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AFP | Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo speaks to the press in Khartoum, Sudan, on May 28, 2019.

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The battle for Sudan's future reached a critical point with the brutal crackdown on a protest camp in Khartoum. Much of it depends on how the ambitions of interim vice president and ex-Janjaweed chief, Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo, are handled.

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Over the past few months, as protesters staged a sit-in in Khartoum, “the bush” was gradually seeping into, and asserting its presence, in the [Sudanese](#) capital.

Perched on Land Cruisers mounted with machine guns, heavily armed troops in desert khaki uniforms seemed to take over the city, stationed at every bridge, street junction and around the main opposition protest camp in Khartoum.

The armed men were not part of the regular Sudanese army. They belonged to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group born out of the [Darfur](#) conflict and led by a warlord whose name sparks terror among the non-Arab tribes of the western Sudanese region who experienced his brutality.

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Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo -- widely known by his nickname "Hemedti" -- was a commander of the government-backed Janjaweed militias accused of committing war crimes in Darfur. His fighters got an official upgrade when the government of the deposed president, [Omar al-Bashir](#), formed the RSF in a bid to control the paramilitaries operating in Sudan's hinterlands.

From a lowly Janjaweed commander, Dagalo has risen up the ranks to the Number Two spot in Sudan following Bashir's April 11 ouster. The 40-something-year-old RSF chief is now the deputy head of Sudan's ruling Transitional Military Council (TMC).

While the TMC is led by Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, most Sudanese believe Dagalo is the brains, and the brawn, behind Monday's bloody crackdown on protesters in Khartoum, which killed at least 38 unarmed civilians, according to doctors linked to the opposition.

Hours later, Burhan announced the TMC had ditched a three-year transition period negotiated with opposition leaders and that the country [would hold elections](#) within nine months.

Scenes from Darfur in Khartoum

Shortly after dawn on Monday, as a convoy of RSF Land Cruisers moved toward the Khartoum protest camp, marking the start of a deadly crackdown on unarmed civilians, video clips shot by Sudanese activists began to surface on Twitter with just one word in Arabic or English: Janjaweed.

The brutal scorched-earth techniques that Khartoum unleashed for decades in peripheral regions such as Darfur, the Nuba Mountains and Kordofan had reached the capital city.

As activists scrambled to outwit the Internet blockade, reports of female protesters

being raped began to circulate. In a WhatsApp interview with FRANCE 24, a Khartoum resident who wished to be identified as “Morgan” said he was stopped by armed RSF troops who made him squat on the street and proceeded to shave his head. They did not manage to shave off his entire head since his hair was thick and long, said Morgan, but multiple accounts of public shavings, particularly of women as a shaming measure, have been reported.

“If allegations and accounts of yesterday's attack are true, [#Sudan](#)'s government basically did in [#Khartoum](#) what they'd done in Darfur for years: rolled in on pick-ups, shot at a bunch of unarmed people, raped women, torched the place, and then denied it happened,” tweeted journalist Jason Patinkin from Khartoum on Tuesday.



The revulsion was palpable in elite circles in the Sudanese capital, according to Patrick Smith, editor of The Africa Report. “The chatter among the elites has been, ‘this guy’s a bushman who got away with these things in Darfur. This can’t be done in Khartoum,’” explained Smith.

The 'real power in government'

The battle for the soul of Sudan’s popular, peaceful revolution has reached a critical point, one that can determine whether the country will be on the path to a democratic future or doomed to repeat the oppression and chaos of its northern neighbours, Egypt and Libya.

Much of it depends on how Hemedti's ambitions are managed, and whether his forces can be tamed or contained before they wreak havoc in Sudan or across the country's borders with troubled neighbours such as Libya, Chad and the Central African Republic.

"A lot of people believe he [Dagalo] is the real power in government. When Burhan announced elections within nine months, it seemed like the RSF was dominating the agenda. The question now is who will the military put up: will it be a civilian leader or one of their own? Burhan frankly doesn't have the personality to be a leader so there are questions over whether Hemedti will be Sudan's Sisi-like figure," said Smith, referring to Egypt's Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, a military man who seized power before the country's only democratically elected leader, Mohamed Morsi, could complete his term in office.

Gulf backers with deep pockets

While it is unclear if Dagalo will indeed clone Sisi's takeover of power, he has aligned himself with the same regional forces backing the Egyptian strongman.

Both Burhan and Dagalo have close ties to Sisi's main Gulf backers, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Sudanese troops are on the frontlines in the Saudi-led war against Shiite Houthi rebels in Yemen, a service for which, Burhan and Dagalo are handsomely rewarded. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have also pledged \$3 billion worth of aid to their financially strapped fellow Arab ally across the Red Sea, a cash infusion that sparked anti-Gulf chants of "keep your money" by protesters in Khartoum.

Monday's crackdown came days after the two top Sudanese military commanders returned from trips to the Gulf where they were encouraged to take a tough line on the protesters to avoid a repeat of the "dire situations in Libya and Yemen" explained Mathieu Guidere from the University of Paris 8, in an interview with the AFP.

Dagalo has also kept his distance from the Muslim Brotherhood, the bête noire of the Saudi and Emirati royal families. Last month, the TMC closed the Khartoum offices of the Qatar-based Al Jazeera TV channel in a sign that Sudan's military leaders are willing to take sides in the Saudi-Qatar spat that has divided the oil-rich Gulf states.

'A hustler, a wheeler-dealer'

The ability to form and break powerful alliances at the opportune moment has been a key trait that has enabled Dagalo, a lowly member of the Rizeigat tribe of camel-herding Arab nomads, to rise to the top echelons of Sudan's power structure.

His family, along with several Rizeigat tribesmen, arrived in Sudan in the 1980s after fleeing the conflict and drought in neighbouring Chad. They settled in Darfur, where Dagalo briefly attended school before dropping out and joining the government-backed Arab Janjaweed militias fighting for resources against the dominant Fur ethnic group in the region.

At the height of the Darfur conflict, he granted a rare access to a British [documentary film](#) crew, a platform he used to boast about a 2006 visit to Bashir's home, where he was "personally asked" to fight in Darfur.

When the latest anti-government protests broke out in December, RSF units were deployed in Khartoum, where Dagalo once again gave media interviews to declare his support for the people's "legitimate" demands. Following Bashir's ouster, he claimed to have played a major role in preventing bloodshed by helping "remove the president" -- who was his biggest patron in less uncertain times.

"He's a hustler, a wheeler-dealer and a fighter-politician," explained Smith. "He attempts to appeal to the people as a lowly fellow from the hinterland of Darfur, not one of the elites from the centre of the country."

Wealthy man with well-paid troops

Dagalo may not belong to the elites of Sudan's Nile Basin, but he's a very wealthy man capable of buying influence in a country run on corrupt, crony ties.

The RSF chief has business interests in the gold mining sector and has lined his pockets providing security services on the Libyan border, a lucrative frontier for smugglers and traffickers. His troops are believed to be better paid than regular Sudanese soldiers and he has publicly offered to pay police salaries from the money he has made from the

Yemen war.

Money can also buy influence during elections, but that can come at the cost of credibility, which is in short supply in Sudanese military circles these days.

Sudanese protest leaders have rejected the TMC's bid to hold elections within nine months, with main opposition Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) issuing a statement declaring, "It's not the putschist council, nor its militias, nor its leaders who decide the fate of the people, nor how it will transition to a civilian government."

The election call by the TMC is widely viewed as a bid to end the protest movement and curb the influence of civil society and opposition supporters, including [women and youths](#), who staged a model protest movement across the country before Monday's crackdown.

"The elections won't be credible. Everybody knows that, even the military knows that. The problem is whether there will even be elections. The best hope for the military is to use the promise of elections as a way of fobbing off the protest movement and just not holding elections," explained Smith.

Dagalo himself has insisted he has no political ambitions, telling reporters that the RSF is a "home" he will never leave. "I am not going to talk politics and I am not into politics," he said.

Iftar meal raises eyebrows

But while Dagalo is unlikely to stand for elections, few believe he is willing to relinquish power now that he's tasted it at a national level.

Proximity to power will also ensure that Dagalo is never held accountable for the human rights abuses inflicted by his forces. The RSF chief is not facing war crimes charges at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for his actions in Darfur, but his international profile has been rising in recent months and with that comes increased scrutiny.

Last month, when the US Charge D'Affaires in Sudan, Steven Koutsis, attended an *iftar*

meal to break the daily Ramadan fast with Dagalo and other Darfur elders, it sparked rumours in opposition circles that the US was supporting the RSF chief.

Koutsis explained to the [Voice of America](#) that he has attended *iftar* meals over the past three years "to support the Darfuri people," but many US experts believe it was a case of poor judgment that must be addressed.

"In the case of the US, the first step should be the immediate removal of Steven Koutsis as Charge d'Affaires in Khartoum," said Eric Reeves, a long-time Sudan researcher and analyst, most recently a senior fellow at Harvard University, in an email to FRANCE 24. "His decision to share an *iftar* meal with Hemedti two weeks ago gave an implicit signal that the US felt this ruthless *génocidaire* was someone who could be dealt with on these terms of diplomatic nicety."




Monday's massacre, according to Reeves, "makes clear just how egregiously bad Koutsis' judgment has been on this and other critical issues."

The TMC has promised to conduct an investigation into Monday's operation on the protest camp, but the opposition has dismissed the offer, calling instead for an independent probe.

Whatever the outcome, it's unlikely that Dagalo, with his money and fighting troops, will be willing to take a backseat in the near future and return to the hinterland from where he rose to dizzying heights of power.

SUDAN MILITARY PROTEST DARFUR

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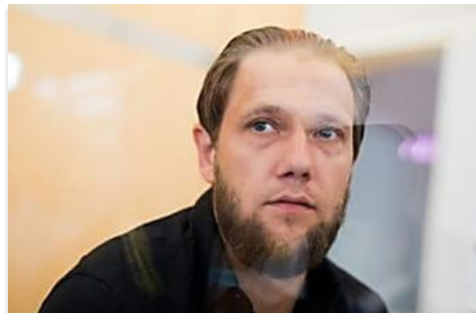


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