J. of Modern African Studies, 61, 3 (2023), pp. 413–437
doi:10.1017/S0022278X23000174

Surviving revolution and democratisation: the Sudan armed forces, state fragility and security competition*

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ABSTRACT

Sudan has for decades been one of Africa's most fragmented polities. Yet arguably the single most consequential actor in its recent history is among the least well studied: the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF). For most of post-independence statehood, Khartoum has been ruled by generals. This article places SAF in a longitudinal context of the expansion and contraction of state power and the functions of the coercive apparatus in these processes. It situates SAF in institutional logics, driven by historically contingent ideas about the nature of the polity, the role of the army within it and its likely partners and enemies. Doing so historicises the strategic calculus of SAF during the 2018–2019 December Revolution which mobilised millions but ended with a new coup in October 2021. I underscore how institutionalised rivalry between SAF and other security services has moulded patterns of regime change and consolidation: from Ja'afar Nimeiri and Omar Al-Bashir to

* I wish to acknowledge two anonymous referees for their very valuable feedback and suggestions; Phil Roessler and Hazem Kandil for challenging me throughout the years to think deeply about security elites and their *gestalt*; and Luuk Van de Vondervoort and Mai Hassan for kickstarting renewed conversations about the Sudan Armed Forces and the December Revolution. But above all, I am indebted to half a dozen key Sudanese interlocutors from Kassala, Masid, Metemma, Muglad, Omdurman and Wad Medani who wish to remain anonymous but whose courage, intellectual dynamism and hospitality have facilitated the sometimes extremely arduous research process that underpinned the writing of this paper.

Abdelfatah Al-Burhan today, anxieties over security competition and state fragility shape SAF's willingness to break with regimes it once dominated and its subsequent subversion of revolutionary change and democratisation.

Keywords: Revolution, state-building, civil-military relations, democratization, authoritarianism, Sudan.

At dawn on 25 October 2021, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), General Intelligence Service (GIS) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) occupied strategic positions around Khartoum and arrested prominent politicians, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. SAF commander-in-chief Abdulfatah El-Burhan declared a state of emergency and the suspension of civilian-led transitional institutions. Burhan rejected that this was a coup intended to smother the incipient democratic process or tear up the 2020 Juba Peace Agreements. Instead, he argued in a televised address, SAF acted to *prevent* civil war. The bickering party leaders whom he accused of inciting violence against SAF were to be replaced with a government of technocrats and former rebels committed to 'our path towards the state of freedom and peace'. Hundreds of thousands of Sudanese citizens poured into the streets in subsequent weeks, protesting SAF's unilateral proclamations and outsized influence in politics. The USA, EU and multilateral development banks froze their support to Khartoum.

This confrontation marked yet another instalment in a protracted struggle over power. The stakes are more complicated than the 'people vs authoritarianism'-dichotomy: fundamentally this is about the nature of state-building and legitimate authority in Sudan. Ever since in December 2018 revolutionary demonstrations erupted that would spell the demise of the military-Islamist Al-Ingaz regime, the grievances and identities of the protesters have been centred. Their demands have mostly been sympathetically framed through the lenses of 'gender' and 'youth' (Ali 2019; Kadoda & Hale 2020) – much like during the Arab Spring a decade earlier (Sjoberg & Whooley 2015). Such frames dominate academic debates but also international media coverage: acclaimed Sudanese reporters such as Nima Elbagir (CNN), Yousra Elbagir (Channel 4) and Mohanad Humam (BBC/Sudan Radio and Television), alongside Western journalists such as David Pilling (*Financial Times*) have described confrontations with government in unfailingly glowing terms in newsclips, podcasts and articles. And while this has amplified voices that have for decades been violently marginalised (secular progressives, Khartoum's tea ladies, students …), it has also meant that SAF, RSF and GIS have usually been treated as a monolithic security bloc. The interests of the constituent parts of 'the old regime' have rarely been deconstructed; the outlook of Burhan's SAF and other security services has been taken for granted – assuming congruence between them and continuity with past behaviours and strategic positioning. Except for the rapacious political economy of gold extraction and the

involvement of the RSF and its commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemedti' (Chevrillon-Guibert *et al.* 2020), detailed analysis has remained largely absent.

This underexploration of the calculus of state security organs and their role in shaping political order is a long-standing deficiency of scholarship on Sudan. Despite the oft-cited fact that army leaders have presided over Sudan for most of its post-independence history, the number of monographs or journal publications devoted to the SAF, GIS (or its predecessors), or paramilitary forces aligned with various Khartoum regimes is remarkably limited. Exceptions cited here notwithstanding, the military and its auxiliaries-cum-rivals have remained a black box – their decisions and motivations imputed rather than carefully evidenced. Neglecting the complex history of SAF as the product of specific *institutional* logics is an academic shortcoming with real-world consequences. Indeed, as demonstrated by the years preceding the 2021 coup, failing to understand SAF's self-image, formative experiences and ambivalent relations with its supposed allies has led civilian reformists and Western actors to pursue some questionable priorities and overlook other possible courses of action.

This article offers an analysis rooted in Historical Sociology of Sudan's protracted crisis and SAF's long-standing pre-eminence in politics. I situate the armed forces in a historically contingent context of the formation and evolution of institutions: that of the expansion and contraction of state power in Sudan and the functions of the state's coercive apparatus in these processes. Such an understanding highlights the socialisation of generations of army officers into a particular identity and set of ideas about the nature of the Sudanese polity, the role of the army within it and its likely partners and enemies. Institutionalised cooperation *and* competition between SAF, political centres of power and other security services have consistently moulded patterns of regime change and consolidation – and determined the tactics deployed by SAF to 'survive' the challenges presented by revolutionary projects and clamours for democratisation from within and without. Historically retracing SAF's turbulent relations with its 'frenemies' enables a reframing of the 2018–2019 'December Revolution'.

This article draws on two main types of sources: for most of the pre-1985 period, it critically and extensively re-reads the rich literature on Sudanese history. The aim is to reinterpret key political junctures through the analytical prism of the interplay between state-building, security competition and the evolution of SAF as an institution that actively recognises and defends a set of interests and beliefs. Extant scholarship has emphasised actors and research questions other than the centrality of Sudan's armed forces but nonetheless provides vital ingredients for a longitudinal analysis of SAF's strategic outlook and pivotal role in politics.

Second, as part of ethnographic research on the social forces comprising the Al-Ingaz regime, the paper relies on more than 100 interviews with members of SAF's senior leadership, mid-level officers and ordinary recruits over more than a decade (2008–current), as well as with protagonists in the intelligence services and paramilitary units and various political forces, especially Sudan's Islamists. These provide invaluable first-hand insights into the cognitive map of those at the heart

of the rise and fall of regimes. Simultaneously, these conversations also faced well-documented pitfalls challenging the chronicling of politics: memory loss, ex-post rationalisation of one's actions, self-flattery, tendency to overemphasise personalities, skirting discussion of involvement in illegal/extra-legal conduct, etc. When access was granted, it was rarely without impact of the political weather of the day and with interlocutors intending to coproduce knowledge and shape how the historical record might remember the institution he (rarely she) served (Morse 2019). Moreover, especially in authoritarian settings, there is much that can only be asked indirectly, and answers are often cryptic, delayed or farcical (Ahram & Goode 2016: 838–42). Yet even in one of the world's most violent countries, the evolving political context has, over the last decade, unexpectedly been a boon: the existential crisis of the 2011–21 decade, within SAF and the wider Sudanese polity, and the growing tensions between different pillars of the military-Islamist regime rendered otherwise often obstinate interlocutors into remarkably candid conversation partners, who reflected in complex and sometimes contradictory ways on why the current predicament came to be. A sense of being misunderstood and misrepresented internally and externally as well as plain vanity underlay the willingness of many to engage in discussion, over a period of many years. Combining the triangulation of sources with the ability to pose the same research questions repeatedly in dialogues stretching a decade generated original perspectives that are discussed through the conceptual registers this paper engages.

This article commences by examining the literature on African militaries in post-independence politics and situates SAF within key scholarly debates as well as some of their silences. I underline SAF's central role in power struggles at the state's core and in asserting empirical statehood in distant peripheries. Space limitations prevent me from detailing SAF's posture in every regime in post-colonial history: I concentrate on how it co-created the two governments with the greatest longevity and arguably deepest impact on the polity (Ja'afar Nimeiri's rule from 1969–85 and the Al-Ingaz regime between 1989 and 2019) and on how SAF protected these administrations for many years whilst playing a decisive role in ultimately toppling these very same orders. The article dissects how security competition with other coercive state organs and perceptions of growing state fragility shaped its evolving posture in the Nimeiri and Al-Ingaz regimes; the same priorities have defined SAF's approach to the 2019 revolution and the inter-regnum that abruptly ended in October 2021 as the bulk of the paper shows. I conclude by underscoring the need to pay closer attention to numerous African armies as guided by institutional logics and how their interests, self-images and historical experiences mould conflict and cooperation with intelligence services and paramilitary forces as well as ongoing processes of state formation.

MANIFEST DESTINY: SAF AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE SUDANESE POLITY

Debates around civil–military relations in African politics have been both rich and pressing since decolonisation. Indeed, evidence from Africa has

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X23000174 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contributed extensively to the broader political science and sociological literature (Feaver 1999). Early post-independence work examined militaries as vanguards of modernisation and incubators of national consciousness in countries with arbitrary borders and a configuration of ethno-regional groups that often shared little else than a history of subjugation (Janowitz 1977). Later research was preoccupied with the withering of authority as African polities and armies suffered deep crises – the fallout of the Cold War, Structural Adjustment, civil wars. Analysts underlined the all-important function of security organs in safeguarding the capital and the concomitant ability to leverage *de jure* authority ('letterbox sovereignty', Clapham 1996: 20) for financial and political gain. In the shadow of state fragmentation, attention shifted to the modes of organisation, military tactics and governance approaches of various insurgent groups that successfully challenged the army's monopoly on violence (Arjona *et al.* 2015; Roessler & Verhoeven 2017).

However, the central theme of civil–military scholarship remains what it has been since the 1960s: the survival tactics of autocrats and the *coup d'état* (Decalo 1989; Arriola 2009). For some, democratisation in the 1990s and 2000s was the result of a decline in coups and changing self-perceptions – and therefore decreasing appetite for political intervention – of the armed forces (Luckham 1994; Salihu 2020). Others stressed changes in the regional and global normative environment – and especially the African Union's intolerance for unconstitutional takeovers of government (Williams 2007). But many scholars have countered that it is not so much a declining interest in taking power by force, but the shrewd posture of incumbents that stops would-be usurpers from doing so (Quinlivan 1999; Levitsky & Way 2010). Because the greatest threat to autocrats still emanates from (former) co-conspirators/comrades within their ranks (Carboni & Raleigh 2021), rulers have developed ingenious ways of safeguarding their regimes. Such tactics include the involvement of African militaries in peacekeeping, embedded in internationally sanctioned discourses of 'security assistance as development' (Fisher & Wilén 2022). In many societies, regime stability also continues to intersect with political violence and ethnic segmentation; these linkages help account, even in polities with competitive elections, for the continued ethnic layering of internal security forces by incumbents fearful of dissent (Hassan 2017) and elucidate why autocrats use co-ethnic violent specialists for coup proofing even at the expense of triggering civil conflict (Roessler 2016). In Burundi, Chad, Mali, Uganda and elsewhere, the ethnopolitics of 'stacked' militaries has greatly undermined democratisation and fostered civil war (Harkness 2016; Allen 2019).

Insights from this literature resonate across Sudan's history. SAF has long imagined itself as a unifying force in a society with myriad ethno-linguistic groups, racial identities and religious beliefs. In socialisation efforts as well as in messaging vis-à-vis the Sudanese public, the army has underscored the continuity it provides for a poor state in turbulent geopolitical waters such as the post-1948 Middle East and a Horn of Africa wrecked by regionalised conflict. SAF has auto-proclaimed itself as custodian of the national interest, rather than

beholden to the parochialism of political parties, and prided itself on being the only state institution that has consistently recruited from across the territory, including communities in Darfur, Kordofan and Southern Sudan which historically have been virtually absent from other government agencies. SAF's multiethnic composition is cited as evidence that its commitment to national integration is much stronger than that of Sudan's supposedly democratic parties: 'We are the only institution in this land where people whose communities still live in the Stone Age can become senior leaders and live in the 21st century … The traditional parties, they are all led by the same wealthy families in Khartoum that have always wanted to control Sudan', in the words of one SAF veteran.[1]

The empirical record, however, shows that, similar to its peers across the continent (Welch 1967), SAF's ranks have always been deeply ethnically stratified: the senior officer corps mostly drawn from the *Awlad Al-Bahr* – the Ja'aliyyin, Shaigiyya and Danagla ethnic lineages that dominate the riverine areas around the Nile at the core of the state – and ordinary recruits usually sourced from impoverished groups brutalised by decades of violence, such as the Nuba or Nuer (Allen 2020). Indeed, SAF's self-image as defender and indeed builder of the nation incarnates the biases and bellicose pathologies of 20th century Sudanese nationalism, which has reflected the complex relationships with Islam and Pan-Arabism of riverine elites (El-Affendi 1990; Sharkey 2008). On the one hand, SAF has been the *Awlad Al-Bahr*'s preferred instrument to pacify and assimilate vast rural areas. On the other, the army has also been their recourse by default, in the absence of other effective tools. SAF's military campaigns and quotidian dealings with 'its' population have thus echoed tropes about civilising missions whilst concurrently making pragmatic accommodations where needed, especially with riverine elites reluctant to provide the actual resources required for durable integration and assimilation of the peripheries into Sudan's political-economic core.

Simultaneously, structural similarities with other African militaries should not cloud vital differences. SAF was not formed because of independence; predating formal sovereign nationhood, SAF prides itself in being older than the Republic of Sudan (following a name change from 'Sudan Defence Force') and thus having a special responsibility to midwife the nation and guide it to modernity. Unlike many other African armies (Welch 1986; Parsons 2003: 5–17), its roots as a colonial force did not preclude a significant share of its officer corps being non-white prior to 1956: the resultant sense of exceptionalism and historical duty only strengthened its feelings of entitlement. Moreover, contrary to most African armed forces (usually considered inexperienced and highly ineffective in combat; Herbst 2004), SAF was compelled to fight from day one (Hasan 1967). Sudan became independent amidst a civil war (1956–72) and since 1983, it uninterruptedly fought wars across its territory – east, centre, south and west – until the 2020 Juba Peace Agreements.

Sudan challenges Tilly-ian arguments about the weakness of African polities resulting from their lack of involvement in warfare or external polarisation (Herbst 1990). Indeed, quite the opposite: the projection of devastating force

has been a core dynamic in Sudanese history from the 16th century until today, as polities have been consolidated through the violent appropriation of surplus, often through slave armies; the degree of accumulation of wealth and authority has been directly dependent on the ability to send armed forces into peripheral areas where gold, cheap labour, water sources and valuable lands could be controlled (Johnson 2003: 2–5). For many of the peoples that comprise Sudan and now independent South Sudan, the felt presence of the state has been coterminous with its armed agents and with gruelling forms of exploitation, entrenching extremely violent core-periphery dynamics that are embedded in ethnic, racial and religious hierarchies (Jok 2001).

From SAF's standpoint, however, its central role in expanding the frontiers of state authority and socialising recruits from around the country into its modernising outlook has been as thankless as it is necessary. SAF has been the main employer of local people, customer of consumer goods and maintainer of infrastructure in the peripheries. But Sudan's vastness and many impenetrable hinterlands also facilitate rebel movements' hit-and-run operations, often assisted by foreign forces. In combination with high levels of ethno-linguistic diversity, this political geography presents formidable challenges to controlling territory and gathering intelligence from hostile communities, risking exposure to enemy attacks. Because the state is weak and lacking in resources, it has often fallen to SAF to broker arrangements to provide a modicum of local stability, absent developmental progress such as public services and roads. 'It is easy to complain from Khartoum or outside Sudan about us in the Nuba Mountains or the South … But we are usually there alone [as state agents], we do not have money or schools to change the people. And still you insist with us to maintain security there …', protested Colonel Mohamed El-Amin Khalifa, a coup-plotter in 1989 and veteran of the most bitter fighting of Sudan's Second Civil War.[2]

Yet it is of course militarised state-building – however 'unthankfully' perceived by those outside the army – that has provided SAF with its self-identity and given its leadership ample justification for intervening in unconstitutional fashion. During the December Revolution and subsequent inter-regnum (2019–2021), most of Khartoum's political parties – all nominally committed to democracy – have once again denounced SAF's large footprint in politics. Mutual recriminations between Khartoum-based particrats and the military, however, continue to rest on historical ironies. The formations that have dominated Sudan's civilian governments have long cultivated and infiltrated important army factions to advance their agendas and made common cause with SAF to repress dissent in the peripheries (Malwal 1990). Whilst publicly lampooning the military, leading politicians of different backgrounds have privately offered to recognise SAF's core interests in exchange for some form of power-sharing (whether during the 1960s or after the December Revolution), leaving the default mode of state-formation in Sudan and its violent pathologies unaffected. Indeed, the political establishment has long failed to develop constitutional and redistributive mechanisms to deal with the root causes of conflict and, when it

suited it, has sent the army back into the peripheries, where most political parties have no meaningful presence (Woodward 1987).

GUARDING THE GUARDIANS

Prior to October 2021, SAF overthrew three civilian governments, each time with political support: in 1958 at the request of the sitting Prime Minister, in 1969 with the hopes of constructing socialism with the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) and in 1989 allied to Islamist revolutionaries. The circumstances surrounding these coups differed each time and the level of elite support – among politicians and within the army itself – for SAF intervention has varied considerably. But the continuities are more consequential than the differences. Each time an officer from within SAF ranks became president. And after the consolidation of each regime, disappointment resurfaced as the SAF man at the apex has consistently mistrusted the comrades who put him in power – rewarding the old boys for their service but clipping the army's wings in important areas. Other actors, especially other state security providers, would emerge increasingly empowered, aggrieving many SAF officers and rank-and-file and deepening their preoccupation with security competition.

Recurrent clashes with the political leadership and intelligence actors arising from the army's choices in managing revolutions and clamours for democratisation are not unique to Sudan – even if the literature has mostly emphasized other themes. While rebel movements and sub-national militias have become prominent in civil–military scholarship in view of the erosion of the monopoly on violence of the armed forces in many African societies, the traditional concentration on coups persists. Academics have remained engrossed with the outlook of rulers and their commitment problems (Roessler 2011) and other 'coercive dilemmas' that increase violence targeting civilians (Greitens 2016) – including how particular organisational and staffing practices of state security organs by the ruler affect regime survival and repression (De Bruin 2021). The literature has remained relatively silent about security competition from the standpoint of those, like SAF, who work with – and not always under – autocrats. Although some recent work re-emphasises the role of state institutions, it still focuses on their constraints and utility for incumbents in authoritarian governments (Meng 2019) rather than addressing the ambivalent relationship between various coercive arms of the state security organs as *institutions* and how they understand 'regime stability'. The calculations and interests of African intelligence services, despite their intrinsic importance to the nature of the political order and questions of war and peace, have been particularly scarcely documented (Pateman 1992; Shaffer 2021).

Hazem Kandil's *The Power Triangle* (2016) explains how, in authoritarian regimes, distrust and mutual dependence between the political leadership, army and intelligence services oscillate over time and how regular reconfigurations in the balance of forces between them reproduce mistrust, exclusion and violence. Kandil underlines how institutional logics governing the power

triangle provide opportunities for cooperation between sovereigns, their militaries and spies but also lead them to inevitably clash: political leaders need security organs to not only keep the opposition and the population at bay, but also to compete with each other for influence so the political pillar is not overwhelmed by a united security bloc. For its part, the army's self-image as guardians of the nation necessitates some distancing from the ideological proclivities of any regime it partakes in; simultaneously it fears having its dominant position in national security undermined when ruler(s) are too dependent on the intelligence services, which risk encroaching on its privileged access to funds, weapons and decision-makers, foreign and domestic. Finally, security chiefs and generals have a common interest in reminding their nominal political overlords that they work *with* them, rather than under them – and they possess the coercive technologies to replace their frenemies in the presidency or the party.

In Sudan, the interplay between centrifugal competition within the power triangle and centripetal incentives to defend regime stability has defined the rise and fall of governments and the ebbing and flowing of political violence as aspiring state-builders have sought to redraw Sudan's political geography. This is best illustrated by dissecting the regimes with the greatest longevity and deepest impact on the polity – which I do in this section and the next, before turning to the resurging logics of the power triangle during the December Revolution and its aftermath.

The 1969 coup brought leftist officers, led by Nimeiri, to power. They believed Sudan's traditional sectarian forces (the Ansar and Khatmiyya) and their respective parties (Hizb al-Umma and the Democratic Unionist Party) could neither end the country's civil war nor solve its economic problems; for the coup-plotters, state weakness, conflict in the peripheries and sectarian rule went hand in hand and necessitated the overthrow of parliamentary democracy. In theory, Nimeiri governed collectively, with fellow SAF officers through a Revolutionary Command Council and with the SCP's guidance. But as Nimeiri broke with his communist friends, the insecurity of governing without an established party's backing drove the colonel-turned-president to centralise authority in his hands.

This process was enabled by the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement ending the civil war, which gave Nimeiri constituencies in Southern Sudan and allowed for the demobilisation of SAF and reshuffling of its officer corps (Bell 1975). This occurred in parallel to Nimeiri's courting of Gulf states, which provided capital for agricultural projects so state agents could penetrate Sudan's peripheries, especially Kordofan, Darfur and Blue Nile where sectarian parties had retained their strongholds (Khalid 1985: 106–38). Furthermore, because his Sudanese Socialist Union remained ineffective in generating legitimacy and dismantling sectarian patronage networks and because he feared a counter-coup from within SAF by socialist or pro-sectarian officers, Nimeiri built a ruthless security apparatus. Borrowing a leaf from his Egyptian colleague Anwar Sadat, he embraced Washington and sought US assistance to buy off discontent

within the power triangle, enabling SAF's institutionalisation of expanding business interests (Wai 1979; Bienen & Moore 1987).

However, Nimeiri's tinkering with the balance of regime forces led to escalating contradictions and the alienation of his army (Berridge 2015: 39–63). Political legitimacy could only come from reconciling with the sectarian parties – which was tried and failed – or from courting the rising force in society, the Islamists of Hassan Al-Turabi. The latter's integration into the cabinet merely bought Nimeiri time; Turabi's fortunes soared as his partisans instrumentalised governmental power to bankroll their domestic and transnational networks (Medani 2021: 92–125). The Islamists' ascendancy eroded the president's standing in the South – undoing his main achievement, because the civil war re-erupted. Nimeiri once again thrust the army in the position of the state's most forward agent in Sudan's peripheries as penetration by bureaucrats and business cronies with Khartoum connections had exacerbated inequalities and conflicts. Meanwhile, Turabi nurtured his own constituencies within SAF. According to a key Islamist charged with recruiting officers, they did so to pre-empt a likely betrayal by the president, 'to defend ourselves … We knew what had happened to the Ikhwan [Islamists] in Iraq, Syria and Egypt'.[3] In 1985, amidst demonstrations against Nimeiri and with state authority atrophying across Sudan's peripheries, the army removed its commander-in-chief. Heading the Transitional Military Council was Abdel Rahman Siwar al-Dahab, who had helped Nimeiri quash his communist allies but resented his empowerment of the State Security Organisation which had been created, at least in part, to spy on the army and in 1985 tried to blame SAF for killing civilian protesters (Berridge 2013: 861–2). As Siwar al-Dahab and other generals saw it, to save SAF (and therefore Sudan), they had to sacrifice their marshal and rein in the intelligence services.

THE SALVATION GAMBLE

Five decades on, the ghosts of the Nimeiri years still haunt SAF's leadership as it navigates the pitfalls presented by the December Revolution – which in 2018–2019 ended another regime in which generals partook. For some leftists, SAF was guilty by association of the crimes committed by Nimeiri and the Islamists, including the 1983 introduction of a punitive interpretation of Sharia Law. Critics also disliked how military-industrial interests muscled into civilian sectors of the economy. But for SAF, just like in 2021, these were treacherous times of institutional vulnerability, irresponsible politicians and economic crisis amidst geopolitical tensions: its actions were self-defence so Sudan's oldest institution would survive and be able to defend the national interest, or so generations of officers have believed. In the late 1980s, SAF's internal crisis and anxieties vis-à-vis other security actors would lead the armed forces to yet another coup and further rounds of coercive state-formation (Salih 1990). Understanding how this happened and the lessons the army has learned is

essential to grasping SAF's approach to managing the revolutionary thrust and security competition today.

In the years after Nimeiri's ouster, parties jockeyed for power and SAF tried to balance withdrawing from politics with fighting the war that had resumed in the South and was spilling into Central and Eastern Sudan. Sectarian forces had not forgotten the blood the army had shed; the Hizb al-Umma of Prime Minister Sadiq Al-Mahdi remembered the 1970 SAF bombing of its Aba Island stronghold and armed tribal militias – al-Murahalin – drawn primarily from Baggara Arab constituencies in Western Sudan to hedge against SAF (Salih & Harir, 1994). This challenge to the military's monopoly on violence and the inability of politicians to end the war and protracted economic crisis again triggered intervention. Sudan's generals concluded that the critique of the 1960s had not been wrong, but Nimeiri's implementation had lacked resolve.

Internally SAF was divided on who to partner with. Army chief Fathi Ahmed Ali and circa 150 officers demanded in a February 1989 memorandum that peace be seriously pursued, urging an unspecified 'broadening' of the Al-Mahdi government (likely to dilute the Islamist influence[4]) and an immediate end to the proliferation of paramilitary forces outside the regular chain of command (Salmon 2007: 12); defence minister Abdul Majid Khalil resigned to protest how the civilian cabinet's procrastinating was dividing the army and paralysing the country (Khalid 2010: 183–4). Following months of speculation about socialist and Ba'athist coup plots, a group of SAF officers tied the fate of their institution to Turabi and his *Al-Harakat Al-Islamiyyah* (HI) who promised to pursue state-building ruthlessly and to end insurgent resistance while squashing sectarian and leftist politics (Ali 2010). Some officers were registered HI members, such as Colonel Mohammed El-Amin Khalifa; others such as the two formal coup leaders, Brigadiers-General Omar Al-Bashir and Zubeir Mohamed Saleh, were conservative nationalists without ideological zeal. Recruiting this latter group was crucial for Turabi, as it broadened his support – including, crucially, throughout the army hierarchy – and allowed him to frame his goals as dovetailing with the mainstream project of saving the nation and SAF from tearing themselves apart. It also enabled Turabi to veil his ambitions to potential outside interveners – a necessity given the long-standing, institutionalised ties between SAF and the Egyptian army. When, on 30 June 1989, Bashir suspended democracy, Cairo assumed it was business as usual with another pro-Egyptian strongman (like Abboud in 1958 and Nimeiri in 1969) taking over.

As Turabi, who went to jail to perfect the façade, testified: 'It is easy to kill a baby before he can talk. So the baby does well to stay unnoticed. But when the child grows and consolidates strength, it can take on its opponents'.[5] The coup had been masterminded behind a khaki façade by the HI whose vision was a root-and-branch transformation of Sudan's society, economy and foreign relations, including a full rupture with Khartoum's traditional partners in Cairo and Riyadh. Islamisation entailed the exporting of the revolution across borders, such as overthrowing hostile regimes in Chad and Ethiopia. Disloyal SAF officers were executed, political opponents disappeared into 'ghost

houses' (Gallab 2016: 77–114). Sudan's military-Islamist revolution called itself 'Al-Ingaz', the Salvation.

From SAF's standpoint, there was much to like about the Salvation regime: the Islamists were Leninist in their organisation, including how they prosecuted the intensifying conflict. Parties that were ambivalent about SAF and its role in nation-building, such as the Hizb al-Umma and the communists, were brutally repressed, their supporters purged from army and government ranks. Every spare Sudanese pound was pumped into the war effort and Turabi greenlighted forced recruitment of students and even closing universities such as in 1997 to send thousands of youngsters to the front as *Shuhada*, martyrs for the revolution. Army commanders were given considerable leeway in fighting the war.[6]

However, Al-Ingaz was Turabi's creation and SAF was the junior partner: SAF was 'governing but not ruling' (Cook 2007). Bashir, as the regime's figurehead, remained often side-lined in decision-making. Many policies clashed with the army's institutional interests. Turabi did not restore SAF's monopoly on violence but recycled al-Murahalin as part of the Popular Defence Forces (PDF), an Islamist militia comprising a range of hard-core ideologues, forcibly conscripted students, tribal 'self-defence units' and others. SAF also had no grip on the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) which was dominated by loyalists from inside the HI's security organs and old career spooks offering their skills to the regime. And Al-Ingaz exporting its revolution – most infamously by trying to have Hosni Mubarak assassinated in Addis Ababa in 1995 – generated dangerous blowback. It rendered Sudan a pariah state and ended international perks benefiting SAF officers (training abroad, armaments, joint exercises, etc.), while risking international war as leftist liberation movements in Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda began supporting regime change in Khartoum (De Waal 2004: 182–230). To make matters worse, in 1998 the SAF heavyweight most popular among the rank-and-file deployed in the war-torn peripheries died. Turabi barely consulted the army, according to Zubeir Mohamed Saleh's deputy, Mustafa Al-Dabi: 'The Sheikh ignored us after the helicopter crash of Zubeir … We had no influence in choosing the next Vice-President … even though we told him he wanted someone from the army'.[7]

The sense of marginalisation was what led the SAF leadership – Bashir as well as virtually all senior generals – to conspire with disgruntled Islamists corralled by Turabi's dauphin, Ali Osman Taha. Their 1999 revolt against the Al-Ingaz godfather promised to remove the sharpest edges of the Salvation Revolution and was supported by NISS officers – a rare alignment of the army and intelligence services who joined forces to confront the political leg of the power triangle. Turabi later acknowledged that antagonising SAF's institutional interests was myopic: 'We underestimated the army … We made a political mistake'.[8] What emerged from the Al-Ingaz patricide was a duopoly, with Bashir (SAF) and Taha (HI and with strong networks in NISS) representing the rebalanced pillars of the power triangle as well as Sudan's two most powerful ethnic groups (Ja'aliyyin and Shaigiyya). For the army this was a more comfortable arrangement: its commander-in-chief was now de facto in charge yet could

rely on a civilian deputy to handle the day-to-day messy politics of Khartoum. The Bashir–Taha partnership was underwritten by Sudan's emergence as an oil exporter and their signing of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) to end Sudan's Second Civil War. The regime's state-building brand shifted from virulent Islamisation to economic opportunity (Verhoeven 2013).

In the reinvented Al-Ingaz, the military looked unassailable: generals served as governors and ministers and collaborated closely with the ruling National Congress Party. Abdelrahim Hussein, Bakri Hassan Saleh and other army comrades of Bashir's remained dominant government figures for decades. Oil funded expansions of the Military Industrial Corporation, higher salaries and a gigantic headquarters in Central Khartoum symbolising SAF's self-image as the beating heart of the Sudanese state. Bashir himself – from humble village origins, with little connection to wealthy political dynasties – embodied the army's promise of being open to all classes and promoting social mobility. He loved being the soldier-president, spending hours at army messes listening to officers and colouring weddings, funerals and Friday prayers with humour and empathy to keep his finger on the pulse. But below the waterline, the same problems that destabilised earlier regimes were re-emerging: security competition and the growing fragmentation of state authority would ultimately spell Al-Ingaz's collapse – and inform the armed forces' approach to subverting the post-2019 push for democratisation.

THE PERILS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE DECEMBER REVOLUTION

Thus, numerous SAF priorities, stemming from insecurity within the power triangle and from the army's historical experiences, had been in jeopardy since at least 2011 – although much of this remained veiled to outsiders until SAF moved against its own commander-in-chief in April 2019. A decade earlier, Bashir and Taha had promised to use oil to develop a robust economy that would strengthen Sudanese sovereignty and ultimately shed dependence on petro-rents – the belief in this proposition evinced by Al-Ingaz' acquiescence in the secession of South Sudan and the forging of a pragmatic relationship with its erstwhile enemies in Juba (Woldemariam & Young 2018). But despite a decade of rapid growth and billions of dollars invested in the dams and Agricultural Revival Programme that were intended to further develop the core of the state, the post-2011 economic collapse revealed this to be a chimera (Verhoeven 2015: 192–215). Sudan entered a deep recession from which it has still, more than 10 years later, not recovered. Rising material prosperity had underpinned the Salvation's political hegemony. Or as Taha put it in a self-congratulatory (but not incorrect) reflection: 'with every extra telephone, fridge and road, support for us grew'.[9] The economic meltdown dissolved the political capital accumulated by the 'new' Al-Ingaz and after 2011 resulted in uprisings in Sudan's cities as well as its peripheries where the contradictions of both revolutionary and 'banal' authoritarianism had long been apparent (Mahé 2020). In response, Bashir empowered two institutions, at SAF's

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X23000174 Published online by Cambridge University Press

expense (Hassan & Kodouda 2019). One was NISS, a prime beneficiary of petrodollars which had been allowed to acquire paramilitary forces, cyber-capabilities and extensive assets in agriculture, ICT and other sectors. Under spy chiefs Salah Gosh, Mohamed Atta and Abdelghaffar Al-Sharif, NISS turned into Al-Ingaz' first and last line of defence – including saving it, at the last minute, from a Darfurian rebel attack on Khartoum in 2008 and during the street revolts of 2012 and 2013. Renewed infighting among HI cadres further diluted the influence of Taha and other prominent Islamists (Berridge 2020: 168–70); with Bashir's authority increasingly personalised yet limited in reach, the regime leaned on its feared intelligence service as its political wing was foundering.

A second challenger to SAF's pre-eminence, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), had been created as a vehicle to reorganise various tribal militias ('Janjaweed') and SAF auxiliaries in Darfur. Using the RSF, al-Murahalin and the PDF to do the ugliest fighting in scorched earth campaigns has served SAF interests; having such forces engage in ethnic cleansing allows SAF to maintain its cherished image as nation-builder and to let the legal risks be borne by others. But this has been a double-edged sword.[10] As discussed, SAF has long been frustrated with lacking a monopoly on violence in view of the autonomy granted by various governments to paramilitary forces across Sudan's peripheries. While the PDF was largely brought under the control of Salah Gosh's NISS, RSF instrumentalised its involvement in policing Sudan's borders and the lucrative gold trade from Darfur to the Gulf (Global Witness 2019) to acquire a degree of independence that army officers struggled to stomach. Awash in cash by 2015–16 and encouraged by Bashir who sought to balance both SAF and NISS with this new force, RSF participation in the Yemen War sent the fortunes of its leader Hemedti soaring. RSF cadres forged international connections and were handsomely rewarded by Saudi and Emirati paymasters; army commanders warned Bashir about a 'state within the state' – and one that because of its origins in Darfur 'risked undermining the integrity of Sudan'.[11]

But with the president uninterested, SAF generals began going their own way. While remaining nominally part of 'their' regime, officers took advantage of the fragmentation of authority (El Battahani 2016). For example, SAF Chief of Staff Imad Eldin Adawi used his position to craft mercantile ties inside and outside Sudan. His telecommunications firm, Lycos, not only secured contracts worth millions of dollars with leading Sudanese ICT firms but also entered the Saudi and Chadian market. That no other Sudanese company was entrusted with sensitive operations in foreign jurisdictions such as content filtering was a function of Adawi's partnerships with the commander of the Royal Saudi Air Force, Fayad Al-Ruwaili, and Hassan Sylla Bakari, confidant of Chadian President Idriss Déby-Itno and Minister of Telecommunications. Such mixing of personal finance and corporate realigning was ubiquitous. SAF doubled down on safeguarding its financial reserves – and therefore its institutional autonomy – in the context of a shrinking economy. Exploiting their privileged access to scarce foreign exchange in a landscape of multiple official rates, army-

owned companies such as Zadna benefited from huge arbitrage rents. They also capitalised on their ability to strongarm administrators into enabling import-export flows to boost the SAF budget. Perhaps the most striking example of market capture has been the rise of SAF-owned al-Ategahat al-Mutadeda, the dominant livestock trader in Sudan and a vital transmission channel in providing the military with ample foreign exchange, especially as economic storm-clouds gathered. Enrichment of army officers and the strategic refinancing of SAF had been common practice since the 1980s but rent-seeking occurred at a much-heightened pace during Al-Ingaz's last years. 'Surviving all the crises facing our army and country meant what we call 'economic defence', like in meat processing or sesame or telecoms … Sometimes we asked Bashir for permission. But more and more we didn't do that anymore … Because we could not wait and had to survive …'[12] Creating deep personal and sometimes institutionalised relationships with other players in the region became essential for SAF to retain institutional autonomy and hold its ground amidst intensifying domestic security competition.

These considerations shaped SAF's reading of the 2018–19 revolution and its decision to abandon 'soldier-president' Bashir, as millions of protesters refused to back down, despite months of repression. Defying the hierarchy, SAF junior officers protected demonstrators from riot police and plain clothes thugs, highlighting that a violent rift in the armed forces – and their projected image as defenders of the nation – was a real prospect. Moreover, as NISS chief Gosh and RSF supremo Hemedti concluded that the Salvation government was irredeemably toxic for large swathes of the population, they manoeuvred to exploit the protests to strengthen their prospects in a post-Ingaz order. Their willingness to oust Bashir from within meant that the army leadership risked being outflanked inside the power triangle. Sensing that going with the tide gave them a better chance of managing it, SAF generals elected to join the intelligence services and RSF. SAF ultimately jettisoned Bashir, with senior army commanders physically thwarting the deployment of well-armed PDF units stationed south of Khartoum that the president had instructed to clear the sit-in outside army HQ.[13]

Perceptions of the army's subsequent role went from the romantically naïve among segments of the middle-class – SAF seeking to redeem itself after the Salvation years and return to barracks – to the dogmatic among leftist militants – SAF as irrevocably wedded to an unreconstructed military-Islamist project that keeps everything the same, minus Bashir as its leader. Yet SAF's approach to the question of how much change to encourage or oppose after April 2019 has continued to be refracted through the prism of the power triangle. The SAF leadership has repeated self-serving storylines about its own indispensability to assure its primacy amidst renewed security competition: 'The people of Sudan want a lot of change, sure … But that doesn't mean they want to change us. They wanted to get rid of Al-Ingaz, not their army. Because they know: if you lose us, you lose Sudan.'[14]

The point here is not that such sentiments accurately capture popular opinion, but to highlight how during the inter-regnum the objectives for

Abdelfattah El-Burhan remained consistent with the army's historical experiences and internal logics. Unsurprisingly, the top priority has been the reassertion of SAF dominance over the RSF and intelligence services. NISS has been converted into a downscaled General Intelligence Service and was forced to surrender economic assets as well as its paramilitary Operations Department, dixit Ibrahim El-Badawi, Minister of Finance in 2019–20.[15] The prime beneficiary of NISS/GIS's loss of influence, for instance in the telecoms sector, has been the army which rapidly moved to control both the sectoral regulator and ICT company board seats and obtained new privileges. The generals have also supported the regulation of the gold sector and pulling Sudanese forces out of Yemen – big sources of income for Hemedti's RSF, which has responded to the reassertion of SAF dominance by developing its own ICT and cybersecurity arm.[16]

While the relationship between Burhan and Hemedti proved functional and resilient for years, this has, at least in part, been a function of cunning manoeuvring to render the latter's political survival dependent on SAF. When in the wake of Bashir's downfall protesters continued demanding full civilian rule, security forces mostly drawn from the RSF quashed the sit-in before SAF headquarters, reportedly killing more than 100 unarmed civilians. The resulting uproar and calls for justice – which headline revolutionary protests to this day – gravely curtailed the options for Hemedti to reinvent himself as a political force, independent from the army. Evidence suggests that SAF leaders might have trapped the RSF by inciting the clearance operations of 3 June 2019 and promising back-up for RSF units that carried out most of the evicting, raping and killing but then not following through fully as RSF commanders requested support.[17] To be sure, the Transitional Military Council – led by Burhan – approved the dispersal of protesters outside SAF headquarters; moreover, military officers were instrumental in the crack-down, including through a telecommunications black-out during and after the massacre.[18] Nevertheless, they left the most sordid violence to RSF units brought in from the west of the country who believed that they were acting in tandem with NISS and SAF to save Sudan from what some interviewees in the security services denounced as 'atheists', 'communists' and 'debauched Diaspora [returnees]' who were 'misleading the real people from here' as well as 'looking down on Darfurians, especially Arab Darfurians'. Rumours circulated in the massacre's aftermath that SAF recruits sympathetic to the protesters had been murdered too by RSF gunmen – allegations on which opinion of civilian survivors remains divided to this day, but which SAF and NISS officers disseminated as 'proof' of their innocence and of their enduring status as 'national' institutions (as opposed to the 'Western Sudanese' or 'tribal' RSF; on the changing role of competing nationalist narratives see Suliman 2022: 279–80).

While staggered by the international outroar after 3 June and privately apologetic to trusted diplomatic interlocutors, SAF generals seized the opportunity to underline that widespread RSF involvement tarnished Hemedti's reputation.[19] His status as de facto diplomatic *persona non grata* – who still after all these years

cannot meet many Western envoys publicly – and the looming threat of grave criminal charges should Sudan transition to a fully civilian government are at least partially the outcome of a shrewd choreography by his power triangle rivals in SAF and NISS. Ironically but not coincidentally, this predicament has compelled Hemedti to seek the protection of Burhan and other SAF commanders against internal and external detractors. His isolation and legal vulnerability solidified their partnership, even if army and RSF simultaneously spy on each other, battle for control of positions of bureaucratic and commercial influence, and openly defy the other's pronouncements at the centre in Khartoum and in peripheries such as Darfur (Tubiana 2022). The events of 3 June have proven pivotal in the hierarchy between the state security organs and limiting RSF's ability to assert its autonomy from SAF and to challenge its role as *primus inter pares*. Given how Hemedti outshone SAF during the final years of the Salvation regime and how important his conspiracy with Salah Gosh was in the ousting of Bashir, undermining RSF's ability to explore alliances with domestic civilian and Western actors has been a major SAF priority.

Re-establishing its position as the pre-eminent security actor is, from SAF's reading of its history, indispensable for reversing the growing fragmentation of state authority that characterised the last decade of Al-Ingaz.[20] It is also crucial for confronting both its sectarian doubters and the left that has been reinvigorated by the emergence of well-organised resistance committees around the country, who challenge the legitimacy of state institutions they regard as brutal and/or ineffective. Signing the 2020 Juba Peace Accords with rebel groups from Blue Nile, Darfur and Kordofan fit that logic too: it enabled SAF to ostensibly manoeuvre itself on the side of peace, allowing the Sovereign Council to somewhat incredulously posit that while under Bashir reconciliation was not possible, the army could now resume its role as nation-builder. This was essential given that 'peace' was a conspicuous demand in the anti-Ingaz demonstrations, including among middle-class constituencies that have long supported SAF's prominence in politics (see Awad 2022: 11–12). Signing peace accords also mattered to SAF's allies-cum-patrons in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which following Western criticisms of the Yemen war and their backing of authoritarianism in Khartoum, wanted to be seen nudging belligerents towards ceasefires.[21] Furthermore, SAF realised that turning rebel commanders into politicians would crowd the political arena and enable it to play various civilian forces off against each other. The army remains distrustful of party politics and relies on how little the traditional Khartoum-based elites and insurgents from the peripheries have in common beyond abstract slogans of 'a Sudan inclusive of all'.[22] Prioritising the peace deals means liberalisation in Khartoum can be manipulated to secure core SAF interests.

That the army would approach the transition informed by deep-seated institutional logics appears to have barely featured in the approach of Sudan's committed revolutionaries and Western partners. Many have pursued a maximalist agenda of all good things at the same time: peace in the peripheries;

accountability for war crimes and corruption; a secular constitution; strengthening the state; reforming the political economy; and so forth. In pursuing most of these, SAF was identified as an implacable opponent, because its preferences are still those of Bashir and his rent-seeking 'keizan' that produced Sudan's 'years of solitude' between 1989 and 2019 (Young 2021). Dominated by leftist appointees, institutions such as the Tamkeen Removal Committee used sweeping powers of arrest and expropriation and suspended due process to recover stolen assets from networks formerly aligned with Al-Ingaz – a process that became increasingly polarising as the fruits of exchange rate reform were slow to materialise, subsidy withdrawals hurt the middle classes and successive Ministers of Finance failed to wrest control (or even comprehensively chart the universe) of army-owned companies.[23] As the Committee also endeavoured to fire thousands of administrators suspected of Salvation loyalties, this further degraded the bureaucratic capacity of the state as senior and mid-level cadres were either suspended or paralysed by fear – a recipe for policy standstill at a time of economic crisis.

That Ba'athists, communists and sectarian politicians targeted former regime assets and individuals and went after the army's wealth and influence came as no surprise to anyone familiar with SAF's history – nor did SAF's reaction. In interview after interview, dating back to 2013–14, SAF officials have expressed their angst of Sudan falling into the same abyss as Libya, Somalia and Yemen, neighbours that are considered peers and where the inability of squabbling politicians to compromise intersected with unrestrained security competition to cause state collapse. One potential explanation for such anguish is that it simply stems from the anxieties of an officer corps fearful of losing indefensible privileges.[24]

Another interpretation does not discount such self-serving factors but highlights their interaction with a historically determined institutional context that leads SAF officials to be sensitive to what they have long perceived as existential threats at times of acute security competition. With internationalised civil war rupturing Ethiopia and the recession continuing unabated at home, in 2021 anarchy appeared overwhelming as the resistance committees in Khartoum, tribal leaders in Eastern Sudan and roving gunmen in Darfur all ostentatiously defied laws and orders from central government.[25] Watching a plethora of fragmented actors erode state authority confirmed SAF's old instincts about the dangers posed by democratisation. It is against this background that simply lumping the army together with remnants of the Salvation regime as the reason for state fragility (as the resurgent Left did), ended up becoming somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more instability and societal polarisation deepened – and the more SAF's traditional opponents blamed this on the machinations of a cohesive 'deep state' rather than opportunistic violence and normative conflict that are typical by-products of revolutionary politics – the more appealing realignment with (limited) sections of the old regime has become.

According to one secularised officer stationed for years in Western and Eastern Sudan: 'We know Sudanese people dislike Islamists. They want to tell you your clothes [i.e. restrict choice of dress] and limit your freedom. In the

army, we are all Muslim but there are few real Islamists who mix religion and politics, especially after the Revolution. Like other politicians the Islamists tell you one thing and then make something different. But for us in the army, some of them can be useful because they are better organised than all others and they know [how] to govern. They are more respected in neighbouring countries and at least they don't want to squeeze the army. Right now, this is very important for Sudan, at this dangerous moment.'[26] While for many up and down the military hierarchy 30 years of power-sharing with Islamists had yielded decidedly mixed results and is no guarantee for safeguarding core army interests, tactical realignment with some HI veterans and selectively drawing on their organisational prowess, decades of administrative knowhow, and economic networks can be expedient as SAF reimposes its understanding of law and order during perilous times.[27] Indeed, this was even more so because the Tamkeen Removal Committee and civilian reformers insisted that the army surrender control of its economic and governance privileges which SAF commanders see as a necessary bulwark against power triangle rivals and the unreliability of politicians: Burhan became convinced that SAF was the revolutionaries's real target.

The imperative of surviving the dangers of Sudan's latest revolution also informed the army's temporary strengthening of relations within the power triangle. Despite mutual mistrust and divergent interests in key areas, casting SAF as hell-bent on reviving Al-Ingaz ironically incentivised it to accommodate rival security actors while affirming its own primacy. After all, the military needs allies – even imperfect, unreliable ones – and felt that it could neither walk away from government nor manage the transition alone when faced with a degree of subordination and uncompromising opposition it did not expect. Once Hemedti's RSF and the downscaled NISS/GIS reaffirmed the army's preponderance, SAF did not hesitate to prepare the counterrevolution. Burhan's words on 25 October 2021 reflected the institutional logics and historical experiences highlighted in this article: duty commanded SAF to act in self-defence.

CONCLUSION

Kandil (2016: 230) reminds us: 'The false perception of a unified elite ruling under military tutelage is itself a constitutive element of regime resilience.' The imperative of deconstructing shifting power relations between the various pillars that have constituted authoritarian governments in post-1956 Sudan has guided this paper – a subject at once historical and of direct relevance today. Sudan's most recent coup ensued, to a considerable extent, from SAF's angst about state fragility, its old feud with the Left and ever-lurking institutional rivalries. These anxieties could have been instrumentalised by reformers and their international allies to drive a wedge between SAF and other security organs to begin to dismantle the police state and push for incremental but durable progress in institutionalising peace and reforming the political economy.

Highlighting the costs of the road not taken should of course not be construed as an apologia for SAF's devastating responsibility for post-independence calamities that have cost the lives of millions; there is no question that SAF's nation-building rhetoric and state-building identity have been self-serving. Yet as I have argued, thinking historically and sociologically about SAF is essential if hard-wired linkages between security competition, state fragility and military coups are to be overcome. By tracing these connections over time, this article has emphasised the institutional determinants of Sudan's December Revolution and its tumultuous aftermath. In doing so the paper has sought to contribute to broader scholarly conversations.

First, to understand an important cohort of armed forces on the continent as institutions with relative autonomy that possess historical memories, enduring interests and a corporate ethos that transcends the idiosyncrasies of individual commanders or societal impulses (Bienen 1980). These structure conflict and cooperation *within* regimes as well as broader state-society relations. SAF, like other armed forces around the continent, has faced internal rivalries, variegated ethnopolitical pressures and attempted instrumentalisation by different political parties – and to the extent that the Sudanese military has been studied, dominance of society over the army and resultant institutional incoherences have been emphasised (Bechtold 1975). And indeed, the attitudes of individual officers have differed regarding tribal militias, how to deal with civilian politicians and which foreign policy choices best buttress sovereignty – an observation as valid for the Burhan-led Sovereignty Council as it was during the Nimeiri or Al-Ingaz years. Yet as this article demonstrates, there is merit in thinking about the whole as meaningfully different from the sum of the institution's parts. This necessitates a longitudinal approach as well as greater attunement to ideological legacies, bureaucratic cultures and historical contingencies than game-theoretical approaches usually allow for (Tendi 2020). Doing so does not flatter army generals by ascribing unrealistic levels of coherence, historical consciousness or rationality to their decision-making. Rather, it recognises that their perceived interests and expressed preferences regarding revolutions and processes of state-building respond to older, path-dependent logics that circumscribe the realm of the possible for any generation of officers. Such behaviours can be interpreted as embodied practices that carry meaning, which generations of uniformed personnel have derived from operating in and through the Sudan Armed Forces as an autonomous social structure. Naturally, identifying with this institution has been materially valuable too – in Sewell Jr.'s classic formulation (1992: 26), 'Agents are empowered by structures, both by the knowledge of cultural schemas that enables them to mobilise resources and by the access to resources that enables them to enact schemas.'

Second, to reinsert the study of armed forces in the ironies, contradictions and dilemmas of state-building in Africa. Reflecting the reproduction of insecurity in Congo, Sierra Leone and Somalia, Keen's (2005) anti-Weberian 'sobels' argument has influenced how many African militaries are studied: scholars working in this vein underline how armies partner with the rebels they are supposed to fight and regularly change hats, blurring the civil–military

distinction as they pursue strategies of self-enrichment, status affirmation and/or survival (Reno 1995; Eriksson Baaz & Verweijen 2014). Yet the case of SAF underscores that the pendulum may have swung too far toward casting African armies as the gravediggers of any *raison d'état*. Many SAF strategic priorities have proven counterproductive but must nonetheless be understood in the context of real, recurrent fears about the fragmentation of sovereignty that help explain many of its initiatives in Sudanese politics. How armies navigate geopolitical ruptures and identify potential allies and enemies is rarely just a matter of democracy vs authoritarianism but often a function of deeper-lying anxieties in environments where the splintering of polities and national militaries is not merely a hypothetical scenario. This is especially pertinent in the Horn of Africa where the 1963 Organization of African Unity consensus to accept colonial boundaries was always tenuous at best and the redrawing of boundaries and creation of new states such as Eritrea, South Sudan and (de facto) Somaliland (Clapham 2017) is a lived reality that SAF must contend with in its short-term decision-making and longer-term strategic outlook.

This article therefore dovetails with recent scholarship that challenges the narrative of African militaries as driving forces in state *un*building. Securocrats play a major role in the attempted bolstering of internal and external sovereignty in some fractured African states; in such cases, 'the close integration of armed forces in political decision-making and tasks of domestic governance' reflects the imperative identified by political leaders and their military rivals-cum-partners that institutional cohesion is critical to extending durable order and that military organisation and means are better suited to the task than strictly civilian, liberal alternatives (Day *et al.* 2020: 167). This 21st century resurgence of 'militarism' in Africa seeks to buttress authority not only at home but also abroad through a securitisation of development (Fisher & Anderson 2015; Abrahamsen 2018). However, debates around militarism have remained focused on how armies such as the Ugandan People Defence Forces partaking in peacekeeping missions help incumbents neutralise domestic political threats rather than situating the professionalisation and internationalisation of militaries, and their deployment in the reorganisation of the commanding heights of the political economy (Behuria 2016; Sayigh 2021), as part of broader trajectories of 'illiberal state-building' (Jones *et al.* 2012). Complex histories such as SAF's, or that of the Rwandan Defence Force and the post-genocide state (Jowell 2014; Purdekova *et al.* 2018), invite us to rethink how security elites understand sovereignty and their own central role in processes of concentrating wealth and power not outside but *through* state institutions, believing the reinforcement of the army to be coterminous with the strengthening of political order.

Finally, the article calls for greater attentiveness to the pluralism of interests among state security organs as they compete for influence. Recent Africanist literature on authoritarian regimes has helpfully moved past debates about personal rule versus the instrumentalisation of dominant parties (Hassan 2022). However, most scholarship still gives analytical precedence to the incumbent's outlook and his survival chances (Meng 2020) and struggles to capture the

calculus of various coercive *institutions* which cannot be reduced to jockeying pitting the head of state against individual rivals. The problem of the power triangle is precisely that it is structural: power (im)balances between state security organs are continuously in flux and revolutions are merely times when rivalries acquire heightened visibility; from the standpoint of institutions such as SAF, there is much more at stake than the survival of any particular leader or regime. The flipside of the preoccupation with the latter has been the downplaying of how security competition between the army, paramilitary forces and intelligence services intersects with (inter)national politics to impact processes of democratisation, state formation and peacebuilding. As the case of Sudan demonstrates, the stakes of this neglect reach far beyond the Academy.

NOTES

1. Interview with retired Brigadier-General of SAF in Khartoum, March 2016.
2. Interview in Khartoum, February 2011.
3. Interview with Hassan Rizzig in Khartoum, June 2012.
4. The politics of the 'Memorandum of the Army' are still contested. Turabi's close aides saw the document as intended to primarily curtail them and to push through a bad peace deal negotiated in preceding months – interviews with Hassan Rizzig and Amin Hassan Omer, June 2012 and February 2016. However, other interviews conducted with numerous SAF officers suggest that it was institutional grievances – pertaining to the erosion of SAF's monopoly on violence and inability to defend itself against its enemies – that dominated the Memorandum of the Army and that it was the unwillingness of the Al-Mahdi government to address these specifically (rather than difficulties in reshuffling the cabinet) that led to the 30 June 1989 coup. This too was the defence proffered by Omar Al-Bashir in December 2022 at his trial facing charges of destroying the republic's constitutional order: <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/sudan-bashir-admits-role-in-1989-coup-4062526>.
5. Interview in Khartoum, December 2010.
6. Interviews in December 2010, July 2013 and March 2016 with a former HI secretary-general, a former chair of the Sudanese National Assembly Defence Committee and SAF officers serving in senior commands during the 1990s.
7. Interview in Addis Ababa, January 2014.
8. Interview in Khartoum, December 2010.
9. Interview in March 2016.
10. Interview with Colonel Khalid Sawarmi, June 2012.
11. Interview with a (now retired) SAF commander, June 2020.
12. Interview with a SAF general, June 2020.
13. Interview with a key foreign defence attaché, November 2020.
14. Interview with one of the five military members of Sudan's Sovereign Council, May 2021.
15. Interview in July 2020.
16. Interviews with SAF commanders from the parachute and armoured regiments, August–September 2020.
17. Interviews between January 2020 and August 2021 with numerous current or retired SAF officers, a former HI deputy secretary-general and two senior RSF officers.
18. Interview with a foreign defence attaché with deep institutional ties to SAF, November 2020.
19. Interview with a foreign defence attaché with deep institutional ties to SAF, November 2020; see also interview with a senior member of the Sudanese Navy, January 2021.
20. Interview with one of the five military members of Sudan's Sovereign Council, May 2021.
21. Interview with a confidante of the National Security Advisor of the UAE, June 2021.
22. Interview with a senior member of the Sudanese Navy, January 2021.
23. Interview with Ibrahim Al-Badawi, November 2021.
24. Interview with a member of the political bureau of the Sudan Communist Party, September 2020.
25. Interview with a retired Brigadier-General of SAF, January 2022.
26. Interview with a senior colonel and (former) defence attaché of Sudan in the Gulf, February 2022.
27. Interview with a former (Islamist) leader of the Khartoum University Student Union, November 2021.

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