



Public Policy Paper: Beyond the Stalemate: mitigating the political spoiling of peace in Sudan's Conflict

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Abstract

This paper highlights how various political and military groups in Sudan have spoiled efforts to achieve peace during the ongoing conflict in Sudan, pointing at the failures of the international community's approach for peace talks. To mitigate these spoiling behaviors, the paper suggests a two-track approach that keeps military talks separate from political discussions. This strategy aims to encourage more effective international engagement in the process and decrease the influence of spoiling in order to create a more positive environment for peace talks.



Introduction:

Since the outbreak of war in Sudan on April 15, 2023, numerous attempts to secure peace or even a technical ceasefire have fallen short. International and regional actors, notably the USA, KSA, and the IGAD countries, engaged in extensive diplomatic efforts to facilitate peace talks between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). While some progress was made, particularly in the Jeddah platform where a humanitarian ceasefire was agreed upon, these talks ultimately failed to reach a ceasefire and were postponed in December 2023. Subsequently, efforts by the IGAD were rebuffed by both factions, leading to Sudan's suspension of its membership in the regional bloc.

Simultaneously, Sudanese civilian initiatives faced similar fate. The prominent efforts led by The Sudanese Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (Taqaddum), while attempting to engage both warring leaders, were only able to secure a meeting with the RSF leader. The broader landscape of Sudanese political initiatives remains fragmented, with various groups aligning with one faction or the other, or undertaking uncoordinated actions. This lack of cohesion and unified purpose further complicates the path towards a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

The persistent failure to secure peace in Sudan evidently points to political spoiling behavior. Warring factions and political actors, both military and civilian, are actively engaged in manipulative behaviors to shape any potential peace agreement to their advantage. This spoiling behavior, apparent from the onset of Sudan's transition and exacerbated by misguided international efforts and conflicting regional interests, continues to undermine peace negotiations. If left unchecked, such behavior threatens to derail any future peace agreement. This paper aims to point at and analyze these specific spoiling behaviors, examining how international and regional interventions have amplified their impact. It will propose a framework to mitigate these effects, focusing on reforming the international mediation approach and empowering Sudanese civilian efforts. This framework seeks to create a more favorable environment for sustainable peace and a successful political transition in Sudan.

Complex Internal Dynamics:

The ongoing conflict in Sudan is fundamentally political in nature, born from a failure to achieve consensus among competing factions within the military and political spheres. Deep-seated distrust between the SAF and RSF, coupled with a highly polarized political landscape, ignited the war and continues to fuel its prolongation. Pre-existing political tensions, shaped by the 25th October coup and the subsequent undermining of the transitional government by an alliance of former regime loyalists and rival political actors, further worsened the situation. The internationally-backed framework agreement, while intended to resolve the crisis, ultimately fueled further

polarization and escalated tensions between the SAF and RSF, particularly concerning military reforms, pushing the country toward armed conflict. In the aftermath of the war's eruption, it is evident that both international and domestic approaches have proven fruitless, leading to the current disaster. With the military stalemate persisting, various political actors are actively engaged in spoiling peace talks, seeking to manipulate any potential agreement to their advantage. This is evident in the behavior of the RSF, SAF, former regime Islamists, and even the civilian Taqaddum coalition.

The former regime Islamists, with their deep-seated opposition to the transition, have consistently sought to undermine it, viewing it as an existential threat (Abdelaziz, et al., 2023). Despite diminished popularity since the revolution, their intact economic networks and influence within the military allow them to pressure the SAF leadership to withdraw from peace talks and shape it to gain legitimacy and safeguard their Networks.

With a history of atrocities and a paramilitary status, the RSF is focused on gaining legitimacy and strengthening its position (ACLED, 2024). Despite continuous declarations of intentions for peace, the RSF continues aggressive campaigns throughout Sudan, aiming to leverage military gains in any potential compromise, while gaining legitimacy in any possible platform.

The SAF leadership, while holding de facto control of state institutions, is weakened by territorial losses and internal divisions influenced by Islamist elements. While initially showing willingness to participate in peace talks, they are continuously hindered by RSF actions and internal pressure by its fragmented camp, alongside increasing isolation from regional actors that pushed the SAF to further complicate the situation by introducing other actors in the conflict such as Iran and Russia.

The Taqaddum coalition, despite its efforts to end the war, is also implicated in spoiling behavior. Their exclusion of key political actors and their approach of imposing a pre-conditioned agenda, was criticized by many actors such as Abdulwahid Noor of the Sudan Liberation Army (Ayin, 2024). Also their insistence of imposing rigid views on the conflict as evidenced by their refusal to meet with Burhan as the head of state but only as the SAF leader, coupled with the miscommunication that left a room for other actors to label Taqaddum as a political ally of the RSF have undermined their ability to contribute to the mediation efforts and hindered a more inclusive approach to peace talks.

The complex interplay of these actors and their allies, each driven by their own interests and agendas, and mainly seeking more legitimacy and spoiling any peace talks to its interests, underscores the deeply rooted political nature of the conflict and the significant challenges facing any attempt to achieve a sustainable peace in Sudan.

Misguided international approach: Driven by the immense humanitarian toll of the war, international and regional efforts hastily pursued peace without effectively addressing the underlying potential for political



spoiling behaviors of various actors. This rush to negotiate inadvertently provided free legitimization for certain factions, potentially hindering the prospects of a more comprehensive agreement. The initial exclusion of key regional and local stakeholders by the USA and KSA led to a proliferation of uncoordinated platforms and approaches, providing warring factions and political actors with ample room to maneuver and exploit these diverse platforms to their advantage (Ali & Kurtz, 2023). Furthermore, the disregard for public opinion and the fragmented communication across various platforms and initiatives left the Sudanese public opinion vulnerable to manipulation. This miscommunication fostered opportunities for spoiling actions that exploited public opinion to undermine peace and consensus-building efforts, ultimately deepening polarization.

However, a recent shift, as indicated by US Special Envoy Thomas Perillo, suggests a willingness to include more actors in the Jeddah talks (State, 2024). While this may offer greater leverage over the warring factions, the challenge of achieving consensus among Sudanese civilian actors remains. The ongoing battle for legitimacy and political influence among these groups presents significant implications for the likelihood and sustainability of any peace agreement.

Policy Options:

The complex and multi-faceted nature of the Sudanese conflict necessitates a careful consideration of the most effective approach to mitigate political spoiling. A potential avenue is a two-track approach, where the existing Jeddah platform maintains its focus on humanitarian issues and ceasefire with little to no political interference by civil actors, while political negotiations transition to the African Union (AU) with extended civilian consensus-building measures. This approach capitalizes on the AU's deep understanding of the Sudanese context and its established relationships with various Sudanese actors, and the clearly shown leverage of the USA and KSA over the SAF and RSF as shown by their commitment to Jeddah platform despite all the failures, facilitating a more targeted approach to both military and political facets of the conflict. By separating the tracks, spoiling behavior by political actors like the Islamists and SAF allies could be curbed by allowing them limited legitimacy and presence in the political process, thereby minimizing their interference in the military-focused Jeddah Peace talks. This separation would also limit Taqaddum's ability to exclude other actors. Moreover, emphasizing the role of the SAF and RSF in the Jeddah talks would limit their influence on the political aspects of the post-war phase. However, this approach does present challenges in coordination between the two tracks and risks fragmenting the peace process, potentially sowing confusion and mistrust among The Stakeholders.

Alternatively, a unified and more inclusive mediation effort, building upon the credibility of the Jeddah peace talks and led by a coalition of international and regional actors, could offer a holistic approach to counter spoiling behavior. This unified platform would bring together diverse Sudanese stakeholders, ensuring all voices are heard and addressing both humanitarian and political issues. Incorporating a broader range of actors can potentially minimize the room for spoiling and foster a more consensus-based negotiation process. Furthermore, this approach enhances international leverage over all actors and



minimizes opportunities to exploit divisions. However, managing such a complex platform with diverse interests could prove challenging, and the risk of deadlock on key political issues and its influence over chances of a ceasefire and humanitarian issues persists.

Suggested Policy:

We propose the two-track approach as a pragmatic and potentially effective strategy to navigate the political spoiling of the Sudanese conflict. The Jeddah platform, having established credibility and leverage over the warring factions, should be expanded to further bolster trust and influence. Moreover, a second track, led by the AU, would address the deep-seated political issues that ignited the war. This approach aims to diffuse the current polarity and foster a sustainable resolution to the conflict. In order to increase coordination and unify the efforts, both tracks should involve the same coalition of regional and international actors, with distinct mediation leadership roles for each entity. The KSA and USA have demonstrated interest and leverage over the military, while the AU and countries like Uganda have expressed willingness to engage more effectively and commit to longer-term processes.

The Jeddah platform would emphasize the role of the warring factions, while their participation in the AU-led track would be limited to military-related aspects of the political process. This approach of dividing labor aims to maximize the strengths of each platform while minimizing the potential for political spoiling and ensuring a comprehensive approach to peacebuilding in Sudan.

Crucially, clear agenda setting is essential to prevent any spoiling opportunities by inserting actors' interest in the form of a new agenda to drive the process in the direction of their interests at the expense of the process. And to clarify any overlapping between the two tracks, this as well as making priorities such as ceasefire and humanitarian issues would prevent chances to spoiling behavior through using these files in the actors interests, a committee for coordination between the two tracks should be formed to ensure a smooth coordination of activities.

Conclusion:

The Sudanese conflict is deeply rooted in complex political rivalries and entrenched distrust, necessitating a multifaceted approach to peacemaking. The proposed two-track strategy offers a pragmatic way forward. By maintaining the established credibility of the Jeddah platform for humanitarian concerns and military negotiations, while simultaneously leveraging the AU's expertise and legitimacy to guide the political dialogue, this approach could mitigate the political spoiling behavior that has hindered progress thus far. By addressing the humanitarian and political dimensions of the conflict separately, yet in a coordinated manner, this two-track approach could provide the necessary framework for a lasting peace in Sudan. While challenges remain, the potential benefits of this strategy, in terms of mitigating spoiling



behavior and creating a more comprehensive peace process, addresses serious consideration by the international community and Sudanese stakeholders alike.

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