

Root of Conflict Podcast

**Episode: Sudan's Political Transition**

*Featuring*

Ibrahim Elbadawi, Managing Director of the Economic Research Forum for the Middle East and North Africa

*interviewed by*

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Full Transcript

Hannah:

Hello, this is Hannah and you're listening to the University of Chicago Public Policy Podcasts. You are listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies, and policy issues it affects. In this series, you'll hear from experts and practitioners who conduct research, implement programs, and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research institute housed in the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

What does an interrupted democratic transition look like? In this episode, we speak to Dr. Abraham Elbadawi, Managing Director of the Economic Research Forum, and former Minister of Finance and Economic Planning in the Republic of Sudan. In May, Dr. Elbadawi joined us in Chicago at the 6th Annual Reverend Doctor Richard L. Pearson Lecture to discuss Sudan's political transition and economic policymaking. The lecture took place just weeks after violent conflict erupted in Sudan. Fighting between two military factions has forced millions of Sudanese to flee the violence and cast a shadow of uncertainty over Sudan's ambitions to transition to a civilian-led democracy.

Hisham Yousif:

My name is Hisham Yousif. I'm a second year MPP here at Harris. I'm also a Pearson fellow.

Kirgit Amlai:

I'm Kirgit Amlai. I'm a first year MPP and also a Pearson fellow.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

My name is Ibrahim Elbadawi. I am currently the Managing Director of the Economic Research Forum for the Middle East and North Africa. I joined this forum back in 2017. It's a forum of distinguished economists from the region and outside the region. It's really a very interesting forum that produces research and reports on the development and public policy issues. Before that, I was Director of Research at the Dubai Economic Council in Dubai, which is a semi-government institution on policy-oriented economic research. However,

the majority of my professional experience was developed while at the World Bank Development Economic Research Group, which I joined in '89 and then I resigned in 2009 and came back to the region.

I was a graduate of the University of Khartoum and then I had a PhD from Northwestern University and North Carolina State University. So we lived in Evanston for two years and my wife and I and our elder daughter who is with us here, Dr. Lina Elbadawi, she's a medical doctor, was born in Evanston. So it's really a great pleasure to be back here in Chicago. When I was a graduate student, we used to come to the Department of Economics of University of Chicago to attend some seminars and so on. So I've always been impressed by University of Chicago.

Hisham Yousif:

All right, so before we start with the questions, just kind of a framing, we have as our kind of working title, a retrospective on democratic transition interrupted. Many people studying conflict and folks that listen to this podcast, the civilian transition after the toppling of a dictator obviously is the most sensitive and fragile part of the transition. That process of democracy, you got headwinds of entrenched former regime elements, you got the army, you have various civil interests, you have protestors out in the street. So ultimately, we'd like to hear what it was like to be in Khartoum during that transition in a place of sensitive posts during that period, and how we got to where we are today. Obviously, you can't flip on the news without hearing what's going on in Sudan.

But before we get to that, tell us about your upbringing. Where are you from in Sudan and how was it like growing up in good old Sudan?

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

Despite the political instability and what we come to know in our kind of political culture as the Sudanese political syndrome, which are all of these coups and uprising and the alternation between short-lived democracies and long-reigning dysfunctional authoritarian military regimes.

Nonetheless, for my generation, we lived in a country that enjoyed a legacy of strong institutions, educational system, efficient bureaucracy, and to a large extent, a judiciary system and services. I enjoy it actually as the rest of my generation the benefits of meritocracy and being able to study at the University of Khartoum.

Of course, before that I was raised in a medium-sized city in central part of Sudan, in the region of Kordofan, which is a region that reflect the mixture of various cultures at the crossroads of various tribes and communities. And so, I studied my pre-university in my city, in my home city, and then I moved to the capital to study at the University of Khartoum, which was then in the late-70s or mid-70s was considered one of the best learning higher learning institutions in Africa and the Middle East.

For example, one of my professors, he was a physicist who actually became so renowned in his research on astrophysics so much so that he was contributing research to NASA at that time. I remember in the early 70s when I was a student majoring in mathematics at the university, he gave a talk about general relativity. And of course, we didn't understand much, but it tells you about the standard. We have an Arab linguist who was considered one of the major contributor to the history of the Arabic literature and so on and forth. And as well, as of course, economists, because I transferred to economics after my first year in mathematics. So what I was saying is that actually it was really great growing at that time, despite the fact that they were coups and militaries and so on.

The major setback to the Sudanese society and politics as a nation was the coup of 1989. That coup actually reflected or came as a result of a movement that we call in Sudan now an Islamawest. Not an Islamic because actually that movement effectively used the great religion which constitute the face of the majority of the population in order to advance very narrow-minded sectarian kleptocratic gains or agenda. Since then, actually Sudan was never before.

I personally was fortunate because in '89, I got an offer from the World Bank to join the Research Department of the World Bank. So six days after the coup in June 30th, 1989, I left the country. But my colleagues who were there, they really suffered. Because I used to teach at the University of Gezira, which is the second largest university in Sudan. They actually basically mismanaged everything. For example, they thought that they will feed themselves so the country will feed itself, so they destroyed the cotton industry and tried to grow wheat in a climate that's not conducive to high-productivity wheat. That's just one example. This is in one of the major agricultural projects in the country, the so-called Gezira scheme. Two million acres of irrigated agriculture, which was a backbone, so they destroyed that. That's just one example.

The Sudan Shipping Corporation that used to have a thriving maritime transport capacity, they basically sold that. Privatized and sold at fair sale prices to their membership. They did the sort of privatization that very much akin to what happened in the former Soviet Union when the former Soviet Union collapsed and chronic capitalism emerged. They disseminated the army and the civil service so much so that during the waning days of the regime, many of the leaders of that movement, they regretted what they have done. So it was a situation where you have kleptocratic ideologues taking over a country and destroying the elements of vitality in that country and that society.

That is why when the youth who were basically raised under the reign of that regime, 30 years and below, because that regime survived for some 30 years between early 90s up to 2018 when the revolution started in December, 2018. So these very youth who were raised under that regime, they actually they were the one who rebelled against the regime. The stories abound about their bravery and patriotism and their lyrics and literature and all of the wonderful things that the social media have reflected.

So myself, and my generations, who felt really challenged by what this new generation have done and that we failed to do, we've looked to serve in all capacities, including in myself. In my case, I resigned from my, I would say, comfortable position as Managing Director of a major research center based in Cairo to join the transitional government.

Hisham Yousif:

So before we get to that point, it was good timing on the World Bank that you were able to leave right as that regime took hold. A family member has described that period of time of they had an energy, but it was all directed in the wrong place. The privatization or the intensification of the war in the South or like you said, the destruction of the military and then having these parallel militia groups essentially where a lot of young people were conscripted. The 90s was a rough time for the Sudanese population. During that time, where were you headquartered? With the World Bank? Were you in ... ?

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

Headquartered at the World Bank. But like all Sudanese in the diaspora, we were not oblivious about what was happening, the atrocities in Darfur, the religious war in the south and the persecution and brutalization of the political movements and so on. So what we did was, or in fact personally I did, was to join the opposition in my own teams. Obviously as an academic and a researcher writing papers and participating in discussions about how to develop, for example, an alternative economic agenda, national agenda.

Then in 2005, an opportunity came for me to be directly involved from my perspective of the World Bank, which was the peace agreement between the Sudanese People Liberation Movement of the late Dr. John

Garang. With the support of the international community and the US and other members of the UN Security Council, a peace agreement was arranged between the then government of General Omar Bashir and the Sudanese People Liberation Movement. I was invited and asked to actually join the international group to support this process.

So I used to travel to Nairobi where we met with the two delegations, the government and the rebel SPLA movement, and we discussed issues about the future in terms of economic agenda, and the needs and the support that the World Bank and the UN system could provide in terms of technical support, in terms of training officials from both institutions, from the government institutions and their counterpart in the South. And so, that was a great opportunity for me to be involved and the first time actually in my lifetime to visit South Sudan. Because Sudan is a huge country, so I never had a chance to go to the south. The amazing thing is that we were staying for two weeks at the headquarters of Dr. John Garang, SPLM, the Sudanese People Liberation Movement, and then they were cattle rustling in the neighborhood. So we came with a plane from Kenya, but the weather actually, there was a storm, and so the plane could not come back. By the way, this is the same area where Dr. John Garang actually died as a result of an airplane crash.

Hisham Yousif:

That's right.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

It's called New Site. So we spent two weeks providing training and discussions with the technocratic leadership of the Sudanese People Liberation Movement. And so on the way back, the commander of that camp or the base decided to actually escort us with the Sudanese People Liberation Army.

Hisham Yousif:

Oh wow.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

And so, when I went back to Kenya in a town near by the border Sudanese/Kenyan border, that was a kind of an interesting point of discussion with my friends about that it was the first time for somebody like me to be escorted by the Sudanese People Liberation Army, which in the north, or at least the discussion was that this is an army of the rebels and what have you.

Hisham Yousif:

The enemy for a long period of time.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

But it's amazing that it's so unfortunate that the SAOs has to succeed as a result of the policies of the former regime. Because the young man that I was actually sitting by him and he was driving the car was playing Sudanese music, a famous singer, the late Mohammed Wardi, who was very popular in Sudan.

Hisham Yousif:

Oh, wow.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

This is supposed to be the rebel movement that was supposed to articulate grievance and a different culture and so on. So there were so much in common. If, for example, the thinking was right about their Sudan is ultimately a multicultural, multi-ethnic society, and we need this political system that actually accommodate all of these diversity.

Hisham Yousif:

It truly was a lost opportunity, unfortunately. The fact that as Bashir came to power, you were able to jump to the World Bank. That in retrospect is actually a positive thing in the sense that you were able to escape the closed environment that gets created in a dictatorship like that. So when an opportunity presents itself for services to the country, after the regime gets toppled, you were able to create these alternative ways of looking at the economy or rendering services, a thought process that happens outside of the country. And so, you have a very interesting journey here. So describe to us how you came to be in a position to be in the Finance Ministry, the Finance Minister, during such a pivotal moment playing such an important part after Bashir was gone.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

I think obviously part of it is that, as I said, like many Sudanese professionals in the diaspora, I was quite concerned Sudanese first and foremost, but also a quite concerned professional economists who would like to help. Therefore, I was involved in a variety of activities during the 30 years, attending opposition events and presenting papers. And so, there was almost like a consensus about that I was a person that might actually be a good choice to lead the economic agenda, especially since the regime actually destroyed the economy, and it was by its own politics because of the sanctions and the listing of Sudan in the state-sponsored terrorist list. But also because of the mismanagement of the economy and especially the fact that they were unprepared for what we call in Sudan ... sorry, in economics, the sudden stop. The sudden stop is that when you have an economy that depended on a resource, whether capital flows by investors or an actual resource, and suddenly that stream of income stopped.

So what happened was that actually most of the oil more than 70%, or in fact 75% of the oil proceeds come from oil wells produced in the South. So when the South succeeded, they thought the ideologues of the so-called Islamic front who controls the government then, they saw that this is a time for them to exercise full control on Northern Sudan as an Arab Muslim country. But then they didn't really, their economic calculus did not really take into account the huge implications that an economy will suddenly lose this significant resource. That is why that the beginning of the end for them economically. Obviously the revolution was a revolution for dignity and freedom and so on, but it was aided by economics, economic crisis.

And so, when the transitional government or when the agreement, when the revolution succeeded, and the coalition that came out to be known the FFC, the Forces of Freedom and Change, which is a large coalition of freedom forces and political parties and civil society and so on, they decided to form a government for two years in order to prepare the country for elections and democratic transition, but then also in the interim, to manage an economy and to prepare the legal infrastructure for election, for the systems of government and what have you. I was one of those who were considered most qualified to lead that agenda. I'm quite grateful for the opportunity given to me.

I think despite the political instability and the setbacks and so on, the economic agenda that actually I was responsible for as the Senior Minister in charge of the economic sector remains the best hope for Sudan to chart a path of renewal and nation building.

Hisham Yousif:

Sure.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

Right now, I think there is a general consensus that hopefully when we return back to the constitutional process, we will go back to the same agenda, the unfinished agenda.

Hisham Yousif:

So before we actually get to that agenda and that period of time, which is pretty interesting, you also had the military kind of in the background. So one of the interesting things that I think people want to know is how much freedom was there to be able to implement such an agenda during the transition? But how did you come to the attention of the Forces of Freedom and Change, the FFC? How did that transition come about? How were you able to join the government in that direction?

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

Because of my activism during the period, the 30 years period. For example, as early as 1994, I presented a paper about the alternative economic agenda at the Sudanese Democratic Forum then in the 90s. Then in 2011, in Sudan, after the peace agreement and some opening up of the political system, I went to Sudan and there was a major, major conference or workshop organized by the Umma Party, which is one of the largest party in the country. Even though I'm not really an explicit political activist, but I am associated with the Umma Party.

Hisham Yousif:

I see.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

And so, I presented the alternative economic agenda in 2011, which basically constituted the basis for the program that I tried to implement during my reign as a Minister of Finance.

Kirgit Amlai:

Wow, I mean, that's interesting, with years of experience and all you've been able to contribute. I just wanted to, if you could share more back in 2021, the Juba Power Sharing Peace Agreement, which you talked a little bit about it. We know that it was designed to promote peace and democratic transition in Sudan, and evidence showed that provision of effective inclusion of previously marginalized ethnic groups could increase chances of peace. What went wrong? Any hope for this agreement to move forward?

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

Actually, perhaps maybe the intentions were good. The expressed intentions. But really the Juba Peace Agreement entailed much more than meet the eye. The Juba Peace Agreement, it started when I was a minister. It was basically overtaken by the military partners in the government. And it turns out that actually the reason why they pushed for the Juba Peace Agreement was that they wanted actually to reorder or to move the balance of power towards their hidden agenda, which is basically to disrupt the civilian democratic transition by building alliance with the so-called what we call in Sudan freedom fighters. But they're really leaders of militias who proclaim to represent the aspirations of the marginalized people. Of course, they fought and paid heavy prices, their armies, but at the end of the day, they were also military institutions.

They were not sure about their political power base, civilian power base, even in places like Darfur or the Sudan Blue Nile or the Sudan Kordofan. That actually created a dilemma for the Sudanese political discourse because they basically were quite ready to concoct a deal with the military leadership in Khartoum. Except for one leader, all of them, they actually joined the coup that took place in October, 2021. That was a litmus test as to their commitment to the democratic process and to the true aspirations of the people of the marginal

right regions. Unfortunately though, they remain powers to contend with because they have fighting forces and so on.

But I think the future, thinking ahead, the Juba Peace Agreement has to be integrated into a national peace conference in which all the stakeholders, civilian stakeholders, should have a seat in the table. That is the only way to ensure that peace is a democratic peace. Because actually what was happened in Juba was essentially, as in hindsight now we know, was basically a collusion of military institutions, military forces in Khartoum in terms of the army and the rapid support force, which is of course now they are fighting it out in Sudan and in the capital on one hand, and the rebel movements. And so, that actually kind of repeat the experience of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the Sudanese People Liberation Movement and the regime of Omar Bashir.

Because when you confined, in fact, I wrote a paper and presented it at the Copenhagen Consensus Forum, which is a forum in Copenhagen concerned with peace and development. I criticized the agreement then of the 2005 as an agreement between two military protagonists who eventually will control the process and exclude the civilian stakeholders who have every right and legitimate right to be part of the process. So I think my answer to the question is that while it was a process that at least silenced fighting, but it wasn't enough, and it should have been integrated into a broader context. Unfortunately, part of the hidden objectives was actually to consolidate the militarization of Sudanese politics

Kirgit Amlai:

Considering your experience over the time both in Sudan and outside of Sudan, in every conflict there are always stakeholders be it within and external. If you could just share more, what has been the role of external actors such as neighboring countries, regional organizations, and international communities in responding to the crisis in Sudan and how their actions have influenced the trajectory of the crisis.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

This is a very important question, I think. The external actors have substantially influenced development in Sudan and will continue to do so. I think if I take the African Union, I think in Sudan and in all of Africa, I think the African Union has come a long way. The African Union actually has now matured and emerged as a respectable, genuine regional organization that actually promotes peace and security and development.

Obviously, not all African countries are democratic, but it is very clear that Africans as a collective body of people and political discourse and culture, I think they are much closer to democracy and democratization through the various interventions like for example, not recognizing a government produced by a coup. That has been very helpful for the case of Sudan after the 25th October, 2021 coup that reversed the political process.

I think the UN system obviously is impaired by the lack of consensus in the Security Council and the role that the autocrats in the Security Council play. Because China and Russia, they basically prioritize sovereignty, national sovereignty, and economic agenda over human rights and political rights and so on. But then also, I think probably the West also has own some other interests that may not necessarily align with these ideals. But by and large, I think the European Union and the US have played a very positive role in supporting the democratic process in Sudan, has provided immensely needed resources to support the program that I have

been responsible for, which I understand I can speak about later. So I would say that the external influence, largely positive.

The Arab countries obviously are not as advanced in terms of embracing democracy and democracy ideal as the African part of our belonging as Sudanese. But nonetheless, I think the more recent role of Saudi Arabia is really very commendable and supportive and neutral. Working with the United States now is, I would say, the only hope for the Sudanese people to help stop this violence. Because right now this violence is not like a

standard civil war. It's actually a high intensity military conflict between two branches of the armed forces. And so, this is the sovereign institution fighting it out. So it does require positive neutral external intervention to stop the war first. Then, we're very heartened actually the vibes that come out of the two sponsors, the recent reiteration of commitment by the Secretary of State, that the ultimate goal is not just to stop the fight, but also to ensure that there is a democratic transition. And I think he went further, which is really very encouraging, that actually the security reform should be under the auspices of the civilian administration. That's really very important.

Hisham Yousif:

Looking at the situation now and see that these two branches, as you call it, of the military fighting it out, they've had control of this situation or at least the government for a while. So while the Secretary of State Antony Blinken talks about having security reforms under a civilian transition, we're kind of a long way from that. Before we get to that point, we need to understand that what happened the last time the civilians were in control and how that kind of unraveled.

And so, there's going to be two questions here. One is going to get us to the role of the civilian institutions, whether it be the Sudanese professional association or the forces of freedom of change and how they did not want to support President Hamdok on the second try when he came back after reversing the coup. But before we even get to that, the period of transition where the Hamdok regime was in power, they were met with a lot of resistance, secret resistance from the army. And one major part of that is that the army has a large stake in the economy. Being a Finance Minister responsible for jump starting this economy, you must have had bumped up against that obstacle.

So can you tell us about that transition period? Because it started off very optimistic, there was a lot of energy and President Hamdok was saying all of the right things and the civilians were moving in the right direction. If you can take us from those first optimistic days to right before the eve of that coup in October and how it all unraveled.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

Actually, as you said, the revolution itself, or what we call in Sudan, the Glorious December Revolution itself, injected huge feeling of optimism about the future of the country. I was going to say tomorrow in my speech about the meeting that I had with some group of staffers from the Congress who actually requested a meeting with me when I came in September, 2019 to attend the annual meetings of the IMF and the World Bank. I was really pleasantly surprised about their knowledge about Sudan and also about their admiration of the Sudanese youth and their expression of support. That makes me feel quite confident that actually the US and other countries that really wanted Sudan to move forward as an example of a democratic system. And it did happen obviously in terms of the various programs that they supported. So all that, in addition, in fact first and foremost, the support of the Sudanese youth and commitment and so on, not only actually filled us with optimism, but it was in the first place the reason why we flocked to support the new system.

Unfortunately, I think the impact of isolation has actually created a huge impediment to us in the government. As a Minister of Finance, I had to deal with two major sources of headwinds. The first one obviously and the most challenging one is the military itself, as you said. But we thought that we will be able to overcome that through the agreement with the IMF. The staff-monitored program is a famous agreement that usually the IMF try to arrange with countries coming out of conflicts that are highly indebted countries or countries that are highly indebted in economic crisis and dysfunctional kleptocratic system, like what we experience.

One of the clauses in that agreement, which I think was the genesis or the beginning of the motivation for the coup of 2021, was that in June, 2020, I signed a framework agreement with the IMF in which in addition to



the standard economic reform, there was a clause that stipulates that the HIPC program, the High Indebted Poor Countries program that was going to actually provide unprecedented debt relief for Sudan. Actually the HIPC was going to reduce the debt of Sudan from 64 billion or above 60 billion to less than 15 billion. About 50 billion will be relieved. That would constitute one-third of all the resources is spent in the HIPC program since it was established in 1996. So this is a really, really huge deal. This will open up opportunities in terms of investment, in terms of attracting businesses, in terms of a huge transformation in the very well-endowed Sudanese economy.

I thought as a Minister of Finance that will be enough to convince the military. I tried to actually, because as a Minister of Finance, I was a member at a very important forum, which is called the Security and Defense

Council. I was also a member of the Supreme Peace Council. These are all led or chaired by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan as the Chairman of the Council of Sovereignty. We used that as a way of introducing, of course in addition to our normal business at the Council of Ministers, the Civilian Council of Ministers. I was presenting this program as a program that is going to enhance and enlarge the economy, and therefore the share of resource allocation to all functions of government including the military. I was one of those who thought that this will be enough to convince them that you go for the bigger pie in the future in lieu of a smaller pie that eventually will not be sustainable.

I think that particular clause, if you think about it and how two main actors react to it, I think will give you an idea about the challenge and why eventually things collapse. That the military for some reason, they don't seem to be willing to abdicate their hegemony on the economy and the illicit activities in the gold sector, as well as of course the budget, and so on. That is one major impediment. This is because of kleptocracy. I think the Sudanese situation teaches us that when you have a kleptocratic regime that remains in power for so long, it creates a culture of kleptocracy and of kind of political marketplace in which the actors basically corner the resources and their political calculus that let us stay with the current and the future is uncertain. So, they don't really gamble on a prosperous future. They want to retain what they have in a very kind of myopic scheme of thinking.

The other actually impediment was the isolated political class, especially the left-wing Sudanese political class, especially like the Communist Party and the Arab Ba'ath Party and so on, who were actually very influential in the FFC, in the Forces of Freedom and Change. They didn't see the agreement with the IMF, which came by the way as a result of a national vision that actually we developed very carefully as Sudanese economists and Sudanese thinkers, that actually we need to undertake reforms because actually these reforms were not sustainable. The country was spending deficit financing through deficit financing, one third of the budget on fuel subsidies.

I was very embarrassed really when the visiting Minister of Energy from UAE, from United Arab Emirates, who is a very good engineer and told me about the prices of energy in the world, and that Sudan, Iran, and Venezuela where the three countries that provide the cheapest energy prices, sell energy at the cheapest prices in the world. Iran and Venezuela are major energy producing countries, but Sudan, he just mentioned that to

me. I knew about it but the lessons became very clear. How would you actually expect us to support you if we are actually pricing energy at a more costlier and more realistic price than yourself?

So basically we came up with a communication strategy that I tried to preach very widely in Sudan through the radio and television and so on, was that we are not lifting subsidies. We are actually graduating from supporting commodity subsidies to directly empowering Sudanese people. Our two main instruments for that empowerment was a very comprehensive salary review program that basically addressed the distortions in the

salary structure, and also increasing salary in order to actually meet the high expenses, the living expenses. The share of salaries and benefit in the government in Africa was on average about between 8% to 10%. We inherited a share of about 3% to 5%, which shows the impoverishment of the civil service as well as the military rank and file in Sudan. So, we have to address that.

Then also, the Family Support Program, but which I can speak to, but I think your question is geared to different angles. So I would say that you'll find the military on one hand, and supposedly the supporters of the revolution and the political parties, some of them, very opposed to any kind of reform. But nonetheless, of course, even though I left the government, but the program that I was responsible for was implemented later.

Now when I go back to Sudan, or have been going back to Sudan actually recently, everybody I meet in Sudan as well as outside Sudan in the diaspora, almost everybody, especially the young educated people, they would tell me that that was a learning process. But unfortunately that learning process was slow. But everybody now seems to be in agreement about the agenda that we had to do. But unfortunately, the lack of support by the military as well as by some partners in the civilian camp basically created a situation of apathy and undermined the hopes and aspiration, and I think contributed to the coup.

Hisham Yousif:

By the way, I think that's an element of transitions that are not talked about enough in the sense that there is two parallel from what you just told me. There's a mirror ring that happens. So the army and the kleptocratic regime is afraid of economic reform because they don't want to give up what they have now for positive things later in the future.

But there is a parallel to that in the civilian population as maybe isolated elements, left-wing elements of the civilian coalition, that there is a subsidy dependence. There is no way that they can give up the security in such a precarious economic situation to be able to get economic growth, which they see on charts. They really don't understand what that means. And so, being able to get to that democratic transition is not just ballot boxes or economic opening. It's convincing two different elements, kleptocratic and civilians that are concerned about subsidies being lifted. And that's a really difficult challenge that I don't think many people understand that democratic transitions have to go through, and it opens up a lot of difficult questions and difficult decisions, and how can you implement unpopular policies that are good for the long-term that are not good in the short-term that creates an effect.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

If I may very quickly, I would say that-

Hisham Yousif:

Please.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

... we basically were very aware about this dilemma. That's why we introduced the Family Support Program, which by the way was very successful. The international community provided about 800 billion ... 800 million, sorry, \$800 million for this program. \$400 from the World Bank and the other \$400 from the bilateral donors.

The start of this program was based on creating direct links with the families, and if the time allows, I'll tell you a nice story about that when I presented this program at the Security and Defense Council. One of the top leaders, I won't mention his name, but he's now one of the top leaders who are now involved in this unfortunate conflict, asked me about how much we are going to give to the families. I told him that we will be giving about \$5, which then would be about 500 Sudanese pounds.

I went on to explain, a family of six will be receiving about 3,000 Sudanese pounds per month. Imagine a family in isolated village in Darfur, that family, the only thing that they remember or they experience vis-a-vis the central government is conflicts and warfare and atrocities and what have you. That event, the head of the family, the woman, the mother or the father receiving the 3,000 will be the most important event for them. And that will be tantamount of a new social contract. That is how I try to present it. You know what that leader told me? He said, "If you really manage to do that effectively," and that was before the Juba agreement, "those rebel movements will not find fighters to fight for them."

So it was really a big deal. But unfortunately, people who were isolated for a very long time, it's hard for them to appreciate the potential. In fact, I will tell you that I had a discussion with the Director of the World Bank, the Regional Director of the World Bank for Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, who actually, he's from Senegal, who was actually transferred from Vietnam. He was the Director of the World Bank office in Vietnam. When I actually explained to him that I'm facing some difficulties, and I believe these difficulties is because of the isolation and some of political activists could mostly really appreciate the potential, he said, "How about actually inviting some Vietnamese officials from this Vietnamese Communist Party to come to the Sudan and explain their experience?" And so, you have a very powerful ruling communist party in Vietnam, and of course before that, in China, who really understood because of the elongated experience they went through, that actually they need to reform the economy and they need actually to have an efficient economy in order to finance the social agenda that they care for.

Hisham Yousif:

And so, that requires certain innovations in communication with the population, certain ways to persuade that this is how we're going to deliver. What happened?

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

What happened, of course, I left the government. Before, I had my own differences with the Prime Minister, but because maybe I was hoping actually to move forward as quickly and on the agenda before, and because maybe the divisions within the FFC itself kind of complicated the process. But right now, I think the main point really is that now the real concern is the military. But actually, If you manage to get an agreement whereby the military, and that's a different story, but the military is cleansed from this Islama west group that actually ignited this conflict in the various place. Also, the other branch of the military, the Rapid Support Force to be integrated into a unified professional military. I think the politics now is fully aligned. I think everybody now, almost everybody now understands that the program that I tried to implement is really the way to go. The Sudanese people themselves now I think will be very much from this experience. Perhaps maybe you have to go through this experience to be able to appreciate the end result.

Hisham Yousif:

Especially the kind of a missed opportunity. So the next time it comes around, I think everybody will seize it. So you said you had differences with the Prime Minister and you left the government. I think, what, about three months before the coup? Is that right?

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

No, I left actually in July, 2020.

Hisham Yousif:

Ah, I see.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

So much later. By the way, I will tell you also that actually after the Prime Minister resigned, I was approached by the military leaders to come as a Prime Minister, and of course I declined.

Hisham Yousif:

Fascinating

Kirgit Amlai:

Wow.

Hisham Yousif:

Go ahead.

Kirgit Amlai:

I mean, we've had a lengthy discussion about economy. I know the issue of subsidy in most African oil-producing countries is like a major, major issue, but it's something that I know we're not really going to delve into, but I just want us to just look at other things. Earlier we were having a conversation how Sudan was once the largest country in Africa, which you also kind of give us some details how the separation affected the economy and so on and so forth. But I wanted to ask, Sudan fought one of Africa's longest civil war. The first one was in 1955 to 1972. The second was the largest that lasted 22 years. With all the things that happened, I just wanted to ask just what are the lessons learned? What were the mistakes that led to what is happening now? How can Africa learn to avoid issues like this moving forward? Because it is a global issue now and almost everyone is watching and it's a learning curve for almost every African country. I was just wondering if you could just shed more light on this.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

Thank you. This is a very important issue. I remember in 2000, the World Bank, I was a task manager for a project that produced a widely circulated and discussed report called Can Africa Claim the 21st Century? That was the name, that was the title of the report. One fundamental conclusion or message from this report was that unlike the historical Asian experience where an authoritarian regime, developmental authoritarian regime, could be counted on to actually create huge economic transformation, eventually subsequently leading to democratization, as in for example, Taiwan and Korea, this experience is not transferable to the case of Sudan ... sorry to the case of Africa, as well as the Arab world, by the way, because of Africa is dominated by social diversity and in many countries actually social polarization. And so, even if you have a developmental authoritarian regimes, and there are quite a few of them, take the example of Ethiopia, that regime under Meles Zenawi was able to transform Ethiopia in about 15 years where the economy grew more than four times from 2000 to 2018.

Nonetheless, at the end, because of lack of democracy, a civil war erupted as we know, and Ethiopia had to deal with warfare and conflicts and so on along ethnic lines and so on. So I think what we need in Africa is really is to give much more premium to the importance of democracy. But not democracy as electoral competition. It has to be democracy as an instrument, as a platform for discussing how to develop resources and how to distribute these resources. And so, I think we need an economic legitimacy for democracy.

That has been actually for the cause of Sudan one of the problems that Sudan inherited from the British system, a west ministerial democracy. And we had elections in 1954. It's one of the early elections, fair and elections and open in Africa. But because it was a system imposed on a backward society and kind of primitive economy, it did not survive. And there was a disconnect between the educated minority kind of

class in the center of power in the Nile River region of Sudan and the rest of the country, especially the marginalized regions, the far reaches of the country in Darfur and the south and so on. And so, uneven development was the main cause behind the conflict. Then when the conflict was resolved temporarily as part of disagreements that we talked about, it was not a democratic peace building. It was a militarized peace building. I think these are the main lessons that perhaps we need to have.

Right now, I think for the case of Sudan, hopefully if this conflict is resolved and the demilitarization of the Sudanese politics was addressed and a full civilian government came to power. The civilian itself, even after this tragic experience, if they did not learn the lesson that actually we have to have a decentralized political economic system that gives power and resources to the various regions and so on, I'm afraid that actually we will still might face another setback.

Hisham Yousif:

So there are kind of getting towards the current situation and maybe a perspective look to what you think how this is going to develop, there are two questions that I think are important. One is how you've observed the civilian government after you left it, that observation of it all the way to the coup, there was a chance for the Prime Minister to come back, which he did, but he didn't have civilian support, which led him to resign again. And so, that's probably the point where we can mark the loss of civilian influence in the Sudanese government. Then it gave us about a year, year and a half, or however long it was of where the military kind of took over and decided to talk about transitions, which is ending in the military breakdown in this fight between these two factions. So to get us to where we are today, just a word on how the civilian relationship splintered and failed, and then how this military relationship is splintering.

Ibrahim Elbadawi:

Actually, what has happened is that after the Juba Peace agreement, especially given the context behind the agreement, the government was transformed from a technocratic to a large extent apolitical government as it's supposed to be during the transitional period. To a government of political parties and freedom fighters movement or rebel movements. And so, I think to a large extent, the authority of the Prime Minister was diminished because the reference point for these ministers are their movements that actually, or parties, and I think that was a major or a fatal setback to the meritocracy and efficiency of the government. Obviously as a result of that transition, the situation did not improve and the progress was actually was halted.

One important milestone basically was like the straw that broke the back of the camel, which was that the leadership of the Council of Sovereignty was supposed to be moved from the military to the civilian. That was actually the trigger of the unfortunate developments that took place, that actually the military leadership and of course with the support of their new alliances of the signatories of Juba, they wanted to retain the leadership of the Council of Sovereignty. They also were not keen about, there was a major thing which is related to the investigation committee that supposed charged with investigating the violent disbanding of the setting, which was the epicenter of the revolution. As you know, there were so many atrocities and this violent disbanding by the military forces and also some elements from the so-called National Islamic Front and so on, was to be investigated. But then nobody want to touch it. The committee was phoned, but they never really came up with any reports or anything like that.

So all of these issues prompted the army or the leadership of the army to mount the coup, even though being fair to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister was trying actually to mediate these conflicts, these divergent views between the FFC and the military and so on. But then, I think after coup, the fatal mistake I think that the Prime Minister committed was actually to give in to the army and sign this agreement before asking for an opportunity to explain to the youth and the freedom and democracy camp about why he wanted to do that. That actually created the condition that deprived the new deal between the Prime Minister, between Dr. Hamdok and General Burhan of support by the general public. And so, it ignited actually counter actions through protest in the streets and what have you, and obviously also the international community were not convinced that actually this is a return to the constitutional process, which actually eventually obviously forced the Prime Minister to resign.

Since then, there was no any constitutional process. The head of the army was the ultimate ruler. He was actually ruling by decree and there was no any constitutional process until actually we reached this stage. Before that obviously because of the pressure and the economic crisis, that became so clear. Basically Sudan was returned back as a result of the coup to the last phase of the former regime. And so, the military leadership was forced to come back to the table of negotiations and the process was going fine. But then an issue that was not really discussed before was who should control the military? That is when the two branches of the military see themselves in huge difference.

Obviously before this fight happened, everybody was stalking arms and fighters and so on. So the atmosphere was very clear. And this is very important point, but the trigger, lots of evidence which was conveyed in social media and everywhere during the last 10 days of the holy months of Ramadan, the National Islamic front and the followers of the former regime who were disgruntled and never accepted that there was a revolution that deposed them. And famously, the former leader, the late Sadiq al-Mahdi, he described them as the disgruntled far right. And so, this disgruntled far right basically seized the opportunity that actually now the military itself found itself divided and in discord and so on. And so, it is widely discussed now in the media that actually the bullet was fired by the brigades of these followers of the former regime at the camps of the Rapid Support Force, which then ignited the conflict between the two who caused the Rapid Support Force attack the army garrisons and so on, and that was the beginning.

So I think any kind of credible, viable resolution has to also account for who started this and to be held accountable legally and politically. Because I think as long as this subversive element continue to operate freely, the future of Sudanese democracy and transformation will be in doubt, even if the military finally come to terms with an agreement that a unified force professional army will be formed. Because as long as their elements are in the army, the future democracy of Sudan will never be secured. Not only him, but of course all the politically motivated elements in the army.

Hannah:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict featuring Dr. Abraham Elbadawi. This episode was produced and edited by Hannah Balochi and Nishita Karu. Thank you to our interviewers Hisham Yousif and Kirgit Amlai. Special thanks to UC3P and the Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. For more information on the Pearson Institute's research and events, visit their website, [thepearsoninstitute.org](http://thepearsoninstitute.org) and follow them on Twitter at [pearsoninst](https://twitter.com/pearsoninst), inst spelled I-N-S-T. Thanks.