# THE AFRICAN UNION IN SUDAN

## Perspectives from the Sudanese Media

## Willow J. Berridge

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## About the Authors

**Dr Willow Berridge** is a specialist in 20th and 21st century Sudanese history based at Newcastle University. She is the author of Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan: the 'Khartoum Springs' of 1964 and 1985 (London: Bloomsbury, 2015) and Hasan al-Turabi: Islamist Politics and Democracy in Sudan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). She is currently working with the World Peace Foundation on a project covering the role of the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel in the Sudans between 2009 and 2013.

## Executive Summary and Recommendations

Recent academic literature has criticized internationally led conflict resolution processes in Sudan for 'killing politics'[1] and diverting attention from purely Sudanese efforts to bring about change through revolutionary civic mobilization. This paper investigates why many in Sudan held this perspective through an assessment of Sudanese media reactions to the African Union's activities in Sudan, with particular reference to the involvement of the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) between 2009 and 2016 and the broader role of the African Union in Sudan following the 2018-2019 Revolution. It draws on commentaries on the African Union in a wide range of electronically available Sudanese media outlets between 2009 and the present.

This paper advances four main findings:

- Much of Sudan's independent media has mirrored the academic critique of internationally facilitated talks, particularly when it comes to the domination of the talks by elites and the marginalization of grass roots actors.

- Both regime affiliated and anti-government media outlets attacked the AUHIP's involvement in Sudan before the fall of the regime in 2019. Unsurprisingly, opposition and government outlets attacked the AUHIP for different reasons, but it is notable that in different contexts both framed the AUHIP's role as an assault on Sudanese sovereignty.

- The AU's status as a body representing the African continent did not confer it automatic legitimacy – media actors were far more concerned with scrutinizing the cultural and political outlooks of its representatives.

- Critiques of the AUHIP's activitiesbetween 2009 and 2016 acted as a reference point for criticism of internally led talks following the 2018-2019 revolution, including those in which the international community had a role

This paper introduces a number of recommendations relevant to international actors in Sudan and other conflict affected countries, including (i) using independent media organs to identify a wider range of civic actors who need to be engaged with through internationally facilitated processes (ii) adoption of careful media relations strategies to prevent hardline actors undermining talks. It also recommends that civic actors continue to use the media to create an alternative fora to those established by internationally convened talks.

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[1] Sharath Srinivasan, *When Peace Kills Politics: International Intervention and Unending Wars in the Sudans* (London: Hurst, 2021).

# Introduction

This paper discusses media perspectives on key moments of the AU's involvement in talks and political processes in Sudan, such as its attempts to support the resolution of conflicts in Darfur and Abyei, the post-2014 National Dialogue Process, and the transitional process that followed the toppling of Umar al-Bashir in 2019.The paper demonstrates that much of the Sudanese media analysis chimed with the critique that internationally-facilitated conflict resolution processes, including those facilitated by the AUHIP, 'killed politics'. It is widely acknowledged that pro-regime media in Sudan leads calls to reject or circumscribe international mediation on the grounds of sovereignty, but opposition elements are often assumed too easily to be driven by liberal democratic principles.[2] This paper, however, will also contend that opposition media deployed discourses around sovereignty just as frequently as regime-controlled media, criticizing the African Union for putting illegitimate regimes ahead of the sovereign wishes of the Sudanese people. 'African' mediators are often seen as providing greater legitimacy to peace processes on the African continent in line with the 'African Solutions to African problems' narrative.[3] However, the majority of the Sudanese commentators whose output has been surveyed to produce this paper gauged the legitimacy of African Union mediators less on the basis of their status as Africans and more with reference to the specific political and cultural leanings and affiliations the mediators were perceived to have.

# The African Union High-Level Implementation Panel in Sudan

The AUHIP emerged out of the African Union Panel on Darfur, also chaired by Thabo Mbeki and mandated by the African Union in to 2008 investigate and issue recommendations on the sources of the Darfur Conflict. The AUPD's report, published in 2009, inspired the formation of the Panel, which was tasked by the African Union Peace and Security Council (AU PSC) with both implementing its recommendations and enabling talks between the NCP led government in Khartoum and the SPLM led government in Juba over carrying out the various requirements of Sudan's 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The AUPD's most contentious recommendation related to the formation of Hybrid Courts in Darfur, which regime media claimed represented a violation of Sudanese judicial sovereignty, and opposition media claimed were intended to provide al-Bashir with an escape route from prosecution by the International Criminal Court.[4]

After it received its mandate from the AU PSC, some of the Panel's most prominent tasks including support for the 2010 elections, facilitating talks between Juba and Khartoum over the conduct of the referendum on the secession of southern Sudan as well as the consequences that might stem from a pro-secession result, in addition to similar talks over the CPA-mandated referendum on the status of the disputed region of Abyei. One of the greatest achievements of the AUHIP-facilitated talks was that Sudanese President

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[2] Francis B. Nyamnjoh, *Africa's Media, Democracy and the Politics of Belonging* (London: Zed Books, 2005).

[3] Allard Duursma, 'Partnering to Make Peace: The Effectiveness of Joint African and non-African Mediation Efforts', *International Peacekeeping* 24 (2017), 590-615

[4] See, eg., Kamal Idris: 'Dr Kamal: Muqtarah al-Mahkama al-Hajin mu'ayyab qanunan wa khata' siyasiyyan wa sabiqa khatira', *Sudan Safari* 1 November 2009, https://www.sudaress.com/sudansafari/128. For the opposition perspective, see Thawrat Qasim, 'Lajna Mbeki…asrar wa khafaya yukashshifha wazir al-kharijiyya al-Misri al-sabiq', *Sudanile* 4 November 2009, https://www.sudaress.com/sudanile/7149.

Omar al-Bashir gave him blessing to the timely conduct of the South Sudan independence referendum on 9 January 2011, and then to the secession itself 9 July 2011, meaning that the potential war to keep the south in Sudan was averted. On the other hand, the 2010 presidential and parliamentary elections produced implausibly large victories for Umar al-Bashir and the NCP, and the Abyei referendum was deferred with the area's political status left unresolved, while war continued in Darfur and broke out in South Kordofan in June 2011 over the inability of the SPLA and the SAF to agree over the expected post-secession merger of the former's northern divisions into the latter. As such, many of the severest criticisms of the AUHIP's facilitation of the talks in this time period have come from the representatives of the civilian democratic opposition in the north, as well as of the rebels in the north and Abyei, each of whom maintained that the communities they represented had been betrayed by the AU and other international actors prioritizing the secession of South Sudan.

In the aftermath of secession, the AUHIP continued to facilitate talks between Juba and Khartoum over the disentangling of the two countries' shared economic infrastructure, as well as the status of soldiers and citizens affiliated to one nation residing in the other. Relations reached a crisis point when South Sudan shut down its oil pipelines to the north in January 2012, and then war broke out between Juba and Khartoum over the disputed border region of Heglig 3 months later. However, the AUHIP and other prominent international actors managed to negotiate an end to the conflict, and in September 2012 al-Bashir and the South Sudanese President Kiir signed a set of 'co-operation agreements' addressing the remaining issues related to oil, shared debts, security and citizenship. However, these agreements still left the status of Abyei uncertain, the wars in Darfur, South Kordofan and now Blue Nile ongoing, and the NCP's monopoly of political power unchallenged. As such the AUHIP remained open to the

challenge that it was putting inter-state crises ahead of intra-state ones. In 2014, the AUHIP began to focus more on Sudan's internal crises, and was mandated by the AU PSC to facilitate the conduct of a National Dialogue between the regime and the armed and civilian opposition. However, and in spite of repeated attempts to activate this process, the AUHIP was unable to get the government and established opposition groups to agree on the manner in which it should be carried out. The AUHIP's last major initiative to revive the dialogue, the 2016 Roadmap Agreement, was signed by the government and a section of the opposition, but remained inert until the outbreak of the 2018-2019 Revolution.

## Sovereignty and its Exponents

Both opposition and regime narratives used sovereignty as a rhetorical device to undermine the AUHIP process. For the regime, it itself was the key sources of sovereignty; the opposition saw the parties and movements that constituted it as the only genuinely sovereign alternative; for the more radical opposition, sovereignty was located at the grass roots level. For the regime and elements of Islamist press, the AUHIP was presented as a guarantor of sovereignty where it was felt that it might provide less scrutiny than other representatives of the 'international community', and a threat to sovereignty when the regime was saw the AUHIP as adopting a more interventionist approach. At times, Mbeki's history as a liberation fighter against apartheid was highlighted as likely to predispose him to the Sudanese regime's fight against what it presented as Western imperialist assaults on its sovereignty.[5] Elsewhere, however, the Islamist press - including leading NCP politicians writing in the Islamist press – condemned the AUHIP as insufficiently committed to the 'African solutions' principle,

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[5] Abd al-Wahhab el-Affendi, 'Fattash 'an Mbeki: al-haqiqa wa'l-wahm wa'l-sadaja  fi masala al-taqarab al-Sudani-Amriki', *Sudanile* 17 February 2015, https://www.sudaress.com/sudanile/77984

and a Trojan Horse enabling US and UN intervention. A classic example was the NCP media organs' claim that Mbeki's hybrid courts proposal was 'African in appearance but international in content'.[6]

In opposition narratives, the AUHIP was guilty of collaborating with an illegitimate regime to deprive the Sudanese people of their sovereign rights to land and democracy. One example was the AUHIP's facilitation of the Agreement on Temporary Arrangements for the Administration and Security of the Abyei Area signed by Khartoum and Juba in June 2011. The opposition press attacked the NCP for allowing the stationing of Ethiopian peacekeepers in Abyei, which it interpreted as an occupation of sovereign Sudanese territory.[7] Meles Zenawi, the Ethiopian Prime Minister, was chair of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the principal North-East African regionalist bloc, and had co-ordinated closely with Mbeki over the deployment.[8] However, the opposition press were just as hostile to regionalist interference as the government-affiliated press were. They raised similar sovereign principles over the referendum that enabled the secession of the south: in the opposition view, the NCP had made a bargain to surrender sovereign Sudanese land in exchange for being allowed to remain in power.[9] A similar narrative emerged among the oppositionists who opposed the post-2014 National Dialogue process – the AUHIP and the more pliant elements of the opposition had enabled the NCP to use the dialogue to divert from the revolutionary popular of street protest, the real location of popular sovereignty.[10]

## The African Union High- Level Implementation Panel in Sudan 's Politics

It is often assumed that African mediators automatically confer a greater degree of legitimacy. However, we also need to consider that public perceptions of any mediator – or 'facilitator' – will be based on a range of economic, political, and cultural considerations beyond the 'African' character of the mediation. At times, the Islamist commentators championed Mbeki as an African liberation fighter who would defend an African regime;[11] at other times, the hubris of the Islamist press led it to denounce the 'African' character of the mediation, and argue that the AUHIP were naturally more sympathetic to the south.[12]

The non-Islamist elements within Sudan's public space were less invested in culturalist critiques of the AUHIP, and more likely to attack the Panel on the grounds of its political background. Mbeki was a free market liberal who had been forced to step aside by the ANC under particular pressure from the hard left;[13] it was perhaps unsurprising that some of the greatest criticisms the Panel faced in Sudan were from the hard left. The radical element of the Sudanese political spectrum presented Mbeki as a 'broker

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[6] Kamal Idris: 'Dr Kamal: Muqtarah al-Mahkama al-Hajin mu'ayyab qanunan wa khata' siyasiyyan wa sabiqa khatira', *Sudan Safari* 1 November 2009, https://www.sudaress.com/sudansafari/128.

[7] 'Muhallil Siyasi: Umar al-Bashir ba'ad safakhu li-dima' al-Abriya' yansahib min Abyei li'l-muhtallin al-Ethiopiyyin', *Hurriyat* 29 June 2011, https://www.sudaress.com/hurriyat/27358.

[8] De Waal and Berridge, forthcoming

[9] See, eg., Thawrat Qasim, 'Mbeki wa Bassole yahjiruun Abyei wa Darfur mushta'alitayn wa yaqa'an fi hudn sahil al-'aaj!', *Hurriyat* 7 December 2010, https://www.sudaress.com/hurriyat/5560.

[10] Ahmad Qadiriyya Khamis, 'Mubadara Mbeki fashilat…madha ba'ad?', *al-Rakoba* 4 April 2015, https://www.sudaress.com/alrakoba/1059837.

[11] el-Affendi, 'Fattash 'an Mbeki'

[12] *al-Mijhar al-Siyasi*, 'al-Watani yataghazzal fi Mbeki!', 3 February 2013, https://www.sudaress.com/almeghar/8884.

[13] Kate Cooksey, 'Thabo Mbeki to step down as President after ANC request', *The Guardian* 20 September 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/sep/20/southafrica1.

(*simsar*) serving the agendas of his private masters and interests'.[14] This shaped much criticism of the AUHIP approach from Sudanese radicals, which saw the Panel as a proxy for US and regime interests.[15] The AUHIP led talks were read as enabling a series of bargains between elite actors seeking a share of power whilst ignoring the structural problems within the Sudanese body politic.[16] This was particularly the case after the inauguration of the National Dialogue, and then the presentation of Mbeki's Roadmap for the Dialogue.  The left-wing media in Sudan criticized Mbeki for focusing on elite politics while overlooking the demands of the everyday citizen, who Mbeki's roadmap had little to offer because he was 'struggling for the roadmap of his daily bread.'[17] Most of all, the Panel was condemned for failing to recognize the socio-revolutionary dimension to the Sudanese political dynamic in the 2010s, trying to reproduce the Khartoum-Juba negotiations by searching for a 'crisis between two parties' rather than recognizing the 'true Sudanese revolution' that was occurring.[18] The revolutionaries called for street protests as an alternative to the AUHIP facilitated talks, insisting that these represented the only genuine means of bringing about a transition in Sudan. It was, indeed, four months of street protests that brought about the downfall of the regime in April 2019.

## Post-2019 Perspectives on the African Union in Sudan

With the success of the revolutionary approach and the marginalization of the negotiated transition approach, the AUHIP moved into the background but the AU continued to assert itself in Sudan. The new special envoy Mohamed el Hacen Lebatt played a major role in facilitating the Constitutional Declaration that inaugurated the first transitional government. With the protest movement emphasizing the 'African' character of Sudan's revolutionary moment in an effort to distinguish it from the 'Arab Spring' of 2011, Sudan's media was keen to embrace AU as opposed to Arab League mediation.[19] While AU mediation was often seen as preferable in principle, however, the advocates of civic politics in Sudan often criticized the AU's representatives for committing what were in their view similar political errors to the AUHIP. The advocates of civic politics have repeatedly criticized Lebatt in particular for pushing for the inclusion of the NCP – formally dissolved after the 2019 revolution – in talks.[20] They cited the AUHIP's approach as a negative exemplar to critique some of the notable agreements of the transitional period, notably the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement and the December 2022 Framework Agreement on the grounds that such agreements placed the emphasis on 'who rules, not how you rule'.[21]

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[14] 'Al-Ba'ath: Mbeki 'Simsar', 1 September 2015, *al-Hadag* https://www.sudaress.com/alhadag/15035.

[15] Abd al-Ghani Birish Fayuf, 'Lan nasmah bi-an tiba'a qadiyya al-Nuba fi Suq Addis Ababa li-mudaribat siyasiyya', *al-Rakoba*, 1 July 2016, https://www.sudaress.com/alrakoba/1068511

[16] See, eg., Mubarak Abd al-Rahmal Ardol, 'Ba'ad intiha marasim al-salam bi-Addis hal yatahaqqaq al-salam fi al-Sudan', *Hurriyyat* 30 September 2012, https://www.sudaress.com/hurriyat/80137. "'Nida al-Sudan' tanfi sihha ma dhakarahu Mbeki wa tu'id waraqa li-taslimha li'l-wisata'", *al-Yom al-Tali*, 1 February 2017, https://www.sudaress.com/alrakoba/263188.

[17]     Kamal     Karrar,     'Kharita     Tariq     al-Intifada',     *Hurriyat*     25     June     2016, https://www.sudaress.com/hurriyat/204988

[18]     Ahmad     Gadariyya,     'Al-Sudan…wa     afdal     ma     ya'amalahu     Mbeki!',     21     August     2014, https://www.sudaress.com/hurriyat/161366.     Ahmad     Qadiriyya     Khamis,     'Mubadara     Mbeki fashilat…madha ba'ad?', *al-Rakoba* 4 April 2015, https://www.sudaress.com/alrakoba/1059837.

[19] Um Salama Sadiq al-Mahdi, 'Wai wai wai wa li'l-maqal al-baqiyya', *Sudanile* 13 September 2019, https://www.sudaress.com/sudanile/118235.

[20] Mahir Abu Jawkh, 'Al-Hiwar ma' 'mu'atamar al-watani al-mahlul'…li-waqf al-harb am al-mukafaha aleiha?', *Medameek* 27 January 2023, https://www.medameek.com/'?p=138939

[21] Wathiq Kameir, 'Al-Ittifaq al-Itari wa Kharita Mbeki Nafs al-Minhaj wa al-Malmah!', *al-Yom al-Tali* 30 January 2023, https://www.sudaress.com/kushnews/354982

After war broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in April 2023, the civic voices in Sudan's independent media remained ambivalent over the AU's emergence as one of a series of competing mediators. On one level it was accepted that the AU was, in principle, the best mediator, since it encompassed within its membership the various forces – specifically IGAD and the Sudan's immediate neighbours – that were threatening to pull the talks in different directions.[22] Shafie Khidir, ex-advisor to the transitional Prime Minister Hamdok, endorsed the principles of the May 2023 AU Roadmap for the Resolution of the Conflict in Sudan and insisted that the AU must have a role in the resolution of the conflict, whilst lamenting the actual mediation practise of the AU and calling for the institution to review the history of its previous endeavours in Sudan and make an assessment as to why the Sudanese public viewed them with such scepticism.[23] Meanwhile, the apparent willingness of the African Union Commission Chairman Moussa Faki to legitimize the Rapid Support Forces – the militia force that had grown out of the Janjawiid militias used in the post-2003 counterinsurgency in Darfur, but was now fighting a war against the regular army – by meeting its senior advisor Yousuf Izzat was used by other elements in the Sudanese media to question the African Union's neutrality.[24]

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has traced Sudanese media perspectives on the African Union's role in Sudan from 2008 to the present. Sudan's media may have a limited public reach, but it still has a significant enough capacity to sway the view of elites that the perspectives it produces on international mediators must be taken seriously. The toppling of the June 2011 Framework agreement following a campaign by the Islamist media is a notable example. Critical media voices, whether aligned with incumbent governments or oppositions, have the capacity to hamper mediators by deploying narratives about sovereignty and exposing the marginalization of non-elite actors in internationally led talks. At times, campaigns in the Sudanese media have frustrated international mediators and facilitators – but international actors also need to recognize that they speak to a need for mediators to engage with a wider range of civic actors in Sudan and recognize the dynamic character of the country's revolutionary politics.

**Recommendations for the International Community**

Mediators should recognize that diplomatic interventions at time of urban revolution and civic protest cannot be resolved using the same methods as in the case of conflicts between governments and armed movements, without undermining the mediators in the broader public arena.

It should be recognized that African mediators do confer automatic public legitimacy as their legitimacy will vary among different actors; mediation teams need to speak to different political factions and interest groups, especially those that represent grass roots concerns. Careful analysis of a wide range of Sudanese media outputs should enable international mediators to identify prominent civic voices and form an appreciation of Sudanese critiques of established mediation practises that should enable them to respond accordingly. Empowering such voices will enable mediators to maintain public legitimacy and prevent violence without diverting from campaigns for broader structural change. Mediators should work carefully to defuse hardline actors'

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[22] Al-Wathiq Kameir, 'Al-Tasabuq ala Manabir: ma Masir al-Hall al-Tafawudi?', *al-Taghyer* 1 February 2024

[23] Al-Shafi'i Khidir Sae'id, 'al-Ittihad al-Ifriqi wa al-quwwat al-madaniyya al-Sudaniyya', 7 August 2023.

[24] 'Kaifa la tafshal mufawidat Jedda?', *Nilein* 8 November 2023, https://www.sudaress.com/alnilin/13333738.

use of the media to derail talks. They should consider adopting carefully considered media relations strategies, that emphasize the centering of Sudanese actors and respect for sovereignty within the limits defined by the provisions of various international charters such as Article 4 (h) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union.

## Recommendations for Sudanese Civic Actors

Civic actors should engage with both local and international media to offer an alternative public space to that offered by the internationally-convened talks, and use sustained campaigns in both international and local media to force elite actors and mediators to pay attention to the decisions made in those spaces. They should continue to use both international and local mediators to critique the elite-led character of the talks.