef continued his political activity with the Sudanese Congress Party in 2005. He was elected as the party's Secretary General in 2007, and was one of the youngest people to hold such a position in the Sudanese political parties. He held various positions in the party: he assumed the duties of foreign relations, and became the deputy head of the party in 2016, and then returned to be the General Secretary again in 2018. Mr. Khaled Omar Youssef is a member of the coordination of the Alliance of Freedom and Change Forces - the leading body of the Alliance that led the December 2018 movement – and is currently a member of the executive office of the alliance. He assumed the position of Minister of Cabinet

Affairs in February 2021 in the transitional government that the army removed from power in October in the same year.

2. A general lecture given by Mr. Khaled Omar Youssef

Mr. Khaled Omar Youssef started his lecture by pointing out that Sudan has crossed a critical juncture, yet it is still going through many obstacles that hinder its transition towards democracy. He then moved on to talk about the real opportunities for restoring the democratic path in Sudan in a better way than before, taking advantage of successful experiences around the world. He explained that democratic transitions are in decline all over the world, so these are not the best times in the world for the waves of democratic transition. Data from the 2021 Global Democracy Index shows the decline in the spread of democracy at the international level, with only about 45% of the world's population living under the rule of regimes that can be described as democratic.

He pointed out that in countries ruled by a democratic system, such as France, there can be worrying indicators about the future of democracy, as 80% of the French expressed their distrust of the parties, and in an opinion poll, 25% of the French expressed that they had no objection to the army taking overpower. The reason for these results can be despair at partisan politics, because in the end democracy is not an end but a means to improve people's lives.

After his introduction to global democracy, Mr. Youssef moved on to talk about Sudan, and emphasized that the path taken by Sudanese democracy is opposite to the path that is declining in most democracies. When Samantha Power, the Executive Director of the USAID, visited Khartoum several months before the coup, she said in an interview with Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok that Sudan was going against the global trend of declining democracies. Youssef asserts that Sudan has a large space for a transition towards democracy, despite the obstacle posed by the 25 October coup in this context, noting that the military component failed to end democracy as a whole, and Sudan still has a great opportunity to transition towards democracy. About nine months after the coup, it can be said that this event did not see much progress, and it can still be overcome given the strength of the democratic and civil movement in Sudan and its adherence to completing the road to the end.

The speaker then shifted to provide more detail from a theoretical point of view. He noted that democratic transition is a complicated, multi-dimensional issue in itself, no experience in the world is identical to other experiences, and each experience has its own peculiarities and differences in how it is perceived. For example, Mr. Youssef referred to the diversity and multiplicity of theories in the humanities, social and political sciences, as there are many theories that discussed the issue of democratic transition and its factors shaping success and failure.

Some of these theories suggested economic factors as catalysts for the transition towards democracy, such as the degree of prosperity and industrial development in a country - with poor and economically backward countries less likely to have successful transformation. At the same time, there are other theories linking democratic transformation to the culture of society, based on the fact that there are cultures conducive to democratic transformation, while there are cultures that do not accept coexistence with democracy. A third opinion discussed the social factor and its contribution to the success of the democratic transition.

From the speaker's point of view, these theories are deficient in a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon of democratic transformation, and it is clear that the specificity of each experience is important in this field. He also pointed out that there is a consensus that the choices of the main actors within the arena of conflict in a particular place have a major impact on the direction in which democracy can go, and it can therefore be concluded that democracy can be a means to settle conflicting interests when the main forces fail to individually dominate the situation. Accordingly, the end of the conflict will be - according to the speaker - when all parties agree on rules and limits within the political arena, by allowing the expansion of the base of participation, and by providing an opportunity for all spectrums and components to compete for power, which is within the framework of preserving civil and basic liberties.

Thus, if we read the Sudanese scene, we find that since the independence of Sudan, it has been stuck in continuous struggles over power. The speaker stressed that the multiplicity and diversity that characterize Sudanese society entailed that it lived through continuous historical stages of suffering and inflaming conflicts and disputes over power with different dimensions including the Sudanese fight against totalitarian and dictatorial regimes and the occurrence of military coups, which caused the division of Sudan. He added that Sudan's continuation in this cycle of divisions and conflicts threatens that it may divide again, which confirms the need to create a unified national project to prevent this, considering that democracy is the only solution to end the conflicts and divisions that we see in the Sudanese scene now.

3. The December movement and the restoration of the democratic path in Sudan

Mr. Khaled Omar Youssef then moved to talk about the details of the December movement, the trends of the active political parties and forces in it and the military control over power after reaching an agreement on the constitutional document in 2019, along with the mistakes made by both military and civilian components in this experience, noting that understanding that experience is important to be a starting point in this context.

The previous period ranged between two streams; the first is the one that led the experiment and used criticism as a method for justification, and the second one is the stream that looked for

errors and shortcomings during the transitional period while using criticism for incrimination. Both approaches - from the speaker's point of view - do not offer solutions to restore the democratic path at the present time. Also, these two approaches do not look at the real problems that faced the transitional period. The speaker believes that the previous stage was built according to a specific balance of power. He pointed out that some believe that the problem of the previous transitional period is that the military component was part of the equation, and this is a different approach to reading history, as what happened three years ago cannot be judged with the tools of the present time, drawing attention to the fact that what happened three years ago did not originate because it was desired, but what created the equation that existed in the past is the balance of power that was on the ground at that time.

In the context of his talk about the experience of the previous transitional government, Mr. Youssef touched on the obstacles that the government faced, represented by the parties' desire to create an instant and immediate transformation, explaining that the transformation process does not happen overnight, but rather it must be gradual in order to mature and bear fruit, while accelerating it with the search for quick radical solutions will help hinder the process and endanger it. Afterwards, he stressed the need for a deeper understanding of past experiences, and avoiding the mistakes of the parties involved, with the high consideration of the balances of power during the previous three years between the "civilian force" (that has the power of the street and the masses), and the "military force" (that has the power of arms, money, and regional alliances), to prevent the conflict between the parties from happening again, and to seek a creation of a broad social base.

3. The experience of the previous transitional government

To clarify in more detail, the speaker referred to the events of 6 April 2019, when the Forces of Freedom and Change took a strategic decision to call for a million-person march towards the General Command of the Armed Forces. At that time, a memorandum was submitted to the army explaining why the General Command of the Armed Forces should align with the demands of the Sudanese people, remove the Bashir regime and the Muslim Brotherhood from the political scene and power in Sudan, as well as open the door to the state of the nation instead of a one-party state. The civilians then marched towards the General Command of the Armed Forces and asked them for specific demands in order to form a new situation in the country. Therefore, most of the contributions to this new situation are due to the mass movement that sought change, while one percent of the change was completed by the General Command of the Armed Forces, which put the former President Omar al-Bashir in prison. According to such context, the two parties that played a role in the change and the overthrow of the previous regime are those who determine the future. Therefore, the discussion with the military

component on 13 April was not criminalized since they actually contributed to the new situation.

After that, the speaker explained the clash that followed the revolution between two wills represented by the will of the military component, who wanted to establish a military council for a period of two years in order to arrange the elections, with civilians dedicated to preparing for them. In return, the civilian component refused full military control over the reins of government and power to prevent the replication of the experience of 1985 and the experiences that preceded it. Afterwards, they proposed that a civilian government is to be in power to lead the transitional stage, and from here negotiations between the military and civilian components began. The speaker pointed out that the objectives of the civilian component were clear, specific, and focused on the demand that real power should be in the hands of civilians, with a symbolic participation of the military component without dominating the situation. He drew attention to the fact that this symbolic power of the military component mentioned in the constitutional document that followed the negotiation stage is different from the real power that the military component possesses in the field.

After the revolution that overthrew the Bashir regime, the civilian component possessed power gained from the power of the masses who took to the streets at the time. Therefore, we find that the constitutional document gave the full executive powers to the Council of Ministers made up of civilians without military interference; it also gave legislative powers to civilians with noticeably limited intervention by the military component. The constitutional document and the negotiations that followed focused on that power must be in the hands of the civilians with symbolic powers for the military component. At that time, the civilian component was convinced that going in the opposite direction would lead to the failure of the transitional process. The speaker pointed out that the military signed the constitutional document in order to weather the storm, with their intention to change the situation after that using the fait accompli method.

4. Obstacles to democratic transition in Sudan

The speaker continued his lecture by referring to the obstacles in the transitional stage; these obstacles can be summarized as the fragmentation of the civil front during transition that Sudan experienced. This stage faced an obstacle represented as narrowing the base of participation in the elections, which led to the complication of the democratic transition process. He added that expanding participation in power is a necessary condition for the transition, stressing that the success of the elections for a successful democratic transition also depends on broadening the

base of participation. In addition to these obstacles, the speaker stated the challenges faced by the security and military sector in Sudan.

The previous transitional stage faced other difficulties, which are the lack of prioritization in the Sudanese arena and the demand for rapid change. According to the speaker neither can happen, since the transition to democracy is gradual, with prioritization and the unification of efforts. The speaker believes that the priority of security and military reform comes first in the Sudanese file, which makes it impossible to advance in other files unless these two areas are reformed. Since Sudan is in a regional-international environment that is hostile to the emerging democracies, its unity necessarily requires this reform through support towards creating a single army that saves the state from entering into a state of clashes between the military and civilian components.

In this context, although the coup has failed to achieve its results because the democratic movement continues, as the speaker sees, the regime with its two poles seeks to support itself with social polarizations, through its attempts to build social support through the tribes in Sudan. This is what makes the security situation in Sudan dangerous. Each part of the social base that the two-headed regime is trying to create works against the other parts, which exacerbates ethnic and tribal polarization in a way that does not serve Sudan. He evidences this by referring to the increase in the frequency of tribal violence, especially after the events of the coup in areas such as Alkournuk and Blue Nile, considering this a natural reflection of the competition among those who led the coup over the outcomes of the revolution and the constitutional document.

At the conclusion of his lecture, Mr. Youssef described the Sudanese case as a "dangerous situation", and that the only chance to achieve the process of transformation and transition lies in dealing with this situation with "seriousness". Despite the obstacles that Sudan faced during the transitional period and the coup against the results of that stage, he highlighted that the democratic movement has not stopped since the overthrow of the regime of former President Omar al-Bashir and the key attempts to restore the democratic system in Sudan. The speaker pointed out that the December movement led to the expansion of the popular movement demanding restoration of democracy in Sudan. He also explained that this movement has led to an obvious change in the political situation. Among these changes, despite the large numbers of coups that Sudan has gone through (which made the idea of military rule not strange), the current reality is now different, and the idea of military rule has become out of the question. The December movement strengthened a belief among civilians that it is not possible to coexist under the rule of the military forces. It also indicated that within the current context the military cannot rule Sudan alone.

5. Question and answer session

The lecture was followed by a question-and-answer session and included a wide-ranging discussion of various topics related to the title of the lecture. It revolved around the political situation of Sudan and its history from military coups until the establishment of a new transitional government, in addition to the constitutional charters and the extent of the parties' commitment to them. The discussion also focused on opportunities to achieve a democratic transition.

Mr. Khaled Omar Youssef touched on the need to broaden the base of dialogue among all Sudanese, pointing out the government's inability to perform its duties well. He also explained that the peace agreements signed in Sudan had taken place under totalitarian regimes without any commitment to them. According to his opinion, these agreements cannot be adhered to without the existence of a democratic government.

Speaking about the Salvation Government, he explained that the issue of the civil service and the destruction that befell it during the previous stage were two of the biggest challenges the government faced, despite the latter's use of expertise to evaluate the service and develop a plan to reform it. Nevertheless, the civil service remained "crippled" and unable to complete its tasks; and there is still a need to activate the dialogue mechanism between the main political actors.

Mr. Youssef answered a question about Sudan's political history, indicating that it is a history full of divisions and military coups, and considering the current experience, repeating the same history should be avoided by keeping away any political incubator that supports any coup process in the future.

Answering one of the questions about the balance of power within Sudan, Mr. Youssef reiterated the need to understand and accommodate these balances to make the process of establishing the transitional government easier. This depends on activating the dialogue mechanism between the parties in order to set new constitutional arrangements that contribute to choosing the Council of Ministers and the Sovereignty Council as well as determining the tasks of the transitional stage. He mentioned that the parties are seeking to address the international community to facilitate the process, noting that the stage faces multiple difficulties and obstacles that complicate the issue.

In response to a question about accusing the Forces of Freedom and Change of betraying the covenants and their acknowledgment of not sharing power, Mr. Youssef explained that the political process is a moving act and not a static one, and the Forces of Freedom and Change had considered the necessity of participation in the context of reviewing the mistakes of

previous experiences and learning from them. He added that they were keen to inform everyone of their participation in the inevitability of civilians owning the reins of power.

He referred to the fact that the previous mistakes were the result of the military's numerous abuses of civilian power and the infringement of constitutional charters, to which the latter turned a blind eye. Addressing previous mistakes necessarily requires the existence of a unified civilian strategy in the political circle to prevent any future violations of these charters and to preserve power in the hands of civilians. Accordingly, the new government must realize the shortcomings of the previous authority's experience during the transitional period and consider democracy an essential and irreplaceable element.

6. Key messages

In general, the lecture focused on the stage of democratic transition in Sudan as a current issue in light of the processes the country is going through. It also revealed the challenges of the transitional stage that Sudan faced after the December revolution and presented the experience of the Sudanese transitional government during that stage. The speaker described in detail the challenges of this complicated stage and the lessons learned from it. The lecture also disclosed the opportunities available to the people of Sudan, which are based on local, regional and international factors, aiming at success of the democratic transition, ending the policy of exclusivity in government, and expanding the base of political participation to include all Sudanese.

Finally, the lecture emphasized that a successful democratic transition needs to accommodate the intellectual diversity and political trends within Sudan as any transition towards democracy cannot be defined in one direction only, nor can Sudan be governed without an equation in which everyone sees themselves in the mirror of the state and are represented with their rights protected in accordance with the law and the constitution, on the basis of equality without discrimination.

The lecture was held in-person at the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in the Cultural Foundation Building. It was broadcasted live on the Center's social media platforms, with live Arabic to English translation available.