



# Citizens' Perceptions of Democratic Participation in Sudan





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In collaboration with:



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# Abbreviations

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- CPA ..... Comprehensive Peace Agreement
- CSO ..... Civil society organization
- FFC ..... Forces of Freedom and Change
- IDP ..... Internally displaced person
- JPA ..... Juba Peace Agreement
- NCP ..... National Congress Party
- OHCHR ..... Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN)
- SPA ..... Sudan Professionals' Association

# Acknowledgments

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## Acknowledgements

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# Executive summary



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## Executive summary

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The December 2018 revolution in Sudan, which ended the longest period of autocratic rule in the country's history, and the subsequent signing of a Constitutional Charter on 17 August 2019 led to the establishment of a Sudan Transitional Government. This set Sudan on the path to democratization and ignited the prospect of transformational change and a new era for the country's civic space and democracy, as well as people's wider participation in governance.

The Charter contains strong stipulations on freedoms, justice and equality for all Sudanese and their fundamental human rights, not least participation in formulating civil rights and policy. It further stipulates the rights of youth and women's groups, which were in the front line of the revolution. The Charter indicates that the state must guarantee the protection of women's rights and gender equality, and contains a provision that 40 per cent of the members of the Legislative Assembly must be women. Democratic elections based on an updated population census and the adoption of a new Permanent Constitution—following an inclusive and participatory constitution-making process and a National Constitutional Convention—are expected to mark the end of the transition period, while the medium- to long-term political and governance reforms initiated during this period will continue.

The primary objective of this report is to study the perceptions among the Sudanese population of the motivations for and barriers to democratic participation. The study aims to generate a baseline of understanding to guide the design of further relevant civic education interventions. Methodologically, this was achieved through the use of primary and secondary data sources:

- Primary data was collected through direct fieldwork using a structured questionnaire, interviews, focus group discussions and key informant interviews, as well as participatory observation.
- Secondary sources were collated in a desk review of existing academic and public opinion research, such as data from Afrobarometer and the International IDEA Global State of Democracy Indices.

## Key findings

### Democracy and devolution

- A majority of the surveyed population viewed democracy in classical liberal terms, such as representing the ability to express opinions freely, and linked it with peace and the absence of corruption. This is opposed to the 'event' of democracy pertaining to elections.
- A majority of the surveyed population (81 per cent) indicated that they discuss political matters freely with friends and family members, and that they do this frequently or sometimes.
- About one-third indicated that they felt somewhat free to express political views. Combined with those who indicated that they felt completely free, this section makes up approximately half of the surveyed population. This is, of course, offset by the other half, who felt the opposite.
- A significant majority of the interviewees expressed frustration that the prospects for full liberal democracy remained bleak. Despite some progress towards achieving peace, challenges remain, in particular with regard to deepening democracy, fighting corruption, preventing human rights violations, security sector reform and the adoption of national and state constitutions or local legislatures.
- Interviewees highlighted issues linked to a lack of inclusivity in the peace process, and the fact that the framework agreements that have been signed between the state and armed groups have contributed to tensions in the regions of Eastern, Northern and Central Sudan. Furthermore, progress remains limited with regard to specific armed groups. These messages can reliably be interpreted as confirmation that the Juba Peace Agreement has not yet achieved a tangible and comprehensive consensus on a sustainable peace in Sudan.

## Marginalization and dissolution

- The economic situation remains important to the surveyed population: 59 per cent indicated that the economic situation was ‘too bad’ and 92 per cent believed that it was bad or too bad. Sowing further seeds of doubt over devolution of the peace process and so-called peace dividends is the fact that the majority of the surveyed population reported a disconnect between the people and the government.
- On the sense of detachment between populace and power, participants in rural areas felt excluded and unable to influence government policy. Participants from rural and urban areas were highly critical of the government’s economic policies and considered these a setback in the country’s progress.
- Access to information unsurprisingly differed along geographical and generational lines. Social media is often the main source of information for citizens, especially among youth and in urban areas. Radio was used by the older age groups. While the research shows that the participants perceived an improvement in their access to information, they also believe their ability to influence decision-making processes to be limited. A considerable number of participants indicated that they had not read the Constitutional Charter, while others questioned its credibility—arguing that it has already been amended several times.
- In as much as both rural and urban areas acknowledged the availability of spaces to practise freedom of expression, and appreciate this as progress and change from previous governments, access to and exchanges of information should not be mistaken for informed and active participation in political processes. The difficulty of directly linking citizens to active participation, albeit not unique to Sudan, is pronounced and highlighted by the fact that 86 per cent had not attended a campaign rally during the previous elections.
- Participants noted a lack of transparency, under-reporting of certain crises, concealment of facts and withholding of critical information as factors that weaken belief in the sincerity and authenticity of the implementation of the peace process and political transformation. According to some respondents, the slow progress with transformation has been exacerbated by the lack of change of personnel in key leadership positions in the post-revolution administration.

## Faces of the revolution

- Youth and women were at the forefront of the revolution but the survey's findings indicate that both remain underrepresented in political decision making.
- At the grassroots and community levels, it should be noted that 'resistance committees', known as the guardians of the revolution, have continued to play a key role since the revolution in organizations and local dispute resolution mechanisms in the neighbourhoods.<sup>1</sup>
- Women from urban areas are often keen to participate but identify the social structure of their communities, which pushes women out of the public sphere, as the main obstacle. The documented lack of change in government institutions and leadership positions, in particular in the security and financial sectors, only adds to the sense of insufficient transformation—especially when it comes to youth and women's integration.

## Key issues highlighting the fragmentation and divisions

- The familiar patronage-based system for public sector appointments, based on neither merit nor expertise, continued to benefit a few well-connected people, while lack of transparency and accountability regarding the functioning of public institutions reinforced the impression of a superficial transformation. This sustained the impression that resources were being wasted and post-revolutionary government structures were underperforming.
- Interviewees often ascribed the lack of functioning public institutions to well established tensions within the military factions in the government, and between the civil and military components of the government.
- The fragmentation of the Forces of Freedom and Change (see below), concerns about a military takeover and return to pre-revolution policies, and the lack of government/civilian control over the Rapid Support Forces and other militias have slowed the process of disarmament.

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<sup>1</sup> The formation of resistance committees, which are local, grassroots and informal neighbourhood-wide networks of residents, dates back to 2013. They played a significant role in organizing the demonstrations that succeeded in toppling the regime in April 2019.

## Overall analysis and recommendations

- There are significant gaps in the dissemination of information to and communications with the public. Nor have access to information and freedom of expression necessarily resulted in greater participation. Support is needed for expanded platforms of expression and dissemination in broader community structures to ensure the sharing of information in a timely and meaningful manner. These platforms need to be generationally and geographically adapted, and sensitive to the relevant media available.
- Interviewees are aware of and informed about the reasons for the lack of transformation or even improvement. A large part of this is related to economic difficulties and realities, but part of it is related to recent experience with democratic processes and the lack of visible examples of transformation or genuine belief in agency being able to solicit such change. Linking agency to transformation at all levels of society remains a crucial task and a fundamental catalyst for broader change.
- Politically and culturally marginalized groups in particular still have a strong sense of exclusion. This contributes significantly to the sense that tangible benefits are largely absent from the new dispensation. Empowering these groups, especially at the local level, should remain a strategic priority.
- Structural and institutional deficiencies and lack of capacity remain significant contributors to the lack of belief in transformation. Support must be provided for institutional renewal and reform, for example in public sector institutions, and in the trade unions and political groups that were instrumental to the revolution and transformation.
- Knowledge of civic rights needs to be scaled-up, as well as of the challenges of democratic transition and the opportunities for the groups that contributed to change. The gaps between the government and civil society, women's groups and youth must be bridged by increasing their capacity, designing tailored programmes and including them under the umbrella of official policy reform and policymaking.

# 1. Introduction

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## 1. Introduction

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Sudan's 2019 Constitutional Charter provides a road map and legal framework for the country's transition to democratic governance and free elections. Previous elections in Sudan under former regimes have been marred by boycotts by opposition parties. In addition, despite the fact that they were peaceful, various observer missions expressed strong concerns about their inclusivity and the ability of voters to actively participate in the full electoral process, as well as the absence of genuine democratic dialogue and engagement.

Protests in December 2018 culminated four months later in President al-Bashir being deposed, raising hopes of a new democratic dawn and drawing parallels with similar, historical revolutions in 1964 and 1985. Civic mobilization and resistance, the role of existing structures such as trade unions, symbolism, and the sheer euphoria in Sudan and internationally all added to a sense of renewed hope for popular participation in Sudanese politics. The eventual change brought by the December revolution came against a backdrop of the wider region having undergone tremendous change and popular pressure during the period of the Arab Uprisings.

Across the region, early belief in genuine transformation has since been damped down by the slow progress of political reform and, more importantly, the lack of improvement in the socio-economic conditions that ignited these uprisings. Sudan is no exception, and parallel political, economic and security challenges coexist while popular expectations of a democratic dividend have soared.

The findings of this study indicate that civic space and the ability to express political views are somewhat patchy, but slowly opening up to individuals and opposition parties. Nonetheless, influence and a sense of genuine political change remain elusive. Nominally, the civic space as defined in the Constitutional Charter commits Sudan to a pluralist, decentralized political system in which citizens are free to exercise

their rights without discrimination on the grounds of political opinion or regional association. In this case, civic space is defined, as per the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as the ability to freely access information, and engage in and exchange dialogue in an open manner.

Civilian structures played an instrumental role in the overthrow of President al-Bashir and the following political dispensation. This represented a break from the previous regime, during which the civic space was severely curtailed and often violently suppressed.

The transition period represents a critical juncture in Sudanese politics. There is a widespread belief among different segments of society that a failure to secure genuine inclusivity for civil society will have severe ramifications for its potential success. These are not just national convictions. For many scholars, the paradigm of open civic space, and thus social interaction, is seen as a method of enhancing public participation, consultation, transparency and accountability in democracies (Scholte 2001). Democracy scholar Larry Diamond (2003) stresses the importance of a strong and open civic space for the 'protection of the rights of ethnic, cultural, religious and other minorities; a pluralistic civil society affording citizens multiple channels outside the electoral arena through which to participate and express their interests and values; and civilian control over the military'.

It is well known that post-conflict democracies are more vulnerable to relapse into conflict, and that these conflicts are fed by underdevelopment and lack of inclusivity. The so-called conflict trap and its linkage with socio-economic denominators adds to the palpable sense of fragility that surrounds the Sudanese transition. The linkages between civic space and the sense of ownership of and buy-in to a transition govern the potential for success. In Sudan, aspects of this discourse and visible signs of change are linked to the notion of accountability, not least with regard to the accountability of al-Bashir and other former political leaders for crimes committed during their rule. Post-revolution Sudan offers a prime example of the complex nexus between accountability, meaningful participation and socio-economic improvement, and the potential for an absence of large-scale conflict.

Nonetheless, the tenets of democratic discourse and common decision making do not emerge by themselves but require support. For civic participation to take root and deepen democracy, interactions between citizens, civil society, political parties and government must offer real opportunities to deliberate and influence decisions. A vibrant civil life is essential for the democratic elements of the Sudanese transition to thrive. Not only does it allow citizens to interact, but it also provides training grounds for political leaders, teaches tolerance and stimulates individual participation in politics (Paxton 2002).



Genuine public participation can help to foster specific democratic values of legitimacy and justice, and the effectiveness of government decision making. Citizens' political participation can be a force for both political and socio-economic development. Ideally, participation activates citizens, creates relationships with decision makers and promotes an appropriate balance of power between citizens and government (National Democratic Institute for International Affairs 2013).

For citizens, accessing information and being heard is important, but still a far cry from being involved in decision making. Furthermore, a lack of meaningful spaces for citizens to engage with public officials inexorably erodes participation. Democracy theorists argue that a country with a vigorous and open civic space and associational network is better able to maintain and sustain a transition to democracy (Calhoun 1993; Hadenius and Ugglå 1996; Putnam 1995; Ferguson 1995; Montesquieu 1989; Tocqueville 1990, the latter three cited in Paxton 2002 :254). This argument emphasizes how people's interactions provide them with different platforms to voice their opinions, criticize government policies and provide alternatives. Collective social interaction is a method of enhancing public participation, consultation, transparency and accountability in democracies (Scholte 2001). Regional and continental trends have demonstrated the ability of civil society organizations (CSOs) to innovate and invent new methodologies for participation and representation in order to secure more meaningful participation beyond the event of elections or, in other words, meaningful participation in the process of democracy as opposed to a mere event.

### 1.1. Study rationale

To assist with developing more effective methods for encouraging citizen participation in political and electoral processes under the European Union funded programme, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) commissioned Partners for Development (PDS) to conduct this study. The findings will be widely disseminated to improve stakeholders' understanding of Sudanese motivations for and priorities regarding democratic participation. The findings will also inform the design of International IDEA's programme on civic education in Sudan.

## **2. Background: Transitional history and current context**

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In 1956, Sudan became one of the first countries to achieve independence from British colonialism. However, its post-independence period was marred by internal conflicts, military rule and various dynamics resulting from elite competition for power, the colonial legacy, an unequal division of wealth and power, short periods of democratic governance, humanitarian crises and a lack of development. Despite its history of elections, Sudan has experienced just 11 years of parliamentary rule since 1956.

Sudan, however, also possessed unique features. The country was seen as a possible model for successful African parliamentary democracy and national unity, as an example of inter-ethnic cooperation in the African context, and as a potential ‘breadbasket’ for the region and continent. The country had a cosmopolitan educated class and political organizations that had successfully bridged the gap between more traditional elements and modern groups in society (Voll 1990).

Nonetheless, the defining characteristics of Sudanese politics can to some extent be summarized as elitist, with a revolving door for military, sectarian and ideological political parties to take turns at competing for political power. Fluctuating features of national identity politics were linked to the inherent fault lines in Sudan’s culture and geography, which straddle the splits between Arab and African religions, cultures and customs (Elshabik 2015), be they real or perceived.

The political dynamics and subsequent conflicts in Sudan were also a consequence of its geography. Before it split, Sudan was the largest country in Africa in terms of landmass, and geography played an instrumental role in what transformed from political into violent conflicts. Whether these pertained to the colonial narrative of parts of Sudan being ‘impregnable’ and the subsequent marginalization of the South, or the more recent narrative of marginalization, identity, and climate change, this gave rise to more local but no less detrimental conflicts in Darfur, or between

pastoralist and farming groups, whose respective livelihoods bring them into conflict with one another. A common factor is that a combination of geography, size and identity politics—whether ethnic, political or sectarian—has provided a context in which a relatively developed centre of political power has been in conflict with groups that often perceive themselves as marginalized on one or several of the above grounds.

These seemingly intractable realities have had profound political consequences. First, the longest civil war in post-colonial African history, between the government in Khartoum and armed and political groups in what is now South Sudan (1955–2005), culminated, at a cost of up to 2 million lives, in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 and the subsequent creation of an entirely new political entity. The Republic of South Sudan gained independence in 2011, following a plebiscite among southern Sudanese. Second, they led to conflicts between the political and geographical centre and marginalized groups in outlying areas. The ferocity of the violence led to the first Head of State being charged with crimes under the Rome Statute, further adding to the country's status as an international pariah.<sup>2</sup> This status, which had developed progressively following years of Sudan's leaders acting as regional spoilers and hosting groups or individuals that supported international terrorism, led to the imposition of financial and economic sanctions that crippled the wider Sudanese economy and brought about one of the largest sovereign debts in Africa.

This brief historical backdrop to the December 2018 revolution and overthrow of al-Bashir demonstrates the magnitude of the challenges facing the transitional government if it is to create an inclusive and socio-economically progressive environment.

Elections in Sudan are well known for their dramatic political transitions, whether through the above-mentioned popular uprisings or through top-down military coups. Perhaps less well known is the history of elections in the country.

The first election took place in 1953 and, ever since, the process of democracy in Sudan as elsewhere has focused on the event of democracy, or elections, rather than the process and values that surround democracy. This type of minimalist democracy is captured in Møller and Skaaning's (2013) typology (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup>

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2 On 4 March 2009, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued the first arrest warrant for the then Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir, on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes.

3 Møller and Skaaning (2013) classify the most influential definitions of democracy by different scholars. This categorization starts from the minimal procedural type of democracy by Schumpeter, who focused on free electoral criteria and argued that democracy means competition for political power via free elections. Schumpeter's definition is a system for arriving at political decisions through empowering people and giving them the power to decide through a 'people's vote' (Diamond, L., 2003. *Can the Whole World Become Democratic? Democracy, development, and international policies*. Center for the Study of Democracy. Paper 05-03, <https://repositories.cdlib.org/csd/03-05>). Dahl and others added to this definition that civil liberties, and freedom of assembly and association must also exist, followed by O'Donnell and others who added the rule of law as a defining attribute of democracy (Møller and Skaaning, 2013: 143–44).

Unsurprisingly, this minimal type of democracy with its narrow focus on elections as an event rather than part of a process, combined with various military governments using elections as means of legitimizing an already ingrained political order, has undermined popular belief in elections. Correspondingly, the purpose of elections has informed belief in the very same elections. In other words, if the elections were an exercise in legalization, rather than in linking citizens to the leadership through representation, they helped to undermine democratic participation in Sudan.

**Table 1. Typology of democratic political regimes**

	Competitive election	Inclusive elections with high integrity	Civil liberties	Rule of law
Minimalist democracy	+			
Electoral democracy	+	+		
Polyarchy	+	+	+	
Liberal democracy	+	+	+	+

*Source:* Møller and Skaaning 2013.

Outside of the elections that took place during Sudan's years of military rule, Sudan experienced fair elections on several occasions. The first was three years before independence, when Sudan elected its first parliament in November and December 1953, followed by the first elected government in January 1954 (Nibloc 1987). Then, long before the December 2018 revolution, Sudan was the first state in the Middle East and Africa to use civic resistance on two occasions to end authoritarian rule and create a democratic parliamentary system following fair elections (de Waal 2013: 213; Voll 1990: 575; Zunes 2011: 397). The unpopular dictators General Ibrahim Abboud (1958–1964) and Field Marshal Jaafar Nimeiri (1969–1985) were both ousted by historic revolutions; the 1964 Green October and 1985 April intifada were both followed after short transition periods by successful general elections in 1965 and 1986 respectively (Elshabik 2015).

Future elections in Sudan are unlikely to be different, in terms of legitimacy and a sense of forming part of a genuinely democratic order. The structures and powers that elections seek to be part of and to legitimize have wide-ranging ramifications for the conceptualization of democratic participation overall. Diamond (2003) contends that electoral democracy can still exist in countries experiencing massive human rights violations and massive corruption, but argues that 'democracy advocates' should

not be content with such illiberal democracy but push for more reform until liberal democracy is the result. In anticipation of possible complications, the Constitutional Charter has allowed a longer transitional period to pave the way for a more enabling environment that can allow democracy consolidation in Sudan. This would include an independent and non-discriminatory judicial system, as well as extensive individual freedoms of belief, speech, publication, association and assembly.

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### **3. Challenges and opportunities of the Sudan transitional period**



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### 3. Challenges and opportunities of the Sudan transitional period

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As much as the current challenges facing the transition in Sudan are tremendous and may seem insurmountable, the ousting of al-Bashir and the popular revolution that preceded it fed hope for Sudan both nationally and internationally. Whether through the academic and perhaps romantic parallels drawn to previous ‘intifadas’ and the notion of the intifada being ‘invented in Sudan’, external and focused on aspects of accountability, or internal and informed by the ordeals of everyday life in Sudan, there has been no shortage of expectations of the revolution and the transition. Inherent in seeking to navigate all the various interests that combined to create the transformation is the difficulty of bringing together all of the above.

However, while immediate improvements in the ability to exercise civic freedoms have been appreciated, the economic situation continues to deteriorate and the security situation has worsened in several regions. Everyday reality has contributed to a sense of underperformance by the government. In particular, the security situation has laid bare the state’s inability to impose its monopoly on the legitimate use of force, on the one hand, and served to highlight the very real differences between the military and civilian components of the transitional government, on the other.

The military remains a formidable force in Sudanese politics. It has expanded its functional powers during transitional rule to an extent beyond that stipulated in the agreement on forming the Sudan Transitional Government, thereby weakening the prime minister’s power and thus also civilian power (Elhag 2020). Military control over sensitive economic sectors such as the telecommunications sector continues to expand (Smex 2020).

Transitions following internal conflict are not normally straightforward. Tossell (2020) underlines that legitimacy crises and early signs of upheaval are crucial in the Sudan case, and that lessons must be learned from other states emerging from years of

internal conflict, not least with regard to finding a tenable balance. Nonetheless, there are already worrying delays to the transition requirements set out in the Constitutional Charter. The formation of a Transitional Legislative Council has not yet taken place. Nor has the government yet formed the promised commissions on human rights, transitional justice, constitution-making and elections, among others, or made any meaningful institutional reforms.

The continuation of intercommunal and inter-tribal violence signals a deterioration in the security situation, especially in Eastern Sudan, the Darfur region and South Kordofan. In his most recent report to the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General described how: 'Humanitarian needs, driven by the economic crisis and intercommunal conflict, are growing, with 418,000 people newly displaced between January and August due to conflict and armed attacks, mainly in Darfur, parts of Kordofan and Blue Nile.'<sup>4</sup> More recently, tensions between civilians in the transitional government and military components reached a nadir in the aftermath of an alleged coup attempt on 21 September 2021.<sup>5</sup> All this has increased the general sense of frustration among citizens about the future transition of the country.<sup>6</sup>

These challenges influence citizens' perceptions of and attitudes to political transformation, which are determined by their belief in their ability to influence the situation and by the transitional government's ability to respond to obstacles to establishing an inclusive and democratic process.

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4 See the remarks by the UN Secretary General at the high-level side event on Sudan, New York, 30 September 2021, accessed 19 October 2021, <<https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/259814>>.

5 The Sudanese authorities reported a coup attempt by a group of soldiers on 21 September 2021, but the attempt failed, and the country's ruling council and military remained in control.

6 On 25 October 2021 these tensions culminated in the military dissolving civilian rule, arresting political leaders and declaring a state of emergency. On 21 November an unpopular political agreement signed between the General Commander of the Army and the Sudanese Prime Minister led to the reinstatement of the civilian rule and a continuation of the fragile partnership.

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## **4. Methodology and sampling**

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## 4. Methodology and sampling

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The objective of the research was to study and better understand perceptions of democratic participation in Sudan, based on behaviour, motivations and barriers. The study applied a participatory methodology to develop a comprehensive research framework. Qualitative and quantitative primary data informed the analysis of citizens' perceptions of democratic participation. A comprehensive and participatory research methodology was used that included data collection tools. Afrobarometer and International IDEA Global State of Democracy surveys were used to develop a mixed-methods methodology.

Primary data formed the backbone of the survey exercise, collected through direct fieldwork using multiple data collection techniques to ensure representative sampling, triangulation and the validation of information and data.

- A structural questionnaire was designed for interviews with people of voting age at the household level. It was designed to be very simple to identify and reflect the ideas and perceptions of Sudanese citizens and pinpoint the challenges and obstacles that prevent citizens' democratic participation.
- Structured interviews were conducted with key informants (men and women in groups or individually, and officials where relevant). Checklists were developed and used for focus group discussions with different population categories.

Secondary sources involved the collation and rigorous desk review of existing academic and public opinion research, including from Afrobarometer data and International IDEA Global State of Democracy Indices.

Onsite visual observation involved observing people's attitudes and behaviour. Selection was based on geography, gender, age and location (rural vs urban).

Participants were selected from 10 of the 18 states in Sudan, and from different regions of those states.

The total sample size was 800 people and the total number of respondents was 761. Table 2 lists the geographical distribution of participants. Khartoum had 39 per cent of the respondents and South Darfur about 11 per cent, making 50 per cent which reflects the size of their populations.<sup>7</sup> The remaining 50 per cent was distributed almost equally between the eight other states.

**Table 2. Geographical distribution of participants**

	State	Frequency	Per cent
Valid	Khartoum	300	39.4
	River Nile	50	6.6
	El Gezira	40	5.3
	Blue Nile	40	5.3
	South Kordofan	50	6.6
	West Kordofan	50	6.6
	South Darfur	85	11.2
	West Darfur	50	6.6
	Gedaref	46	6.0
	Red Sea	50	6.6
	Total	761	100.0

One-third of the sample was selected from rural areas and about half from urban areas. The remaining 19 per cent were from semi-urban areas, which is a fairly common setting in Sudan. Men made up 59 per cent of the respondents and women 41 per cent.

The age range was between 16 and 81 years old. The average age of respondents was 32. About 5 per cent of the individuals were below the age of 20 at the time of the survey and 6 per cent were 60 or older. The majority (63 per cent) were aged between 20 and 39 years old, which is a good representation of Sudan's population distribution pyramid and defines Sudan as a young population (see Figure 1). Around 89 per cent of respondents were native Arabic speakers while 11 per cent mixed Arabic with local dialects.

<sup>7</sup> Khartoum and South Darfur are the two most populous states in Sudan.

Qualitative information was collected from eight states: Khartoum, South and West Kordofan, South Darfur, Blue Nile, El Gezira, River Nile, Red Sea and Gedaref. Two focus group discussions were held in each state: one targeting urban communities and the other rural.

Each group was selected with consideration given to gender, age, level of education and socio-economic status. Three key informant interviews were conducted in each state.

Figure 1. Age and gender split of participants (%)

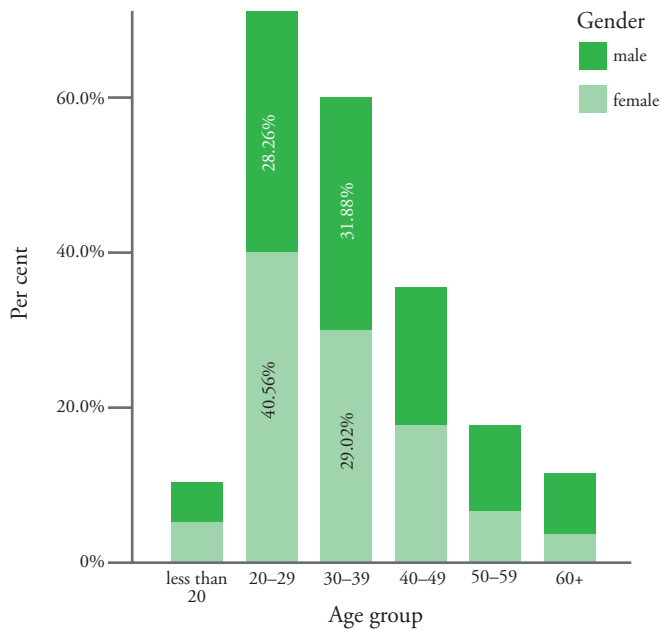


Table 3. Rural and urban split of participants (%)

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	Rural	249	32.7
	Urban	371	48.8
	Other	141	18.5
	Total	761	100.0

# 5. The results



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## 5. The results

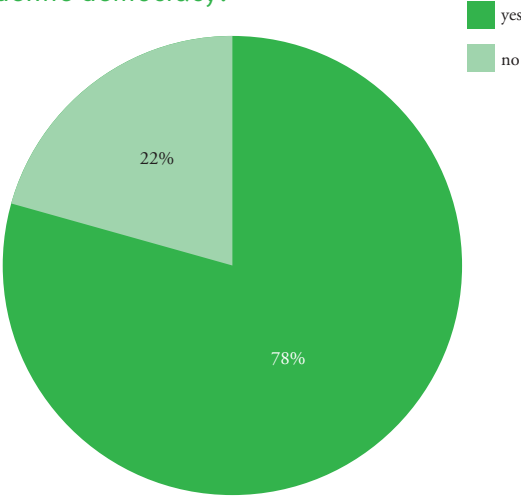
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The research asked questions about respondents' overall perceptions of democracy, the state of governance in Sudan and the performance of the transitional government, including on service delivery.

About 78 per cent of the sampled population were able to define democracy in some way, but there was a significant difference between men and women (see Figure 2). More than three-quarters of male respondents were able to define democracy, while about half of the surveyed women struggled to find a definition for democracy.

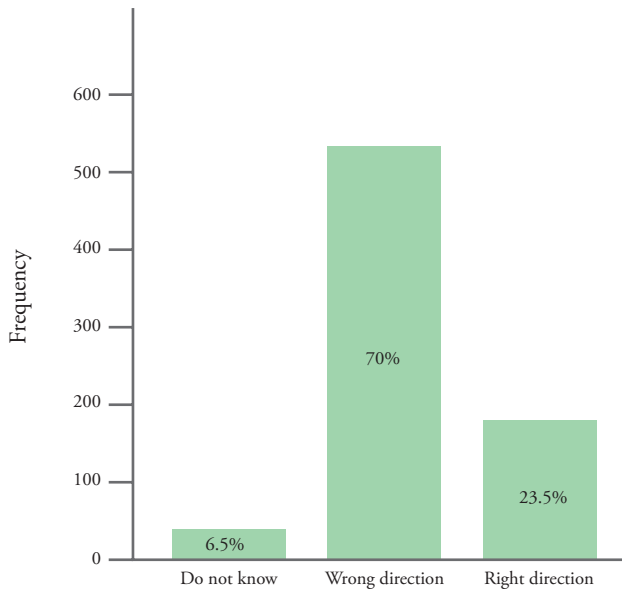
Knowledge of classic notions of democracy was more widespread among the general surveyed population than in rural areas. It was found that age had no significant bearing on knowledge of or ability to define democracy.

Figure 2. Can you define democracy?



On progress during the transitional period, about 70 per cent believed the current situation to be heading ‘in the wrong direction’ while 23.5 per cent believed the opposite (see Figure 3). There was a significant geographical difference, as a higher proportion of respondents in South Kordofan and Red Sea states believed the country to be heading in the wrong direction, while higher percentages of people in El Gezira and Gedaref states thought the country was on a positive trajectory. Similar belief patterns were observed in the focus groups and interviews.

Figure 3. Current direction of the country



Participants in Blue Nile state were the least satisfied with the current situation, and this dissatisfaction was similar across all age and gender profiles, as well as in rural and urban populations. Key to this were perceptions of a lack of representation, the deteriorating economic situation and the continuing marginalization of local communities.

The results from the Red Sea state’s focus group discussion show that participants strongly believed the country to be on a downward trajectory, but they also had negative perceptions of the concept of democracy. Similar, more conservative opinions with regard to current realities were found in the Beja communities, which are commonly considered conservative, traditional and male-dominated societies. (Gender separation was required during interviews.) Both men and women had negative perceptions of democracy, which was seen either as opposed to Islam or as representing unlimited freedoms and practices alien to local culture and norms.

Similarly historically informed traditionalism fed the belief that the situation is now seriously deteriorating and not comparable to anything previously experienced. There were bitter complaints about bread scarcity, shortages and unaffordable prices of essential consumer goods. This sense of deterioration was accompanied by a concerning sense of exclusion, expressed as never having been consulted or being given any information about how decisions are made or who makes them.

In the majority of the Nuba Mountains and Darfur groups, women participated on equal terms. These groups expressed a strong and a profound mistrust of the transitional government. This is almost certainly informed by the recent history and experience of direct conflict with central government, as well as the slow progress of recent peace negotiations. In very practical terms, however, this was expressed as a lack of belief in the democratic transition, as well as a lack of intention to take part in the related processes. A strong sense of accountability and retribution accompanied this palpable discontent, focused on but not limited to achieving justice for crimes committed and carried out by the previous regime.

In South Darfur, while the situation remains unchanged for many of the participants, there was general satisfaction that at least the government had not been forced on them, and that it represents a larger degree of free will. Participants also acknowledged, however, that the current situation is fluid and disorganized. While some believed that the security situation had improved, the majority believed that it was worse than under the former regime. They also believed that the government was not responding to the demands of citizens unless forced to do so through protests.

Among the internally displaced person (IDP) participants in West Darfur, the situation was characterized as moving in a more positive direction, although the security situation was described as having significantly deteriorated.<sup>8</sup> This extended to opinions on poor conflict resolution efforts by the government. Respondents in the outlying areas historically affected by conflict indicated a continuing sense of separation from the political process informed by the sense of a central alliance between the military and the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). Nonetheless, the same group appreciated efforts on fighting corruption, such as the work by the Committee for Dismantling the June 30th Regime and Retrieving Public Funds.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents from the conflict-affected areas expressed little hope of improvement in the foreseeable future. Their views on democracy and the economy were equally negative. The visible effects of this were most significant in South Kordofan, where participants in both urban and rural areas perceived the situation as very bad, and

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8 At the time of writing, a conflict has erupted in Al-Geneina, leaving at least 129 people dead, 200 injured and over 90,000 displaced (Reliefweb 2021).

traditional leaders from the Nuba ethnic group expressed a sense of increasing alienation and discrimination, which will require serious efforts to enhance inclusion. This is in stark contrast with the opinions of traditional leaders of Arab tribes.

Participants from Gedaref expressed the most positive opinions about the current political situation, in spite of the fact that a majority of the respondents also said that the performance of the government was below expectations. Some of this was related to a recognition that parts of the opposition were unprepared for the post-revolution governing period, which created a level of understanding and patience with the government, by virtue of Gedaref participants acknowledging that the damage to democratic practices over the past 30 years will have a long-lasting impact and take time to resolve.

Participants in both urban and rural Gedaref raised serious concerns about the re-emergence of tribal conflicts.<sup>9</sup> The majority of participants drew a link with the government's poor handling of dismantling the former regime's control over markets and the government apparatus, as well as security disturbances and economic deterioration.

As in Red Sea state, women in River Nile state remain marginalized. They believe that their access to information is controlled by the men in their communities, and that their political opinions are limited by the information they receive from the men. They lack spaces designated for their needs and feel alienated from the political process.<sup>10</sup>

The rural community of Manasir in River Nile state expressed great dissatisfaction with the performance of the government and the lack of services, especially in light of the fact that one community had been relocated as a consequence of the building of the Merowe Dam. They perceived their demands as going unheeded and saw their situation as the same as before the formation of the transitional government.

Participants from Khartoum shared the assessment of a deteriorating situation. However, while they perceived the government as isolated from the population and lacking both representativeness and a clear strategy, they expressed a need to be more patient with it as the challenges are huge. Many participants expressed disapproval of the nature of the protests by local resistance groups, and saw them as complicating problems rather than helping to resolve them. The lack of a legislative council was identified as one of the main gaps in the transitional process. Nonetheless, participants in Khartoum appreciated the government guaranteeing freedom of expression and association, not least in terms of gatherings in public spaces.

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9 Eastern Sudan states have witnessed intercommunal clashes and tensions since 2020, culminating in September 2021 when tribal leaders in Eastern Sudan closed the main road and Sudan's major port.

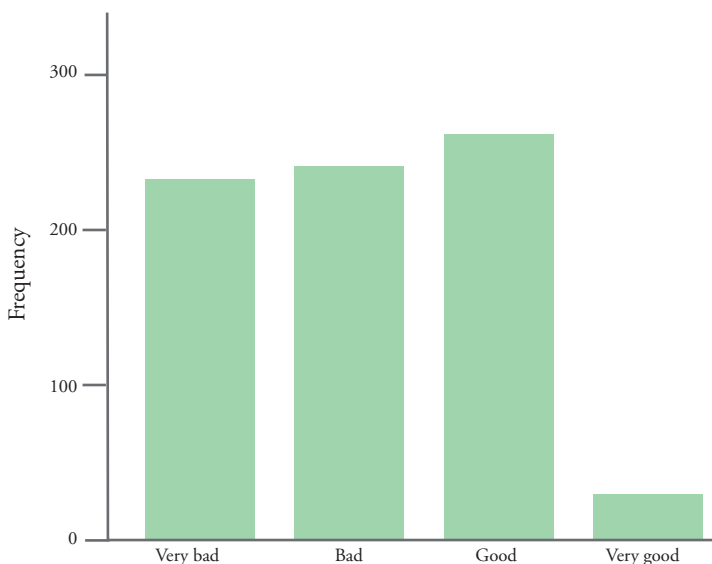
10 It is worth noting that this is one of only two states governed by a woman in Sudan. River Nile has historically been categorized as a male-dominated region. While the appointment of a woman governor is significant, she has faced opposition from traditional leadership groups and members of the former regime, almost all of whom are men.

While the survey respondents in El Gezira showed relative satisfaction with the economic situation, participants in the focus groups in both rural and urban areas expressed deep concern about and dissatisfaction with the current situation. Some participants described the situation as little different from military rule. Interestingly, participants in rural El Gezira highlighted how the peace process had overlooked the potential tension between landowners, farmers and agro-labourers in the state. It was felt that it was negotiated without consultation with local communities.

Some participants expressed fear about the normalization of relations with Israel, as they believe their land and water will be targeted by Israeli companies, which would have a negative impact on farmers. They also indicated that the security situation was deteriorating, and that the military component was expanding its control, meaning that the situation will worsen. The FFC was also seen as deeply fragmented, which is jeopardizing the entire transitional period.

A total of 59 per cent think that the situation is too bad, and 92 per cent feel that it is bad or too bad. On the other hand, only one per cent believe that it is very good, with eight per cent who think it is good or very good, while 30 per cent believe that their present living condition is very bad and 61 per cent think it is bad or very bad. On the other hand, 35 per cent believe that it is good, with 39.2 per cent believe that it is good or very good. There is a significant difference between economic situation evaluations. Khartoum has the highest economic and living conditions evaluation, and the red sea is the lowest. However, there is no significant difference between rural and urban areas in evaluating living conditions. See Figure 4.

Figure 4. Personal living conditions



Importantly, participants in more than 10 of the states surveyed raised concerns about the ownership and control of large corporations by the security sector. It was noted that the security sector has business interests in a significant number of companies that do business in almost every sector of the economy, which makes the security sector a central actor in the market place. Interviewees noted that these security-sector-controlled companies also benefit directly from government subsidies on commodities and are usually well positioned to divert subsidized commodities to the black market.

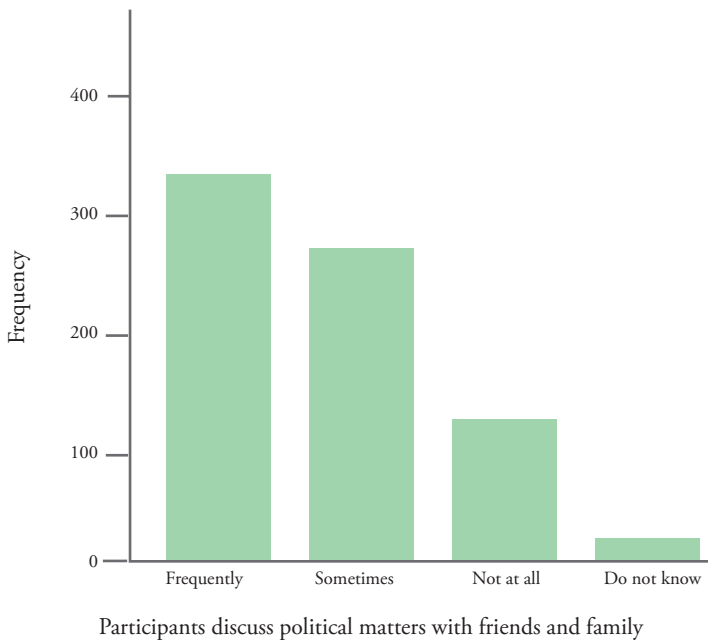
### 5.1 Access to information

The research findings identify social media as the main source of news. Television and radio have the same effect on men and women, while social media, newspapers and the Internet are higher ranked (have more effect) on men than women. There is no significant difference between the rankings of media sources in rural and urban areas. Television is the only source that has no significant difference between the rankings of all age groups. Radio has higher rankings with older people and its effect decreases with age. Newspapers received higher rankings from those aged 49–30 years, the Internet for those aged 20 to 39 and social media for those aged 20 to 49.

It is worth noting that the number of Internet users in Sudan increased by 316,000 between 2019 and 2020, which is an increase of about 2.4 per cent. Internet penetration is 31 per cent, or 13.38 million users, 1.3 million of whom use social media.

The vast majority of the participants (81 per cent) discuss political matters with friends and family members either frequently or sometimes (see Figure 5). About one-third of the respondents regard themselves as somewhat free. Generally, about half the interviewees felt either completely or somewhat free, against almost the same percentage of people who felt that they are not very or not at all free.

Figure 5. Political matters discussion



While most of the participants from both urban and rural areas of West Kordofan state get their information primarily from radio and television, social media was the main source of information for political activists. On communication with the government, participants in rural areas explained that their only access was to the army unit in the area as it was responsible for security. They faced difficulties communicating with local government because of the need to travel, often using motorbikes for long distances, to be able to reach the state capital. The central and local government are not seen as making efforts to reach out to citizens in rural areas.

Participants from both rural and urban areas of Blue Nile state expressed dissatisfaction and a sense of alienation and marginalization with regard to access to information and the ability to influence government policies. One participant described political freedom in the country as 'useless freedom'. He shared the sentiment of other participants that the freedom of expression available has no impact on the government's positions and policies. The belief was that they had no influence over the government and would have to protest for their voices to be heard. They had, however, noticed an improvement in service provision and the distribution of goods at the local level due to the involvement of the service committees.

In the interviews and focus group discussions, citizens in South Darfur complained that they do not have regular access to newspapers. Those with access to the Internet

use social media as their main source of information. They do not believe the government has an effective work plan or programme, or a vision that guides its work. They also complained that their knowledge of the state budget is limited to what is on television. They perceive government policies as unclear. While participants generally feel that they are consulted, at least through the resistance committees, their opinions are not considered, the clearest example being the imposition of de-subsidization despite widespread objections.

Young women rely on the Internet while older people depend on the radio and discussions with family members. As a socio-political norm, women are rarely in direct communication with the government or politicians. Participants in rural areas indicated they had organized discussion groups about the current political situation based on the information available but stress their limited ability to have any influence.

Participants in urban West Darfur believe that the government's lack of transparency is the reason why they know little about its plans or budgets. They rely almost entirely on social media as their source of news. Participants complained about the lack of responsiveness from the government and said that they were no longer urged to communicate their problems. They do not believe the government is making enough effort to inform marginalized citizens, which for them represents a continuation of the politics of inequality.

In urban Gedaref, some participants believed that full transparency by the government might create more problems than it solves, but they also recognized that the government does not communicate with citizens clearly. They argued that while marginalized groups were the fuel of the revolution and the main drivers of change, only some of them have access to the government and their voices are not being fully heard. Participants agreed that they do not have access to government budgets and annual plans. Some attributed this to the presence of elements from the former regime within government structure.

Participants from rural Gedaref specifically felt that they did not have any reliable sources of information. They did not trust news from social media, on the one hand, and the government does not communicate effectively with its citizens, on the other. Many believed that marginalized people are not represented in the government, and that these marginalized communities would have been better represented by one or more of the armed movements after the peace agreement.

Participants held even more pessimistic views about the political landscape. While there are spaces for freedoms, the deteriorating economic situation means that these are enjoyed only by certain social groups. The government has not been strict in monitoring trade monopolies and lost track of the livelihoods of citizens.



In Khartoum, while participants believed that information is relatively more available, they generally thought that the handling of this information and its impact had been weak and not up to expectations. The government is widely perceived as slow in responding to events on the ground. Older participants generally rated radio as their top source of information followed by television and newspapers. Participants were also critical of the way the government's information is often leaked rather than communicated. One respondent mentioned that 'government information is all over the WhatsApp groups of the former regime's affiliates'.

Most of the participants consider this period to be critical to shaping the country's future and believe that the current chaotic flow of information and decision-making processes are only to be expected. They noted that a transitional period is not linear and that mistakes happen in periods of reformation.

As in other states, participants in El Gezira acknowledged the increase in the democratic space and their ability to freely express their opinions, at the same time as a reduction in the impact of their protests and demonstrations against the government's behaviour. Participants from rural areas agreed that the facilitation of communications between the government and citizens through resistance committees has been the most effective method in the absence of a legislative council.

In Red Sea state, it is noticeable that women and youth are underrepresented, and their voices not listened to. Ethnic groups from peripheral Sudan, mainly Darfuris and Nuba based in the state, feel that they have no access to the political domain. They perceive that whenever they try to get involved in politics, they face mistrust and rejection—the very things that have forced them to protest and revolt. Participants are also upset by a perceived lack of transparency, under-reporting of crises and concealment of facts, as well as the slanting of news and withholding of critical information from the public. They perceive the situation as generally much the same as before, if not worse, particularly in public sector corporations where elements loyal to the ousted regime still occupy key positions. For the participants, this is why the process of change has been so slow, because those remnants still control all workers' trade unions, which explains the stark failure of trade unions to take up any cause or call for rallies and protests to denounce the multiple failures of the government. One key informant went so far as to suggest that the interim government and the ousted regime are two sides of the same coin.

In South Kordofan, frustration was expressed at the deteriorating situation across rural and urban areas by traditional leaders from both the Hawazma and the Nuba tribes, as well as members of the FFC mechanism in the state. The FFC representative argued that there had not been enough effort to monitor and fight against corruption. She further believed that marginalized groups are not represented and their voices

are not listened to. The government makes decisions without engaging with the people and policies are made in a top-down approach. It is interesting that the FFC representative mentioned that her sources of information are television, radio and the Internet, and there was no mention of internal communications within the ruling alliance that would allow the local leadership to receive early or credible information about the general situation.

Participants' general sense was of a lack of transparency and of clear and open communication channels with citizens. Most of the government's decisions are made behind closed doors without any consultation with the people. Participants also noted divisions between the Sovereignty Council, the Cabinet and the FFC.

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## **6. Understanding popular perceptions of the transition**

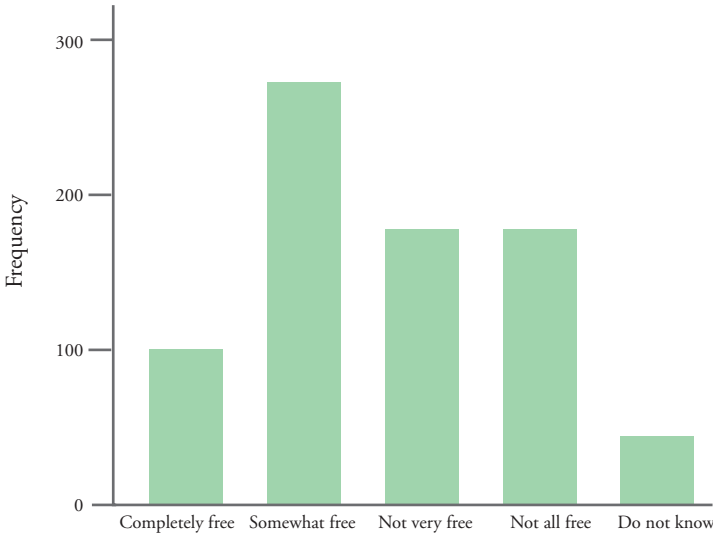
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## 6. Understanding popular perceptions of the transition

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This section discusses participants' views on freedoms, democracy, elections and government performance.

Figure 6. How free do you feel?



A worrying 54 per cent did not vote in the most recent elections. Among these, 19 per cent simply decided not to vote and 15 per cent were not convinced of the need to vote. A large majority—two-thirds of the people surveyed—believe that the last elections under the former regime were not competitive, free or fair. A large majority of people (86 per cent) did not bother to attend a campaign rally (see Figure 8).

Figure 7. Voting in last elections

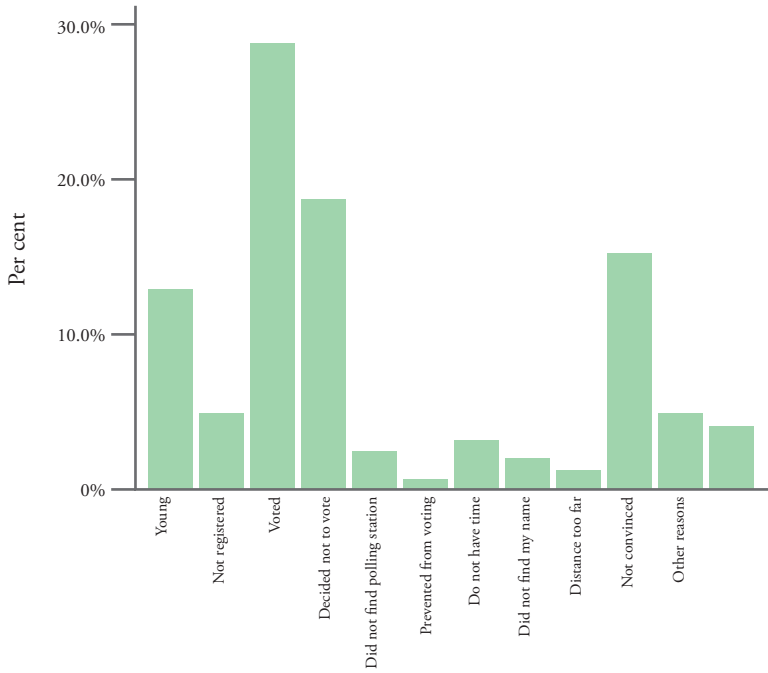
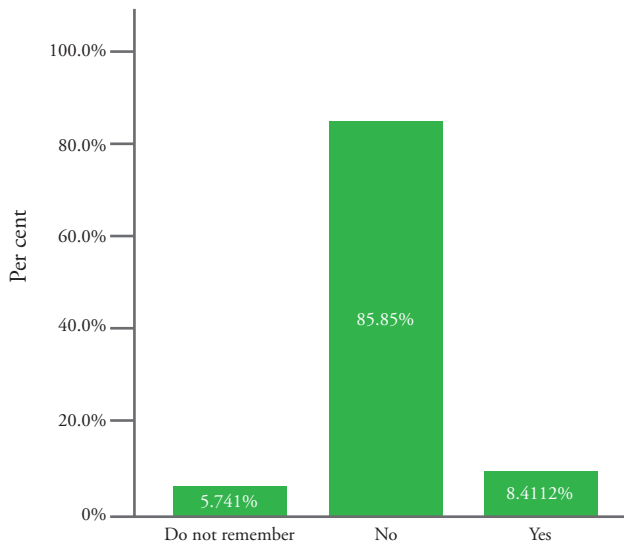
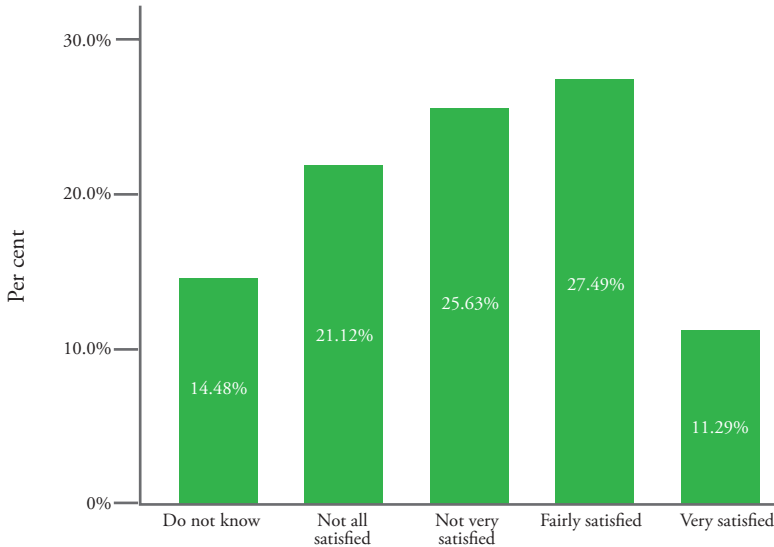


Figure 8. Attended a campaign rally



Opinions are divided when it comes to the current state of democracy in Sudan, and this is reflected in levels of belief in the potential of elections (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Satisfaction about democracy



About 55 per cent of respondents had made contact with a resistance committee at least once. Contact with other communities to share views and resolve problems is poor. Generally speaking, participants told how people are reluctant to participate in most political action, apart from joining strikes and participating in protests and demonstrations about poor government performance.

In Gedaref, participants disagreed in their assessments of freedom spaces in the country. Some strongly believed that the situation was significantly better than under the former regime, but others saw the situation as deteriorating and that many protests had been met by brutality and state violence. A majority of the participants felt that the government does not respect the Constitutional Charter. All the participants agreed that the most recent elections had been fraudulent and none of them indicated that they had voted in any of the elections under the former regime.

Despite many participants' general optimism about the current situation, many remained sceptical about democratic practices in the country and dissatisfied with the political debate. Some mentioned that while the environment is not conducive to civilized political engagement, they felt their engagement to be driven by a sense of responsibility. Dissatisfaction with the performance of the government at the local level has manifested itself in a lack of interest in taking part in any political activities.

The new local governance law has not been discussed in the areas and people felt that they had not been consulted.<sup>11</sup>

Participants from both rural and urban areas and across the genders expressed greater satisfaction with the performance of the government in their engagement on political issues, especially with regard to freedom of expression, but they were highly critical of the government's economic policies and the impact of these on citizens. Participants also agreed about their mistrust of previous elections and believed that Sudanese society, especially youth, need greater exposure to the concepts and practices of democracy.

In West Darfur, there was a positive assessment of the popular freedoms in the country. Some of the participants ranked Islamic extremism as a danger to democracy in Sudan, with reference to elements of the previous regime, adding that marginalized groups are rarely considered, especially on security issues. In spite of the fact that the majority did not take part in the most recent elections, participants expressed a desire to participate in the political process and to become politically active.

In Blue Nile state, the majority of the participants referred to the 2010 elections as the last election and ignored the 2015 elections. A large proportion of voters registered for the 2010 elections, which were somewhat related to the then pending referendum on independence for South Sudan. They expressed a correlation between the potential legitimacy of elections and the presence of international observers. The vast majority of participants were well aware of the problematic past and viewed past electoral experiences as largely fraudulent and unrepresentative. Women generally felt more discouraged from participating in political processes, including elections.

As in Blue Nile state, elections in South Kordofan have been problematic and a source of conflict. For example, the Hawazma traditional leadership described their participation in past elections as 'limited to casting a vote' and participants from Nuba did not participate at all. Overall, participants from urban South Kordofan expressed some level of trust in the civilian component of the government but none in the military component. They view the Prime Minister positively as an official who listens and considers the opinions of the citizens.<sup>12</sup> However, they believed that the government does not consider the needs and issues of the youth.

Some participants from El Gezira indicated that they participate in meetings, such as of trade unions and interest-based groups. Older respondents had only participated

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11 A constitutional decree issued by the Head of the Sovereign Council ordered the establishment of a regional federal system in Sudan. The decree tasked a committee with preparing for the convening of a Conference on the System of Governance. The process is meant to be consultative and bottom-up by convening the local governance system in all states to decide on the number of regions, boundaries, structures, authorities and governance levels.

12 This could be due to the fact that the Sudanese Prime Minister is originally from South Kordofan state.



in the 1986 elections and not in any of the subsequent elections. Some described the current democratic space as troubling and full of limitations.

Some women participants perceived the status of women as unchanged. Women were in the front line of the revolution, but now note with concern the slow pace of change on women's rights and gender equality since 2019. The Constitutional Charter provides for 40 per cent of the seats in the legislative council to be occupied by women, once it is formed. However, government plans for social protection to support women in sectors where they constitute the majority, such as street vending, are still limited and ineffective. They do not provide an adequate safety net or social protections that would enable women to cope with inflation and increasing prices of essential commodities.<sup>13</sup>

In an interview, a representative of the Sudan Professionals' Association (SPA) stated that one of its main concerns is the issue of appointments to public office. He argued that these are based on nepotism rather than merit or expertise, and that this has led to a further deterioration in the civil service. The SPA representative cast doubt on the possibility of holding fair and transparent elections at the end of the transitional period.

Citizens in rural areas, the majority of whom are farmers or farm owners, were particularly concerned about the issue of reorganizing the relationship between landowners, farmers, and agro-workers. Most of the participants from West Kordofan state believed that the democratic and civic space has improved on the back of the revolutionary spirit in comparison to where it was during the time of the ousted government. They saw particular improvements in democratic practices and freedom of expression, and also noted that the gap between government officials and citizens had been bridged, meaning that the current government was more accessible. Participants from urban areas stated that while the economic situation was deteriorating, there had been progress in the areas of justice and international relations. Nonetheless, they remained critical of the lack of justice in the government's handling of the corruption and crimes of the leadership and members of the ousted regime.

A majority of the participants from Red Sea state believed that the elections held under the former regime had been rigged and were illiberal. People were generally not hopeful of any improvement in political and socio-economic conditions and did not rule out the collapse of the interim government. Their main fear is the onset of chaos. Accordingly, they argued that the current government should step down and

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13 The level of harassment of women who work as street vendors by the police has reduced since the revolution. The transitional government has prioritized groups working in the informal sector during the Covid-19 lock down, and introduced in-kind assistance and other social protections such as health insurance, but this is still insufficient.

be replaced by a more reflective, representative and inclusive national salvation or national unity government made up of elements they know and trust.

The type of government was not their priority, and most of the participants knew little if anything about democracy and how it works. They were reluctant to participate in any event at any level with this government. In fact, they were more in favour of bringing down the government than reforming it, due to what they regarded as the government's empty promises and groundless optimism. Youth were no exception to the general sense of frustration at and disbelief in the transition process. Notably, almost all respondents in Red Sea state prioritized loyalty to their ethnic group, their region and their tribal leaders over political aspirations. There were pressing public service needs—key among them water—and they expressed strong dissatisfaction that their urgent priorities were being ignored by the government.

Participants from the Nuba community in Red Sea state clearly had no intention of participating in any political process or what they described as 'premeditated and rigged elections'. They did, however, favour a democratic, secular and inclusive new Sudan, in which rights are based on citizenship alone rather than race, or cultural or religious backgrounds. Not a single respondent expressed any hope of any possible improvement arising from the democratic transition process in the foreseeable future. Views on democracy and the economy were equally negative.

In South Darfur, participants distrust the military component of the government but emphasized the importance of engaging with it as it interacts better and faster, and thus has the ability to resolve problems—especially when it comes to security issues. They perceive that the civilian component of the government lacks mechanisms for engaging with citizens on their plans and policies, especially in the absence of a legislative council. This situation has empowered the military component and allowed it to play a role beyond its constitutionally stipulated tasks. Participants generally do not feel consulted or considered in the government's plans. One participant noted that: 'All we know about the budget is that there is inflation.' There were complaints about the lack of transparency in the government's policies, especially when it comes to the budget of the Sovereign Council, and about the military's control over the economy. Participants from more rural areas stated that marginalized groups are not well organized and therefore unable to influence government policy. Both rural and urban areas acknowledged the increased availability of civic space and that this was important progress compared to the situation under the former regime. Like all the other states, participants were highly sceptical of the government's economic policies and considered these a massive setback to the country's progress. Some participants had not read the Constitutional Charter, while others questioned it given their belief that it had already been amended several times.

Female participants in River Nile state generally linked the new civic space since the revolution with increased crime and insecurity. Those participants who expressed knowledge of the Constitutional Charter indicated that they did not think that any of the government's components would adhere to its provisions. Participants in rural areas indicated that they knew about the Constitutional Charter as a topic of debate, and that it had been amended several times, but that they had not read it. Some participants indicated that they had voted in the last elections even though they did not believe them to be fair, but at least they were peaceful. Others believed people were forced to vote for the National Congress Party (NCP) as it was the ruling party at the time.

With regard to the obstacles to a democratic transition, participants identified issues such as: (a) the possible fragmentation of the FFC; (b) plans by the military component to take over and return to pre-revolution policies; (c) the immersion of NCP elements into the political and social landscape; (d) the lack of government control over the Rapid Support Forces and other militias; and (e) the slow progress of the disarmament process. Women participants from urban areas were keen to participate but saw the social structures of their communities, which push women out of the public sphere, as a major obstacle.

In Khartoum, a majority of the participants agreed that not all actors respect the Constitutional Charter. A majority of the participants from rural areas indicated that they had participated in past elections even though they were aware that they were not free and fair. The majority of the population in rural areas, however, did not vote. Participants generally preferred a democratic system and were divided in their opinions about the current government: some trusted it while others strongly did not. The majority believed that it is important that the government publishes not only its budget, but also its plans, and provides more updates and analyses on the developing security situation.

Generally, participants displayed enthusiasm and a willingness to participate in political processes. Most participants perceived the government's foreign policies as positive, but still had doubts about its economic policies.

# 7. Conclusions

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## 7. Conclusions

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Sudan's 2018 December revolution placed the country once again in the middle of a profound and uncertain political transition. In his 30 September 2021 address to the United Nations General Assembly, Sudan's Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok stated that '... Sudan is passing through multiple transitions; from wars and conflict to peace; from economic collapse and hardships to prosperity; from dictatorship to democracy; and from isolation to relinking the world'. Sudan's political transition comprises many gradual changes that are already under way. Studying and analysing these changes from a citizen's perspective can provide insights into the potential for progress of Sudan's transition and for advocacy for reform.

This work has studied perceptions of behaviour, as well as the motivation for, and attitudes and barriers to, democratic participation in Sudan. The study was intended to generate baseline information to guide the design of responsive civic education interventions that can help to augment the transition process. The report's findings reveal popular perceptions of the transition process. Issues of participation, democracy, economic performance, the rule of law, the partnership between civilians and the military, freedoms and access to information, elections and the Constitutional Charter were examined through people's perceptions. It is important to understand, however, that this report provides individual information in a specific context, and that it only portrays a snapshot of the political situation. It therefore provides glimpses of valuable information on the challenges facing the revolution, as well as opportunities for advocacy and reform.

The findings of this study show that the necessary environment and theoretical imperative for political participation by the people of Sudan does exist. The findings also show that there has been a noticeable improvement in the political and social freedoms in place in the country, compared to the situation under the former regime. However, despite this ostensible openness, people's aspirations for a fully fledged

transition that would encompass the requisites of a liberal democracy such as inclusive elections, civil liberties, a functioning public sector, and rule of law institutions and systems have not been met.

The areas with the largest gaps from the participants' perspectives are: (a) the government's weak capacity and fragile civil services; (b) its lack of credibility due to minimal transparency and the lack of open communication channels with citizens; (c) the lack of civilian control over the security sector; (d) the new elites' corruption, particularly over the distribution of constitutional positions; (e) that NCP elements are still infiltrating the public sector and key positions in the government; (f) the military component's monopoly over government resources; (g) sluggish implementation of the tasks of the transitional period as stipulated in the Constitutional Charter; (h) an incomplete peace; and, above all, (i) a fear of being bounced into autocratic practices that shrink the civic space. More survey opinions with wider sampling will be needed, however, to provide a broader assessment of Sudan's long walk to democracy.

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# 8. Recommendations



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### For international organizations working to support Sudan's transition

- Given the widespread frustration among citizens, it is important that any future programming consider linking citizen engagement with the ability to influence democratic change. This could be implemented by exposing targeted groups to similar experiences from other countries and lessons learned from citizen engagement during transitions.
- Further broad analysis is needed to identify the gaps in and prospects for civic education and political participation, in particular to correlate cause and effect with indicators and results, in order to derive concrete onward steps.
- Any programme or campaign should consider giving women and youth special consideration, and attempt to creatively navigate existing cultural constraints in order to engage them in programmes that strengthen peacebuilding and democracy and bring them closer to policymaking circles. The engagement of youth and women's groups should be at the local, state and national levels.
- Structural and institutional deficiencies and lack of capacity remain significant contributors to mistrust of the proposed transformation. Support for institutional renewal and reform remains crucial among public sector institutions, as well as trade unions and other political groups instrumental to the revolution and transition.
- Knowledge of civic rights and the challenges and opportunities of democratic transition needs to be scaled-up among the groups that contributed to change. There is a need to bridge the gaps between the government and civil society, and

women's groups and youth by increasing capacity, designing tailored programmes and ensuring their inclusion under the umbrella of official policy reform and policymaking.

### For the Transitional Government of Sudan

- The deteriorating economic situation was regularly raised as the main source of frustration among the surveyed population. Notwithstanding government efforts to improve the economy, it would be advisable for the government to investigate sustained policies that address financial inclusion, social protection, youth employment, women's participation, improving food security and sustaining livelihood programmes. Without the prospect of material improvement in the conditions of those groups which supported change, the transitional process will remain fragile and could be gradually reversed amid continuing economic hardship.
- The Transitional Government should consider greater engagement with its constituencies. Reports indicate a wide gap between the government and its population. A broad public campaign specifically targeted at the revolutionary groups of women, youth and resistance committees, which would need to be conducted primarily through social media and radio, as the most popular means of communication for these groups, would reduce information gaps and ensure realistic expectations about the transition.
- The Transitional Government has made significant steps forward in achieving a sustainable peace in Sudan. The surveyed population in various areas, however, reported conflicting levels of appreciation and understanding of these efforts between those in conflict-prone areas and those in non-conflict areas. Peacemaking and peacebuilding pose a potential threat to stabilization in the transition period. The Transitional Government should escalate its efforts to complete a comprehensive peace, and campaign to explain the peace and the meaning of civic engagement in the country, as well as the potential benefits and its impact on the population—especially those in conflict-affected areas.
- On youth participation in the political process, women and youth were at the forefront of the revolution but both are still underrepresented in political decision making. However, resistance committees, known as the guardians of the revolution, are key players in local areas, responsible for resolving neighbourhood disputes. The Transitional Government is encouraged to involve youth and women's groups in these committees to provide a platform for their proactive engagement with government policymaking.

- Although some progress has been made with regard to the peace and democratization processes, including the adoption of national and state constitutions, deepening democracy remains a challenge. The peace has not yet evolved beyond a political agreement, and key legal and constitutional reforms essential for democratic transformation have been delayed. It is time to start establishing the institutions mandated by the Constitutional Charter, which offer avenues for stronger civic engagement and participation.
- In relation to the latter, the issue of justice was frequently raised by participants as a major concern. A Transitional Justice Commission should be among the key commissions established by the government.
- There is a need to re-examine the mandates of the security sector vis-à-vis its role in the economy, as well as how this impacts on its effectiveness at implementing its primary mandate to secure the country.

### For the FFC, political parties and other Sudanese stakeholders

- Ensure adequate participation in political party structures by women and youth.
- Include civic education in your programmes, particularly on issues related to democracy, elections, constitutional reform and peacebuilding, and advocate and mobilize for enhanced open civic space.
- Take the lead in establishing a Sudan model of transitional justice.
- Support government efforts to decentralize the local governance system to ensure a bottom-up approach and that the voices of rural areas are heard.
- Support civic education by advocating for and promoting issues of economic empowerment such as economic literacy, community mobilization, youth participation in policymaking, organizational management skills, peace building and human security, advocacy and networking, and better understanding among youth of the dynamics of equitable conflict resolution.
- Plan and facilitate community meetings, and training in youth development, planning and organization.

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## About the Author

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Partners in Development Services (PDS) is a consultancy firm established in 1999 and is legally registered at the Organizing Council for Consultancy Firms, Register No 144. PDS brings together renowned Sudanese experts to inform substantive programmes and strategies in a challenging development context. PDS offers a range of research, facilitation, and training services and has long experiences in contextual analysis, citizens perceptions, conflict research, and peace-building. Particular strengths include capacity building, socio-economic assessments; agricultural research; environment; climate change issues, land tenure and natural resources governance, action-oriented research, conflict analysis; training in leadership and gender; organizational management, and strategic planning.

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## About the Editor

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*Mohamed Elshabik* is a humanitarian/development professional, political analyst, blogger, researcher and leader. In October 2019, he was appointed as an Undersecretary for the Ministry of Labor and Social Development in Sudan's then newly formed Transitional Government. Throughout his career, he served in United Nations and other International non-Governmental Organizations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, South Africa, Lesotho, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda; in addition to his native Sudan.

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## About International IDEA

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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

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The challenges facing the democratic transformation in Sudan are immense. This report signified the power-sharing intricacies that had been in place for over two years between the civilians and military. The 25 October coup put an end to that flawed partnership. Nonetheless, people in Sudan are increasingly determined to regain their democratic transition. Building Democracy requires more than extending goodwill. It has always been said democracy cannot prosper without democrats.



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