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Challenges to Political Transitions and Strategies for Regional Peace and Stability in The Horn of Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The primary question that came to my mind in considering the topic *"Challenges to Political Transitions and Strategies for Regional Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa"* was: Are the challenges to political transitions in the Horn of Africa any different from the rest of the continent? The challenges faced by all the regions of the continent appear, at least on the surface, to be the same and should therefore be treated together as challenges to political transitions in Africa rather than in a particular region. However, upon closer examination, there are peculiarities in some of the challenges faced by countries in the Horn that have led to some of the countries in the region seeming to be perpetually at war with themselves and their neighbours. While challenges plaguing political transitions in other parts of the continent appear to have been managed skillfully to allow for internal peace, regional stability, and good interstate relations, states in the Horn have had difficulties nurturing political transitions from gestation to full term to deliver sustainable democracy.

What are these peculiarities that shape the political transitions trajectory in the Horn of Africa that make an enduring democracy impossible to engender in the region? There are several factors, and the organisers have identified some of them in the concept note of this meeting. A quick rehash of these factors is important here:

- Legacies of state formation and collapse,
- The role of identity politics and ethno-regional contestation, which undermines inclusive governance and sustainable peace,
- Governance deficits, weak institutions and failure in public service delivery and
- The militarisation of political power

What lessons can we learn from existing initiatives aimed at addressing the crises of political transitions in the Horn? How can these

inform ongoing consultations for advancing the goals of the African Union's (AU's) *Silencing the Guns and Agenda 2063*? Finally, how can the African Union and IGAD be strengthened to effectively mediate political crises and support stable transitions in the Horn of Africa?

What I intend to do in this presentation is to contextualise some of these challenges that you have clearly articulated in your concept note and that require no further elaboration at the conceptual level. Nearly all the countries in the Horn of Africa, as listed in the concept note underpinning the event, including Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti, exhibit in one form or another, some or all the identified challenges. However, Sudan and Ethiopia, two of the biggest countries in the Horn, exemplify these characteristics the most. I will use Sudan as my main example, but will make recourse to others as well, depending on the point being emphasised.

I use the Sudan example mainly due to my experience first as the Joint Special Representative (JSR) for the United Nations-African Union Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) from 2012 to 2014, and subsequently as the current Chair of the High-Level Panel on Sudan and the High Representative for the AU's Silencing the Guns (STG). Sudan is also chosen because its current war was caused by the failure of the political transition in the country, and I have first-hand experience of what pushed it into war.

CHALLENGES TO POLITICAL TRANSITION IN SUDAN AND THE DESCENT INTO WAR

In Sudan and most of the Horn of Africa, **historical legacies of state formation and collapse**, including colonial and post-colonial political and economic power relations among groups, have combined with a range of other factors to

continue to shape current political transitions in a manner that makes enduring democratic governance difficult to establish. The structure of relations among groups tilted in favour of certain groups, who continued to treat other groups as subjects rather than compatriots. Khartoum and other cities around it enjoyed relative wealth at the expense of 'distant' regions such as Darfur, creating instant agitation and rebellion from marginalised groups.

In 2009, the African Union report on the root causes of the crisis in Darfur, Sudan, argued that the conflict was, in reality, a manifestation of a broader crisis affecting the whole of Sudan. This larger problem was described as the consequence of the development of a colonial and post-colonial socio-economic system in which a minority of the population, concentrated in and around Khartoum, maintained a stranglehold over political power and economic resources.

This led to the political and economic marginalisation of the people in other regions of Sudan, including Darfur. To contain and manage disaffection and dissatisfaction, the central power inevitably resorted to measures intended to limit the democratic possibilities for the people to freely express themselves and organise to attain what they considered to be their rights.

While what was reported was on Darfur, it applied to the whole of Sudan, and I dare say that it was also applicable to most of the countries in the Horn of Africa. The prevention of several groups from political participation by the dominant group of elites that received power at independence led to widespread marginalisation of several other people politically and economically, which in turn led to political agitations that some of the countries did not recover from. Sudan certainly has suffered from it, having continually experienced civil wars, which led to the secession of South Sudan and the ongoing civil war which has been raging since 2023. The cause of agitation has always

been marginalisation and exclusion from political power and economic resources.

Regrettably, South Sudan has not escaped from the same symptoms that have plagued Sudan since its independence; continuing instability and occasional outbreaks of fighting in the country stem from the same structural factors driving instability in most transitional countries. There has been a failure to ensure power sharing and equitable distribution of resources to engender a feeling of national cohesion and unity. At the same time, the country has proven incapable, unable and lacking the political will to implement various agreements to ensure effective power sharing. Consequently, it has been unable to organise elections to allow for a genuine democratic process, which will enable the people to elect a post-transition government.

Ethiopia suffered a similar fate in the 1980s with the guerrilla war of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, and recently with the war between the Federal government of Ethiopia and TPLF in the Tigray region. Several low-intensity conflicts have been raging in parts of the country since 2019. All these prevent political transitions as groups in the periphery refuse to accept that such transitions would lead to genuine democratic, inclusive governance and instead resort to self-help through armed struggles.

Closely associated with the challenge of the historical legacy of the colonial past is **the problem of managing diversity and building inclusive institutions**. The very nature of centre and periphery in Sudan's body politic means that a group or groups are already disadvantaged in the scheme of things. Sudan is a diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-religious country. However, it has often been ruled as if it were a monolithic country in terms of culture, religion and language. The inability to manage the country's diverse groups has been a major problem for the country moving

forward. A major issue that led to the breakdown or collapse of the transition in Sudan was the failure of the civilian population/stakeholders to agree amongst themselves on how to move the country forward, or how to deal with the military government. The FFC was excluding other civilian groups supposedly on principle to the point that the military used the issue of excluding other civilian groups as a pretext for taking over the government of the country when it was their turn to relinquish power in the power-sharing arrangement.

As if that was not enough, after the war started and political dialogue process was initiated to organize the civilian population to discuss issues related to the war especially how to put pressure on the belligerents to stop the war and develop a framework that would govern a post-war Sudan, the civilian groups still could not overcome their differences to ensure they produce a united front to take over from the military. Each group wants to exclude the other with the aim of being the main beneficiary of power when civilians take over leadership. Building an inclusive institution becomes a major challenge under these kinds of circumstances. Therefore, the country's civilian stakeholders remain divided as they refuse to work together, and efforts to put pressure on the belligerents through a united civilian front continue to be in limbo.

Yet the essence of political dialogue is for all groups to sit and discuss issues pertinent to their cause and agree with others to develop a joint institutional framework that will help in building a common front to achieve their objectives. If the civilian stakeholders cannot unite to end the war and continue to exclude other groups even as the war progresses, then nothing concrete can be achieved with the mindset of excluding others so ingrained in the psyche of the political class, civilian and military.

The situation is compounded by ethnic politics and regionalisation. Between Arabs and other groups, between Misseriya and other African

groups, between one ethnic group and another in Darfur, and between the North and other regions, and between Darfur and the Eastern region or the Central areas and Khartoum, raising ethnic tensions and enabling a predisposition towards armed conflict. Identity politics, such as the Arabisation and Islamic fundamentalism of the National Congress Party (NCP) government, fuelled ethno-regional contestation, significantly undermining inclusive governance and sustainable peace processes by exacerbating social divisions, hindering political participation, and fuelling conflict.

This idea of excluding others and the adoption of a non-compromising attitude is the cause of constant tensions and armed rebellion among the excluded people and is not limited to Sudan alone. Other countries in the region also exhibit this characteristic in governance.

Militarisation is another key feature of the process of political transition that Sudan again exemplifies. The political transition processes the country has had have all been militarised by the country's armed forces and the armed movements that formed the opposition to them, mainly because of their exclusion from power. Former President Omar Bashir's military regime ruled the country for nearly 3 decades, with several armed movements formed across the regions to contest his leadership or to fight for the recognition of their regions. When he instituted the process of transition in 2014, and after he was overthrown by a revolution, the armed movements were already well entrenched and demanded to be part of the political process. Bashir was effectively overthrown after widespread demonstrations led by a coalition of civil forces, the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), facilitated his removal by the Armed Forces of Sudan (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The FFC agreed to a power-sharing arrangement with the military for the period of the transition to democratic governance. Shortly after the power-

sharing arrangement agreement was signed, all the armed movements again negotiated a separate deal to be part of the political transition, and several of them worked hand in glove with the military to eventually truncate the political process, which resulted in the civil war.

Part of the problem in Ethiopia and Eritrea has been the challenge of the governing parties completely transforming from militarised guerrilla groups to governing civilian political parties, leaving the governance processes seriously militarised. This has been a challenge facing liberation movements in other parts of Africa.

The military in Sudan did not allow the political transition to move as quickly as envisaged by the Constitutional Document agreed to guide the process. All the agreed steps to guide and fast-track the transition were not operationalised, and when the time was up for the military to transfer power to the civilians, as agreed in the power-sharing arrangement, they reneged and turned the process into a fully-fledged military rule, effectively executing a coup d'état by removing the civilians.

Sudan has also experienced **governance deficits** and weak institutions that affected public service delivery, leaving most citizens' aspirations unfulfilled. In the nearly 30 years of the National Congress Party (NCP) of President Bashir, there was little to show in terms of providing necessities to the people of Sudan, either in Khartoum or in the regions and states outside of Khartoum. There was thus little enthusiasm for entreaties to transit towards democracy. Instead, most of the regions, especially Darfur, resorted to self-help to achieve what the state could not provide. The emergence of several armed movements around the country was a direct consequence of the government's lack of impact on the lives of the people. The long years of Bashir and NCP also witnessed international sanctions on the country, which affected the ordinary citizens more than those in government, who were supposedly

targeted by the sanctions. The result was the pauperisation of the populace, which, combined with frustrations of being marginalised and excluded from decision-making, created inter-ethnic, inter-group tensions which made the political transition fail to deliver to the population, hence their failure.

Finally, the overbearing influence of external actors in virtually all the countries of the Horn exploited and complicated internal struggles for power to make political transitions a challenging proposition. There were many external actors who were openly against political transitions, while others were in support. Countries in the region played one external actor against the other, depending on their interests. From Ethiopia to Somalia through South Sudan to Sudan. Competing external forces manipulated the countries to suit their interests, and the need for external resources also made the countries submissive to the external forces.

In Sudan, the ongoing conflict is still raging due to a wide range of factors. However, the most crucial conflict-driving factor that has kept the belligerents going in this war has been the influence of external forces. They supply the weapons and provide other forms of support for the fight to continue. They also support the civilian groups and ensure that those who insist on keeping others out of the political process continue to receive support, thus keeping the civilian stakeholders perpetually divided. Since resources are available to the parties to the conflict, the SAF and the RSF continue the war. Flow of funds to civilian factions ensures that they continue to maintain their positions of excluding others from participating in the political dialogue process. This is a major cause of fragmentation and disunity, which enables the warring parties to continue the war.

It should be noted that due to disputes over shared borders and the hosting of armed movements by neighbouring countries, actions taken by a country to enhance its security could

be perceived as a threat to others, creating further tensions and instability. This regional security complex exacerbates existing tensions that cause deep-seated instability.

There is thus a need to rein in all the external funders of Sudanese actors in the war. The sub-regional body Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), whose mandate was exclusively on issues of environment, climate and sustainable development, is obliged by frequent conflicts in member-states to take on a peace and security role. In the process, it is now evolving normative frameworks that could effectively guide the processes of political transition in the region. While military rule is now frowned upon, there is no denying that many of the governments in the region evolved from armed movements into power in their respective countries. This background poses a challenge to the role of IGAD in the region's political sphere.

WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS TO RESOLVING THE ISSUES IN THE HORN?

The recently concluded mid-term strategic evaluation of the AU Master Roadmap for Silencing the Guns in Africa by the year 2030 identified the centrality of political dialogue as the only viable and sustainable path towards sustainable solutions to the plethora of challenges. The strategic evaluation also identified the importance of inclusive political transitions and expeditious restoration of constitutional order in Member States currently undergoing political transitions, as well as the promotion of national reconciliation.

From the foregoing, what are the solutions that could be proffered? In my view, we should start by learning from each other. Political transitions have been successfully implemented in other regions of Africa, and there should be a sharing of lessons learned.

I think the Horn should learn from successful transitions and adapt to suit local conditions. One good way to start is to pose questions of how the root causes of possible transition failure were addressed, resolved or managed.

Nation-building is a continuous process; each country continues to build itself into a cohesive unit by constantly tinkering with parts of the state that are weak and require to be worked upon. It should be a continuous exercise that should occupy the minds of those in leadership positions in the country.

Most African states are colonial states except Ethiopia and Liberia, but most have gone beyond challenging colonial borders in line with the AU Constitutive Act which admonishes them to respect those borders to prevent territorial clashes and border wars. Yet, disputes over borders are quite common in the Horn, which aggravates existing tensions between states and leads to regional instability: Ethiopia-Sudan, Sudan-Eritrea, Ethiopia-Somalia, Sudan-South Sudan, Eritrea-Ethiopia. These are issues that appear to be relatively settled in other parts of the continent, where the colonial borders have been, by and large, accepted. Where disputes have arisen, various border joint demarcation approaches have been adopted to mutually agree on frontiers. The Horn should learn from this and resolve border issues amicably, as has been done in other regions.

Based on a substantive understanding of Sudan, a significant concern is the reluctance among the nation's political leaders to implement genuine federalism and to pursue effective decentralisation or de-concentration of authority. Sudan, on account of its size and diversity, is ideally suited for a federal form of government. The challenge to the Sudanese is to apply a federal system of governance, a Sudanese version more suited to ensuring unity in diversity, responsive governance that addresses the needs of the diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic groupings while ensuring a common Sudanese identity and unity.

In the same vein, Sudan, South Sudan and Ethiopia, which are all federations, could work, in their respective countries, to forge a sense of one common country with a common vision and a common destiny among its peoples by exploring approaches to what in Nigeria is referred to as power rotation (or power shift), a practice where leadership deliberately moves to different geographical zones.

This could accelerate a process of nation-building, cement a sense of belonging, renew the citizen-state compact and reduce negative divisions/differences to the bare minimum.

The lack of opportunity in Sudan for other groups to lead the country led to the struggle of the SPLM, which eventually resulted in the creation of South Sudan. The Darfur armed groups would be less restive if they realised that the Presidency would soon be their turn, while the people of Blue Nile and South Kordofan would also be happy to wait for their turn to govern the country rather than take up arms against the state.

Finally, I think serious attention should be paid to the issue of powerful external actors interfering in the internal affairs of the countries of the Horn of Africa. While all the countries on the continent experience external interference in one form or another, the extent of such interference in the Horn is quite alarming and a cause for concern. The ongoing war in Sudan is being sustained through the support of external patrons that can keep the war going for as long as the belligerents are willing to fight. As the situation stands, it appears there is no country sufficiently interested in Sudan or sufficiently powerful enough to stop the countries providing the means for fighting from further supporting the two belligerents in the Sudan war.

There is a need to strengthen both IGAD and AU mechanisms for mediation and stable transitions in the Horn of Africa. The African Union and IGAD need to enhance their coordination, improve early warning systems, and address the root causes of conflict. This includes fostering stronger

national-level peace structures, promoting inclusive dialogue, and ensuring sustainable development initiatives.

Currently, the sub-regional body, IGAD and the AU have been unable to exercise any leverage on the belligerents and their sponsors. Neither organisation can be greater than the sum of its constituent parts. As indicated in one of the conclusions of the recent midterm evaluation of the AU Master Roadmap for Silencing the Guns in Africa, the AU has all the instruments for addressing the challenges on the continent; however, the lack of political will to comply with these instruments [by Member-States] remains one of the main challenges.” When member states respect the normative frameworks that they sign up to, the organisations will be strengthened and able to support them in times of crises.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas served as Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) from 2014 to 2021.

During that period, he was also Chairman of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC) which was established to facilitate implementation of the judgment of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the Cameroon-Nigeria boundary dispute.

He has extensive experience from a long and distinguished career in governmental and international service. Before joining UNOWAS, he was the African Union-United Nations Joint Special Representative for Darfur and Head of the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur.

From 2010 to 2013, he was Secretary-General of the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States. Prior to that, he served as President of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), from 2006 to 2009, and Executive Secretary, from 2002 to 2005.

From the time he joined the Government of Ghana in 1987, he served as Deputy Foreign Minister and Deputy Minister in Charge of Tertiary Education at different periods. He was also a First Deputy Speaker and Member of Parliament of Ghana.

From the beginning of the outbreak of the Liberian civil war, he was involved in ECOWAS mediation efforts till the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (ACPA) of 2003. He was similarly involved in ECOWAS mediation efforts in several transitions from military to civilian rule in a number of West African countries.

Mohamed Ibn Chambas holds a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science from the University of Ghana, a master's degree and a Doctor of Philosophy Degree from Cornell University and a Jurist Doctorate Degree from Case Western Reserve University School of Law, both institutions in the United States. He was admitted to the Bar of the State of Ohio and the Republic of Ghana.

Dr. Chambas currently serves as the African Union (AU) High Representative for Silencing the Guns, since his appointment in March 2023 and the Chairman of the AU High Level Panel on Sudan (HLP-Sudan) which took effect in January 2024.

He also serves as Chairman of the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme Task Force, Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center (KAIPTC Accra), Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS Africa), member of the Board of Governors of the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Geneva), member of the Board of Governors of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI Stockholm), and a member of the West Africa Elders Forum (WAEF/Goodluck Ebele Jonathan Foundation Abuja).



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