

RESEARCH REPORT



Ethiopia's Pivot from Institutionalised Regional Diplomacy to Populist Peacemaking: Abiy Ahmed's 2019 Khartoum Peace Initiative and Its Impact on Ethiopia-Sudan Relations

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Abstract

This paper analyses the mediation initiative launched by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in Sudan in June 2019, which facilitated political dialogue between the country's soldiers and civilians. In the short term, it paved the way to a celebrated breakthrough. It also marked a significant step in the emergence of a new paradigm for Ethiopian diplomacy, based on advancing personalised foreign policymaking and marginalising longstanding foreign policy principles and institutions. The paper uses the concept of "populist peacemaking" to frame this pivot and analyses its impact on the relations between Ethiopia and Sudan.

Introduction

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed was celebrated as a peacemaker at precisely the same time that the complex institutional system of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), with Ethiopia at its hub in the Horn of Africa, was unravelling. Over the previous two decades, Ethiopia had played a key role in regional peacemaking efforts including good offices, mediation, and deployment of peacekeeping troops. These efforts helped advance its strategic national interests of preventing the spillover effects of regional conflicts, protecting national sovereignty, and preserving the internal security and stability of the state.

The efforts elevated the country's diplomatic image and regional standing. Ethiopia successfully used its institutions particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its diplomatic professionals to undertake these regional peace and security efforts. Ethiopia played a critical role in the establishment of continental and regional organisations including the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), its successor the African Union (AU), and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). These institutions were effectively utilised to advance Ethiopia's national interests.

Abiy was presented with the opportunity to build on the regional peacemaking legacy left by his predecessors. Emperor Haile Selassie mediated the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement between Sudan's Numeiri regime and the southern Anyanya Movement.¹ The IGAD Declaration of Principles of 1994, in which Ethiopia played a leading role, was the basis for the negotiations between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) that led to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Subsequently, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi discreetly played a critical role in the negotiations between those two parties leading to the independence of South Sudan in July 2011. This was most notable in the agreement for temporary security arrangements for the disputed area of Abyei in June 2011 which led to Ethiopia being the sole troop contributor to the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA).² Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn also played a role in the IGAD-led mediation process for brokering a peace agreement in South Sudan to end the civil war that erupted in 2013, with former Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin serving as chief mediator.

In these instances, Ethiopia acted in close cooperation with the United Nations (UN), AU, and the US, utilising IGAD as an institution for grounding the process and outcomes in a multilateral framework.

Unlike previous Ethiopian leaders who had sought to minimise their personal exposure and promoted the role of their national institutions and multilateral partners, Abiy was keen to maximise his role, taking public credit for any positive outcome or breakthrough.

This paper explores one neglected episode in Abiy's remarkable and eccentric peacemaking career, namely his visit to Khartoum in June 2019, showing how this manifested the key characteristics of his style. Much has been written on peacemaking in the Horn of Africa, especially in Sudan. This paper contributes empirically to its focus on Abiy's Sudan initiative, much covered by the media, but little studied by scholars, and by applying the concept of "populist peacemaking" to this episode.

Having witnessed the growing involvement of populist leaders in international mediation, Dana Landau and Lior Lehrs introduced the concept of "populist peacemaking."³ The authors argue that although mediation is a widely studied subject, there is a gap in the literature on how populism affects peacemaking. They developed the concept through an iterative process combining the theoretical underpinning of populism and empirical findings developed from examining US peacemaking efforts during the Trump presidency.⁴ Through projecting the tenets of populism on peacemaking and international mediation, the framework proposes three elements to determine a peacemaking effort as a populist undertaking. These elements include (i) the rejection of the peacemaking establishment and elites and corresponding norms and practices ("anti-elitism"); (ii) putting the populist mediator in the spotlight of the process ("personalisation"); and (iii) framing of the peacemaking as taking care of the real needs of the "People" (i.e. "*volonté générale*").

By analysing secondary sources and personal observation, this paper will zero in on Prime Minister Abiy's mediation effort in Sudan and argue that it was a populist peacemaking endeavour; despite the initiative bringing a short-lived diplomatic recognition for Ethiopia and the prime minister, it resulted in reducing the profile and role of Ethiopia's institutions, in particular, its Ministry of Foreign Affairs; delinked Ethiopia's peacemaking from the APSA⁵ and third, it did not lead to a sustainable reset of Ethio-Sudanese relations for the new era. The analysis takes into account the complex domestic and regional developments that catapulted the negative outcomes.

The first section of the paper will describe the populist tendencies of Abiy Ahmed, his philosophy of peace, explore the mediation process, his visit to Khartoum, and the role of domestic and international actors. The second section will analyse the mediation effort using the populist peacemaking framework, and its impact on the bilateral relations between Ethiopia and Sudan.

Abiy: An Insider-Outsider Populist Leader

Defining populism and who is a populist remains debatable.⁶ According to Mude, populist leaders characterise their engagement in politics as a higher calling to bring politics back to the people and seek to govern based on direct and unmediated support.⁷ Abiy's rise and power consolidation efforts exhibiting populist tendencies have been a subject of debate. Some defended him as a liberal democrat⁸ while others labelled him an opportunistic populist.⁹ Abiy's accusation of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) leadership of giving a deaf ear to the people's demands by resorting to factionalism is in line with populist leaders' attempt to gain unmediated support by bringing politics to the people at the expense of their predecessors. While praising the peaceful transfer of power in his inaugural speech, Abiy described his appointment as:

*"indicative of the fact that we are building a system that walks at par with the country's political, economic, and social conditions and which is governed by the will of the people, that which makes the people its master and serves them accordingly."*¹⁰

Abiy strove to gain unmediated personal support from all Ethiopians through nationalistic rhetoric in stark contrast to EPRDF officials. True to the political strategy deployed by populists to connect with people to consolidate their power,¹¹ Abiy preached peace, and reconciliation by projecting an image of a humble servant of the people.¹² In his inaugural speech, he told Ethiopians "While alive we are Ethiopians, in death, we become Ethiopia" and achieved widespread acceptance.¹³ The sweeping political, and economic reforms that included releasing thousands of political prisoners, halting media censorship, peace with Eritrea, appointing women to top leadership posts, and promising opening up the economy won him domestic support and wooed the international community.¹⁴

Abiy successfully managed to detach himself from EPRDF and its old ways by projecting an image of an insider who always strove for change from within.¹⁵ These actions are in line with the characteristics of "insider-outsider" populist leaders. Such leaders are not members of the inner circle of the political regime but have strong connections to them and emphasise their novelty to politics to separate themselves from both the unpopular corruption and incompetence of politicians.¹⁶

Abiy may not have been known by the public but was in truth a devout EPRDF insider who managed to equate himself to a chick that broke out of the eggshell. In his book "*Yemedemer manged*", the second of his three books published in office, Abiy labels himself "*betegnaw baytewar*" ("stranger of the household") to describe his time as a member of EPRDF.

Moreover, cementing an insider-outsider image peculiar to his party colleagues, Abiy openly claimed to have provided scripts for popular television series, edited manuscripts of authors, and written books using a pseudonym.¹⁷ Openly admitting his mother's prophecy of becoming the seventh king of Ethiopia, Abiy functioned as such.¹⁸ Meetings equating lectures with his cabinet, military commanders, ambassadors, doctors, and teachers were televised to create the image of an intellectual leader.

Abiy became a member of EPRDF at the age of 15 and served as deputy head of the Information Network Security Agency (INSA), Minister for Science and Technology, and vice president of the Oromia Regional State.¹⁹ He whitewashed his involvement in the previous regime by putting a charm offensive and blaming everything on the top leadership of EPRDF. Documentaries that showed him as a thinker, innovator, and man of the people with testimonials of former co-workers and close friends were broadcasted to refurbish his divorce from the past.

The disassociation with EPRDF was cemented by targeting Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) a dominant party within the EPRDF coalition. Through televised documentaries and repeated statements, TPLF and its leaders were presented as responsible for the repression and corruption in the country. Abiy went as far as publicly admitting the state committed terrorist acts on its citizens. Successive actions such as the dramatic arrest of Kinfe Dagnaw, head of the Metal and Engineering Corporation (METEC) live on national television and repetitive narratives that framed Tigrayan speakers as perpetrators of torture and human rights violations helped solidify his distance from the TPLF-dominated EPRDF rule.

The detachment also extended to regional foreign policies of the EPRDF. Abiy argued the regional peace and security arrangement was dominated by the TPLF and claimed Ethiopia was hated by all its neighbours. In an address to the parliament, Abiy stated the leaders of Somalia and South Sudan confided their dissatisfaction to him.²⁰ This was an attempt to glorify his foreign policy reform by belittling and severely criticising the past.

Despite emerging from an institutionalised party process, Abiy presented himself as the singular, individual face of reform, and demanded unconditional support both from key domestic and international actors, including the US.²¹ He received such support. Abiy interpreted this as a mandate for unconstrained personal action in both domestic and regional arenas. Later in 2019, Abiy's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize contributed to his feeling of confidence to the point of infallibility.²²

Abiy's Philosophy of Peace

Abiy's philosophy of peace was critical to his power consolidation efforts. It also guided his foreign policy and regional and domestic peacemaking endeavours. The thinking seems to be grounded in a strong sense of religious calling. In stark contrast to the EPRDF, Abiy tapped into Ethiopia's divine exceptionalism and preached peace, love, and reconciliation as his mission.²³ A Pentecostal who adheres to prosperity gospel, Abiy exploited his Muslim and orthodox Christian family background to gain popular support and legitimacy.

Peace was given a greater place in Abiy's political overtures and served as the mantra of his political discourse. In his inaugural speech, he stated:

*"peace is not the absence of conflict. Rather it is the active pursuit of finding common grounds for differences. We must actively seek peace within our borders and outside."*²⁴

Abiy's philosophy of peace focuses on simplistic and superficial appearances and building a personal legacy. Substantive engagements and deeper investigation of underlying interests are not given attention. Photo ops and short-lived cosmetic changes that appeal to the public are given more emphasis. He believes in an overly optimistic assumption that conflict can be resolved by just focusing on positivity and interpersonal connection and by avoiding problematic things. He laments in his book *Medemer*:

*"Spending time on the issues we agree over should be the focus rather than spending time on the issues of differences. Adding the positive aspects will in the long run provide sufficient impetus to resolve the differences. We can then use these interactions to solve our problems."*²⁵

Abiy seems to believe in the power of mere social and personal interaction as an alternate conflict resolution method. In a publication on the resolution of a conflict in Jimma Zone in 2006, Abiy concluded that a simplistic approach involving a coffee ceremony where Christians and Muslims discussed their strong social fabric resolved the conflict.²⁶ This idea sidelined the institutional approach that would have resorted to identifying the underlying complex societal, political, and religious causes that led to the conflict.

Abiy utilised the rhetoric of peace to project the image of a consensus leader. Abiy was keen to take the credit for mediating schisms in religious institutions, holding town hall meetings and tours in all parts of the country. Slogans such as "building bridges and taking down the wall of hate" were used, and several peace and reconciliation committees were established. Reminiscent of Orwellian cognitive dissonance, Abiy oversaw the establishment of the Ministry of Peace to oversee national intelligence and security agencies.²⁷

The rhetoric was augmented with the projection of an image of intellectual excellence. Abiy portrayed himself as an all-knowing philosopher King. Abiy published under his name a series of books on his "Medemer" philosophy while in office. However, his authorship remains debatable. A group of scholars presented evidence showing that his PhD thesis is significantly plagiarised.²⁸ Abiy used the concept of "political marketplace" to crack down on his party members without giving any credit to its originator.

Abiy's philosophy of peace rooted in charismatic leadership informs his personalised approach to foreign policy. He argues in his book *Medemer*:

*"diplomatic efforts based on diplomats should be revised and particular emphasis should be given to diplomatic activities by leaders rather than professional diplomats when it comes to relations with Ethiopia's neighbors and other important countries."*²⁹

Abiy also advocates for abandoning the idea of "Friend and Enemy" and replacing it with renewing relations without having to give any explanation of what the "relation" is and what it constitutes. He states in his book *Medemer*, "The labeling of our relations with others as of enmity or friendship is a thinking that closes the door to dialogue and improves relations. Hence, in our foreign policy we will adhere to the principle of "there are no enemies or friends" rather than "there are no permanent friends or enemies."³⁰

This thinking was visible in his approach to peace in the Horn of Africa. The rapprochement with Eritrea without substantive changes on the ground remained a "bromance" between Abiy and Isaias that led to the Tigray war. His efforts to mediate between Somalia and Somaliland by bringing the two leaders into one room neglecting the sensitivities and complex nature of the conflict backfired.³¹ Abiy was quick to take credit for years of IGAD mediation efforts in the signing of a peace agreement between Salva Kiir and Reik Machar. He was seen burying himself in a three-way hug with the two leaders declaring peace had come to South Sudan and that the two leaders were linked.³²

A close look at Abiy's philosophy of peace can be summarised as a simplistic and personalised approach. It neglected established principles and institutions; and abandoned inter-agency coordination mechanisms involving ministerial committees at the technical expert levels. Such an approach to regional diplomacy and foreign policy decision-making is now concentrated on the office and person of the prime minister.³³ This personalised approach inclined towards a populist peacemaking endeavour brought a drastic pivot in Ethiopia's foreign policy.

Abiy's Mediation Initiative in Sudan

Contemporary international mediation³⁴ is a crowded field characterised by varied initiatives undertaken by multiple actors.³⁵ Mediation is considered an essential tool to enhance peace and security in the African continent. The AU has embedded peacemaking practices within the norms and principles enshrined in its Constitutive Act which include "non-indifference", rejection of unconstitutional changes in government, and commitment to constitutional democracy. The APSA emphasises and places multilateral partnerships, including monitoring and reporting to the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) and UN Security Council at its centre.³⁶

Despite the increase in private peacemaking by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and individuals, mediation by states and leaders remains a common practice.³⁷ States engage in mediation efforts to protect or further their power in terms of resources or status.³⁸ Leaders undertake a mediation initiative seeking and motivated by personal legacy, to cater to a domestic audience, or to promote national or institutional interests.³⁹

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's initiative in Sudan, together with the AU and other external actors helped to facilitate political dialogue between the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) and the Transitional Military Council (TMC). The mediation effort can be characterised as formulative mediation where the mediators guided the process and drafted a declaration of principles for the parties which led to the signing of a power-sharing deal. The mediation process and its outcome are crucial to explaining what transpired in the relations between Ethiopia and Sudan soon after.

Following the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir on 11 April 2019, Gen Abdulfatah al-Burhan, and Gen. Mohamad Hamdan Dagalo ('Hemedti') took power, forming the TMC. Protests calling for the military to hand over power to civilians continued forcing the generals to negotiate with FFC. Talks over the number and composition of the Sovereign Council – the body that would serve as a collective presidency during the interim period – remained a bone of contention. The infighting and divisions within FFC and support from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia helped the military generals to implement a divide-and-conquer strategy to delay and stall the negotiations.⁴⁰

The hopes of reaching an agreement were dashed when talks broke down following a brutal crackdown by security forces at a sit-in in front of the Army Headquarters on 3 June, which led to the death of more than a hundred protestors. If the crackdown was intended to frighten the civilian protestors into submission, it failed. Their resolve was hardened, and they regrouped, announcing a "march of the millions" for 30 June.

The 3 June incident paved the way for international and regional efforts to resolve the Sudanese crisis. The AU, IGAD, and Western countries mainly the Troika (US, UK, and Norway) upped the ante on their call for the formation of a civilian-led transition in Sudan. Ethiopia and Egypt as immediate neighbours of Sudan competed to exert influence in the Sudanese political transition. Egypt took advantage of its Chairmanship of the AU to extend a lifeline for the TMC while Ethiopia leveraged its IGAD chairmanship, Abiy Ahmed's domestic and international popularity. Coming to power on the back of popular resistance, international recognition of Abiy's reform agenda was taken as an inspiration by the Sudanese people.

The Sudanese people aspired for democratic change in their country demanding the ousting of the nearly thirty years of rule by President Omar al-Bashir and his hybrid of the National Congress Party (NCP) and military and security officers, overwhelmingly Islamist in orientation. Abiy appeared to serve as a model of what could be achieved and came on top to take the mediation initiative.

The Khartoum Visit

On 7 June, Prime Minister Abiy arrived in Khartoum draped in a white safari suit and spent eventful hours. He held separate talks with members of TMC and FFC, who would not meet face-to-face because of the mutual suspicion between them. A meeting with the FFC was held at the Ethiopian Embassy where Abiy urged the FFC negotiators to focus on cutting a deal on a power-sharing arrangement with the generals by dropping preconditions for negotiations which included the release of prisoners and accountability for the 3 June massacre.⁴¹ Abiy insisted that FFC members should stop activism and act like politicians. Despite split views within FFC, Abiy's proposal was accepted allowing negotiations to resume. During the visit, Abiy also showcased his "citizen-centred diplomacy" in action to the domestic audience returning home with Ethiopians released from Sudanese prisons.⁴²

Civilians in Sudan perceived Abiy as standing on the side of the people and that Ethiopia's regional position and closeness with the West could serve as a counterweight to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE which they saw as backers of the military. Worldwide recognition of Abiy's reforms at home and Ethiopia's perceived neutral position and closeness to the West cemented the perception.⁴³ Some Sudanese were suspicious of the AU, particularly raising the Chadian AU commissioner Mussa Faki Mahamat's closeness with the military.⁴⁴

In meetings with al-Burhan and Hemedti, Abiy followed standard diplomatic practice and expressed his respect for the sovereignty and independence of Sudan. However, the Prime Minister's cosiness with the FFC and proposal for a composition of a civilian majority Sovereign Council was not well received by the generals. In a statement written in Arabic released at the end of the visit, Abiy stated that "the unity, stability, and sovereignty of Sudan must remain a sacred and uncontested goal. And that the army should focus on defending the integrity of the homeland and its sovereignty and play an active and positive role in the transitional phase."⁴⁵ In a show of dissatisfaction, they arrested a member of the FFC negotiation team immediately after attending a meeting at the Ethiopian Embassy.

Regardless, the 7 June visit kick-started Abiy's mediation effort along with the AU. Abiy appointed Ambassador Mahmoud Dirir⁴⁶ as a special envoy to undertake the day-to-day mediation effort. Ambassador Dirir jointly facilitated the talks with Mohamad Hassan Labat, Special Representative of the AU Commissioner until 17 August aided by the Ethiopian Embassy staff.

The mediation effort in Sudan culminated in the signing of a power-sharing agreement that established a civil-military transitional government with three structures: a Sovereign Council composed of equally of civilian and military members but, for the first 18 months, a military chair; a technocratic government composed of professionals in which Abdalla Hamdok, a veteran international bureaucrat and economist became the new prime minister; and a legislative council that only existed on paper. Because no agreement on the composition of the legislative council was reached, this led to the Sovereign Council being both the de facto parliament and executive with its military chairperson running the transition until the coup in October 2021. This was predictable from the get-go as many were sceptical of the process as well as distrusting the generals.

Despite instilling renewed hope in Sudan, the mediation only helped to delay a deadly political crisis. However, it brought short-lived diplomatic gains to Ethiopia and earned Abiy celebrity status among the Sudanese. He received a hero's welcome, and people cheered and chanted for Abiy as he made a speech during the signing ceremony. A rally was held in honour of Ethiopia, and messages of gratitude continued over social media as artists made songs thanking Ethiopia.⁴⁷ The Norwegian Nobel Committee identified the prime Minister's role in Sudan as key in reaching the 17 August agreement in its citation for the Peace Prize award.⁴⁸

The Role of Domestic and International Actors

The Ethiopia-AU mediation effort was accompanied by back-door mediation efforts of the Troika (US, UK, and Norway), UAE, Saudi Arabia, and internal Sudanese mediators. These actors were critical as they had significant and complementary leverage over the negotiating parties. The Troika and the internal actors were in alignment with the AU-Ethiopian mediation effort. The Gulf countries took actions that favoured the generals and received opposition from the Sudanese people. Abiy's mediation effort won wide acclaim amid these other critical parallel domestic and international efforts, possibly because of the desire to provide credibility to any negotiated outcome, giving it the gloss of legitimacy in line with the "African solutions to African problems" discourse. The combination of these complementary and convergent efforts resulted in the finalisation (on 5 July) and signing (on 19 August) of a Constitutional Declaration.

The main text was derived from the efforts of the AU and IGAD, the major leverage on the parties came from the Quartet, and the actual talks between the parties were convened by Sudanese facilitators. Abiy was the public face of this effort.

The Role of AU and IGAD

The AU and IGAD were crucial in exerting diplomatic pressure in paving the way for the mediation process. Meeting on 15 April, just days after the overthrow of al-Bashir, the AU PSC demanded the TMC hand over power to a civilian-led administration within 14 days. Following Egypt's diplomatic manoeuvres, it met again on 30 April and extended the time for establishing a civilian-led transitional authority to sixty days. On 3 June, that schedule was upended by the massacre and dispersal of civilian protesters. On 6 June, the AU PSC suspended Sudan from all AU activities until the effective establishment of a civilian-led transitional authority. It also mandated the chairperson of the AU Commission to strengthen the AU facilitation team in Sudan and liaise closely with IGAD. It emphasised that the latter should mobilise and convene a dialogue in Sudan.

Despite AU's emphasis on IGAD's involvement in Sudan, the latter was less active and only managed to meet once over Sudan. On 19 June, IGAD held an Extraordinary Session at the level of foreign ministers and issued a communiqué that recognised Prime Minister Abiy's initiative while underscoring its concern over the proliferation of initiatives and decided to assume a leading role to coordinate all efforts to bring sustainable peace in Sudan.⁴⁹ IGAD's communiqué was significant in showing Ethiopia's initiative was indeed a separate initiative and that IGAD was determined to institutionalise the peace initiatives in line with its long experience of these matters. Although IGAD did not assign a special envoy to Sudan or engage actively in the negotiation process, Abiy was reportedly irritated by IGAD's action.⁵⁰ The watered-down involvement of IGAD in the talks between TMC and FFC can be attributed to the combined effect of the regional configuration following the peace with Eritrea, Ethiopia's chairmanship of IGAD, and the West's unconditional support to Abiy.

The Quartet

The "Quartet" consists of the US, UK plus the Gulf countries UAE and Saudi Arabia. It was established to share intelligence and analysis concerning matters of the Persian Gulf and met regularly for that purpose. It was repurposed in June by adding Sudan to its agenda. The Quartet had the advantage that the US and UK had good relations with the civilian leaders but little contact with the generals, while for the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the reverse was true. The Quartet, while openly supporting and commending AU and Ethiopia's efforts, exerted maximum pressure in pushing for a compromise behind closed doors.

They increased their push for dialogue following the 3 June incident. The US and UK were adamant about the process being African-led while pushing for a civilian-led transitional government with a reduced role of the generals. The US special envoy for Sudan, Donald Booth, reiterated US's Support to the AU and Ethiopian mediation effort,⁵¹ while the UK emphasised its support for the AU.⁵² The UAE and Saudi Arabia supported TMC under the guise of stability, curbing the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, and economic interests.⁵³

Domestic Actors

Sudanese businesspeople undertook a crucial yet less recognised internal mediation effort. The internal mediators were critical in reconsolidating the FFC, engaging with groups that were either marginalised in, or outside, the FFC, and convening face-to-face meetings between TMC and FFC. Coupled with international pressure, the efforts of these domestic actors helped to reduce tensions and prevented further violence on the 30 June "march of the millions".⁵⁴

Applying the Lens of “Populist Peacemaking”

Many factors help explain why the August Constitutional Declaration did not lead to the required outcomes in Sudan or for Ethiopia's regional policy. The lens of “populist peacemaking” contributes to explaining these outcomes. Abiy's approach rejected diplomatic expertise and established rules and practices of mediation efforts in the IGAD and AU system. Instead, it put the prime minister in the spotlight enabling him to use the process to consolidate his domestic political needs. In line with the concept of the 'pure people' and their “*volonté générale*,” Abiy's personal engagement was founded on the assumption that collective goodwill was sufficient for democratic transformation.

Rejection of Peacemaking Expertise

Abiy's mediation effort in Sudan involved anti-elitist undertakings that involved taking an adversarial stance toward regional institutions and undermining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomats. Unlike Ethiopia's previous peacemaking efforts in the region, Abiy took the initiative under Ethiopia's name and sidestepped and competed with IGAD and AU. This diverged from the hitherto Ethiopian diplomatic practice of utilising IGAD and AU to advance a foreign policy objective.⁵⁵

IGAD was made redundant and conspicuously absent in the process. The mediation effort also disregarded established practices, rules, and principles of regional peacemaking. The AU and IGAD mediation unit and documents detailing best practices and lessons learned from the peace process were not consulted. For instance, the mediation effort did not consider the recommendations and principles of inclusivity stated in APSA.⁵⁶ Rather the success of the mediation effort was attributed to the principle of *Medemer*.

The office of the prime minister in a statement following the Nobel peace award stated:

*“Abiy Ahmed has been championing regional stability and integration in the spirit of Medemer. These efforts are bearing fruit and have manifested in stable transitions of power in Sudan.”*⁵⁷

The sidestepping of established norms and institutions extended to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ethiopia's diplomatic corps. Abiy belittled and severely criticised the Foreign Ministry and its way of doing things in a televised meeting he held with Ethiopian Ambassadors and Foreign Service officers in January 2019. Abiy stated, "There are situations where I think the ministry should not exist as an institution. Ambassadors display limitations in their knowledge capacity and the current reform is expected to address this gap."⁵⁸

Comparing an Ethiopian Ambassador with a common Chinese citizen, Abiy continued his criticism: "An Ethiopian ambassador would not even undertake a quarter amount that a common Chinese citizen does for the image of his country. Many foreign service officers consider foreign posts as a vacation, embassies are not places of retirement. We need to correct how we evaluate the work of Embassies and the Ministry."⁵⁹

This on the surface seems a benign statement, but it was only the prelude to more disparaging statements. These statements damaged the morale of the diplomatic corps and downgraded the image of the institution in the eyes of the public. It seemed to be aimed at consolidating Abiy's effort to dismantle the policies of EPRDF while augmenting and projecting the image of an intellectual reformer. The fact that Abiy managed to consolidate his power at the expense of TPLF and the international acclaim he received for the peace with Eritrea created a false confidence that made him impervious to expert advice.⁶⁰ This inevitably made it easier for the Prime Minister to take a personal initiative.

Abiy went further to sideline Ethiopian diplomats by publicly lamenting on the failure of Ethiopia's diplomacy and the need for revision of the foreign policy accompanied by a reform of the Ministry.⁶¹ The hitherto unpublicised foreign policy of Abiy's administration introduced a new concept of "Peace Diplomacy." The reason provided was Ethiopia's historic peacemaking role and the changes in the region such as the peace with Eritrea.⁶² The rapprochement with Eritrea was not formalised and remained at the personal level against the advice of people with experience mediating peace efforts in the region.

Abiy's anti-elitist rhetoric against the foreign service reached its peak after the mediation effort in Sudan and at the height of the Tigray war. In a briefing to the parliament, Abiy belittled the role of an ambassador and the diplomatic profession. He stated:

"...my Ambassador in Kenya may meet the Foreign Minister or the leader once in a year or two, the Ambassador whether here in Addis or Nairobi will be reading a newspaper. Thus, he can follow issues from home and may travel when an appointment is arranged for him. Given our current situation, having Embassies all over the place is not needed. There are Ethiopians who live abroad who undertake a great deal comparable to Embassies without receiving any payment whatsoever. They perform much better than Ambassadors. If I were the Foreign Minister, I do not need a consulate in Los Angeles. I would have assigned patriotic individuals to help coordinate the Diaspora. In Europe, many individuals know the countries and languages much better, we could assign them and shrink the Foreign Ministry."⁶³

Shortly after, more than 30 diplomatic missions and consulates were closed and all foreign service staff including ambassadors were recalled. Although most of the embassies were reopened, and officers reassigned, the decision resulted in hallowing the ministry due to the resignation of many foreign service officers, and the demoralisation of those who remained.⁶⁴ The century-old bureaucratic institution was reduced to being a mouthpiece of the prime minister busy tracking and reporting his achievements. Personalisation replaced institutional professionalism. This contributed to the lack of strategic engagement with Sudan that was demanded in such a delicate transitional period.

Putting the Populist Peacemaker in the Spotlight

Abiy's regional mediation initiatives focused on augmenting his international image and consolidating his domestic power.⁶⁵ This was contrary to the previously established Ethiopian understanding of mediation as discreet and impartial third-party action. The Nobel Peace Prize award contributed to shaping Abiy's personalised approach. His administration, aided by the Western media, amplified his peacemaking endeavours at home and in the region. This boosted his confidence to take initiatives aimed at augmenting his public image, disproving his critiques, and cornering his rivals, mainly the TPLF. Observers believe that Abiy felt emboldened by the Nobel prize and abandoned negotiating with TPLF and sought additional awards and recognition.⁶⁶ He took credit for facilitating peace talks and uniting the Synods of Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church and the Islamic Council.⁶⁷

The mediation in Sudan was used to bolster his image and consolidate his power domestically. His encounter with journalist John Lee Anderson shows that he was even angling for the Nobel Peace Prize.

*"Once I became P.M. and I made peace with Eritrea, I asked my minister of foreign affairs, 'Do you think I could get the Nobel?' He said, 'It's true you have done everything you promised, but on this, I am not sure.' And then I won the Nobel."*⁶⁸

Ambassador Dirir's emotional speech during the signing of the initial political agreement on 5 July bolstered his and Abiy Ahmed's image in the hearts and minds of the Sudanese people.⁶⁹ The Special envoy congratulated the Sudanese people stating, that the great people of Sudan deserve to get out of poverty, and in tears characterised the negotiating parties as one bloc.⁷⁰

The mediation process also involved competition for the spotlight and self-aggrandisement by the two African special envoys which helped the TMC to take advantage. This was most visible with the AU special representative Mohamad Hacan Labat who wrote a book about the mediation in Sudan in which he put the AU and his role as critical.⁷¹ He also claims his efforts started 45 days earlier and his advice made Abiy assign Ambassador Dirir as a special envoy.⁷²

Differences in approach and proposals between the two special envoys not only demanded a conversation between PM Abiy and Commissioner Moussa Faki Mahamat but also the generals to summon and demand coordination between them.⁷³ Labat admits it took ten days for Dirir and him to reach an agreement on the mediation approach for Sudan. He also claims that the friendship and goodwill between Abiy and Faki led toward unity rather than division.⁷⁴

Promoting the "General Will" of the People

Abiy's peacemaking endeavour in Sudan was framed and grounded in addressing the real needs of the Sudanese people. However, it lacked a clear direction or objective end besides the glorification of Abiy. Ambassador Dirir in an interview following the signing of the agreement stated:

*"Ethiopia did not go to Sudan with prescribed solutions, what we have done was listen to the people of Sudan, to their worries, concerns, desires, and aspirations to realize democracy and peaceful transition to civil administration."*⁷⁵

This pattern was visible even during the mediation effort in Sudan. In a striking departure from previous Ethiopian practices, Abiy openly preached peace, reconciliation, and love to the people of Sudan. Four days after the ousting of al-Bashir, the office of the prime minister put out a statement appreciating the resilience of the people of Sudan. Admiring the military for overseeing the transition, Abiy suggested the practice of inclusive dialogue with all stakeholders to facilitate the path to a strengthened, united, and democratic Sudan. This is a somewhat effusive version of standard diplomatic messaging. However, Abiy went further. He released statements and messages targeted at the Sudanese people that put him as a mediator who knows the desires of the Sudanese people better than their own leaders and elites.

Days before the start of his initiative and on the occasion of the observation of the holy month of Ramadan Abiy stated, "We stand committed to safeguarding the interests of the people of Sudan as if they were the interests of the people of Ethiopia." He further advised the leaders of the TMC and FFC that they should focus on building a solid foundation for a democratic system and keep in mind that they represent the aspirations of the people of Sudan. This on the surface may qualify as a customary practice by leaders but it was intended to boost Abiy's image and the first step to acquiring legitimacy as a mediator in the Sudanese civilian camp.

The Impact of Populist Peacemaking on Ethiopia-Sudan Relations

Abiy's mediation effort was successful within the broader context of multilateral cooperation and allocation of tasks based on comparative advantage. The mediation culminating in the signing of the political agreement has had a short-lived positive impact on Ethiopia's image and regional standing. The outcome, due in part to Abiy's initiative, was cohabitation between soldiers and civilians, enshrined in the August 2019 Constitutional Declaration. From the outset, it was clear that this would be a troubled partnership needing close support from the midwives of the agreement. Ethiopia should have been invested in ensuring the success of the agreement while also ensuring its national interests were consolidated, but in the event, it failed in securing either of these outcomes. Notably, the border dispute flared, and al-Burhan and SAF became more closely aligned with Egypt. The personalised, tactical approach to foreign policy and populist peacemaking of Abiy catalysed the deterioration of the delicate relations between Ethiopia and Sudan.

Ethiopia and Sudan share a common interest in each other's security. Though their politicians understand and recite the same rhetoric, both countries have engaged in mutual destabilisation efforts that catalysed the secession of Eritrea and South Sudan. In a similar fashion to their predecessors, the EPRDF government in Addis Ababa and the NCP regime in Khartoum were engaged in mutually hostile destabilisation in the 1990s. Ethiopia was concerned due to the presence of foreign terrorists, including al-Qaeda in Sudan, and the prominent position of their sponsor, Hasan al-Turabi, within the Sudanese regime.

Between 1996 and 1999, Ethiopia, acting in concert with the US, succeeded in ensuring that al-Bashir expelled terrorists and removed al-Turabi, and thereafter the two countries began to establish a peaceful strategic relationship.⁷⁶ The EPRDF recognised that Ethiopia's national security interest depends on a Sudan that is at peace and able to conduct independent foreign relations with reduced Egyptian influence. NCP understood Ethiopia's influence in the region and leveraged it to manage its international isolation. This was significant for both regimes, especially in the context of staving off domestic challengers, the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the isolation of Eritrea, promotion of infrastructural integration and economic ties.⁷⁷ They jointly addressed a disputed border area, the al-Fashega triangle in a manner that maintained the status quo for the resident population while continuing negotiations to settle the demarcation of the boundary.⁷⁸

The ousting of EPRDF and NCP on the backdrop of popular resistance in 2018 and 2019 respectively led observers to hail the prospect of parallel and similar processes of democratic transformation in Ethiopia and Sudan. The changed dynamics paved the way for Abiy's initiative and presented a golden opportunity to enhance bilateral relations.

Abiy's initiative was a continuation of Ethiopia's established foreign policy practice of close engagement with Sudan. the Sudanese civilians positively welcomed Abiy for his domestic reforms. Despite their suspicions of Abiy and his reform agenda, the military generals needed Ethiopia's diplomatic influence to assert themselves in the negotiations. However, Abiy's failure to adhere to an institutional, balanced, and strategic engagement, squandered a momentous opportunity to further enhance and deepen bilateral relations with Sudan. The rare acceptance he enjoyed from rival political actors in Sudan withered quickly. The method and process of the initiative pursued in stark contrast to previous practices ended up being counterproductive. Relations deteriorated and Sudan turned its face towards Egypt.

Countdown to Deterioration of Ethiopia-Sudan Relations

Abiy's initiative took place in fast-changing domestic and regional developments that contributed to the eventual souring of relations. The two untested transitional leaders in Khartoum and Addis faced the task of consolidating power amid regional power reconfigurations.

Abiy's domestic and regional activities antagonised the military. The fact that Abiy, a novel politician hailing from Oromia which does not share borders with Sudan, his security alliance with Eritrea and Somalia, the nationalistic rhetoric that emphasised Ethiopia's glorious past coupled with the increasing role of Amhara in Ethiopia's politics at the expense of the Tigrayans, championing democratisation (in rhetoric), support to the civilians in the mediation and closeness to Abdala Hamdok exacerbated the generals' suspicion. The generals and their NCP backers perceived Abiy's reform agenda particularly his crackdown on the TPLF, and the dismantling of the EPRDF as a prelude to their future.

Abiy also had his suspicions and interest in Sudan. Cordoning off TPLF, cutting support for OLF, and checking Isaías topped his agenda. These interests make building relationships and having a civilian leadership in Sudan who looked up to him a reasonable calculus. This was critical in his power consolidation effort at the expense of TPLF. The Sudanese military and NCP establishment were close and more familiar with Ethiopian highlanders particularly the Tigrayans. Hence, new leadership in Khartoum offers the chance to push out and distance detractors like TPLF from having access to Sudan while consolidating his legitimacy and deepening ties with his Amhara support base. Successful relations with Khartoum are also crucial in staving off threats coming from the OLF which has support from the Oromo diaspora living in Sudan.

The breakout of the Tigray war made these tactical gains more attractive than the pursuit of strategic interests. Abiy sought to avoid Sudan's involvement in the Tigray war at any cost. He attempted to please and maintain his Amhara base's support of the war by blaming TPLF for the border dispute with Sudan. In an address to the parliament, Abiy stated that the Tigrayans reached out to the Sudanese army telling them to take the land.⁷⁹ This removed any sort of agency from Sudanese Generals and set the stage for widening the crack by preventing an impetus for building relations.

Al-Burhan visited Addis Ababa two days before the war and agreed to secure Sudan's border with Tigray.⁸⁰ The Sudanese army took the opportunity to occupy the disputed al-Fashega area, displacing thousands of Ethiopians, burning houses, and killing several people. This catalysed the deterioration of relations.⁸¹ Al-Burhan gained politically. He redeemed his reputation, tarnished by a loss he encountered twenty years earlier in al-Fashega, and used it to rally domestic support by appearing as the protector of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁸²

Convinced that SAF generals were sympathetic to the Tigrayans, Abiy resorted to counterbalancing their influence by getting close to the deputy head of the Sovereign Council and Commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)⁸³ Lt Gen Mohamad Hamdan Daglo (Hemditi). The trader-turned-general rose to the helm of power through the political agreement that came out of Abiy's initiative—most Sudanese blame Hemditi for the Darfur genocide and the 3 June massacre and for forming a tactical alliance with al-Burhan against the civilians. The two generals, however, were entangled in a latent rivalry for dominance and conducted separate foreign policies with rival patrons. Hemditi visited Ethiopia numerous times, explored investment opportunities, and sought military cooperation. Some also saw Abiy's move as a balancing act to the military's closeness to Egypt. Ultimately, Abiy's proximity to Hemditi through the UAE gave the impetus to the military and later on, the civilians to fall into Egypt's warm embrace.

The Tigray War also eroded the civilian components' confidence in Abiy. His rejection of Prime Minister Hamdok's offer to mediate the Tigray conflict in his capacity as the new chairperson of IGAD embarrassed the latter. This robbed Hamdok and by extension the civilian components of the opportunity to return the favour and assert their position domestically against the generals. Abiy's response and his hawkish behaviour left Hamdok and the civilians no option but to ultimately rally behind al-Burhan on the border dispute.

The Ethiopian government, given the war in Tigray, was not in a position to repel Sudanese incursions. Sudanese military operations were overwhelming, and Ethiopia did not make effective resistance as the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) had already vacated their camps and positions located inside the disputed territory to fight in Tigray. However, sporadic artillery fire exchanges and armed response from local militiamen and special forces from the Amhara region took place. Ethiopia sought to avoid escalation of tensions by denouncing the actions of Sudan.

It used diplomatic language to tone down the incident describing it as a "misunderstanding" and a minor skirmish between individuals and militiamen. Foreign Minister Demeke Mekonen travelled to Khartoum leading a delegation of experts in December 2020 to discuss the matter, but it failed to bring the desired result. Consequently, Ethiopia took a strong stance following Sudanese sustained actions and increasing pressure from the Amhara constituency, characterising Sudan's action as an aggression. It requested the restoration of the status quo ante before the resumption of any negotiation over the matter.⁸⁴ Ethiopia labelled Sudan's action as diversionary tactics by the military leaders to consolidate domestic power and pressure Ethiopia to make concessions in negotiations over the construction and filling of GERD.⁸⁵

Sudan established effective control over the Ethiopian-administered territory deploying RSF and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and other signatories of the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement. The disputed territory was effectively administered by the Ethiopian Western Gondar Zonal administration of Amhara Regional State. The zonal administration provided essential public service, issuing land titles and investment rights to investors. Ethiopian civilians and local administrators were forced to flee, the local administration offices were looted and dismantled. Sudanese troops took over strategic military locations engaged in asserting sovereign authority and establishing facts on the ground. The Gedarif state administration started giving out land titles and Sudanese citizens were transferred to settle in the territory. The Sudanese Army engaged in the construction of critical infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and hospitals.⁸⁶ These actions unequivocally constitute an assertion of effective control over the territory fulfilling both the displacement and substitution criteria of a belligerent occupation under the law of armed conflict.

The propaganda by the military unified all political actors in Sudan. After having his peace initiative in Tigray rebuffed by Abiy, Hamdok fell into line with the generals. Journalists and artists who had earlier praised Abiy made a U-turn and publicly condemned Ethiopia by supporting the actions of the Sudanese military. Ambassadors of the two countries were summoned and a flurry of press statements were exchanged. Ethiopia accused the Sudanese of backing the Tigrayans while Sudan accused Ethiopia of backing a rebellious faction of the SPLM-North in the Blue Nile.

The deterioration of the relations reached its peak when the civilians and generals in Sudan sided with Egypt officially abandoning Sudan's relatively balanced position on the GERD file and requesting the withdrawal of Ethiopian Peacekeeping troops under UNISFA from Abyei.

The GERD Negotiations Blunder: Losing Sudan as an Ally

Abiy's populist tendencies compromised Ethiopia's counter-hegemonic efforts on the Nile hydro-politics. The decision to include the US as a mediator in the GERD negotiation abandoning the hitherto trilateral process is a clear testament to Abi's novelty, and preference for a more transactional, and personalised approach to foreign policy. The EPRDF regime built cordial relations with the NCP leadership in Sudan to support the construction of the dam, managed to rally other upstream countries to ratify the Cooperative Framework Agreement (CFA) and the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), mobilised all Ethiopians to rally behind the project, and managed to have the AU endorse GERD as a continental development. The signing of the Declaration of Principles Agreement in 2015 made GERD a fait accompli; thwarting Egypt's existing "hydro-hegemony" cemented by the 1929 and 1959 water-sharing agreements.

Sudan's support for GERD was instrumental in Ethiopia's diplomatic success. The GERD carries the same benefits to Sudan as the Aswan High Dam does to Egypt. It prevents deadly annual floods, prevents siltation in Sudan's hydroelectric dams to generate more power, and provides an average annual flow enabling it to irrigate its vast arable lands. Failure to consult Sudan before involving the US disturbed the delicate balance that was maintained in the trilateral talks. It increased Sudan's fear of a deal between Ethiopia and Egypt and made siding with Egypt an attractive alternative.

The decision to accept the US as a mediator came after a meeting with El Sisi during the first Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, Russia in 2019. This decision, against the advice of experts, subjected Ethiopia to self-inflicted diplomatic complications jeopardising the hard-fought diplomatic gains. The decision marked a clear shift from previous Ethiopian leaders' cautious diplomatic engagement with Egypt and handling of the GERD file. It showcased populist tendencies. Abiy's statements about the technical defaults attributed to the corruption and mismanagement of his predecessors in the construction of GERD mainly aimed at domestic power consolidation may have given an impetus to Cairo to push for having the US as a third-party mediator.

Moreover, Abiy in his first visit to Egypt in May 2018 swore in Arabic not to harm Egypt's share of the Nile during a press conference held with President El Sisi.⁸⁷ Abiy's statement while boosting Sisi's domestic position, put Ethiopia in a difficult position. It was ill-advised given Egypt's securitisation of the Nile River with the Egyptian General Intelligence Agency overseeing the Nile file tasked to ensure unimpeded water supply.⁸⁸ Egypt deploys significant resources to keep upstream countries from challenging the status quo. Egypt engages in destabilisation efforts, and it was successful in making sure any international financial organisation, the US, and Gulf countries provide technical or financial support to Ethiopia on water development-related projects over the Nile.

The US mediation track was questionable from the get-go given the Trump administration's pro-Egyptian stance. Reports indicated Egypt made a 10-million-dollar donation to Trump's election campaign.⁸⁹ Strangely the Treasury Department, which has no experience in handling similar files, was made the lead in facilitating negotiations instead of the State Department. President Trump also remarked on the possibility that Egypt would bomb the dam if the agreement were not reached.⁹⁰ Abiy and his administration framed the US-mediated talks as an unavoidable alternative and attempted to justify it as if there was no policy shift. Despite Abiy's efforts, the negotiations ended in a stalemate. This resulted in an immense backlash and pressure inside Ethiopia forcing him to withdraw from the negotiations. The AU became the new mediator, the negotiation process was salvaged by dedicated experts and professionals that Abiy sidelined and rejected.

Even then Abiy framed the return of the file under the auspices of the AU as his diplomatic victory. His overtures resulted in the pausing of 270-million-dollar US aid to Ethiopia. Egypt and Sudan continued to act in unison to exert maximum diplomatic and military pressure on Ethiopia. They sent letters to the UNSC, concluded a military cooperation agreement, and conducted several joint military trainings dubbed "guardians of the Nile", and "Nile Eagles" signalling the end of an era in Ethiopia-Sudan relations.⁹¹

The final nail in the coffin came when the then Foreign Minister Mariam Siddiq, leader of the Umma Party (part of FFC) and daughter of the late Sadiq al Mahdi announced Sudan's request to the UN for the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops stationed in Abyei under UNISFA. This marked the end of a chapter in Ethiopia's decades-long successful regional peacemaking and anchor state status.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how populist peacemaking became a feature of the Ethiopian foreign policy pivot after 2018. Ethiopia was at the centre of a complicated, institutionalised web of foreign policy and peacemaking mechanisms that formed the African peace and security architecture. This all unravelled between 2019 and 2020, at precisely the same moment when Abiy was being fêted internationally as a peacemaker. This paper has shown how these elements are linked. Abiy had all the necessary diplomatic and institutional instruments left by his predecessors but squandered them in search of glory and self-aggrandisement.

Abiy's initiative in parallel with the AU resulted in the signing of a power-sharing deal leveraging the support of the international community (mainly the US, UK, Saudi Arabia, and UAE), but failed to advance Ethiopia's national interest. As shown in this paper, In addition to the outbreak of the Tigray war and other domestic and regional developments, the mediation initiative being a populist peacemaking endeavour, contributed to catalysing the souring of relations between Ethiopia and Sudan. it led the Ethiopia-Sudan border dispute to resurface, Sudan shifted from its balanced position on the GERD file and leaned toward Egypt, and Ethiopia's peacekeeping forces were forced to withdraw from Abyei, transforming Ethiopia from a regional peacekeeper to a threat to its stability.

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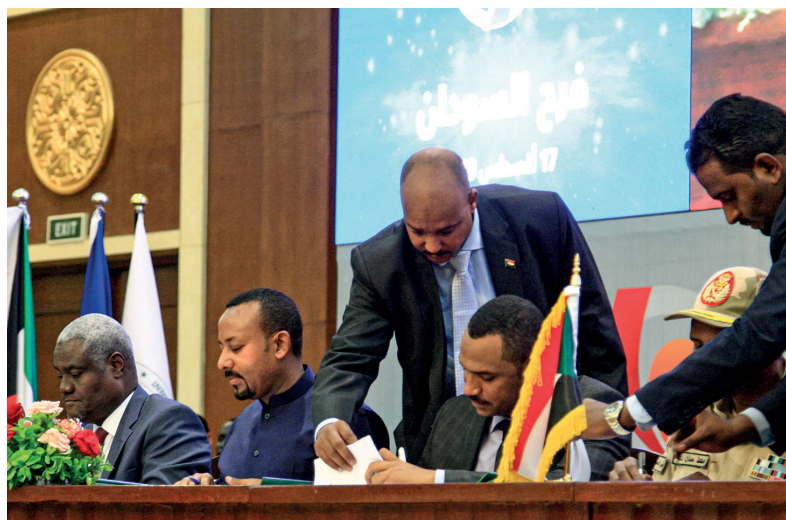
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