



Working for Peace & Rights

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Sudan's Current Crisis and the Imperative Role of Civil Society

1. Introduction

Sudan is undergoing one of the most dangerous and complex crises in its modern history. The collapse of the December 2018 transitional period following the October 2021 military coup, and the outbreak of war on 15 April 2023 between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), have plunged the country into unprecedented political, social, and humanitarian turmoil.

The conflict has deepened ethnic, tribal, and regional polarization, accelerated the proliferation of arms, and enabled the rise of numerous militias fighting alongside the warring parties. Many of these groups have committed widespread and systematic human rights violations.

Infrastructure across Sudan has been devastated. More than 10 million people have been displaced, and over 25 million are now in need of humanitarian assistance. The crisis is further compounded by drought, poor harvests, and looming famine at a time when international humanitarian organizations lack sufficient resources to meet the scale of needs.

In this context, Sudanese civil society should be a central actor in shaping pathways toward peace, justice, and democratic transformation. However, civil society itself has become fragmented, weakened, and increasingly vulnerable to political manipulation.

First Historical Analysis: Linking the 1985 and 2018 Civic Movements

Sudan's modern political history has been shaped by two major popular uprisings: the April 1985 Uprising and the December 2018 Uprising. While both succeeded in overthrowing authoritarian regimes, the nature, composition, and mobilization dynamics of the civic movements behind them were fundamentally different. Understanding these differences is essential for analysing the current crisis and the resilience of Sudan's civic actors.

1- The 1985 April Uprising: Organized Trade Union Leadership

The April 1985 Uprising was driven by a highly organized and structured civic movement, led by the Sudan Trade Union Alliance. At that time, Sudan's trade unions were strong, cohesive, and politically influential. They had clear leadership structures, nationwide networks, and the capacity to mobilize workers, professionals, and public sector employees.

Political parties also played a central role, joining the trade unions in coordinated strikes and mass demonstrations. This alliance between organized labour and established political forces gave the 1985 uprising a disciplined backbone and a unified strategic direction.

The strength of the trade unions meant that civic mobilization was institutional, centralized, and professionally coordinated, enabling the rapid collapse of the Nimeiri regime.

2. The December 2018 Uprising: A Popular, Youth-Led Movement

In contrast, the December 2018 Uprising emerged from a completely different social and political landscape. Decades of authoritarian rule under the National Islamic Front (NIF) and later the National Congress Party (NCP) had systematically dismantled Sudan's independent trade unions, replacing them with regime-controlled structures.

As a result, the 2018 uprising did not rely on traditional organized labour. Instead, it was:

- Initiated and led by youth,
- Driven by decentralized grassroots networks,
- Fuelled by regional protests outside Khartoum,
- Sustained by popular anger against corruption, repression, and economic collapse.

The uprising began in EL Damazin Blue Nile state and Atbara, Reiver Nile Gadar if, and other regions, then moved to Khartoum, culminating in the 25 December 2018 mass demonstration. Youth movements, neighbourhood resistance committees, and informal civic networks became the backbone of the revolution.

Despite facing the NCP's powerful security apparatus, youth demonstrated extraordinary resilience, political consciousness, and organizational creativity. Their determination became one of the defining strengths of the December Revolution.

3. Why the 2018 Civic Movement Resisted the 2021 Coup Unlike 1989

The nature of the 2018 movement explains why the 25 October 2021 coup faced immediate and widespread resistance.

In 1989, when the National Islamic Front (NIF) staged its coup, the civic movement was weakened. Although political forces had signed the Defence of Democracy Charter, the public response was muted. The government's poor performance and political fragmentation contributed to a neutral or passive popular stance, enabling the coup to consolidate power.

In 2021, the situation was entirely different:

- The youth-led civic movement had already developed strong networks through resistance committees.
- Political awareness among young people was significantly higher.
- The memory of the December Revolution was fresh and mobilizing.
- The public had no trust in military rule or Islamist political structures.

Therefore, unlike 1989, the 2021 coup was immediately rejected by the popular movement, which mobilized rapidly and forcefully. The resistance was not symbolic — it was sustained, organized, and nationwide.

4. Continuity and Change Across the Two Uprisings

The comparison reveals a clear historical trajectory:

Continuity

- Both uprisings were driven by widespread public dissatisfaction with authoritarian rule.
- Both succeeded in overthrowing entrenched regimes.
- Both demonstrated Sudan's long tradition of civic resistance.

Change

- 1985 relied on formal institutions (trade unions, political parties).
- 2018 relied on informal, decentralized, youth-led networks.
- 1985 was urban-centred; 2018 began in the regions and moved to Khartoum.
- 1989 coup succeeded partly due to civic fragmentation; 2021 coup failed to gain legitimacy due to civic cohesion and youth resistance.

5. Implications for the Present Crisis

The evolution from union-based mobilization (1985) to youth-based popular mobilization (2018) has reshaped Sudan's civic landscape. Today:

- Civic resistance is more decentralized but also more vulnerable to fragmentation.
- Youth networks remain the strongest force against authoritarianism.
- The legacy of 2018 continues to shape public rejection of military rule.

Understanding these historical dynamics is essential for designing strategies that strengthen civil society's role in peacebuilding, democratic transition, and resistance to authoritarian relapse.

If you want, I can now:

- integrate this section directly into your full policy document,
- expand it into a longer historical chapter,
- or turn it into a stand-alone analytical paper.

Just tell me which format you prefer.

Second: The Current State of Sudanese Civil Society

2.1 Fragmentation and Politicization

Sudanese civil society has increasingly mirrored the divisions created by the warring factions and political parties. Many organizations have aligned themselves with the narratives of conflict actors, engaging in mutual delegitimization rather than constructive engagement.

2.2 Proliferation of Diaspora Organizations

Hundreds of new civil society organizations have emerged in the diaspora. While some play meaningful roles, many operate primarily as donor-seeking entities focused on organizational survival rather than fulfilling the critical role needed to help Sudan navigate its dangerous trajectory.

2.3 Limited and Instrumentalized Participation

Civil society participation in peace efforts has been extremely limited. In rare instances where involvement was permitted, civil society actors were framed as representatives of negotiating parties rather than independent stakeholders. This approach has turned civil society organizations into part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

3. National Dialogue and the Reproduction of Past Failures

Recent calls for national dialogue — initiated by military leaders through the establishment of a self-selected “National Dialogue Preparatory Committee” composed largely of pro-war and pro-military figures have raised serious concerns. The initiative appears aimed at granting General Burhan greater legitimacy and international recognition, while paving the way for the return of the Islamic Movement, rejected by the December 2018 revolution.

This approach mirrors tactics previously used by the former National Congress Party (NCP), which mobilized Government Non-Governmental Organizations (GNGOs) to simulate civic representation. These efforts failed to secure legitimacy then, and they are unlikely to succeed now.

Simultaneously, armed movements have created their own civil society organizations to advocate for their political agendas. This has contributed to a hostile civic environment, including violent demonstrations in Europe, the United States, and Canada targeting leaders of the anti-war movement (Somod).

These dynamics are further complicated by the role of the Quintet and Quartet as mediators. Unfortunately, some members of these groups have attempted to influence outcomes by aligning themselves with warring parties, including providing financial and political support to selected civil actors to create an artificial sense of popular backing. At the same time, both SAF and RSF have mobilized their own supporters including journalists and media outlets causing significant damage to the civic space and undermining the independence of civil society.

4. The Core Gap: Absence of a Unified Civil Society Vision

The fundamental failure lies in the absence of a clear, comprehensive civil society vision addressing the central issues of Sudan’s crisis, including:

- Transition to just and sustainable peace
- Democratic transformation
- Separation of powers and institutional reform
- Human rights and accountability
- Civil and political liberties
- Cultural and economic rights

Without such a vision, civil society participation becomes symbolic, ineffective, and easily instrumentalized by political actors.

Sudan’s crisis is not the absence of negotiations — it is the absence of a coherent national vision capable of resolving the issues, combined with the absence of political will and the pursuit of narrow, self-serving agendas. Without this, future negotiations will be more complex, longer, and no more successful than previous attempts.

6- Civil Society as a Pillar of Peace and Democratic Transition

Civil society organizations working directly in conflict-affected areas — grounded in commitment to affected communities — can play a transformative role in shaping solutions. Their participation must be recognized as a **core pillar of dialogue**, not as a subordinate actor echoing the positions of others.

Civil society's independent role is essential for:

- Articulating community-driven priorities
- Ensuring accountability and justice
- Promoting inclusive political processes
- Protecting rights and freedoms
- Preventing elite-driven or partial settlements
- Advancing a comprehensive national vision for peace and democracy

Only through meaningful, independent civil society engagement can Sudan move toward a just peace and a democratic future.

7. Policy Recommendations

6.1 Rebuilding Civil Society Independence

- Establish a unified civil society platform independent of political parties and armed actors.
- Strengthen internal governance, transparency, and accountability within civil society organizations.
- Promote codes of conduct to prevent alignment with warring factions.

6.2 Enhancing Civil Society Capacity

- Invest in training on conflict analysis, mediation, negotiation, and transitional justice.
- Support community-based organizations in conflict-affected areas with resources and protection.
- Facilitate collaboration between diaspora organizations and local actors based on shared principles.

6.3 Ensuring Meaningful Participation in Peace Processes

- Advocate for civil society representation as an independent pillar in any peace or political process.
- Reject tokenistic inclusion under labels such as “stakeholders” or “friends of the movement.”
- Develop a unified civil society agenda for peace, justice, and democratic transformation.

6.4 Protecting Civic Space

- Document and expose violations against civil society actors.
- Advocate for international protection mechanisms for activists at risk.

- Promote non-violent civic engagement and counter hate speech and incitement.

6.5 Advancing a National Vision for Peace and Democracy

- Develop a comprehensive civil society roadmap addressing governance, justice, rights, and economic reform.
- Promote inclusive dialogue involving women, youth, displaced communities, and marginalized groups.
- Advocate for transitional justice mechanisms addressing atrocities committed during the conflict.

7. Conclusion

Sudan stands at a critical crossroads. The war has devastated the country, fractured its social fabric, and created one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. In this moment of profound danger, Sudanese civil society must reclaim its role as a central actor in shaping the country's future.

A unified, independent, and principled civil society is essential for advancing just peace, democratic transformation, and national reconciliation. Only through meaningful engagement grounded in community needs and protected from political manipulation — can Sudan move toward a future defined by justice, dignity, and sustainable peace.

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