



U.S. Support for Democratic Openings in Conflict-Affected Countries: Lessons From Ethiopia and Sudan

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Summary

Ethiopia and Sudan experienced historic democratic openings in 2018 and 2019, respectively. The openings presented rare opportunities for the United States government to support democratization and benefit from deepened relations with two of the largest states in the Horn of Africa, a geostrategically significant region abutting the Red Sea and a critical maritime route for global trade. Ultimately, the openings in Sudan and Ethiopia failed to lead to democratic consolidation, and the countries descended into civil wars. The U.S. government missed opportunities to support peaceful democratic change and did harm by exacerbating conflict drivers through exclusionary and short-sighted policies. Meanwhile, emerging middle powers with authoritarian governments have succeeded in expanding their influence in Ethiopia and Sudan.

Given the global democratic recession, the United States must do better at seizing windows of opportunity for democracy. Democratic openings are worthy of increased U.S. commitment because they are driven by local political will for change. While there are limits on what the U.S. government can reasonably do to increase the likelihood of democratization, it can have a positive impact on democratic openings if lessons from these cases are internalized. As the United States looks ahead to support future democratic openings, it should consider the following principles.

Align policy to the degree of high-level U.S. commitment. In an era of democratic recession, inconsistent U.S. support for democracy leads to flawed and at times harmful policies, missed opportunities, and reputational risks. Washington should upgrade its commitment to democracy, and where it chooses not to, it should set realistic goals and transparently communicate them.

Factor in the role of emerging powers. U.S. policymaker's analyses should factor in the increasingly determinative interests of external actors and, where relevant and possible, encourage these actors to restrain policies that undermine democratization. Conversely, if the United States chooses not to encourage restraint by an emerging power due to countervailing interests, officials should acknowledge this and calibrate commitments to democratic reformers, otherwise they risk contradictory policies.

Recognize underlying structural factors. U.S. strategy should be grounded in analysis of the country's structural factors that predate the democratic opening and how they change throughout the transition. Ignoring structure leads to unrealistic expectations, misreading of stakeholder decisions and key developments, and policies that are irrelevant at best and harmful at worst.

Prioritize inclusivity. Policies and programming in democratic openings should elevate inclusion as a foundational principle. The potential for the United States to do harm is high when it intentionally or unknowingly exacerbates exclusion, which can drive violence and undermine sustainable change.

Introduction

Confronted by a global democratic recession and pressing challenges from autocratic powers, U.S. policymakers feel a sharp imperative to support democratic openings¹ when they do occur. Supporting democratic openings, however, is exceedingly difficult, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states. Countries embarking on democratic reform face the seemingly insurmountable task of delivering seismic political and economic improvements while maintaining stability and fostering peace, all within a short window of time. For its part, the U.S. government finds its ability to support peaceful democratic change during these windows of opportunity challenged by the changing global balance of power and the fact that its interest in supporting democracy abroad often runs up against countervailing economic and security interests.

Ethiopia and Sudan experienced historic democratic openings in 2018 and 2019, respectively. The openings presented rare opportunities for the United States to support democratic reform in two sizeable countries with histories of authoritarian governments. The United States also stood to gain significantly from deepened relations with more democratic versions of Ethiopia and Sudan: The two countries are geostrategically significant in the Horn of Africa, which abuts the critical economic corridor of the Red Sea, and are increasingly in the orbit of China, Russia, and Gulf states. However, in both cases, the openings failed to lead to democratic consolidation, and the countries descended into civil wars. Today, U.S.-Ethiopia relations are stable but tense, and in Sudan, the United States has been the focus of criticism over its attempts to mediate between warring factions. Meanwhile, emerging middle-power autocracies, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have expanded influence in the two countries.

While there are limits to what the U.S. government could have reasonably done to increase the likelihood of democratization in Ethiopia and Sudan, the United States missed opportunities to support peaceful democratic change and did harm by exacerbating conflict drivers through exclusionary and short-sighted policies. The United States does not bear responsibility for the failure of Ethiopia and Sudan to transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The likelihood of democratization in both cases was low, and the contexts were conflict prone. However, the United States was a prominent external actor in both contexts with a stated policy of supporting the consolidation of the democratic openings, so examining lessons learned is critical for future opportunities. This paper examines U.S. policy toward Ethiopia and Sudan during their democratic openings, which are defined as the period from the change in leadership to the outbreak of civil war in November 2020 in Ethiopia and the coup in October 2021 in Sudan. The paper draws from numerous interviews with U.S. government officials, nongovernment analysts and experts, analysis by informed scholars and journalists, as well as the author's own experience working in the U.S. government on political transition support programming.

The U.S. responses to democratic openings in Ethiopia and Sudan reveal four key lessons that could be applied by policymakers devising and executing responses in similar contexts in the future. The first—on commitment to democracy—underlines the increasingly harmful impact of the selective elevation of peace and democracy in U.S. foreign policy. The second emphasizes the need to integrate the interests of emerging powers in an era of changing U.S. influence on the global stage. The final two lessons elevate recognition of structural factors and prioritization of inclusion as first-order considerations for defining and executing policy and programming. These are not the only considerations for policymakers working to support democratic openings. The extensive literature on democratic transitions identifies a range of operational and technical best practices worthy of consideration by policymakers and practitioners. However, these four lessons should be prioritized given their downstream impact on other elements of the U.S. response in such contexts.

Four Key Lessons

This section provides an overview of each lesson and briefly explains how it relates to the context in Sudan and Ethiopia. A detailed analysis of how the lessons apply in each case can be found in the case studies that follow.

Align Policy to the Degree of High-Level U.S. Commitment

Democratic openings are dynamic windows of opportunity requiring timeliness, flexibility, and sustained engagement. High-level U.S. policymakers' commitment to democratization is critical for the formulation of aligned strategy through an effective interagency process and the mobilization of adequate levels of foreign assistance and diplomatic engagement

to influence openings. Policymakers generally have genuine enthusiasm for democratic openings when they emerge but lose focus due to competing priorities, leading to high expectations and failure to follow through. U.S. policymakers have also prioritized security and economic interests over democratization. These competing priorities and the tug of war between interests and values within the U.S. government means that at the highest levels of U.S. policymaking, democracy support is selectively prioritized. This tug of war is unlikely to subside.

Absent high-level commitment, the diplomats and development professionals tasked with supporting democratic openings are often faced with a dilemma of executing policy and programming that are under resourced and lack clear goals. The speed, quality, and longevity of U.S. support for an opening is affected, leading to missed opportunities. There is also risk of doing harm where Washington's pursuit of security or economic interests undermines a country's democratic prospects.

In both Sudan and Ethiopia, the strong rhetorical U.S. support for democratic reform was not backed by commensurate high-level strategic planning, diplomatic engagement, or marshalling of foreign assistance. This was largely due to a lack of high-level U.S. commitment to democracy. Both democratic openings emerged during the administration of President Donald Trump, with Sudan's extending into President Joe Biden's tenure. At the most senior levels, policy on Africa and democracy promotion were not prioritized in the Trump administration. In Ethiopia, the White House's focus was on mediating the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) dispute on terms favorable to Egypt.² This was unwelcome by Ethiopia and led to a muddled policy. The U.S. embassy's focus was on democratic reform while, at the highest levels, U.S. influence was focused on GERD dispute mediation, not democratization.

In Sudan, high-level engagement was directed toward advancing the Abraham Accords by pressuring the transitional government to recognize Israel.³ Later under the Biden administration, African policy was elevated, but Sudan was not a central focus given the exigency of the war in Ethiopia. As such, while resources for Sudan were unlocked by the Abraham Accords, they came late⁴ and there was insufficient high-level focus on driving an effective interagency decisionmaking process to use those resources for democratization. In both cases, the lack of high-level commitment to seizing a window of opportunity for democratization undermined the effectiveness of Washington's own policies and programs and the credibility of U.S. commitment to democracy.

U.S. policymakers on the front lines of crafting responses to democratic openings should calibrate programming and policy based on a realistic reading of the degree of White House commitment to sustained support for the democratic opening. When it is possible, they should encourage such commitment by pushing upstream in policy decisionmaking processes. It is critical not to overstate the case, as even with such high-level commitment, the U.S. ability to influence the course of events is affected by a range of factors outside of U.S. policymakers' control. However, where such a commitment does not exist, policymakers should manage expectations of U.S. involvement in engagements with

counterparts in the country experiencing the democratic opening. An insufficient U.S. commitment to a democratic opening presents reputational risk given the United States identifies democracy as a pillar of foreign policy. However, transparently communicated, realistic goals are more valuable in a dynamic global context wherein Washington is increasingly seen as hypocritical.

Factor In the Role of Emerging Powers

Democratic openings are periods of leadership change wherein multiple external actors may aim to advance their interests. Emerging powers have increasingly robust aspirations for extending influence beyond their borders, and they often do not align with support for democratic outcomes. This leads to two hurdles for U.S. policymakers.

First, U.S. policymakers at all levels tend to inadequately account for the interests and capabilities of emerging powers in affecting outcomes during a democratic opening, leading to a misreading of the relative impact of U.S. policies and programs. Second, the United States often prioritizes its interest in managing relations with emerging powers in an unpredictable geopolitical game, undermining core, longer-term interests in democratic outcomes. Other times, it fails to properly blend these two goals. U.S. interests in building and maintaining relations with emerging actors can be a more powerful motivator than pressuring those states to support an unpredictable democratic opening.

In both Sudan and Ethiopia, there was weak international coordination for democracy support and little to no engagement with emerging middle powers, despite the significant increase in their investments and involvement. A range of middle and emerging powers have increased their presence in the Horn of Africa over the last decade including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). During the democratic openings in Sudan and Ethiopia, the UAE was a particularly prominent emerging power that expanded its influence in both countries, with negative effects on the prospects for democratization.

In Ethiopia, the UAE provided \$3 billion in financial support shortly after the democratic opening and, later, military support that turned the balance in the Ethiopian government's favor during the civil war.⁵ In Sudan, the UAE provided military, logistical, and financial support to a Sudanese security force faction, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).⁶ The UAE's support for armed actors fueled conflict and undermined democratization prospects. During the democratic openings in both cases, U.S. policymakers failed to factor in the impact of UAE influence on their goals and missed opportunities to engage and encourage restraint in UAE policies that undermined democratization. This served to undermine U.S. democratization efforts because the UAE's relatively larger and more timely investments counteracted Washington's.

Where the United States aims to support democratic openings, it should invest in strategic partnerships early on with other like-minded states as well as emerging powers to align goals and level-set expectations. Where friendly emerging powers are taking actions that

undermine democratization, the United States should apply pressure to limit or reverse such policies, where possible. Such coordination is an increasingly important use of U.S. policymaker bandwidth given the growing influence of these emerging powers and how it affects the relative influence of the United States. If, however, the United States has countervailing interests with respect to such other governments that impel it to overlook their antidemocratic actions, then U.S. policymakers should transparently calibrate their commitments relating to the democratic openings in question, or risk contradictory policies.

Recognize Underlying Structural Factors

U.S. interventions to support democratic openings often overestimate their ability to foster change. In the context of a democratic opening, firmer recognition of structural factors leads to more realistic context diagnosis and a better understanding of the potential barriers to democratization. Such factors can include the country's history of violent conflict, regime type, level of external actor involvement, degree of inequality including gender dynamics, ethnic and religious fragmentation, demographics, strength of state institutions, level of social cohesion, and extent of civil society engagement.⁷ Inadequate recognition of structural factors leads to unrealistic expectations, the misreading of stakeholder decisions and key developments, and lack of preparedness for shifts in political and conflict contexts. It also produces policies and programs that are irrelevant at best and harmful at worst.

In both Sudan and Ethiopia, U.S. policies and approaches suffered from optimism biases and overestimated the transformative potentials of the democratic openings. In Ethiopia, U.S. policymakers did not recognize the degree of political fragmentation and the inadequacy of the Ethiopian state structure to peacefully manage political competition. In practice this translated to downplaying stalled reform efforts and missing opportunities to encourage reform benchmarks that would have helped clearly identify backsliding. The United States also underestimated the threat of large-scale violent conflict in the run-up to the Ethiopian civil war and missed an opportunity to apply diplomatic pressure for the prevention of violent conflict.

In Sudan, U.S. policy did not reflect an understanding of the durability of Sudan's political economy. This led to a misreading of the intentions of security actors and their backers. Policymakers also overstated the power of the transitional government's civilian leadership and the potential for civilian-run institutions to take root in Sudan. This led to inadequate focus on the challenges to building civilian-led government in Sudan and how and whether the United States could support Sudanese civilian counterparts to overcome them.

U.S. policymakers should craft more realistic policy and foreign assistance objectives based on a recognition of the structural social, political, and economic factors that predate the opening. They should also assess how these factors change, if at all, throughout the transition and update their contextual assumptions and diplomatic and assistance objectives accordingly. By internalizing such an approach, U.S. policymakers can avoid being caught off guard by shifts in local context that were highly predictable.

Prioritize Inclusivity in Policies and Programming

During a political transition when power is shifting, there is a high risk that newly powerful domestic stakeholders manipulate the transition and formerly powerful domestic stakeholders become spoilers. Whether it exacerbates exclusion intentionally or unknowingly, the United States has a high potential to do harm during a political transition given its outsized influence and the highly dynamic nature of transitions. This issue is particularly acute in fragile and conflict-affected states where a legacy of exclusionary politics, historical inequality, and marginalization drove the political transition.

In Ethiopia, the United States exacerbated the exclusionary nature of the transition in two key ways. First, it lent Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed a disproportionate degree of domestic legitimacy, and second, it did not use its influence to press firmly and early enough for consensus-building processes. Such processes could have included political opposition and historically marginalized groups including ethnic groups in central and southern Ethiopia, youth, and women.

In Sudan, the United States missed an opportunity to protect the inclusionary intent of the civilian-led Sudanese uprising in two related ways. Washington did not provide sufficient support to civilian actors who had historically been marginalized, including the civilian transitional government and the resistance committees. Washington also failed to apply diplomatic pressure on leadership of the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) to minimize the risk of them acting as spoilers.

In both cases, the ability of the United States to positively influence inclusive political processes was marginal, given that such processes are inherently domestic. However, there is a higher likelihood of doing harm by not intentionally pursuing inclusion, as was the case in Sudan, and actual harm by exacerbating exclusion, as in Ethiopia.

The United States should make inclusion a foundational principle in its policies and programming aimed at supporting democratic openings. Doing so would be a primary means for avoiding violence and advancing sustainable change. In practice, this means engaging a broad range of domestic actors whose participation is essential to building a democracy, including political opposition, women, youth, and members of marginalized ethnic and religious groups; avoiding picking winners; pressuring stakeholders who advance exclusionary policies; and championing domestically driven processes and reforms that advance inclusion, like national dialogue.

The remainder of this paper consists of in-depth case studies of Sudan and Ethiopia. Each case study provides background on the context leading up to the opening, the relations between the United States and the country in the run-up to the opening, and the basic dynamics of the opening. The case studies then analyze the U.S. response against the four lessons outlined above. Each case study closes with an overview of the outbreak of war in Ethiopia and coup in Sudan, which mark the end of the democratic openings.

Ethiopia

Background

The roots of Ethiopia's democratic opening can be traced to 2012 when then prime minister Meles Zenawi died suddenly while in office. Meles had ruled since 1991, and his death put into question the future of both the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of four ethnically based political-military groups,⁸ and Ethiopia's developmental state, of which he was a central architect. Under the EPRDF, Ethiopia had adopted ethnic-based federalism premised on the right to self-determination of Ethiopia's "nations and nationalities," thus establishing ethnicity as foundational to public life.

The EPRDF was led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which systematically excluded emergent and less-powerful ethnonationalist movements in other regions.⁹ Through the intellectual leadership of Meles, the theory of the "democratic development state" informed policy, prioritizing economic growth.¹⁰ During this period, Ethiopia experienced unprecedented economic growth and promising socioeconomic indicators. While Ethiopia's economic success set a compelling example of an alternative to dominant neoliberal policies, Ethiopia took on substantial public debt during EPRDF rule, and the ruling coalition stifled political and civil liberties. In terms of governance, the EPRDF touted "revolutionary democracy" as its core concept, but it was ill-defined and contradictory.¹¹ In practice, it constituted authoritarian rule, carrying over elements of highly centralized state control from the previous regime under the Provisional Military Administrative Council (commonly known as the Derg).

While the EPRDF's internal systems were initially able to manage the expectations of party elites for change unleashed by Meles's death, popular pressure for civil and political rights began to increase. Ethiopia soon arrived at what the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Africa at the time called "an important crossroads," between democratization or "gridlock of political partisanship dominated by uncompromising views."¹² In 2014, mass protests broke out in Oromia,¹³ Ethiopia's most populous region, in response to government plans to expand the rapidly growing capital city of Addis Ababa into the farmland of the Oromia region that surrounds the city. The protests were largely peaceful and led by youth who were calling for the rights of the people of Oromia to be respected. In 2015 and 2016, protests echoing the frustration with authoritarian governance and calling for political reform spread to other regions of Ethiopia, notably Amhara. As the protests grew, the government resorted to widespread arrests, detentions, and violence, resulting in hundreds of deaths.¹⁴

After years of protests and political turmoil, Meles's successor, prime minister Hailemariam Desalegn, resigned in February 2018 in a bid to "carry out reforms that would lead to sustainable peace and democracy."¹⁵ Hailemariam's resignation was preceded by months of internal debate among the EPRDF's four ethnically based political parties on how to manage the deepening popular discontent, particularly stemming from the Oromia

region. Over the course of a seventeen-day closed meeting of the EPRDF that preceded Hailemariam's resignation,¹⁶ party leaders decided a candidate from the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) should ascend to the premiership. In a surprise move, the OPDO selected a young, ambitious, reformist rising star as their chairman. Abiy Ahmed was then a member of Parliament—a qualification for selection—thus paving the way for the EPRDF to select him as prime minister upon Hailemariam's resignation.

U.S.-Ethiopia Relations Prior to the Opening

In the decades leading up to the democratic opening of 2018, the U.S. government downplayed democracy in its bilateral relations with Ethiopia due to countervailing security and geopolitical interests. The U.S. government had positive relations with the EPRDF and TPLF and provided support to TPLF leadership to overthrow the Derg.¹⁷ Starting in the early 2000s the United States viewed Ethiopia as an important partner for security cooperation, particularly vis-à-vis Somalia in the Global War on Terror. More broadly, Washington saw Ethiopia as an “anchor state” with the potential to stabilize the Horn of Africa. Washington was also driven to maintain friendly bilateral relations with Ethiopia to counter China, which had been deepening engagement with the country, including through close ties between the TPLF and the Chinese Communist Party.

The U.S. government had long been criticized by rights groups for downplaying Ethiopia's democratic deficiencies and human rights record. Where the United States did press for democratization reforms, it was primarily behind closed doors owing to Ethiopia's tough resistance to diplomatic pressure and Washington's prioritization of its security interests.¹⁸

This half-hearted approach to democracy and rights continued up to the 2018 democratic opening and was on full display during then president Barack Obama's July 2015 visit to Ethiopia, the first for a sitting U.S. president, at the height of protests. Obama's public remarks declared democracy a pillar of U.S. foreign policy and acknowledged Ethiopia's problematic governance, but indicated the United States would stand by the Ethiopian government despite democratic deficiencies.¹⁹ U.S. foreign assistance at the time emphasized economic growth and development based on the theory that “ongoing dialogue with the Ethiopian Government creates opportunities to advocate reforms that will hold government accountable and gradually expand political rights and civil liberties.”²⁰ It was a strategy for change that congressional leaders called ineffective while lamenting multiple administrations' unwillingness to confront the Ethiopian government on human rights and democracy.²¹

Ethiopia's Democratic Opening

Ethiopia experienced a democratic opening in 2018 when Abiy became prime minister and set in motion a sweeping reform agenda. The transition to Abiy's leadership is a case of a "promising authoritarian succession,"²² whereby change came from within the ruling elite power structures in the face of a combination of pressure from the public and competition within the party itself.

Within months of coming to power in April 2018, Abiy's government enacted tangible reforms. His administration lifted emergency rule earlier than planned, pardoned high-level political prisoners, reversed draconian restrictions on media and civil society, and began moving to privatize telecommunications.²³ In July 2018, Ethiopia and Eritrea entered into a historic peace agreement for which the prime minister was recognized with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019. The government also made peace with the nonstate armed groups the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front. The agreements paved the way for the return of exiled members of the opposition and the development of new political parties. This represented a major step in opening political space given the domination of politics by the EPRDF. Many of these moves were preexisting ideas, discussed internally within the EPRDF in the years leading up to the opening, that Abiy accelerated into implementation.

The political will for genuine reform under Abiy appeared unparalleled in modern Ethiopian history, and public expectations for change soared. However, the restive political elite within the EPRDF were not all on board. Abiy's new political philosophy, which he called "Medemer," laid out a vision for national unity.²⁴ But many saw Abiy's vision as more a political slogan than a project for genuine reform. The prime minister's motives drew significant skepticism when he dissolved the EPRDF and replaced it with the Prosperity Party in December 2019. Some believed the prime minister had to make bold moves to arrest power from the TPLF, which had such a strong hold on the EPRDF—a necessary, but risky, move. But many believed that the dismantling of the EPRDF went too far and came too early in the transition, signaling an attempt to centralize power. The move resulted in distrust and enmity, particularly by the TPLF, who did not join the Prosperity Party.

A core tension left unaddressed in the democratic opening was differences of opinion, among political elite but also average citizens, on the structure of the state in Ethiopia. Most important was determining what type of federal structure could balance both local autonomy and national cohesion. The newly opened political and media space made it easier to spread divisive messages louder and faster than ever before. This was further accentuated by a very active diaspora in the United States that was increasingly divided along ethnic lines. Ethnonationalists became increasingly vocal as they aimed to stake a claim in the new political landscape. Also unaddressed was the process for integrating opposition groups into political life. Ethiopia's opposition movements outside of EPRDF were grounded in the politics of resistance (often violent) to the center of power. Previously exiled members of the opposition came back with polarized perspectives and high expectations for their engagement.

Incidents of ethnic and communal tensions and violence increased across the country during the democratic opening due to the political landscape shifts.²⁵ As one prominent analyst put it, “Abiy’s accession did not mean tensions between communities has been resolved.”²⁶ In June 2018 a grenade attack occurred at a rally led by the prime minister. In October 2018, members of the military protesting low salary levels showed up armed at the prime minister’s quarters. Starting in August 2018, an Oromo Liberation Front splinter group that did not sign the peace pact, the Oromo Liberation Army, stepped up its recruitment and anti-government attacks. In June 2019 an alleged coup attempt resulted in the death of the president of Amhara Region and the chief of staff of the National Defense Force.

Ethnically charged unrest and violence also took hold on university campuses in 2018 and 2019, reflecting and magnifying the extent of political fragmentation. These campus protests only abated in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic and the shutting down of campuses.²⁷ Then in June 2020, the assassination of a popular Oromo musician and activist, Hachalu Hundessa, led to widespread and deadly unrest and communal violence across Addis Ababa and Oromia, claiming 123 lives and injuring over 500, according to the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission.²⁸ Prominent Oromo opposition leaders were accused of inciting violence and imprisoned in the wake of the murder. Many interviewed for this study identified the incident and government response as the clearest indication that Ethiopia’s democratic opening was over.

The government’s response to the violence and unrest varied: In some cases, the government employed the same heavy-handed securitized response of the EPRDF, and in other cases, the response was inadequate, signaling capacity issues. Overall, the continued violence indicated the need for leadership to coalesce a diverse society around a peaceful way forward—but there was no plan. It was unclear whether these shortcomings were due to a lack of willingness for genuine reform or mismanagement because of the lack of resources and technical knowledge within Abiy’s government to deliver a peace dividend. The effect in either case was to exacerbate the frustrations of the elites and citizens who drove the transition in the first place. Thus, the democratic opening threw open a Pandora’s box of risks in desperate need of careful mitigation, which the new Ethiopian government was lacking.

Applying the Four Key Lessons to Ethiopia

This section analyzes the U.S. response to Ethiopia’s democratic opening against the four key lessons.

White House Indifference to Democracy During Ethiopia’s Opening

The U.S. government’s 2018 integrated country strategy for Ethiopia demonstrated a high level of confidence regarding the potential for democratic change in Ethiopia and the ability of the U.S. government to make a positive difference: “We see a once-in-a-generation

opportunity to advance U.S. national interests with a partner that newly and openly seeks to align its own national interests with ours.”²⁹ The leadership in Abiy’s government had high expectations that the United States and other rich Western countries would deliver large-scale packages of comprehensive financial support that would allow a speedy enactment of reforms.³⁰ The U.S. embassy in Addis Ababa urgently called for more resources and policy attention in the face of what was deemed a “transient” opportunity.

While leadership in the embassy and Africa specialists at the State Department were focused on opportunities for Ethiopia’s historic transition, Africa policy and democracy were not top priorities for the Trump administration. Instead of democratic transition, the White House lens for Ethiopia at the time was the GERD, which would impact Nile River water flows in downstream Sudan and Egypt. The Trump administration took a pro-Egypt position on the GERD and pressured the Ethiopian government to accept U.S. mediation of the dispute in late 2019.

When the Ethiopian government did not cooperate, Trump indicated displeasure, stating in January 2020 that he deserved the Nobel Peace Prize and not the prime minister.³¹ Then in August 2020, the United States froze a portion of foreign assistance to reinforce pressure on Ethiopia over the GERD.³² In October 2020 Trump publicly quipped that Egypt could “blow up that dam,”³³ setting the higher-level bilateral relationship with Ethiopia on poor footing. While the White House approach did not fundamentally threaten the bilateral relationship,³⁴ it did create tension that divided the attention of policymakers who had to manage the diplomatic fallout.

The absence of White House commitment meant there were both insufficient resources to support democratization and a lack of coordinated, strategic planning. By 2019 some resources were made available—such as an increase in State Department political officer positions, funding for security sector assistance, launching of political transition support programs, and funding for democracy, governance, and human rights initiatives—due to a slog of bureaucratic pressure from the U.S. embassy in Addis Ababa, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the State Department. However, it was not commensurate with U.S. rhetoric on the ground nor backed by a clear strategy to support democratic reform. The lack of high-level support meant the goals of U.S. engagement in Ethiopia were not clear or agreed upon within the U.S. policy architecture. Meanwhile, as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff recalled, Congress called “meeting after meeting” asking the administration what its plan was to support democracy and human rights, but there was “foot dragging” and “no delivery” from U.S. policymakers.³⁵

The White House’s approach to Ethiopia during its democratic opening undermined what U.S. democratization support efforts did exist on the ground by signaling that at the highest levels, democratic reform in Ethiopia was not a core concern for the White House. Embassy personnel and Africa specialists at the State Department and USAID did what they could to craft a response and find resources for democracy support. But the lack of internal alignment meant valuable bandwidth that was needed for advancing U.S. interests in seizing the

window of opportunity was spent on advocating internally for resources and policy space. In such a context, U.S. policymakers in the field could have identified more modest goals for U.S. engagement than realigning the bilateral relationship. They also could have done more to focus bandwidth on coordination efforts with other external actors focused on supporting democratization to increase the impact of the investments the United States could bring to the table.

Missed Opportunity to Engage the UAE

The most substantial and earliest financial support Ethiopia received after its democratic opening was from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Just months after Abiy came to power, in June 2018, the UAE pledged \$3 billion in aid and investments, including a \$1 billion deposit in Ethiopia's central bank to help stabilize Ethiopia's currency.³⁶ By comparison, Western donors welcomed Ethiopia's democratic opening, but they did not mobilize resources anywhere near that scale. China, Ethiopia's largest trading partner with whom it has strong bilateral relations, did not demonstrably change its policy or investments during Ethiopia's democratic opening.

Abiy cultivated already existing relations with the UAE and quickly developed a close personal relationship with then crown prince of Abu Dhabi and now UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed. The UAE's interest in the Horn of Africa had been growing for a decade: The UAE saw investment potential in an Ethiopia transformed under Abiy's economic reform agenda and an opportunity to expand its geopolitical leverage through closer relations with the leader of the largest country and economy in the Horn of Africa.

The UAE's geopolitical proximity, offers of partnership, and investments increased its relative influence at a critical moment in Ethiopia's political trajectory. In effect, the substantial UAE investment reduced Abiy's incentives to compromise with domestic opposition, setting preconditions for centralization of authority. The UAE's influence would become even more pronounced after the democratic opening had closed and during Ethiopia's civil war, when military support from the UAE tipped the balance in the war in favor of the Ethiopian federal government forces.³⁷

Despite the UAE's prominent role in the earlier stages of Ethiopia's transition, there was no U.S. engagement with the UAE on coordinating support for Ethiopia's historic transition.³⁸ This can largely be explained by the lack of White House interest in democratization and the fact that the White House focus vis-à-vis the UAE was on execution of the Abraham Accords in neighboring Sudan. Thus, the United States missed an opportunity to find areas of policy overlap with the UAE and encourage UAE restraint where its policies were undermining democratization. Identifying shared goals among allies through a "friends of the transition" partnership or a similar grouping that engaged beyond traditional donors might have helped strengthen the democratic prospects of Ethiopia's transition.

Downplaying Stalled Reform and Potential for Violent Conflict

There are two primary areas where the United States inadequately accounted for structural conditions. First, the U.S. approach did not suggest an understanding of the degree of Ethiopia's political fragmentation and its relationship to the state structure. Ethiopia is formally a federal republic, but in practice, the state structure is highly centralized. States in Ethiopia's federation are defined by ethnicity, which is a central factor in political life that enabled ethnic groups to attain political power. Thus, there is a tension between the centralizing tendencies of the state and centrifugal forces of ethnic federalism.³⁹ In addition to this structural tension and as noted above, a core ideological fault line in Ethiopia is over what form of federalism (for example, ethnic or geographic) is best. These debates and tensions were inadequately managed within the EPRDF. Instead, decisions were made by EPRDF elites, particularly in the TPLF, and state violence was used to manage dissent.

The second area where the United States inadequately accounted for structural conditions was related to Ethiopia's history of ethnically based violent conflict, which was important to understand and plan around as an outbreak of violence would derail the prospect of democratization. Violent conflict had been common in parts of Ethiopia for much of its modern political history. Movements for self-determination founded in the 1970s opposed EPRDF rule due to perceived political and economic marginalization at the hands of the TPLF. Notably, the Ogaden National Liberation Front's armed wing mounted an insurgency in 1994, and the Oromo Liberation Front's armed struggle against the state abated briefly in 1992 when it joined the EPRDF, though it later broke off again over disagreements with the TPLF. The EPRDF was unable to peacefully resolve such ethnoregional political competition and instead violently repressed and managed it, leading to widespread violations of civil and political rights.⁴⁰

Advancing a more democratic state structure would require careful management of these tensions to peacefully work through the deeply rooted barriers to genuine and sustainable reform. Despite promising moves in its first months, the Abiy government lacked specific democratic reform proposals and a road map to get there. As the months and then years went by, the donor community was increasingly unclear on what the government's priorities were and how to support them.⁴¹ There were also worrying instances of violence and unrest throughout the democratic opening. As one former Ethiopian government insider assessed, Abiy's conception of state building was too "simplistic" in the face of complexity and from early on showed signs of "concentration of power at the expense of institutions."⁴² One senior USAID official said, "Abiy had a vision but no plan to address the fissures."⁴³

In the face of these shortcomings, U.S. embassy officials downplayed the fact that democratic reform was never well articulated by Abiy and his government and stalled soon after Abiy's ascension to power. They were deferential to the Ethiopian government and vocally supportive of Abiy in particular. The U.S. assessment of Ethiopia's democratic reform progress was "very personality driven"⁴⁴ and took the form of "support for oral pronouncements" about democracy as opposed to performance.⁴⁵ An Ethiopian civil society leader opined, "there was a need for a reality check, instead of inflated expectations."⁴⁶ U.S.

embassy personnel also had limited bandwidth to spend the needed time engaging Ethiopia's diverse political constituencies outside of Addis Ababa. Even before the transition, the embassy was not connected enough with the diversity of Ethiopia, particularly marginalized communities.⁴⁷ Additionally, the difficult political and conflict context was evident to embassy personnel but was downplayed by U.S. embassy leadership, given the interest in garnering support from Washington to resource U.S. diplomatic and assistance efforts.⁴⁸

A firmer recognition of key structural dynamics on the part of U.S. officials in the embassy in Addis Ababa and in Washington would have led them to be more concerned about the lack of tangible steps toward democratic reform, such as an inclusive dialogue and reconciliation. In retrospect, this was a missed opportunity for the United States to apply more carefully calibrated pressure on the Ethiopian government to develop effective Ethiopian-led mechanisms for democratic reform and benchmarks that would help clearly identify backsliding. The United States also did not indicate a willingness to incentivize democratic reform. For example, multiple high-level policymakers noted a missed opportunity to skillfully press for democratic reform through conditioning international financial institutions' support, on which Ethiopia was heavily reliant, on democratic progress.⁴⁹

The United States also missed opportunities to prevent widespread violent conflict. For example, when communal violence broke out after the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa, embassy officials did not press the Ethiopian government on the protection of civilians in security operations and on the need for dialogue between the government and opposition movements in Oromia to address unresolved political grievances that were driving unrest. When it came to tensions with the TPLF, embassy personnel miscalculated the strength and motivation of regional militias and the extent to which the TPLF felt sidelined.⁵⁰ Despite warning signs embedded in a stalled reform agenda and rising tensions, U.S. policymakers at the time were caught off guard by the outbreak of war.⁵¹ It did not help that the outbreak occurred during the U.S. presidential elections and during the early coronavirus pandemic, when most staff were evacuated from Ethiopia.

Undermining Inclusion Through Overemphasis on Prime Minister Abiy

In the early days of Ethiopia's democratic opening, the political opposition and civil society called for reconciliation and a national dialogue as an inclusive and consensus-based vehicle for unearthing and addressing the deep divisions in Ethiopia's political structure.⁵² However, the new Ethiopian government leadership made no concrete steps toward launching such a process. Local civil society organizations picked up the slack, with the backing of some European donors, and organized innovative dialogue platforms in which prominent opposition politicians participated.⁵³ Such Ethiopian-led dialogue efforts were flourishing, led by experienced peacebuilders who found renewed energy in an environment where their work was no longer restricted. But given the authoritarian legacies of the Ethiopian state, for real change to occur, the Ethiopian government needed to be a full participant. Despite the clear demand for such processes, civil society efforts were simply filling the vacuum left by the Ethiopian government.

For their parts, senior U.S. embassy and State Department officials placed a great amount of faith in the prime minister's capacity to manage Ethiopia's internal political fragmentation. Abiy was deliberately extolled by U.S. diplomats as part of their strategy to support democratic reform.⁵⁴ In Addis Ababa, the prime minister met regularly with the U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia, who was one of Abiy's most staunch supporters in the diplomatic community. The unprecedented access the U.S. ambassador had to Abiy represented a substantial shift for U.S. policymakers, considering the decades of steadfast pushback against democratic reform from the EPRDF.

For his part, Abiy made the first trip of any sitting Ethiopian prime minister to the United States in July 2018 to meet with diaspora members, signaling early on an openness to U.S. engagement.⁵⁵ U.S. policymakers and congressional leaders read tremendous promise in Abiy's leadership, not only for Ethiopia but also for the Horn of Africa and potentially the entire continent. The U.S. government was not alone: Analysts of African politics heralded the moment and shared in the enthusiasm over Abiy as a leader.⁵⁶

However, Ethiopian analysts and members of the diplomatic corps at the time felt U.S. policymakers were "overconfident that Abiy had the ability to bring [opposition elites] along"⁵⁷ and placed too much faith in Abiy's abilities rather than listen to the expectations of the broader public and elites that ushered in the transition to begin with. The sentiment was shared by U.S. embassy officials on the ground who felt their leadership was too enamored with Abiy and that the United States did not press Abiy and his administration hard enough and early enough on structural change.⁵⁸ Given the degree of internal discord and tension in Ethiopia, the vocal support from the U.S. ambassador for the prime minister also "risked sounding very partisan."⁵⁹ In such a tense and competitive context, U.S. support for Abiy was valuable political currency for the prime minister. One interpretation is this did harm by leading to "moral hazard,"⁶⁰ as the impression of U.S. support of Abiy bolstered his local legitimacy in an elite tug of war and undermined the need for Abiy to compromise.

The United States also missed an opportunity to leverage its close relationship with the prime minister and engage beyond Addis Ababa with a broader range of political constituencies to apply pressure for an Ethiopian-led inclusive dialogue and reconciliation processes. As an Ethiopian analyst lamented, "The United States should have focused more on pressing for an inclusive political process to manage that competition as opposed to bulldozing it."⁶¹ In addition to supporting inclusive processes, U.S. policymakers could have spent more time meaningfully engaging the opposition to reduce tensions. It would have been particularly impactful to do so with the newly marginalized TPLF given the U.S. government's extensive history of engagement with the TPLF. In this vein, one senior embassy official remarked, "the unique moment of access to Abiy was not used adequately to put our finger on the scale."⁶²

Outbreak of Civil War

By mid-2020 tensions were flaring dangerously out of control between the Ethiopian government and TPLF-led Tigrayan regional government. In April 2020, the federal government postponed elections that were set for August due to an outbreak of COVID-19.⁶³ The move infuriated officials in Tigray, who saw it as further evidence of Abiy's intention to centralize power. Tigray regional officials took the bold decision in September 2020 to hold regional elections, a move the federal government called illegal. Then, on November 3, the Tigray Special Forces—under the orders of the TPLF-led Tigray regional government—attacked a federal military base in the Tigray region in what it dubbed a preemptive strike. The government responded with a “law enforcement operation,” promising a swift end to hostilities.

Thus began what came to be referred to as the Northern Ethiopian war: a two-year-long war that, on one side, engaged Eritrean forces, Amhara regional forces and local militias, and the Ethiopian National Defense Force and, on the other side, the TPLF and what would emerge as the Tigray Defense Forces. The war resulted in at least 300,000 battle deaths and hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths due to disease and hunger, massive human rights violations, and famine-like conditions for hundreds of thousands of Tigrayans.⁶⁴ It was not the only violent conflict in Ethiopia at the time, but it was by far the largest and most existential.

For external analysts and policymakers tracking the developments on the ground in real time, the war was a tragic and predictable result of unrestrained tensions in a fraught political transition,⁶⁵ and the international community could and should have tried harder to prevent it. As one Ethiopian analyst put it, “The war was two parties colliding in slow motion; everyone saw it, but no one did anything to stop it.”⁶⁶

With the onset of the Northern Ethiopia war in November 2020, Ethiopia's democratic opening slammed shut just thirty months after it opened.

Sudan

Background

The democratic opening in Sudan in 2019 was not the first attempt by revolutionary civic groups to turn the tide of Sudanese politics. Sudan has experienced multiple political transitions since independence in 1956,⁶⁷ including uprisings in 1964 and 1985 that were unsuccessful in consolidating civilian rule but laid a foundation for the 2019 revolution that unseated Sudan's most durable autocrat, former president Omar al-Bashir.

Al-Bashir came to power in 1989 in an Islamist-backed military coup. The period encompassing al-Bashir's twenty-nine-year rule was marked by political upheaval, violent conflict, and economic mismanagement. For the first decade after the coup, Sudan was governed through an alliance of the military and Islamist party members. During the 1990s Sudan experienced increasing international isolation due its human rights abuses and support for terrorism. The governing alliance eventually broke in the late 1990s when the Islamists were demoted to junior partners by al-Bashir.

Sudan's peripheral areas were historically marginalized as the notion of a singular Arab Islamist identity was pushed by Khartoum-based elites and al-Bashir. Sudan endured sustained internal conflict, including in Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan and a decades-long civil war between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement of southern Sudan. Years of negotiations between Sudan and the movement resulted in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that paved the way for South Sudanese independence. Meanwhile, the government's violent repression of an uprising in Darfur in the early 2000s led to accusations of genocide, and the International Criminal Court issued two arrest warrants for al-Bashir for his role in the Darfur conflict.⁶⁸

Central to al-Bashir's longevity in the presidency was his ability to dominate Sudan's "political marketplace" system of governance, wherein institutions are secondary to the transactional nature of power and resource exchange in a competitive political marketplace.⁶⁹ A skilled political operator, al-Bashir balanced the varied political constituencies in Sudan's political marketplace and "coup-proofed" his regime by keeping the security forces fractured and playing them against each other. An oil revenue boom in the 2000s enabled al-Bashir's regime to use profits to buy the allegiance of key segments of Sudan's elite through an inflated government roster.

However, by 2012 Sudan was in an economic crisis that stemmed in large part from the loss of oil revenue from South Sudan. Sudan's economy contracted and inflation rose, leading to difficulties in sustaining payments for civil servants who made up the inflated state bureaucracy. To address the shortfall of resources, al-Bashir bolstered ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who provided financial assistance in exchange for Sudan providing troops to support the Saudi-led coalition campaign against Ansar Allah (also known as the Houthis) in Yemen. Sudan also opened to Gulf investment in artisanal gold mining and agriculture.

But the economic dysfunction was untenable, and Sudan's popular uprising was triggered by protests that broke out in 2018. These protests began in response to inflation with calls to raise the minimum wage, but they quickly evolved into a call to replace the al-Bashir regime. The protesters comprised individuals from a range of economic and political backgrounds who formed coalitions that mobilized in collective action. The Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an umbrella organization of trade unions, played a central role in coordinating protests and ushering in a formidable movement that ultimately prevailed in toppling al-Bashir.

U.S.-Sudan Relations Prior to the Opening

For much of the 1990s, the United States primarily focused isolating al-Bashir in response to Sudan's links to terrorism.⁷⁰ In 1993, the United States designated Sudan a state sponsor of terrorism, suspended U.S. embassy operations in Khartoum in 1996, and in 1997 imposed comprehensive sanctions against Sudan. The sanctions regime was substantial and essentially barred Sudan from international debt relief.

In 2002 the U.S. embassy in Khartoum reopened after Sudan took steps to address counterterrorism concerns, but bilateral relations remained complex. The United States classified the Sudanese government's actions in Darfur a genocide in 2004.⁷¹ Alongside this, the United States played a key role in supporting the negotiation of the 2005 CPA. The process was a priority for Washington, and the United States had significant engagement with the al-Bashir regime, including security elites, during the talks. A core component of the CPA was political reform at the center, something U.S. policymakers welcomed but did not adequately focus on implementing.

Since the early years of the Obama administration, the United States sought to reform its relationship with Sudan. However, the Obama administration's attempts to reform its relationship with Khartoum sputtered for various reasons including mistrust, public pressure in the United States and Sudan, and al-Bashir's 2013 crackdown on protesters. In 2017, the relationship between Khartoum and Washington showed improvement as the Obama administration took steps to remove some sanctions as part of a bilateral agreement that outlined areas for reform. The "five-track process" was initiated to incentivize Sudanese progress across key areas in exchange for the removal of sanctions. The five areas included cessation of government hostilities in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile; improved humanitarian access throughout Sudan; an end to Sudanese support to South Sudanese armed opposition groups; cooperation with the United States to defeat the Lord's Resistance Army; and cooperation with the United States on counterterrorism.

While the five-track process was a useful construct for U.S. policymakers to engage Sudan, the process had little to do with democracy and as such did not set up U.S. policymakers to engage a democratic reform movement. The lifting of sanctions was also met with skepticism by some Sudanese who interpreted it as an unwarranted reward for an "unreformed, nepotistic government led by the same elite that had overseen years of war, mismanagement, corruption, and widespread hardship."⁷²

Sudan's Democratic Opening

On April 11, 2019, al-Bashir was deposed by a military coup after facing months of protests and civil disobedience in opposition to his rule. Sudan's opening represents a hybrid case. At its core, Sudan's opening was an instance of "large-scale citizen mobilization to oust an autocratic leader,"⁷³ where popular pressure created conditions for an inflection point and defined a vision for Sudan's future. But the opening also shares elements of a "promising authoritarian succession" given that a coalition of security elites overthrew al-Bashir and retained power in the transitional arrangement.

In the past, al-Bashir's government had used force to violently suppress protests, but at the time of the civilian uprising, the limits to which al-Bashir could go were constrained. For one, the economic situation meant the regime had interest in sanctions relief. As such, there were disincentives to fracture relations with Western states, which would likely occur in the face of a large-scale loss of life. Additionally, the military elites in the regime were not supportive of a widespread crackdown because many of the protesters were their relatives and friends. Most importantly, the constellation of political and security elites that al-Bashir had balanced and manipulated for years calculated that the moment presented a unique opportunity to overthrow him.⁷⁴ The calculation of these elites was also influenced by the position of external actors, the UAE in particular, who were losing confidence in al-Bashir and offering support for alternatives.⁷⁵

While the removal of al-Bashir was the result of a coup by forces within the security sector, the democratic opening was driven by the civilians whose collective action triggered the political transition. The civilian uprising provided a pretext to topple one of the most resilient dictatorships in the world and was remarkable for the courageousness of the protesters and their level of organization and committed, disciplined resistance. A primary demand was the installation of a civilian government.

The enormous obstacles to instating civilian leadership after al-Bashir's ouster were clear from the outset, given that the transitional government was military-led. The Transitional Military Council (TMC) was developed after al-Bashir's ouster and was eventually led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, one of al-Bashir's top generals, and his deputy General Mohamed Hamdan (known as Hemedti), a leader of the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary force that traces its origins to the Janjaweed militias that undertook a brutal campaign in Darfur.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, the SPA, which spearheaded the protests, had difficulty switching gears from mass mobilization to consolidation of power to advance political representation.⁷⁷ Its highly decentralized structure, which was a strength during the uprising, became a liability as the task shifted to negotiations with the security forces. The SPA eventually joined the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a broad coalition of civic groups and political parties. The decision could be understood as an inflection point wherein the democratic opening shifted to a negotiation between established elites.

Negotiations on governing structures began between the TMC and the FFC in April 2019. The FFC struggled to advance an effective negotiating strategy to match that of the more cohesive TMC. A core disagreement between the protesters in the streets and the FFC negotiators was whether to push for a fully civilian government or the more pragmatic option of a power-sharing deal with the military. Talks between the FFC and TMC stalled, and protesters remained in the streets in large numbers in defiance of the security forces, calling for civilian rule.

The stakes for Sudan's political transition were made painfully clear on June 3, 2019, when the security forces murdered, raped, and beat the protesters.⁷⁸ The Khartoum Massacre, as it came to be known, was a clear indicator of the fragility of the moment and the lengths to which the security actors would go to protect their interests. In response, neighborhood resistance committees and the SPA organized protests in which tens of thousands of Sudanese participated, illustrating, yet again, the resolve of the popular uprising. The massacre was met with condemnation. The African Union suspended Sudan,⁷⁹ and the massacre prompted diplomatic engagement by the United States, United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (the so-called quad for Sudan) in collaboration with the African Union. The violence was a wake-up call for the United States, who was late to the game but quickly became very involved.

The parties reached a power-sharing agreement, and then on August 17, 2019, the FFC and TMC signed a constitutional document that outlined a transitional period to a civilian-led, democratic order. A sovereignty council—the de facto presidency, with members of the FFC and TMC—would be headed by a member of the TMC for the first twenty-one months of a thirty-nine-month transition period. The agreement also established a civilian-led cabinet consisting of technocrats and led by Abdalla Hamdok, a respected economist and retired international civil servant, who became prime minister on August 21, 2019.

The transitional governance arrangement brought structure and a degree of stability to a turbulent Sudan. However, the prospect for the wholesale transformation of Sudan's political structure that the civilian uprising demanded was daunting given that significant power and resources remained under the control of the military apparatus, which showed no interest in democratic reform. Additionally, many critical issues were left unaddressed in these negotiations, chief among them the role of nonstate armed groups including those in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile, where conflicts were ongoing. These and many other intractable issues, including reforming Sudan's economy, would comprise a long list of priorities for reform.

Applying the Four Key Lessons to Sudan

This section analyzes the U.S. response to Sudan’s democratic opening against the four key lessons.

Distorting Effects of the Abraham Accords

At the beginning of Sudan’s transition, the United States made clear its support for civilian rule in Sudan. However, U.S. policy did not follow its rhetoric in the early stages of Sudan’s transition. Instead, the significant factor shaping the U.S. response to Sudan’s historic transition had nothing to do with Sudan at all—but with a major foreign policy initiative from the Trump administration, the Abraham Accords. The Abraham Accords were a series of bilateral agreements between Israel and Arab states to normalize relations. Sudan’s democratic opening and its newly minted transitional government presented an opportunity to engage Sudan in the Abraham Accords process. Because Sudan was listed as a state sponsor of terrorism (SST), the U.S. government could not provide substantial assistance to the Sudanese government to facilitate a democratic opening. Promises to the civilian prime minister, Hamdok, about debt relief and financial assistance were not able to be carried out until the U.S. government conducted the lengthy bureaucratic process of de-listing Sudan. This provided the Trump administration with leverage over Sudan. Instead of using this leverage to advance democracy or hope for civilian rule, officials chose to implement the Abraham Accords.

The Trump administration’s offer to Sudan was substantial financial support and a rollback of the SST designation in return for a commitment to normalize relations with Israel and address claims of victims of terror attacks. The team spearheading the Abraham Accords felt the quid pro quo was a pragmatic approach. As one member of the team recounted, “At a certain point in the negotiations, it became clear multiple birds could be hit with one stone—Israel, Russia, democracy opportunity—and there was recognition that a big investment could make a big difference.”⁸⁰ The negotiation process was White House–led and “very close hold,” meaning only a very limited number of people knew the meetings happened. There was no initial involvement from the Africa Bureau at the State Department, and it was also excluded from undisclosed meetings with key Sudanese military leaders in Abu Dhabi.⁸¹ Predominant civilian leaders in the transitional government also believed that U.S. interests centered around normalization with Israel rather than democracy.⁸²

The Abraham Accords were a particularly interesting move from the perspective of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Deepened relations with Israel would mean security dividends and the prospect of increased revenue. Sudanese generals were acutely aware that the Trump administration did not prioritize democratization or support to the civilians, and their role in the Abraham Accords illustrates how they exploited that to their advantage.

For its part, the civilian leadership of the transitional government was concerned that it did not have the popular mandate to recognize Israel and believed instead that such a decision should be left to an elected civilian government rather than taken during a highly sensitive transition period. The U.S. secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, went to Sudan in August 2020 to pressure the Sudanese government to normalize relations with Israel.⁸³ As one Sudanese analyst familiar with the talks concluded, “Pompeo bulldozed the cabinet into going for normalization.” U.S. pressure prevailed, as the economic situation in Sudan was dire and the agreement promised to unlock significant resources.

In October 2020, Trump announced an agreement between Israel and Sudan to normalize relations. As part of the deal Sudan paid \$335 million to victims of terror attacks at U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and on the USS *Cole*,⁸⁴ and the United States committed \$1.2 billion in assistance to Sudan. In December 2020 the SST designation was rescinded, paving the way for international financial support.

The net effect of the Abraham Accords was to divide the already limited attention of U.S. policymakers, slow the removal of sanctions, elevate the legitimacy of Sudan’s security elites, and add to the burden of the severely overstretched Sudanese civilian transitional administration. White House prioritization of the Abraham Accords process “slowed and distracted focus” of U.S. policymakers in Washington and on the ground in Khartoum from supporting the democratic opening.⁸⁵ One Washington, DC–based expert went further, calling the U.S. approach “patently antidemocratic” for the legitimacy and power it afforded Sudan’s security actors and the compromising position it put the new civilian leadership in.⁸⁶

While that policy process resulted in significant resources for the United States to support Sudan’s transition, they were not timely. The financial assistance came in late 2020, over a year into the democratic transition, and started to move forward during the early Biden administration in early 2021. When the resources finally came online, there were two main challenges to effectively using them for democratization: disagreement within the U.S. government about how to use the funds and insufficient high-level focus on driving a swift decisionmaking process. As one former U.S. official put it, “we woefully failed to surge support behind a citizen-led revolution.”⁸⁷

The lack of high-level policymaker attention to supporting democratization also meant U.S. diplomats on the front lines in Sudan lacked a clear strategy to support democratization. U.S. diplomats and aid workers interviewed for this study recalled viewing the ouster of al-Bashir with exhilaration and excitement. Despite this enthusiasm, the United States was unprepared, and the official U.S. response amounted to a “massively missed opportunity.”⁸⁸ Owing to years of diplomatic isolation and lack of an ambassador at post, the U.S. embassy and the State Department lacked sufficient capabilities on the ground in Sudan, and USAID did not have the programming or staff to respond to a change of this magnitude. There was “no discernable strategy” to support the democratic transition.⁸⁹

Because the normalization process was driven at the highest levels of the Trump administration, it presented an opportunity for significant influence. However, the high point of U.S. influence and leverage in Sudan was focused on an outcome that was only peripherally related to Sudan. At best, the agreement could have leveraged tangible concessions from the security sector to cede power. Instead, it undermined the credibility of the civilian government and sent a signal that at the highest levels of the U.S. government, the security actors were recognized as the most relevant power brokers in Sudan.

Indifference to How Gulf Influence Undermined the Democratic Opening

In the later years of his rule, al-Bashir relied significantly on the financial support of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in exchange for providing troops to support the Saudi-led coalition campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. After al-Bashir's fall, the connections forged between Sudan's military apparatus and the UAE and Saudi Arabia served as a bridge for the two countries' policies toward Sudan's new political reality.

During Sudan's democratic opening, the UAE and Saudi Arabia maintained close coordination with the RSF and SAF and were the first to offer aid to Sudan's transitional military council, pledging \$3 billion just days after the groups toppled al-Bashir in a coup.⁹⁰ UAE and Saudi actions were driven by an interest in attaining stability through propping up security institutions and sidelining Islamist parties and their Qatari and Turkish partners. The UAE also maintained interests in agricultural investments to address food security needs and gold mining in Darfur.

Overall, UAE and Saudi support served to undermine democratization efforts by incentivizing security actors to not engage in negotiations with civilians in good faith. As the International Crisis Group reported, Sudanese and African Union diplomats concluded that Gulf support "emboldened" security actors to use violence against protesters during the Khartoum Massacre by providing them with "political cover."⁹¹

Unlike its approach in Ethiopia, the United States engaged with the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the context of Sudan, including diplomatic engagement for crisis management through the quad process. However, at the level of the White House, coordination with respect to Sudan was for the purpose of advancing the Abraham Accords, not Sudan's democratic transition. Given this prioritization, U.S. policymakers were hardly able, if they were even willing, to press the UAE to change its policies when its own were similarly undermining the democratic opening. When the Biden administration took office in January 2021, more high-level focus was directed toward democratization, but no serious steps were taken to push back on the UAE's support to security forces, which came at the expense of enabling an effective civilian-led transition.

The United States also did not adequately account for the extent to which Gulf interests and capabilities in Sudan, and the Horn of Africa more broadly, outweighed its own. While the Abraham Accords unlocked \$700 million in U.S. assistance for Sudan's political transition,⁹² it was a transactional, one-time deal, and there was no clear longer-term planning for U.S. investment in Sudan. Furthermore, U.S. funds went through U.S.-managed projects, which also affected the comparative impact of Washington's investments as the Sudanese civilian actors in the transitional government had no direct control over the resources. Comparatively, as one U.S. official on the ground at the time concluded, "the level of resource investment, policy sacrifice, and stakes in outcomes was so much higher for other actors, like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, that they far outweighed the resources for the democracy movement."⁹³

U.S. engagement with the UAE and Saudi Arabia during Sudan's democratic opening indicated an indifference to how Gulf interests affected democratic outcomes. The U.S. approach gave the impression that Washington's policy toward Sudan was "outsourced" to the UAE and Saudi Arabia.⁹⁴ More accurately, U.S. policymakers appeared to lack knowledge of how embedded and impactful Gulf interests were. As one former U.S. White House official reflected on the initial months of the democratic opening, "we didn't necessarily know what [the UAE] was doing in Sudan."⁹⁵ A prominent Sudanese analyst reflected, "the United States views the UAE as a friend when it comes to Africa, and they did not wake up to the nefarious acts of the UAE until it was too late."⁹⁶

Underestimating the Durability of Sudan's Political Economy

In approaching policy toward Sudan, U.S. policymakers did not adequately account for the durability of Sudan's underlying political economy, which maintained its key features despite the toppling of al-Bashir. Sudan's political economy has been aptly described as a "political marketplace,"⁹⁷ where institutions are secondary to the transactional nature of power and resource exchange in a competitive political marketplace. Given these dynamics, what mattered most for the trajectory of political outcomes in Sudan's democratic opening were the "material factors driving politics, namely the organizational structures of the political firms contesting for power, the resources that can be traded for political allegiance, and the skill of those making the deals."⁹⁸

In light of this context, U.S. policymakers overstated the power of civilian leadership and the potential for civilian-run institutions to take root in Sudan. Wishful thinking was at play on the part of Washington; this was clear from the outset as U.S. policymakers optimistically, and incorrectly, referred to the transitional government in Sudan as "civilian-led."⁹⁹ As one former White House official reflected, "to marshal resources in Sudan we had to overstate the possible win, and that led us to not focus on the problem."¹⁰⁰ This led to an inadequate focus on the challenges faced by civilian political leadership and on how and whether the United States could support Sudanese civilian counterparts to overcome them.

U.S. policymakers' shallow knowledge of Sudan's political economy also led to the incorrect assumption that the SAF and RSF were serious about handing over power to civilians. As one former senior official stated, "I thought the issue was done and dusted."¹⁰¹ As the transitional phase unfolded, the security forces were the central power brokers. For example, when negotiations with rebel groups began, it was the TMC that took the reins. The security sector stood to lose too much. They had experience in navigating Sudan's politics and big pots of money, but their endeavors were not constrained by earmarking and accountability, unlike Hamdok's. As one analyst observed, Sudanese security elites were "using the civilians as a fig leaf of legitimacy to get money and avoid indictment."¹⁰²

There was also an "overestimation of [the U.S.] ability to influence" Sudan's security apparatus.¹⁰³ In part this could be explained by the limited engagement between U.S. policymakers and Sudanese security force leadership. During the negotiations that led to the CPA in the early 2000s, U.S. diplomats had more access to the security sector in Sudan. But at the time of the democratic opening, Washington had no established contact with the military as the United States had not had a military attaché on the ground in Khartoum due to the downgraded diplomatic presence.

At a minimum, a better reading of Sudan's political economy would have led U.S. policymakers to have more realistic expectations. Ideally, this knowledge would have led to a rapid surge of financial support to civilian-led initiatives to undercut the security force's power in the political marketplace. If ultimately the aim was to transform the Sudanese state, so the political economy was more conducive to democratic governance, that project was not near term. The first task at hand was to level the playing field so the civilian component of the transitional governing arrangements had a chance at changing the balance of power in its favor. To do so, civilian officials needed to outperform the security actors in Sudan's political marketplace. The ability to deliver jobs was key to that. Because the security services are a major job creator with access to funds from abroad, they had the upper hand by a long shot.

Inadequate Strategy to Meaningfully Enhance Civilian Inclusion

The United States missed an opportunity to protect the inclusionary intent of the Sudanese uprising in two related ways. Washington did not provide sufficient support to enable the civilian actors who had historically been marginalized. Washington also failed to apply diplomatic pressure on security actors to minimize the risk of them acting as spoilers.

A core tension that complicated the viability of Sudan's democratic opening was the embeddedness of the security forces in the state apparatus. The approach of power sharing between military and civilian leaders informed negotiations and mediations throughout Sudan's opening. This resulted in agreements that codified an outsized role of the military in governance, such as the Constitutional Declaration, which was an inadequate framework for checking the power of the military.¹⁰⁴ An approach of accommodation to the security sector was not an exclusively Western construct: Hamdok embraced it as well.¹⁰⁵

As a major player in the mediation space, the United States had the opportunity to propose and advance strategies that did more to restrain the security actors, whose incentives for relinquishing power were low. For example, U.S. officials could have linked the removal of sanctions to governance reforms, including structural ones that reduced the military's role in the political economy. As one former senior U.S. official lamented, "in the interest of the accommodation approach we may have destroyed the technocratic government by politicizing it."¹⁰⁶ This accommodation approach was also informed by Washington's alignment with the interests of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who preferred elevating military actors on the assumption that they would be more reliable counterparts than a civilian-run government.

The issues of inadequate guardrails on the military were exacerbated by the fact that U.S. policymakers had difficulty effectively supporting the civilian actors, who had been historically marginalized in the Sudanese political system. Several factors contributed to the inadequacy of the U.S. support for civilians. U.S. policymakers lacked sufficient engagement with resistance committees and struggled to navigate the protest movement. As one Sudanese analyst recounted, "the most egregious failing of international actors is not just refusal to apply guardrails on the military, but the failure to understand the perspective of the groups [that comprised the uprising]."¹⁰⁷

Washington also lacked a high-level strategy for supporting civilian leadership in the transitional government. U.S. officials tended to underestimate the amount of time, resources, and political capital that Sudan's civilian actors would need to pull control from military counterparts in the transitional government. Washington also lacked patience at times; the civilian government was viewed by some U.S. officials as a "difficult and challenging" negotiation partner that had competency issues and required "hand-holding."¹⁰⁸ In the context of the Abraham Accords, one U.S. official lamented Hamdok "nickeling and diming" in an attempt to increase aid allotments, an interpretation that belies a deeper issue of limited U.S. understanding of Sudan's political marketplace and a "failure of imagination"¹⁰⁹ in supporting the inclusion of actors who are new players in an established political space.

The responsibility to deliver a peace dividend was primarily held by the civilian component of the transitional government, which had almost no resources. Meanwhile the security actors had access to money and resources and were not asked to make the same commitments to leading political reform processes that Hamdok was responsible for. The prime minister struggled to garner sufficient political investment and turn off the security actors' tap.

In addition to a resources gap, there was also a political cache gap. The nature of power in the Sudanese political system required "capacity for political graft" that the civilian leadership may have been incapable of.¹¹⁰ The Hamdok government primarily consisted of technocrats whose ability to effectively navigate the Sudanese political system was low

compared to their counterparts in the TMC. The civilian leadership identified a long list of priorities, and reform efforts dragged on without timely impact. For example, a major focus was universal basic income, which took so long to implement that it did not have the intended impact.

Another major focus for Hamdok and his leadership was lifting sanctions and as such the external engagement required to achieve that. With an extensive career in international organizations, Hamdok was familiar with multilateral engagement and was a “legible interlocutor” for international community.¹¹¹ Several analysts felt this led to an externally motivated orientation for the Hamdok government, which came at the expense of focusing on the domestic issues like public health emergencies and flooding that were priorities for the Sudanese population at the time.

Despite the limitations, democracy and transition experts who worked in Sudan felt the standards to which the civilian government were held were too high and not commensurate with the levels and form of support the United States and West provided. As one seasoned U.S. official working on Sudan at the time recalled, “rhetorically we went all in on the civilian government, but our policy support was on paper, and in reality, it was lip service.”¹¹² Engagement by Hamdok and civilian officials with the international community did not see an immediate return on investment, nor did it reach the levels needed to embolden the civilian component of the transitional government. There was a particularly acute need to create jobs: The fact that the RSF and SAF were the biggest job creators increased their relevance and power. The lack of financial empowerment of the civilian segment meant its power and influence was low when compared to the SAF and RSF.

Furthermore, U.S. engagement with civil society was weak owing to the very limited diplomatic presence in country. This meant U.S. policymakers were not plugged in to the political dynamics driving the civilian-led revolution and were behind the curve when the democratic opening occurred.

Coup Derails Democratic Opening

In October 2021, when the chairmanship of the TMC was slated to shift to civilian leadership per the 2019 Constitutional Declaration, the TMC undertook a coup and arrested and removed Hamdok from power.¹¹³ In response, mass protests rose up again calling for the return of civilian government.¹¹⁴

The United States played a leadership role in a series of talks attempting to reinstate the civilian leadership. While the U.S. effort was a timely attempt at mediation, the approach, which prioritized accommodation and power sharing, was viewed as a hasty process that set conditions less favorable to civilian authority than the pre-coup arrangement and that put the RSF and SAF on a collision course. In January 2022, Hamdok stepped down.

For over a year, the rivalry between the SAF and RSF increased as talks ensued. When war broke out in Khartoum on April 15, 2023, “the speed and extremity of the violence caught senior U.S. officials off guard.”¹¹⁵ Senior officials did not anticipate the outbreak of violence; instead, the view was that the increasing bluster of the parties was brinksmanship, and the priority was to preserve lines of communication with security elites.¹¹⁶ The United States also lacked forward planning, wasting valuable time debating whether war would break out rather than planning for preventive engagement and crisis response.¹¹⁷

The United States is not responsible for the actions of the parties—they entered war. But U.S. officials did not heed the warning signs. They also failed to sound the alarm and mobilize higher-level attention and engagement to take advantage of the widespread international consensus that war was not in any external actor’s interest. As one former U.S. official reflected, “when the coup happened, the United States should not have been caught so flat-footed—at the highest levels, [officials] did not believe it was happening—but there were troop movements, and international nongovernmental organizations already had their go bags packed.”¹¹⁸

Conclusion

As the cases of Sudan and Ethiopia illustrate, U.S. policies need to better understand and incorporate the many factors at play during democratic openings, including local actors and power structures, emerging powers and their interests, and competing U.S. interests, among others. Democratic openings are dynamic windows of opportunity for the United States to support local political will for democratic change in the context of global democratic recession and pressing challenges from autocratic powers. Supporting democratic openings, however, is exceedingly difficult, and there are limits on what the U.S. government can reasonably do to increase the likelihood of democratization. The United States can have a positive impact on democratic openings if lessons from past experiences are internalized. At a minimum, the United States must do more to avoid doing harm in democratic openings by developing realistic goals and transparently communicating them.

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Notes

- 1 Though defined by a moment of transfer of power, democratic openings are best understood as a period nestled within a broader political transition. Democratic openings are nonlinear processes that unfold over years and are shaped by a country's unique historical context. The literature on democratic openings identifies a range of types that vary based on the nature and pace of change as well the political junctures and regime types at the time of change. The likelihood of a successful democratic opening is determined by a broad set of factors, including initial structural conditions, critical policy choices made during the transition, and external influences. These different conditions and factors present varying levels of risk and promise. Understanding the unique circumstances surrounding each case can help U.S. policymakers better define opportunities and challenges and calibrate expectations and investment levels accordingly.
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