Paramilitary Forces, Domestic Politics and Conflict:

A Case of the Sudan Crisis

Beatrice Onamu¹, Israel Nyaburi Nyadera²

Abstract

What is the threat posed by paramilitary groups on the state? This paper seeks to examine the role and impact of paramilitary forces on domestic politics and how their involvement results in political (in)stability. It examines how the interplay between the Rapid Support Forces, a paramilitary force in Sudan and the Sudan Armed Forces has resulted in a humanitarian crisis since the overthrow of Omar Al Bashir's government in 2019. The authors argue that the formation of paramilitary groups is aimed at protecting the government from internal and external threats, yet these paramilitary groups can shift or withdraw their loyalty to the political leadership. Such a shift the paper finds creates a high potential for confrontation between the paramilitary forces and regular forces leaving the citizens vulnerable to mass atrocities and war crimes. The paper begins by examining the origin, spread and activities of militia groups globally and at the regional level before examining the concept of paramilitary forces. The authors then look at Sudan’s historical and contemporary experiences with paramilitary groups before discussing the recent crisis between the regular forces and the paramilitary force in Sudan. They find that the preferential treatment of paramilitary forces influences their actions during a crisis.

Keywords

Paramilitary Forces; Uprising; Sudan; Domestic Politics; Conflict.

¹ National Defence University, Nakuru, Kenya
ORCID: 0009-0001-2218-9161, e-mail: Obeatrice@yahoo.com

² National Defence College, National Defence University, Nairobi, Kenya; Center for Conflict, Development & Peacebuilding, Geneva, Switzerland
ORCID: 0000-0002-0432-6935, e-mail: inyadera@ndu.ac.ke
Introduction

What is the impact of paramilitary forces on domestic politics and conflict? The general assumption has been that paramilitary forces are established to reinforce stability and deal with internal and external threats by supplementing the efforts of regular forces (Böhmelt & Clayton 2018, Aliyev 2016). Studies have also been conducted to examine how and why states form these paramilitary forces (Jentzsch et. al. 2015) while others have discussed how they can also be an obstacle to peace (Maher & Thomson 2018). However, the threat component of paramilitary forces especially in countries where governments are facing uprisings has only attracted limited attention. Most studies assume that since paramilitary groups are established and supported by the government, then their loyalty is attached to the government of the day. Indeed, with a closer look at different cases, one would establish that what exists is a variety of relations that are not static. They can shift from time to time depending on the interest of the paramilitary unit actors and the political climate.

Paramilitary groups have been around since the ancient Greece and Roman periods even though the nature of the threats they pose are only getting more visible. They evolved from Mercenary Companies and colonial militias in the Renaissance era to national guards and paramilitary police in the 20th and 21st centuries. Proponents of paramilitary groups argue that they are useful in dealing with unique challenges facing countries especially when those challenges are beyond the capacities of regular forces. Recent conflicts have seen an increased involvement of paramilitary groups with the Arab Spring (2011 onwards) giving a better insight into the vulnerability of governments that rely on paramilitary forces. In some cases, these paramilitary forces were key actors in overthrowing the government, a good example is the Republican Guard in Egypt during the overthrow of President Morsi. In other cases, the presence of paramilitary groups only acted to worsen the post-coup/post-uprising with protracted violence replacing what used to be uneasy peace in the past. Libya stands out as a good example in this category but Somalia as well during the fall of Siad Barre also experienced a similar crisis.

Opponents of paramilitary forces argue that they serve as a symptom of underlying security and governance issues within a country. In instances where these forces are deployed, it signifies a broader challenge to the stability of the state and may prolong hostilities by exacerbating existing tensions. Leaders especially in autocratic countries have in many cases resorted to the establishment of paramilitary forces as a means to consolidate power and suppress resistance. For example, in the 1970s, Idi Amin of Uganda utilized paramilitary forces, such as the State Research Bureau, to consolidate power and suppress political opposition (Hansen 2014). Amin’s regime was marked by widespread human rights abuses, and the paramilitary units played a crucial role in enforcing his authoritarian rule. In Zimbabwe, under the rule of Robert Mugabe, the establishment of paramilitary units like the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) played a crucial role in maintaining political
control. These forces were instrumental in suppressing dissent and securing the regime’s grip on power (Raftopoulos 2006).

In Sudan, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has emerged as a powerful paramilitary group involved in resource extraction, including gold mining and land grabbing (Suliman 2022). Autocratic leaders leverage these forces to secure economic resources, contributing to both regime survival and personal enrichment. The group became notorious following allegations of grave breaches of international humanitarian law in Darfur. So open were the actions of this group that even the Sudanese military officials warned that the RSF, like previous paramilitary groups, could potentially turn against the government in Khartoum. In a parliamentary debate in June 2015, SAF General Adam Hamid Musa, previously considered a supporter of the militia strategy in Darfur, reportedly stated that ‘the use of militias comes at a high cost.’

Furthermore, in mid-2016, reports emerged that SAF forces operating in Jebel Marra alongside the RSF requested the removal of RSF members due to alleged abuses against civilians. Also, there were reported clashes between RSF and SAF elements south of Khartoum in November 2016 (Baldo 2017). The army seemed hesitant to engage in Yemen as part of the Saudi-led ‘Islamic military alliance to fight terrorism,’ of which Sudan was a member, fearing it might necessitate relinquishing certain war theatres to the RSF. Despite this, by early 2017, thousands of RSF troops were reportedly sent to Yemen. Despite numerous warnings and instances of abuse, it seems that Khartoum intends to continue integrating former militias or enlisting civilians into the RSF across various parts of Sudan, expanding RSF operations to all conflict zones. Khartoum’s aggressive stance toward critics of the new force has emboldened existing paramilitary groups to seek integration into it. Additionally, besides the permanent RSF forces, the ‘RSF’ label has seemingly become a new designation for semi-independent, government-affiliated militias assembled for specific missions. This trend is notably prevalent in Darfur, where militias formerly known as the PDF, Border Guards, and CRP are reportedly adopting the ‘RSF’ label (Jori 2018).

In this paper, we will examine the role and impact of the RSF on politics and conflict in Sudan. The group is important because it has been involved in both the overthrow of a government it was established to protect and also is currently involved in a protracted conflict with the regular army of Sudan. The authors begin by examining the origin, spread and activities of militia groups globally and at the regional level before framing the concept of paramilitary forces. The paper then looks at how Sudan has historically experienced paramilitary groups before discussing the recent crisis between the regular forces and the paramilitary force in Sudan.

**Review of Existing Literature on Paramilitary Groups**

The history of paramilitary forces has roots dating back centuries, evolving in various forms across the globe (Mireanu 2023, Vukušić 2022). Unofficially existing outside of a nation’s armed forces, a paramilitary organization also known as a quasi-militarized force is a semi-militarized group whose

---

3 The loyalty of these units to Mugabe ensured a network of patronage that sustained his autocratic rule. More so, the utilization of paramilitary forces in resource-rich nations, such as Sudan, exemplifies the connection between autocratic leadership and economic interests.
Paramilitary Forces, Domestic Politics and Conflict: A Case of the Sudan Crisis

training, tactics, organizational structure, subculture, and function resemble those of a professional military (Davis & Pereira 2003, Powell 2017). More so, Paramilitary forces, although offshoots of the state tend to act as non-state actors, operate either independently or in alignment with state interests with some sought of central control by the executive. One significant aspect of their emergence lies in their role during periods of conflict, civil wars, andinstabilities caused by other forms of irregular warfare, or as adjuncts to regular military forces. Another prominent reason for the emergence of paramilitary forces has been in post-coup countries and those under authoritarian regimes keen on maintaining a grip on power.

Böhmelt & Clayton (2018) argue that paramilitary groups are highly supported by state structures but outside the realm of regular armies. During the early 20th century, paramilitary groups gained prominence in Europe, notably in the aftermath of World War I. Paramilitary groups such as the Freikorps in Germany or the Black and Tans in Ireland were established to maintain order or advance political objectives (Gardenier 2022, Callinicos 2023). This trend grew even further with the rise of fascist regimes which increasingly relied on and utilized paramilitary forces. For example, this period saw the emergence of groups such as Black Shirts in Italy and the Nazi Brownshirts which were being used as tools for enforcing state authority and suppressing dissent (Genwarth & Horne 2011, Fuentes 2018). In the latter half of the 20th century and beyond, paramilitary organizations expanded globally, assuming diverse roles in various geopolitical contexts.

Latin America witnessed the emergence of paramilitary groups, such as Colombia’s United Self-Defense Forces (AUC), which was also accused of being deeply involved in drug trafficking, extortion, killings, kidnappings and counter-insurgency activities (Tate 2001, Goyes & Sandberg 2023). In the Middle East, groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Palestine evolved as both military and political entities, challenging state authority and engaging in conflicts against perceived adversaries. Even more notorious groups include the Fedayeen Saddam a paramilitary group with links to Sadam Hussein’s Ba’athist ruling party and which at its height had troops upwards of 40,000 fighters (Kiyani 2022, Beehner 2022).

While little was known about the Fedayeen Saddam group before the US invasion in 2003, the paramilitary group believed to be under the command of Saddam Hussein’s son Uday came to prominence for their resistance to the American invasion of Iraq and their sustained attacks. In neighbouring Iran, the Quds Force believed to be the paramilitary wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has left its mark on both national and regional security affairs. Divsallar & Azizi (2023) opine that the force handles IRGC foreign espionage activities and has successfully established resistance forces in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Palestine. The assassination of its top commander Major-General Qassem Soleimani during a US drone strike raised concerns over possible all-out war in the region (Tabatabai 2020). This shows how influential these paramilitary forces have become over the years.

The Arab Spring, characterized by mass uprisings and widespread protests, presented a complex scenario in the Middle East, where the response of armed forces varied across countries. Tunisia and Egypt witnessed military defections during the upheaval, while Syria and Bahrain maintained steadfast loyalty to their armed forces. Yemen and Libya experienced a split in military allegiance,
highlighting a divergence in responses during periods of extensive popular dissent (Makara 2011). This observed variation challenges conventional expectations of coup-proofing strategies, which are typically designed to ensure unwavering military loyalty to the ruling regime. Coup-proofing strategies, comprising building parallel security institutions, distributing material incentives, and exploiting communal ties, are essential tools employed by authoritarian regimes to maintain control over their armed forces (Makara 2011). The establishment of parallel militaries and layered security services is intended to insulate regimes from potential military interventions. Large defence budgets and economic incentives aim to co-opt the military, aligning its fate with that of the regime and discouraging any inclination toward intervention in politics. Additionally, regimes often leverage communal ties by favouring communities with close connections to the ruling regime, fostering a sense of loyalty within the armed forces.

However, the Arab Spring demonstrated that while these coup-proofing strategies may effectively prevent classic coups, they might not guarantee loyalty during widespread popular dissent (Makara 2011). The response of armed forces during the upheaval reflects the nuanced dynamics of military defection during periods of societal upheaval. Building parallel security institutions and distributing material incentives, effective in maintaining military support during stability, may inadvertently create divisions within the security apparatus when faced with mass protests. Conversely, regimes successfully exploiting communal ties are more likely to maintain military loyalty during periods of extensive popular dissent, as these strategies establish a sense of loyalty that withstands challenges posed by mass protests.

The history of paramilitary groups in Africa just like in other parts of the world remains fascinating as the region has experienced a complex tapestry of paramilitary activity intertwined with colonial legacies, post-independence struggles, and ongoing internal conflicts. In several nations of the continent, paramilitary groups emerged as key players in civil wars, ethnic conflicts, and struggles/consolidation of political power. For instance, in the late 20th Century, paramilitary forces played pivotal roles in propping up governments or challenging existing authorities. Libya is perhaps one of the countries where paramilitary forces were entrenched in the country’s political system. According to Moniz (2017), the fall of President Muammar Gaddafi offers a unique case study on how paramilitary forces can quickly transform into militias and derail efforts towards building, peace and security. Gadafi had configured a governance structure that relied more on tribal and regional militias which became very powerful during his reign. In Somalia, up until the collapse of Siad Barre’s regime in 1991, the government relied heavily on paramilitary forces some of which included Duub Cas (Red Berets) and victory pioneers to unleash terror on clans such as the Hawiye, Majeerteen, and Isaaq clans believed to be opposed to the government (Rosmanto, Noval & Santosa 2021). Other countries such as Uganda which have experienced a series of coups have seen successive governments rely on paramilitary groups to ensure the survival of the regime as well as deal with uprisings in different parts of the country. Paramilitary groups such as the Local Defence Units (LDUs) have been deployed in areas such as Karamajong (Rwengabo 2013).

In addition, groups such as the Revolutionary Guard Corps (Liwa Haris al-Jamahiriya) which until 2011 had an estimated 3,000 elite fighters handpicked from Sirte the tribal region of the president played a crucial role in protecting the regime (Poirson 2017).
In some cases, paramilitary forces are a major threat to the political and economic stability of the country as they pursue individual and narrow group interests. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo has seen paramilitary groups involved in illegal mining operations, contributing to corruption and the entrenchment of autocratic rule (Global Witness 2016). The economic benefits derived from resource exploitation strengthen the regime's resilience against internal and external challenges. Furthermore, Paramilitary forces are sometimes instrumental in facilitating criminal enterprises and illicit activities that benefit autocratic leaders. In countries like Nigeria, paramilitary groups have been linked to activities such as oil theft, kidnapping, and smuggling (Ukiwo 2010). Autocrats harness these paramilitary structures to advance both political control and financial gain, perpetuating a cycle of corruption and authoritarianism.

This background reveals two fundamental aspects. First, is that paramilitary groups are not homogeneous and acquire unique characteristics depending on their setting. Some have a positive impact on their society while others harm their societies. Secondly, paramilitary groups are often established to protect governments and leaders whose legitimacy is often vulnerable and a history of military interference in politics is common. Governments that either ascended to power through illegitimate means or democratically elected governments that turn to illiberal governance practices also tend to rely on paramilitary groups. In this study, we intend to examine how their involvement in domestic politics is likely to result in a crisis. Using the case of Sudan, we argue that limited attention has been directed at the impact of paramilitary groups beyond propping up authoritarian regimes.

**Framing and Contextualizing Paramilitary Groups**

In recent years, the proliferation of paramilitary groups has been on the rise in both democratic and undemocratic countries. The changing nature of threats to states, the growing number of armed non-state actors as well as the complexities in the nature of means and methods of warfare have encouraged countries to rethink their security formations and units. Similarly, the growing number of autocratic regimes keen on keeping hold of power has seen a significant number of paramilitary groups established. Paramilitary groups have emerged in different parts of the world under unique circumstances and for various reasons. Scobell and Hammitt (1996) argue that distinction can be made between paramilitary forces based on differentiating their level of autonomy and loyalty concerning the government. The distinction is based on classifying paramilitary groups as being either "disloyal" "semi-loyal," or "loyal," to the state or in terms of autonomy, as either being "autonomous," "semi-autonomous," or "dependent."

Yet, despite these differences, paramilitary groups tend to share certain common traits in their logic, function and dynamics. These are groups that are not only formed, equipped and trained by the government, but their role is often to support, sometimes balance or in extreme cases replace the regular forces. In terms of support, paramilitary groups can be introduced to deal with incidences that the regular forces cannot deal with. For example, the French gendarmerie force is a paramilitary group often used in counterterrorism, riot control and hostage rescue missions. Other paramilitary groups involved in special security operations include the Israeli Border Police, the Venezuelan National Guard and the Italian Carabinieri. The configuration of paramilitary groups and limited
restrictions by the law have made many governments consider them as an efficient alternative in dealing with domestic challenges. They are not only easy to mobilize but also offer flexibility to governments keen on responding to threats with limited restrictions.

The proximity of paramilitary groups to central government control, though distinct from the conventional command structure, underscores their clear connection to the regime. This association implicates the government in the paramilitary groups' actions, making it responsible for their activities. In essence, the government's ability to directly influence paramilitary organizations means it is also held accountable for any extreme or unlawful acts committed by these groups. Paramilitaries are often better equipped than other auxiliary forces, and at times even surpass the regular military in terms of equipment, and have the potential to carry out significant atrocities, as seen in contexts such as Colombia. This close relationship complicates the state's ability to deny involvement in such abuses. An illustrative example is Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, which created a security apparatus parallel to the regular armed forces to safeguard against coups, demonstrating the use of paramilitary structures for regime stability. We adopt four common features to paramilitary groups globally.

**Feature 1: Government Sponsorship and Affiliation**

This feature means that a group to be considered a paramilitary, it should be either sponsored by or aligned with a national or subnational government. To be classified as a paramilitary group (PMG), the group must have a recognizable connection to the government. Some of these groups are given different names ranging from Republican guards, special forces, and General Service Units among others. In most cases, the main sponsor of the group is the government which also tends to give the group instructions on when and where to operate. However, as we will observe in the case of Sudan, such groups can also break ranks with the This includes groups that are sponsored or recognized by a government (national or subnational) without the federal government's active opposition.

**Feature 2: Distinction from Regular State Security Forces**

In this feature, we recognize that while both the paramilitary forces and regular forces are affiliated with the government, paramilitary groups tend to be distinct from regular military and police units. This distinction is often officially defined in official government documents. In some cases, paramilitary groups may include members of the official security forces who operate in an unofficial capacity and engage in extrajudicial activities such as death squads. Furthermore, it is also a common feature to establish that there is strong cooperation with state other state agencies in the form of intelligence sharing, joint operations, or informal personnel exchanges.

**Feature 3: Armament and Preparedness for Combat**

Paramilitary forces tend to be better armed, highly trained and prepared for combat at any time. This is attributed to the belief that paramilitary forces can be used to counter insurrections and coups by regular forces, especially in countries where the military is seen as a custodian of certain national values. In other instances, paramilitary groups are heavily armed to the extent that they can establish
an empire. A good example is the commercialisation of private military companies such as formerly the Black Water and more recently the Wagner group whose influence spread beyond the national border. However, the issue of armament and preparedness was recently put to the test when Wagner forces attempted a mutiny in Russia. While the stand-off was short-lived, the dangerous implication of paramilitary groups being heavily armed has been brought to light. Some paramilitary groups such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have become so powerful that they can be able to prop up other irregular armed groups such as some elements of the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Houthis in Yemen. In Sudan, paramilitary forces were initially used to fight proxy wars in countries such as Yemen.

**Feature 4: Organizational Structure and Identification**

Another important feature of paramilitary groups is that they tend to have a recognized organisation structure and identity. This is important not only in legitimizing their activities but also in distinguishing them from other forms of mobs and militias. They have a chain of command as well as a set of rules that members of the group are expected to follow.

**Paramilitary Groups as a Threat**

As noted earlier in this paper, paramilitary groups are often established to protect the government, what is sometimes called coup proof or deal with threats that require special skills and capabilities. We argue that the former reason why paramilitary groups are established can explain why they can be a serious threat. These groups are normally seen as pro-government units which are distinct to the expectations of regular forces which is to be loyal to the state and not a particular government. However, paramilitary groups have also shown that their loyalty can shift from one leader/government to another. Examples of paramilitary groups established to protect the regime overthrowing the same government include the 1999 Coup in Côte d'Ivoire in which the Presidential Guard of Côte d'Ivoire ousted President Henri Konan Bédié. Another example is the 2008 overthrow of President Sidi Mohamed of Mauritania by the Presidential Security Battalion. These examples indicate a serious threat posed by paramilitary groups, due to their unique operational flexibility and positioning to effectively manage to overthrow governments under various conditions. Their capability to act independently yet retain a connection to formal power structures makes them potent agents for regime change, often with significant implications for national stability and governance.

This study is concerned not merely with the capacity of paramilitary groups to execute coups, but also with the methods they employ and the repercussions of their actions. Pro-government paramilitary organizations, inherently trained for combat rather than diplomacy or negotiation, are anticipated to use force to protect the regime from coup attempts. Their modus operandi is intrinsically violent, and thus, when they participate in the overthrow of a government, the primary mechanism is likely to be coercion and armed conflict. The inherent rivalry between regular armed forces and paramilitary groups suggests that in the event of a coup, clashes between these entities are almost unavoidable. Such confrontations can exacerbate the violence and instability already provoked by the coup attempt. The resultant violence often disproportionately impacts civilians rather than the regime members targeted by the coup. The implications of such violence extend beyond immediate physical harm,
encompassing broader socioeconomic disruptions. These can be as a result of stalled economic activities, international sanctions, pervasive uncertainty, and infrastructural damage. This is what we consider to have occurred in Sudan when the rivalry between regular forces and the paramilitary became bare. In the next section, we will explore the origins of paramilitary groups in Sudan, their evolution and involvement in the current crisis.

Paramilitary Groups Crisis in Sudan: A Historical Context

Sudan has historically grappled with the challenge posed by irregular and paramilitary groups. The earliest manifestations of these groups date back to the First Sudanese Civil War (1955 - 1972). During this twelve-year conflict, the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM) combated the central Sudanese government, resulting in over 500,000 fatalities. These high casualty rates and widespread abuses are attributed to the activities of paramilitary groups and militias. A series of military coups during this period led to frequent changes in government, disrupting the central government’s efforts to address the crisis in the South.

It was during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983 - 2005) that the use of paramilitary forces became both common and nearly institutionalized. The Omar al-Bashir administration relied on groups such as the Popular Defence Forces (PDF) to bolster the military’s capacity against the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). In 2003, the Janjaweed Militia, a paramilitary group supported and armed by Khartoum, was established. Comprising Arab nomadic tribesmen, the Janjaweed was formed to counter rebellions by non-Arab groups in Darfur. Although primarily tasked with targeting the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), the Janjaweed has been accused of severe breaches of international humanitarian law, including rape, mass killings, forced displacement, and genocide.

From 2006 onwards, there were notable instances of disloyalty and confrontations between militias and regular forces, particularly in Darfur. These events, coupled with the militias’ misconduct, led to increasing discontent within the Armed Forces over the government’s reliance on militias such as the Janjaweed. This dissatisfaction peaked in 2008 when a significant incursion by the JEM reached Khartoum without interception by the Janjaweed, ultimately being halted in the capital by the intervention of Special Forces. These developments culminated in the establishment of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in mid-2013, an upgraded paramilitary unit. The initial recruits for the RSF were drawn from existing forces, predominantly the Border Guards. Similar to the formation of the Border Guards a decade earlier, the RSF emerged from new operational needs and the militias’ demand for official recognition (Møller & Cawthra 2007).

However, in 2013, the Sudanese government’s strategy towards militias encountered pivotal challenges, marking its most fragile period since the secession of South Sudan in 2011. The nationwide unrest, influenced by the ‘Arab Spring,’ threatened the stability of the government in Khartoum, and discontent began to surface among prominent figures like Ghazi Salaheddin al-Attabani. Arabs in Kordofan and Darfur showed increasing resistance to mobilizing militias to suppress insurgencies (Zohar 2020). Concurrently, existing militias began to elude governmental control, engaging predominantly in internecine conflicts. Much of the violence in Darfur in 2013 stemmed from clashes
among Arab factions, each backed by independent paramilitary forces. All factions implicated Khartoum, or at least accused it of failing to support them, escalating the risk of their turning into insurgents. These series of events in 2013 should have raised a red flag to the central government over the vulnerabilities of relying on paramilitary forces especially when it comes to excreting control over them.

The government made concerted efforts to regain control over increasingly disloyal Darfur Arab militias. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) for example underwent training before being deployed to South Kordofan, with the expectation that they could be better managed outside their home regions. However, this did not prevent them from committing abuses, some of which contradicted government directives. The misconduct in Kordofan compelled Khartoum to redeploy the majority of the RSF forces (5,000–6,000 men) back to Darfur in 2014. Subsequently, between 2014 and 2016, the RSF spearheaded government counter-insurgency operations, including offensives in Jebel Marra, yet they proved as problematic as previous militia groups.

Despite largely reflecting the government’s conventional militia strategy, the RSF initially fell under the control of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), thus providing the security organization with its paramilitary force. Initially commanded by NISS Major General Abbas Abdelaziz, the operations were led by former Border Guards commander Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemmeti). Gradually, Hemmeti assumed a more dominant role, with assertions that both men exercised authority over different sections of the force. In April 2016, a presidential decree ostensibly placed the RSF directly under the jurisdiction of the presidency. By January 2017, with the support of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) but against Hemmeti’s preferences, the Sudanese Parliament attempted to pass an ‘RSF Act’ intending to subject the RSF to SAF control.

The proposed legislation was drafted ambiguously, leading to uncertainty regarding the classification of the RSF as an ‘autonomous’ entity, theoretically under the control of both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the ‘supreme commander’ of the armed forces—the president. While some Members of Parliament (MPs) and SAF officers criticized this ambiguity, Hemmeti, a key figure, welcomed the continued ‘autonomy’ of the force. There is concern that in the future, as the presidency fears losing control over crucial forces, the RSF might transform into a praetorian guard, safeguarding the president from potential coups by the SAF and establishing itself as a distinct third pillar of military power apart from both the SAF and the NISS (Raleigh & Kishi 2020).

Following the overthrow of Omar Bashir, a loose coalition headed by General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan led the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) a paramilitary group led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (alias Hemediti) was established which did not last long because of internal rivalries that had been built over the years. The SAF sees itself as the dominant unit with its chain of command as the rightful heir of the thrown in Khartoum. On the other hand, years of preferential treatment, lack of accountability and impunity gave the paramilitary force RSF the confidence to challenge the SAF for state authority. Its assumption seems to be right as the conflict seems to be balanced with both parties making significant gains against each other. The RSF, despite not being a regular force is proving to have almost similar capabilities as the SAF. Figure 1 shows the situation in Sudan including areas of battle and displacement patterns.
But the irony of this war is not the test of strength between the SAF and RSF, but the indifference shown by both forces in protecting civilians. According to ACLED, between April 2023 and February 2024, over 5000 political violence events have been recorded and more than 14,200 fatalities registered as a result of the conflict. Apart from the huge number of fatalities, the humanitarian situation in Sudan has also worsened as peace remains elusive. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that over six million people have been displaced from their homes as a result of the hostilities. Ironically, some of the countries where the refugees are heading to are embroiled in their domestic conflicts exposing the displaced persons to a situation of double tragedy. Noteworthy, the nationality of those caught up in the conflict and have been displaced is equally mixed. Apart from the Sudanese nationals who constitute 64% of the displaced, 36% of the displaced are foreign nationals (International Office of Migration 2024).

With the war impacting Sudan’s health systems, the World Health Organization in January 2024 estimated that more than 10,700 individuals had been infected by cholera with over 250 of them losing their lives. The humanitarian situation is equally problematic with a large number of people displaced, climate change-induced drought and water scarcity, and disruption of economic activities among other forms of challenges that are facing both the civilians and responders. Indeed, efforts to respond to the humanitarian situation in the country continue to be hampered by among other things looting,
insecurity, bureaucratic impediments, poor phone connectivity, inadequate financial resources, as well as few technical and humanitarian personnel.

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined the role and impact of paramilitary groups on domestic politics and conflict. Using the case of Sudan, we aimed to illustrate the threat posed by reliance on paramilitary groups. We established that paramilitary forces can shift their loyalty from one government to another and in the process pose the threat of violent confrontation with regular forces. Given the level of training and equipment the paramilitary forces possess, the impact of the violence is likely to be devastating. Indeed, for Sudan, the conflict has gotten out of control, and efforts by international and regional peace advocates have failed to push the belligerents into secession of hostilities. As the war continues with the danger that it is likely to evolve into new forms of rivalries and grievances, it is difficult to estimate the level of disruption it will have in the end.

Even more importantly, is the question over the role of the paramilitary groups after this conflict is over. Will the main perpetrators be held accountable? Will we end up with an agreement that returns the same people to the helm of leadership in Sudan? While these are questions we can only spectate at this moment, it is not far-fetched to imagine that allies and supporters of either group have embedded themselves into the state architecture so that even if the two main leaders are finally removed from the political scene, their influence or ideology will remain at different levels of the Sudanese bureaucracy. Nonetheless, the death, destruction and displacements experienced in this conflict offers a strong reminder of the challenges of state management and how things can get out of control as a result of decisions that are intended to benefit those in power.
References

https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2010.530942.


Gramizzi, Claudio, and Jérôme Tubiana. 2013. *New War, Old Enemies*. Small Arms Survey


