Sudan: revolution and counter-revolution

written by Zenobya Mubarak | December 19, 2023

Genocide strikes Darfur, again

9,000 people have died and over 5.6 million have been displaced since the latest escalation in Sudan started on April 15th 2023. The fighting between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) continues for seven months now. Today's war has mainly been fought in the capital Khartoum, as well as in the West of Sudan and some major cities in the South.

Since the beginning of November dramatic and very brutal attacks by the RSF and its allies have been taking place against the civilian population, especially the Masalit, in Ardamata in Western Darfur State. It is not the first time that the people of West Sudan are subjected to massacres, to pillage, and to rape.

The violence against the Masalit evokes images of the Darfur genocide that commenced in 2003, especially given that the present victims once again belong to the non-Arabic population and that the perpetrators, back then the Janjaweed and today the RSF, share historical and organisational ties.

From Rebel group to Paramilitary

The RSF, officially established in 2013, evolved from West Sudan's so-called Janjaweed militias and became a paramilitary force, which as of today is engaged in fierce fighting for control over the Sudan.

Hemiti, its current commander, expanded its influence and capabilities. The RSF became a key player in Sudan's internal politics, aligning itself with the government of Omar al-Bashir. Its role expanded beyond Sudan's borders, with RSF fighters reportedly involved in conflicts such as the war in Yemen, supported by Saudi Arabia.

The RSF's evolution and integration into the Sudanese military and security apparatus solidified its position as a powerful force, distinct from its origins as the Janjaweed militia. While maintaining its paramilitary nature, the RSF became instrumental in suppressing protests against the Sudanese government, particularly during the 2019 demonstrations that led to the ousting of al-Bashir.

Since the ousting of Omar Al-Bashir, the army and pro-democracy groups have demanded the RSF's integration into the regular armed forces. Adel Abdel Ghafar, a fellow at the Middle East Council, said the RSF "has resisted integration into the army, understanding it would lose its power."

This led to today's brutal civil war, with conflict once again focusing on the West of Sudan, where the RSF is establishing a powerbase, ruthlessly killing men, women, and children.

Unpacking Misconceptions

Despite popular narratives, neither the genocide of 2003 nor today's violence, death, and displacement in the West of Sudan are based on visible racial or religious differences. "All parties involved in the Darfur conflict–whether they are referred to as "Arab" or "African"–are equally indigenous, equally black, and equally Muslim", says Ahmad Sikainga, Professor of History at The Ohio State University.

Darfur is home to diverse ethnic groups, including Arabic-speaking communities like the Rizaiqat and non-Arabic speaking groups such as the Masalit and the Fur. Despite linguistic differences, these groups share common racial and cultural backgrounds. A long history of migration and intermarriage has created ethnic fluidity, with labels like “Arab” often used for occupation rather than ethnicity, as Arabic-speaking groups are mainly pastoralists, while non-Arab groups are mostly sedentary farmers, though these distinctions are often crossed.

The struggle over diminishing resources led to repeated conflicts, which historically were resolved through local customs and practices, including tribal conferences and mediation. The post-independence abolition of native administration policies and political manipulation by Sudanese rulers further escalated tensions. Regional and ethnic rebel movements emerged, and in the 1960s, the Darfur Development Front advocated for economic development and autonomy. These events, including two civil wars that eventually led to the independence of the South, influenced the Darfur crisis. After Omar Al-Bashir’s 1993 ascent to power, the dictator was confronted with a wildfire of political conflicts.

In order to secure his power in the West of Sudan and to prevent further autonomy aspirations, Sudan’s long-ruling President used the Janjaweed militias to help the army put down a rebellion and to bolster Arab hegemony in the region.

Exploiting Inequalities

Since gaining independence in 1956, Sudan has grappled with a series of civil wars and political instability, including the North–South conflict resolved in 2005 after two rounds of fighting. Today’s civil war is part of this larger pattern of Sudanese crisis, marked by conflicts in various regions, such as the Nuba Mountains, Upper Blue Nile, and the Beja region.

These challenges trace back to deep-seated regional, political, and economic inequalities rooted in Sudan’s colonial and post-colonial history, characterized by the hegemony of a small group of Arabic-speaking elites marginalizing non-Arab and non-Muslim groups in the peripheries.

These political elites actively sowed conflicts along linguistic lines in Darfur, where the majority of the population is Muslim but not exclusively Arabic-speaking. Similarly, in the marginalized South, Nuba Mountains, and Red Sea region, where the majority consists of non-Arab and non-Muslim groups, political powers instigated conflicts along these distinctions.

Thus, the genocide in Darfur beginning in 2003 as well as today’s violence needs to be understood as a proxy war for power in a country struggling with its colonial legacy. Furthermore, the recruitment campaigns of the RSF, often overlooked, respond to the disenfranchisement of people in the wider region.

The RSF capitalized on social inequalities and thus it is not surprising that as of today we can see that the RSF is not only composed of people native to the West of Sudan, but also young, and disenfranchised people of the wider region.