

Conflict Weekly

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A brief review of conflict and peace processes across the world

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Intensifying political crisis in Sri Lanka, Communal tensions in Ethiopia, and 75 days of Ukraine war

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Sri Lanka witnessed violence, complicating the political and economic crises that the country is facing for the last one month. (Image Source: Daily Mirror)

COVER STORY

Sudan: Three years after Omar al Bashir

After the regime change in April 2019, which overthrew the Omar al-Bashir government, there was a hope that the country will slowly march into democracy and economic prosperity. However, the developments in Sudan since October 2021 have placed them in a situation that existed in 2019, with the rolling back of civilian rule within the transitional setups, military in political command, rampant economic crisis and widespread violence.

Sri Lanka: Political crisis intensifies, with violence across the country

In the news

On 10 May, Sri Lanka's president Gotabaya Rajapaksa urged the people to remain calm and stop violence and acts of revenge against citizens. He added: "All efforts will be made to restore political stability through consensus, within constitutional mandate & to resolve the economic crisis."

On 09 May, prime minister Mahinda Rajapaksha tendered his resignation. His tweet came hours after he urged the general public to exercise restraint.

Also, on 09 May, violence erupted as Mahinda Rajapaksha's supporters attacked the peaceful anti-government protestors. Sri Lanka imposed an indefinite curfew and called in the military to contain the violence. An arson attack destroyed Gotabaya's traditional home and shrine in Anuradhapura. Mobs also attacked the museum belonging to the Rajapaksas in their ancestral village of Meda Mulana.

On 6 May, Gotabaya declared another emergency in Sri Lanka for the second time in a month. His declaration came as the citizens' protests escalated and the trade unions held a massive hartal. The president's decision sparked reactions from protestors and opposition leaders.

Also, on 06 May, Sri Lanka's finance minister announced that the country had less than USD 50 million in usable foreign exchange reserves.

Issues at large

First, the protests turning violent. The protests took a violent turn as pro-government supporters attacked the protestors at protest sites. This led to a violent response on government property, buses, and other state-owned enterprises.

Second, the continuing political crisis. The protest groups are now diversified, with trade unions, priests, and left groups joining the demonstrations against the government. 26 cabinet members have resigned, while the opposition parties have filed a no-confidence motion in the Parliament.

Third, the worsening economic situation. With Sri Lanka's usable reserves falling to USD 50 million, it is on the brink of bankruptcy, and overall reserves crashed by 70 per cent in two years.

In perspective

First, the expanding profile of the protesters. There are Buddhist monks, Christian priests and party members joining the demonstrations. Hence, the demands are likely to expand.

Second, the protests remain leaderless, raising questions over sustainability if more people/groups join the protests. Third, the resignation of Mahinda Rajapaksa has raised questions over differences within the Rajapaksha family. Mahinda seems to be distancing from his brother Gotabaya. Gotabaya has been the focus of the protests and slogans since the economic crisis and his announcements of declaring emergencies in Sri Lanka. Fourth, an autocratic outcome. President Gotabaya called on the military and police to end the protests,

granting more power to intervene. Under the new outline, the police and the army could question people without arrest warrants. Thus, giving impetus to a stronger autocratic government supported by the military, which is likely to use state violence against protestors.

Ethiopia: Rising communal tensions

In the news

On 7 May, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet voiced her concerns regarding the recent clashes between the Muslim and Christian communities in Ethiopia's northwestern Amhara region. The Islamic Affairs Council of Amhara blamed heavily armed "extremist Christians" for the attack.

As on 11 May, the death toll remains unclear even a week after the violence. Gondar's Mayor Zewdu Malede, suggested an investigation team to address the situation. He added: "In my evidence, both Muslims and Christians lost their lives in the attacks."

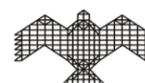
Issues at large

First, a brief background. Since 2018, after the victory of prime minister Abiy Ahmed dethroning 27 years of TPLF stronghold in Ethiopia, there has been a prolonged conflict between Tigrayan leadership and the federal government. Apart from different political interests, the contrast in the religious aspects have widened the polarization between the two communities. While Abiy is Pentecostal and a propagator of religious plurality, rebel groups from Ethiopia and Amhara are mostly followers of Christianity. Therefore, attacks on the minority Muslims on the grounds of rising Islamic extremism in Ethiopia has a political background.

Second, the exploitation of ethnoreligious space. The infiltration of different actors dominant in Christianity and Islam from Ethiopia's Amhara region, the Oromo Liberation army, and TPLF against the national army and Eritrean military add an important religious dimension to the conflict. Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers have often carried out deliberate looting and destroying of Christian and Muslim cultural heritage sites. For instance, the November 2020 massacre at the Aksun center of Christianity killed close to 800 civilians. Similarly, the historic Al-Nejashi Mosque was gunned down during another offensive. The already diversified identities get complicated with the further juxtaposition of separate ethnic identities like (Amhara, or Gondor) to existing religious connotations pushing back collectivism.

Third, growing extremism in Sub-Saharan Africa and Ethiopia. One of the biggest threats to Ethiopia is the rise of extremist tendencies centering on funded Wahhabism by massive oil wealth of Saudi Arabia. Ethiopia also plays between Riyadh and Tehran's primacy in the region with Eritrea previously being an Iran ally and Ethiopia for Saudi. Simultaneously, groups like ISIS and Al-Shabab have been active in Ethiopia's eastern borders over the last couple of years, thus furthering tensions.

Fourth, external influences. Turkey's restoration efforts of an ancient mosque and tomb along with the covert support for the Muslim Brotherhood's teachings harbors deep antagonism. Sudan was previously under the sharia law and Egypt had strong radical Islamic movements like Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Jihad. These countries are often blamed for backing the Islamic faction of rebels in Ethiopia and for promoting extremist religious vision amid the



conflict on the GERD project. Despite the 2000 Algiers Agreement and the 2018 Agreement, the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia remains a bloody wound due to ramping militarization and an increasing number of refugees causing ethnogenesis between the countries.

In perspective

First, Ethiopia currently faces acute food shortages, religious extremism, and political rebels raising concerns about human insecurity. Second, the role of Orthodox Christians and Muslims in polarizing the communities, playing the "us vs them" game against each other and simultaneously against the government can be seen as a collective of ethno-religious and security offshoots worsening the dire condition of Ethiopia. Third, corrective measures such as propagating inter-religious peace efforts and the practice of peaceful cohabitation need to be taken at the domestic level to avoid Ethiopia sliding into hate-filled chaos. The federal administration needs to have open lines of communication with the rebel and dominant religious groups to have an inclusive peace-building mechanism.

Ukraine: 75 days of the war

In the news

On 9 May, Russia observed Victory Day; President Vladimir Putin gave a speech drawing parallel between the current hostilities and World War Two. He called the war in Ukraine as a special military operation and said it was the right decision for a "strong and sovereign country." The day marks the offensives launched by Russia and the mass extraditions carried out due to Nazi crimes.

On 9 May, the US announced additional sanctions on Russia. It imposed sanctions on eight Sberbank, 27 Gazprom bank executives, Moscow Industrial Bank (MIB) and its subsidiaries. Along with this, the private defence company and weapons manufacturer Limited Liability Company Promtekhlogiya, and broadcasting stations such as One Russia, Television Station Russia-1 and NTV Broadcasting Company were also sanctioned.

On 6 May, US president Joe Biden announced the next round of security aid to Ukraine which will include "artillery munitions, radars and other equipment." Previously Congress had declared USD 13.6 billion as a military, humanitarian and economic aid.

On 4 May, the European Union announced their sixth round of sanctions, imposing oil embargo on Russia. The consent of all the member states is yet to be reached as Hungary, and other EU members dependent on Russian oil have rejected the proposed oil ban. Hungary's prime minister said that agreeing to the terms would be like an 'atomic bomb' on Hungary's economy, and added: "The proposal on the table now creates a Hungarian problem, and there is no plan to solve it."

Issues at large

First, increasing sanctions on Russia. Apart from the oil embargo, EU also proposes to sanction Russia's banking and broadcasting companies. The sanction plan does not limit to EU but extends to Japan, Singapore, Canada, Turkey and Switzerland.

Second, the shift in war towards the east. Russia's failure at Kyiv led to increased aggression in the Donbas region and Mariupol. In light of the 75 days of the war, Russia continues to

launch attacks in the east, capturing Mariupol, and several villages along the eastern flank of the country. The recent missile strikes in Odessa prompts speculation of shift in the focus from occupying Mariupol to establishing control over the strategically important Black Sea port of Odessa.

Third, the divide within Europe. EU's proposal on oil embargo has received mixed responses. Despite the exemption of one year to cut down the Russian energy imports, Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic have demanded a full exemption due to no alternate source.

In perspective

Europe being the largest market for Russia, EU's newest set of sanctions if passed will cause severe damage to Russia's oil refineries. Second, EU's internal divide; if the deliberations with Hungary fail, the initiative taken to impose the embargo will have an impact.

Also, from around the world

By Padmashree Anandhan, Sruthi Sadhasivam, Vijay Anand Panigrahi, and Sejal Sharma

East and Southeast Asia

Taiwan: Avoids purchase of the US anti-submarine warfare helicopters

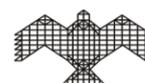
On 5 May, Taiwan rejected plans of procuring 12 "MH-60R anti-submarine helicopters" from the US as it involves high-cost. In a statement, Taiwan's defence minister, Chiu Kuo-cheng said: "The price is too high, beyond the scope of our country's ability." The move comes in the aftermath of the US stalling its USD 750 million arms sale to Taiwan. Previously, eight Chinese naval warships swept across Taiwan's northeast region. Furthermore, the acquisition of M109A6 Medium Self-Propelled Howitzer artillery systems and mobile Stinger anti-aircraft missiles from the US also got belated due to strained supply induced by the Ukraine war.

Taiwan: China's warfare aircraft patrols airspace

On 3 May, China's "Y-8 anti-submarine warfare aircraft" encroached on Taiwan's air defence identification zone, hovering across Formosa region and Taiwan controlled Dongsha Islands in South China sea. A similar aircraft was found patrolling the region during April, with opposing narratives over the aircraft encountering a misadventure. On 26 April, The Chinese military had conducted "flight training" for the Y-8 warfare aircrafts, indicating that the aircraft was operative. Previously, only Z-9 and the Ka-28 anti-submarine warfare helicopters were emplaced.

South Korea: First Asian country to join NATO's cyber defence cooperative

On 5 May, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) became a member of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE). Of the 32 members of the cyber defence cooperative, South Korea is now the first Asian entrant. South Korea introduced its first National Cybersecurity Strategy in 2018 and proffered its application to join CCDCOE in 2019. This association was met with serious remarks from the Chinese media as The Global Times editor called it a hostile move towards the neighbours that could lead to a Ukraine-like situation. However, South Korea has been a recipient of frequent cyberattacks with most of them originating in China or North Korea itself.



North Korea: Ballistic missile fired into the sea, claim South Korea and Japan

On 7 May, North Korea fired a projectile into the sea, which Japan and South Korea suspected to be a Submarine-launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM). South Korea alleges that the missile was launched to warn before the investiture of their new President, Yoon Seok-you, who is observed to have a stern stance against North Korea. Japan also expressed its concern over North Korea's recent interest in empowering their nuclear technology and its continuous launch of ballistic missiles. South Korea's National Intelligence Service also hinted at the possibility of another nuclear test by North Korea before Biden visits Seoul. US President Joe Biden will be visiting Seoul for a summit with the new South Korean President on 21 May.

South Asia

India: Call for industrialised nations to lead the financial battle against climate change

On 8 May, the Union Environment Minister of India, Bhupender Yadav stressed the need for the western industrialized nations to lead the fight against climate change by taking up most of the financial load associated with it. While addressing a conference in Chandigarh, the minister emphasized that India's per capita carbon emission is among the world's lowest. He further added that India has the world's largest number of forest-dependent communities, and therefore the western ideas of conservation can severely affect the local population as they overlook them. Apart from this, he also spoke of equitable allocation of responsibilities and the necessity of balancing between industrialization and preservation of the environment for countries like India.

Afghanistan: Taliban orders women to wear a hijab

On 7 May, the Taliban announced that it was mandatory for the women in Afghanistan to wear a Hijab. The Taliban's Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice issued a decree that includes criminal punishment for the offenders of the prescribed dress code for women. The decree entails that the women who violate the dress code, their male guardians would be prosecuted. It's the first time under this regime that the Taliban have included a punishment with laws restricting women's freedom. The new law sparked widespread outrage by the Afghan women and activists who urged the international community to stand with them and take decisive actions against the Taliban.

Central Asia, Middle East and Africa

Armenia: Protesters call for the resignation of the prime minister

On 4 May, the protesters continued to demand the resignation of the prime minister Nikol Pashinian escalated. Several got apprehended in the wake of violent confrontation with the nation's police officers across the Parliament. The contestations were chiefly directed by the erstwhile presidents namely Robert Kocharian and Serzh Sarkisian belonging to opposition parties, Hayastan and Pativ Unem groups. However, the civilians deeply detest these opposition leaders as they offer no constructive solution to the conundrum.

Kyrgyzstan: Border guards start firing at Uzbek-Kyrgyz border, 3 killed

On 5 May, the Kyrgyz border guard officials shot down three people in the Jalal-Abad area, across the Ferghana Valley. The culprits, a father and his two sons were caught sneaking sizeable amount of goods and were fired in the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border region. In their Telegram channel, Uzbekistan's border security service said: "three people were shot in a border incident when they allegedly were involved in a smuggling operation." They claimed that the security guards were compelled to fire the miscreants due to latter's violent endeavours. Following the border shootings, the local heads of the two countries conferred about the incident.

Turkmenistan: New norms for policing women

On 4 May, in the absence of formal laws, local institutions enforced stringent prohibition on close fitting clothes for women and forbade them from using artificial beauty products. Additionally, women were fired from their jobs for having undertaken cosmetic surgeries like "breast implants", "eyebrow microblading" and "lip fillers". Furthermore, men unrelated to the concerned woman were barred from being chauffeurs. The women found defying these norms were dragged to police stations and fined USD 140, amounting to a monthly salary of a regular Turkmen civilian. These rules have been imposed after President Serdar Berdimukhammedov came to power.

Libya and Syria: The US reports on Russia's usage of mercenaries in Ukraine

On 8 May, the US defence department published reports stating Russia has been using mercenaries from Libya and Syria in the Ukraine war. US defence official stated: "Russian mercenary company Wagner Group has been operating in Donbas and they use Syrian and Libyan fighters." Putin also stated that 40,000 Syrian fighters have volunteered to support Russia. Although Russia boasts of strength in numbers, its fighters have not been able to take over Kyiv. Putin in the wake of setbacks, has withdrawn 200 Wagner Group mercenaries and 1,000 Syrian mercenaries in the last week.

Syria: Children suffer as international aid dwindles

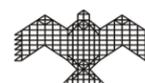
On 8 May, UNICEF and the UN reported that since the war began in 2011, more than 6.5 million children in Syria have been affected and require aid to survive. The number touches 12.3 million when refugees and children who fled to neighbouring countries are added. UNICEF stated: "Syria's children have suffered for far too long and should not suffer any longer." Despite children in poverty growing in number, the funds received are dwindling. UNICEF budgeted USD 20 million to fund "cross border operations" in northwest Syria, however it has received less than half of its requirements. Prices of basic needs have also increased because of the Ukraine war. The UN stated: "among the most vulnerable, children are bearing the brunt of the war's effect."

Yemen: Saudi releases prisoners to the Houthis

On 6 May, the Saudi-led coalition and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has transported 120 prisoners to Yemen in an attempt to maintain the UN-led truce. Among the list of detainees, the Houthis stated it contained prisoners unknown to them so 108 detainees were flown to Aden while 9 were led to the Houthis in Sanaa. The Houthis have refused to take in the prisoners flown to Aden. This is the most significant prisoner exchange since 2020 and this exchange is expected to maintain peace in a war-torn Yemen.

Syria: Videos of Tadamon massacre surface exposing atrocities

In April 2022, footage of the Tadamon massacre of 2013 carried out by militias loyal to Bashar al-Assad surfaced depicting the atrocities committed. The footage captured by the perpetrators themselves shows 41 civilians being shot, their bodies piled in a pit and set on fire. The incident happened at Nisreen Street, a stronghold of Shabiha (militias that are sponsored by Assad) in the wake of the Arab Spring protests. Syrian Human Rights monitors state that incidents like these were common and undiscovered at the time. Many families who tried to cross checkpoints in Southern Damascus were either executed or went missing with no traces to this day. The families of the victims of the Tadamon massacre are not willing to come forward and claim their loss due to fear of violence by militias.



Burkina Faso: 50 terrorists killed in two operations

On 10 May, the military issued a statement reporting the execution of 50 terrorists in two operations carried out on 9 May. The military had conducted the operations in a surprise attack in the northwest near the border with Mali. As per the statement, the commando unit had launched an attack in the southwest near the border with Ivory Coast.

Democratic Republic of the Congo: 14 killed in suspected militia attack

On 10 May, an army spokesperson reported on 14 people who had been killed in a militia attack on a camp for displaced persons in eastern Ituri. The Kivu Security Tracker confirmed the same and the president of a civil society groups' association found that most victims to be children. Blaming the Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO) militia for the attack, the association president said: "It's shocking to see children chopped up by machetes." The attack comes less than a week after over 30 were killed in a similarly which is suspected to be carried out by the CODECO militia - on a mining encampment.

Zimbabwe: Human-elephant conflict claims 60 lives

On 10 May, a government spokesperson tweeted that the human-elephant conflict had claimed 60 lives and injured 50 people, until May 2022. In 2021, 72 people had lost their lives. The news report quoted wildlife expert Tinashe Farawo who maintained that the conflict is likely to increase as the herds will begin to move searching for food and water in the dry season.

Europe and the Americas

The UK: Rejects the EU's plan for NI protocol

On 11 May, the UK rejected the proposal offered by the EU to decrease the impacts of the post-Brexit treaty on trade in Northern Ireland. The reason for the rejection was that the plans would worsen the situation and current trading agreements. The protocol which played a key role in Northern Ireland's election was accepted by every majority except DUP, which did not nominate ministers due to the same. Foreign secretary Liz Truss said that she would not shy away from finding a solution to stabilise the situation in NI. The UK demanded fundamental changes in the treaty as it wants to remove checks on the goods that stay in NI. It also said that it would deplete the market of the small products.

Russia: Defence Ministry claims to have hit Western military equipment

On 8 May, Russia's defence ministry spokesperson Igor Konashenkov mentioned that the army was able to use high-precision air-to-surface missiles to hit Western military equipment at the Sol railway station. Russia claims to have also killed a few armies reserves of the Ukrainian military. On 7 May, the armed forces stated that they used Iskander missiles to eliminate Ukrainian troops and weapons supplied by the US and the EU. Konashenkov mentioned that the 58th mechanized infantry brigade of Ukraine's armed forces were eliminated using the high precision missiles near the stations of Krasnograd and Karlovka.

Europe: Three new countries join NATO CCDCOE for their cyber defence

On 6 May, Canada, South Korea and Luxembourg joined the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Center of Excellence. This organisation's main goal is to safeguard its members as well as NATO nations from cyber security threats and support them with their expertise in digital defence. To mark the occasion of the three countries joining NATO CCDCOE, a ceremonial flag hosting took place at its headquarters in Tallinn, in which representatives from the three nations as well as Estonian officials also attended. They focus on training, exercises, applied research, analysis, information sharing, etc. in the field of cyber security and defence. All three countries are pleased to strengthen their cooperation in the cyber sector and raise

awareness about it. The organisation also combats any cyber threats and tries to prevent them. It gives a 360-degree look at cyber defence and shares its expertise with its member nations.

Europe: NATO to consider Sweden's application

On 5 May, NATO is looking forward to increasing its presence in the Baltic region. The potential application of Sweden to join NATO is being processed. Sweden and Finland are considering joining the alliance after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 even though prior to that they stayed outside NATO. Both countries are seeking military security assurances from NATO. The process for them to join NATO would take them a year. NATO is highly obligated to guarantee Sweden's security if it plans to join the alliance. Russia had already threatened both the countries of the consequences if they join the alliance.

Colombia: Anti-rioting operation against cartel intensifies

On 9 May, an extra 2000 military and police personnel were dispatched to help suppress riots organised by the Gulf Clan cartel. During violent protests against their leader's extradition on Friday, gang members wrecked at least 100 automobiles. They also threatened people, telling them to return home. An "armed strike" was announced for four days in the northern part of the country, which has affected nearly 90 municipalities in nine of Colombia's 32 departments. There have been no recorded casualties.

New Mexico: Warning issued for worsening wildfire conditions

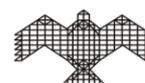
On 8 May, the fire raging in Hermit Peaks for the past month was expected to turn into a devastating wildfire in the coming week. Winds, near-record high temperatures, and dry conditions are predicted to fuel the fire which has engulfed more than 691 square kilometres of land. Thousands of people have been evacuated, while several families have been displaced. The initial fire has been traced to have started on 6 April as a preventive burning by a US Forest Service to minimise flammable vegetation, which went on to merge with another wildfire in the area. President Joe Biden has declared the condition a major disaster and has mobilised federal resources, including financial relief for those affected.

The US: White House appoints first black press secretary

On 6 May, Karine Jean-Pierre was appointed as President Joe Biden's new chief spokesperson, making her the first black, openly gay person to hold the position. On 13 May, She is expected to take over the office of outgoing press secretary Jen Psaki. The historic news highlights a Biden administration that has prioritised putting black women in positions of power, despite their status as an important but politically invisible portion of the Democratic Party coalition. She is deemed to join other recently appointed black representatives in prominent positions of power

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COVER STORY

Sudan: Three years after Omar al Bashir

Shaji S



A young Sudanese woman shouting chants in the anti-government protest in Khartoum. (Image Source: The Independent/Twitter)

Sudan, three years after Omar al Bashir

Sudan, a North African State, has witnessed unprecedented political upheaval since October 2021. This is in continuation to April 2019 developments when Omar al-Bashir, the ruler of a long-standing dictatorial regime, stepped down from Presidency. The regime change brought hope, both at the international and national levels, that the transitional government[i] under Abdella Hamdok and a future government in power through elections would change Sudan's destiny. As part of the Agreement, a transitional government took office on 17 August 2019. However, despite the promises, the transition government reverted to the lame-duck situations due to immense power rivalry and opportunistic military interventions. The recent overthrow of Prime Minister Hamdok, his reinstatement and subsequent resignation, and the parallel wave of protests brought Sudan back where it was before April 2019. These developments impel one to have a fleeting glance at Sudan's political history, beginning with its independence from Britain and Egypt.

The current crisis in Sudan is part of a larger trend; since the 1950s, the country has been witnessing civil wars, violence and suppression of rights, and the stifling of democracy. Sudan has had a history of military coups. Out of the total 16 coups since its independence in 1956, around five military coups were successful. The country was under military rule for 52 years

out of 65 years of its independent existence. The most notable feature about Sudan is the consistent grip of civil war except during 1972-1983.

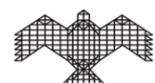
In 1983, Northern Arabs in Sudan imposed the Islamic Sharia law across the country (even in areas where the majority of the inhabitants were non-Muslims), leading to friction and tension between the Arabs in the North and Animists and Black Christians (practicing traditional religions) in the South. The Southern population, led by the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the mainstream rebel group, resisted and took up the cause of people of South Sudan, that ultimately led to the bifurcation of the country into two - Sudan and South Sudan in 2011. The referendum held under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) in 2010 paved the way for the partition of the country. During the decades-long civil war, around two million people died, four million were uprooted, and 6,00,000 people fled the country (UNIMS, 2022). [ii] In addition, over 1.5 million people perished due to the famine.

Meanwhile, the discovery of oil strengthened the Sudanese economy, at certain levels and at another level, intensified the civil war. The involvement of multinational oil corporations, especially from the West, at the beginning of the millennium and their entanglements within the Sudanese political system vitiated the domestic situation. They had to withdraw following the clamour from civil society organizations, and human rights organizations. To a large extent, the vacuum created by the western companies was filled by Asian corporations from China, India and Malaysia. Even these countries were dragged into the crossfire of civil war.[iii] However, the oil economy of Sudan declined after the partition of the State since a large portion of the oil resources went to the newly created South Sudan, though Sudan continued to generate and receive a certain amount of revenue emanated from the transportation of the oil to the major port - Port Sudan on the Red Sea on the Sudanese coast.[iv] Notwithstanding the partition, Sudan still experiences conflicts in the Darfur[v] region, the western part of the country. Having outlined the background to the current crisis in Sudan, one needs to understand the strategic significance from the standpoints of global and regional contexts.

I

Sudan: A State with extreme strategic significance

Sudan is a prominent state in North Africa, otherwise known as Maghrib Africa and attained its independence on 1 January 1956, from Britain and Egypt. Sudan represents an Afro-Arab society and shares borders with nine states with an area of 2,505,810 sq. km, making it the largest state in Africa and the Arab world. The White Nile, whose course is through the middle of the country, merges with the Blue Nile at Khartoum-Sudan's capital, one of the most prominent rivers in Africa. Sudan is surrounded by Libya, Chad, Ethiopia, Egypt, Eritrea, Uganda, Central African Republic, Congo and Kenya. Geographically, Sudan is closer to West Asia, which deepens the country's importance to both West Asia and North Africa (West Asia and North Africa-WANA region). Sudan's proximity to the Suez Canal makes it a critical geographical site of commerce, trade and geostrategic issues; also, the major port - Port Sudan, is positioned on the Red Sea (90 per cent of Sudan's external trade operates through Port Sudan). In addition, Sudan has a long coastline of 700 km on the Red Sea, thereby making it an opening point to the north, east and central Africa. Sudan assumes a strategic role in the Horn of Africa and on the Red Sea, which witnesses 30 per cent of global container ship traffic and around 12 per cent of the global trade.



II Sudan's political churning Since 2019

In April 2019, when Omar al Bashir was removed from power after three decades (1989-2019), through massive protests, there was hope that the country would finally adopt democracy as one could witness its flashes during the Arab Spring days in North Africa. The 'African Renaissance', which was transcending on the African horizon for some time with the promise of democratisation and economic progress, hit the roadblock in Sudan, at least for the time being. The key developments since October 2021 show that the democracy initiative of the interim transitional government was merely superficial, and promises made were utterly hollow.

After the overthrow of the Bashir regime, a transitional arrangement was installed, involving Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) and the military, by forming a coalition government in August 2019. In the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Bashir regime, the military leaders who were leading the Supreme Council and the government, led by Abdella Hamdok, managed the transition arrangements reasonably well for quite some time; later, they turned hostile to each other on different issues, including economic issues which confront the nation in a significant fashion. On the one hand, the transition government also promised elections in July 2021 (which was not realized). On the other hand, the military wanted to postpone the elections by a year. On 25 October 2021, Prime Minister Hamdok was overthrown through a military coup, led by Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, the military chief of the Sudanese Armed Forces. Interestingly, the military cited the economic crisis as its intervention.

Once in power, the military Chief dissolved the government and the Supreme Council. However, after the coup in October 2021, widespread protests, spearheaded by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), which included doctors, nurses, teachers and so on, erupted across the country; the government of Abdella Hamdok was reinstated in November 2021 through an interim agreement. Notwithstanding the reinstatement, there was criticism that Hamdok compromised on certain provisions of the deal, which gave enormous power to the military, to control the supreme council. It was a fragile compromise agreement between Hamdok and the military. Finally, Hamdok resigned on 2 January 2022, citing the deadlock and inability to run the government.

Though the protesting groups lost more than seventy people in the first three months (after 25 October till 2 January 2022) to the violence and military actions, their resolve to oust the military from the country's political processes is strengthening day by day. The international community led by the United Nations (UN) and the Western States are intervening in Sudan, first by the United States blocking the financial assistance to the tune of USD 700 million, which was promised after the fall of the Bashir regime for the re-building of the nation, and then by European Union and the other Western States. The African Union (AU), Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) are at the forefront of striking negotiations and reconciliations, but the progress is slow.

Meanwhile, following the ouster of the Hamdok government, the military regime has been under tremendous pressure from the international community. Though certain powers like China continue to be engaged in Sudan with the policy of 'non-intervention', with an approach of 'ready to negotiate for peace-building', Western States are not willing to recognize the

political change in Sudan; this could have serious economic implications for the country. Emerging powers like India had already withdrawn from the Sudanese oil sector, a major area of economy, much before the military coup in October 2021, citing a lack of cooperation in Sudan (though India had long successful cooperation in the Sudanese oil economy through ONGC-VL since 2003).

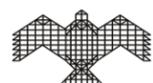
However, the western blockades and collapse or slowing down of negotiations could have serious repercussions on Sudan. The people in Sudan have mobilized all sections of the society and are tagitating to overthrow the military, irrespective of the violence unleashed by the military. The military might employ different strategies, including aligning with other non-western powers like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and so on, to offset the restrictions put forth by the Western powers, led by the US. The UN and African multilateral interventions in long as the State assumes a strategic role in Horn of Africa and the the Sudanese crisis is a welcome step in the right direction The world cannot afford to throw Sudan into an absolute political instability for on the Red Sea as mentioned earlier. In the political sphere, pulling back Sudan on the promised democracy course is a long haul, especially amid the backsliding of democracy in Africa in contemporary times. In general, authoritarianism and anti-democratic trends were quite visible across the African continent in 2021, with at least four states showing a return to non-democratic regimes such as Chad, Guinea, Mali and Sudan.

III

Sudan after the resignation of Hamdok: Key Developments

The developments in Sudan in the last six months have attracted global attention, first for the overthrow of the government of Hamdok on 25 October 2021 and his reinstatement on 21 November 2021; later, his resignation on 2 January 2022 and then the willingness of Forces of Freedom and Change (CFF), the civil society leadership, to negotiate with the military government, led by General Abdel Fattah Al Burhan, under the auspices of the UN from 8 January 2022. Hamdok's resignation and dissolution of the coalition government hampered the possibility of democratization, as promised in the deal between the military and civil society after the fall of the Bashir regime in 2019. Of late, UN-facilitated Consultations on Political Process for Sudan (CPSS), a new process, was set in motion to negotiate among various stakeholders to find a solution to the current wave of crisis in Sudan. Developments in Sudan that started with the 25 October military coup after the promise (transitional government made) to the country to show in democracy have disappointed people and Africa observers alike.

Hamdok's resignation has led to a spate of violence and protest across the country, with CFF leading the agitation for the restoration of democracy and the holding of the promised elections. The Doctors Union and several other professionals' groups have joined CFF in their protest against the military takeover. Around 1000 people have been detained since the current crisis unfolded since October 2021. [vi] Simultaneously, the high-profile members of Bashir's party, the National Congress Party (NCP), were released from the jail to take up significant positions in the government to quell the violence. One such member is Ibrahim Grandour, the former Foreign Minister of al Bashir regime. However, the protest against the military government continues unabatedly, led mainly by neighbourhood resistance committees. The new demands also include a transitional government headed by a prime minister elected by the resistance committees, and restructuring the country's military and security structure and leadership.



Apart from the political crisis and protests in Khartoum, clashes have erupted in El Geneina, the capital of Darfur, between non-Arab Massalit community and Arab fighters which left around 200 people dead. [vii] This incident surfaced when Internal Criminal Court began the trial of a key accused – Al Muhammad Ali Abd-al-Rahman, for the crimes committed by the militia Janjaweed, against the common people in the Darfur region twenty years ago. Massive sexual crimes, committed by Janjaweed are one of the serious allegations against Abd-al-Rahman, apart from mass killings and torture. This is the first major trial, being taken up by ICC on the genocide accusation in Sudan. Former leader Omar-al Bashir is under house arrest after he was removed from power (whom ICC had indicted earlier) and is to face trial at ICC for the crimes like genocide.

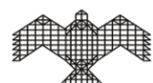
In the social front, around 20 million people are likely to go hungry in Sudan due to violence and Russia-Ukraine crisis, according World Food Programme. [viii] It is to be noted that Sudan imports more than 80 per cent of wheat from Ukraine and Russia. The price rise is at an all-time high. Apart from this, there is serious economic crisis that is currently ongoing with inflation at 260 per cent and depreciation of 26 per cent of the national currency (since October 2021).[ix] The Western aid and lending agencies have paused the flow of aid to Sudan to the tune of \$ 1.4 Bn.[x] All these developments have made the United Nations (UN) Envoy to warn recently that ‘Sudan is heading for an ‘economic and security collapse’ unless it addresses the political paralysis following the coup’.[xi]

IV Concluding remarks

In fact, Sudan, a State which witnessed enormous degree of political churning process in the last decade has been aspiring for durable peace. A generation old civil war in the country ended with the division of country into two States in 2011 - Sudan and South Sudan, though violence in Darfur in Western Sudan, continue to be active in the country. After the regime change in April 2019 which overthrew the Omar al-Bashir government, there was a hope that country will slowly march into democracy and economic prosperity. The transitional governance arrangements were made through negotiations and compromises, strengthening a strong belief among the people of the country who suffered decades long crisis and pain that elections and new constitutional mechanism would usher them into a new era, like the promises embedded in Arab Spring. However, the developments in Sudan since October 2021 have placed them in a situation that existed in 2019, with the rolling back of civilian rule within the transitional setups, with military in political command, rampant economic crisis and widespread violence. The rebuilding of Sudan which unravelled after the entry of transitional government has come to a halt with the withdrawal of aid from the West which in a way can deepen the problems of people significantly. The continued violence on the part of regime, resurfacing of Darfur civil war, along with economic crisis (caused due to internal and external factors), unless dealt with comprehensively, can lead to a security, political and economic collapse which bodes ill for the peace in the region and the world at large.

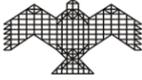
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- [iii] Sometime before the partition of Sudan into two States, there was a complaint that 60 per cent income emerged out of oil trade went into arms purchase which intensified the civil war. Please refer to: “Sudan: Oil Companies Complicit in Rights Abuses”, <http://www.hrw.org/africa/sudan.php>, Accessed on 20th May 2007
- [iv] The partition of Sudan in 2011 into two nation-states posed new challenges as oil fields are largely concentrated in South Sudan (upstream activities) while oil infrastructure and other business/development projects are heavily concentrated in the North Sudan.
- [v] As the conflict between North and South began to decline in the first decade of the century, a new one began in the Western State of Darfur between Non-Arab Communities and Janjaweed, a militia supported by al-bashir Government. The militia was accused of ethnic cleansing which al-Bashir Government (at that pointed in time denied). Several thousands of people have died and several others fled the region for the fear of violence.
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