



Justice Africa Sudan

Briefing

Sudan Proposed National Dialogue and the Challenges Ahead

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First: Introduction

Sudan is in urgent need of a genuine, inclusive, and representative national dialogue. Historically, Sudan was composed of multiple kingdoms and sultanates that were forcibly unified in 1821 by the Turko-Egyptian invasion, without consultation or consent from the different regions. During the independence process and throughout the post-independence period the political elites who inherited power from the colonial administration never asked Sudanese people what kind of country they wanted. Instead, they made decisions on behalf of the population, including failing to honour the promise of federal governance for Southern Sudan out of fear it might lead to separation. This position was shared across Sudan's major political parties, including left-leaning parties, which repeatedly promoted the slogan "No federation for one nation."

These choices were not accidental. They reflected a deliberate strategy to maintain strong central control and preserve the dominance of minority elites, whether under civilian or military rule. Since 1958, military interventions have repeatedly derailed democratic transitions often with the support of political elites who turned to the army whenever they could not secure their interests through democratic institutions.

Sudan's main political parties have historically been sectarian and ideological, and during the brief democratic periods, governance was largely top-down. Members of parliament often represented the interests of the centre more than their constituencies, and many candidates were selected by party leaders rather than local communities.

A persistent problem has been the way political elites respond to legitimate demands from peripheral regions. Instead of recognising rights or addressing grievances, they frequently deployed military force. When negotiating with armed movements, the approach has typically focused on offering rebel leaders' ministerial positions or personal incentives, while ignoring the root causes of conflict. This has produced new elites from the peripheries without resolving structural injustices.

These patterns reflect long-standing policies aimed at concentrating development, education, and services in the centre and the northern regions, while keeping peripheral populations deprived of opportunities and resources. People in these regions were often treated as sources of cheap labour in agriculture or as low-ranking soldiers in the military.

Sudan's current crisis cannot be understood without acknowledging this historical legacy. A credible national dialogue must confront these structural inequalities and ensure that all Sudanese especially those from the peripheries—have a meaningful voice in shaping the country's future.

Learning from Sudan recent political history any dialogue without ensuring the fulfilment of the prerequisite will not succeed as the dialogue must be inclusive allow all Sudanese regions to participate in all its stages and without influences of the ruling elites and in a democratic environment no dictator in power and security appraisal influencing the outcome and that first require silencing all the guns.

Second: Questions Need to Be Answered'

national dialogue is a country trying to talk to itself as means to build social contract and not to allow disagreement becomes violence again. For the dialogue to succeed first we need to find answers for some questions such as:

Who gets a seat? Who speaks for displaced people? Are armed actors represented differently from political parties? Do women and young people participate as decision-makers or as ceremonial observers? Who writes the agenda? What happens when one group refuses to attend? Does the dialogue make decisions, recommend them, or merely surface disagreement? And what institution is responsible the morning after a recommendation is announced?

how a broad domestic political conversation can convert exclusion, mistrust and unresolved conflict into an agenda, a process, decisions and an implementation path that ordinary institutions can inherit. Specially in a country which polarised and many mistrust among its inhabitants

National dialogue is fundamentally different from elite political negotiations. A peace negotiation can be narrow and technical: a small number of actors may need to agree on a ceasefire or transitional arrangements. A national dialogue, however, asks a broader and more important question: who else must be heard for the political order to become legitimate beyond the negotiating table?

A genuine national dialogue includes constituencies that are normally excluded from elite bargaining political parties, civil society, women's organisations, youth groups, traditional and religious leaders, business associations, professional unions, displaced communities, minorities, local authorities, victims' groups, and other social forces depending on the country's context.

There are many examples of national dialogues that helped countries move from conflict to stable constitutional orders. Several countries with complex social fabrics—tribal diversity, sectarian politics, ethnic and cultural pluralism have succeeded because they had political leaders willing to confront their foundational problems honestly.

A relevant example for Sudan is Ghana. Ghana once faced challenges similar to Sudan's: repeated military coups, authoritarian rule, severe economic crises, human rights violations, and deep political fragmentation. Yet Ghana managed to hold inclusive national dialogue processes that addressed core issues such as constitutional reform, civil-military relations, and democratic governance. These processes helped end the cycle of coups and laid the foundation for one of Africa's more stable political systems today.

The key difference is not the complexity of society—Sudan and Ghana both have diverse populations and histories of conflict. The difference lies in political leadership committed to genuine reform, and in the creation of inclusive, credible dialogue platforms that allowed citizens—not only elites—to shape the country's future.

Third: How Ghana has carried out national dialogue

Ghana is widely cited as a successful African example of national dialogue and consensus-building. While Ghana has not held a single “National Dialogue Conference” like Tunisia or Yemen, it has repeatedly used national dialogue mechanisms to manage political tensions and reform processes. These include:

1. National Peace Council (NPC) dialogues

The NPC regularly convenes multi-stakeholder dialogues involving political parties, traditional leaders, religious bodies, civil society, youth groups, and security agencies. These dialogues focus on election security, political reforms, and preventing violence.

2. Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC)

IPAC is one of Ghana’s most successful dialogue platforms. It brings together all political parties and the Electoral Commission to negotiate electoral reforms, resolve disputes, and build trust. This mechanism is credited with reducing election-related tensions and improving transparency.

3. Constitutional and governance reform consultations

Ghana’s constitutional review processes have involved broad public consultations, town halls, expert panels, and civil society dialogues. These processes helped build legitimacy and public buy-in for reforms.

Prerequisites for a successful national dialogue

Across Ghana and other countries, research identifies several critical conditions for national dialogue success:

1. Strong political will and elite commitment

Dialogue succeeds when political leaders agree on the need for peaceful resolution and reform.

2. Meaningful inclusion

Not just a large number of participants—real influence for:

- political parties
- civil society
- women and youth
- traditional/religious leaders
- displaced and marginalized groups

3. Clear representation rules

Transparent criteria for selecting delegates and ensuring they genuinely represent constituencies.

4. Public buy-in and transparency

Open communication, media engagement, and public information to build trust.

5. Clear agenda and process design

A structured agenda, clear decision-making rules, and defined outcomes.

6. Links to formal political processes

Dialogue must connect to constitutional reform, elections, transitional justice, or governance reforms otherwise outcomes remain symbolic.

7. National ownership with supportive external actors

External actors may provide technical or financial support, but the process must be nationally led.

Fourth: Why Ghana's approach is relevant for Sudan

Ghana's model shows that stable, repeated, inclusive dialogue platforms—not one-off conferences—build long-term trust. For Sudan, this suggests the importance of:

- a permanent national dialogue body
- structured political-party engagement
- strong civil society inclusion
- clear rules for representation
- transparent communication
- linkage to constitutional and governance reforms

Fifth: Conclusion

The current national dialogue exercise being promoted in Sudan established by a self-selected preparatory committee and sanctioned by the ruling military general who seized power through a coup lacks legitimacy and credibility. This same military takeover derailed the path toward a genuine democratic transition and ignited a devastating war that has displaced millions of Sudanese, collapsed the economy, deepened ethnic and tribal divisions, and fragmented the country into multiple competing authorities, each seeking recognition and political survival.

A dialogue process built on such foundations controlled by the very actors responsible for the crisis, excluding key constituencies, and operating in an environment of violence, fear, and authoritarian influence cannot succeed. It will inevitably fail to address Sudan's structural problems and will only prolong the suffering of the Sudanese people.

Sudan requires a truly inclusive, nationally owned, and independently facilitated dialogue, free from coercion and political manipulation, and grounded in democratic principles. Anything less will reproduce the same cycles of exclusion, mistrust, and conflict that have plagued the country for decades.

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