

Political Parties and Coup Cycles in Sudan: A Historical Institutional Analysis

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This paper examines the relationship between Sudanese political parties and recurring military coups between 1953 and 1989. Using historical institutionalism, it argues that Sudan's repeated democratic breakdowns were not simply the result of military ambition or temporary political crises, but were rooted in long-term institutional weaknesses within party politics. Weak party institutionalization, sectarian competition, unstable coalition governments, and unresolved civil-military imbalance repeatedly undermined democratic consolidation. Through a comparative analysis of Sudan's three democratic experiments, the paper shows how civilian fragmentation and ineffective governance strengthened the military's role as a political arbitrator. Concepts such as path dependence and critical junctures help explain why similar patterns of democratic fragility reappeared across different historical periods. The study contributes to debates on democratization, civil-military relations, and institutional development in postcolonial states by offering a historically grounded explanation of Sudan's coup cycles.

Keywords: Sudan political parties, military coups, historical institutionalism, civil-military relations, party institutionalization

Introduction

Since independence in 1956, Sudan has experienced one of the most unstable democratic trajectories in postcolonial Africa. Between 1953 and 1989, the country passed through three major democratic experiments, each of which ended in military intervention. Although these periods differed in their political circumstances, they shared several structural features: weak party institutionalization, fragmented coalition politics, sectarian rivalry, limited state capacity, and an unstable relationship between civilian politicians and the military (Niblock, 1987; Warburg, 1990).

Much of the literature on Sudanese politics explains coups through military ambition, ideological conflict, economic crisis, regional instability, or external pressures (Daly, 2003; Woodward, 2013). These explanations are important, but they often treat military intervention as a series of separate events. This paper instead argues that Sudan's coup cycles should be understood as part of a broader institutional pattern. Military coups were not only imposed from outside civilian politics; they were also enabled by weaknesses inside the civilian political sphere itself.

The central argument of this paper is that Sudanese political parties failed to develop into stable institutional actors capable of sustaining democratic rule. Major parties often depended on sectarian loyalties, personal

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leadership, elite bargaining, and short-term coalition arrangements rather than coherent programs and durable organizational structures. As a result, democratic governments repeatedly struggled to manage political conflict, address regional grievances, maintain effective governance, and establish firm civilian control over the armed forces.

To explain this pattern, the paper adopts the framework of historical institutionalism. This approach emphasizes institutional continuity, path dependence, and critical junctures in shaping political outcomes over time (Pierson, 2004; Thelen, 1999). From this perspective, Sudan's democratic failures were not accidental or isolated. Institutional weaknesses formed during the late colonial and early post-independence periods continued to shape political behavior across later democratic transitions. Moments such as the October Revolution of 1964 and the April Intifada of 1985 created opportunities for reform, but civilian actors largely reproduced earlier patterns of fragmentation and weak civil-military institutionalization.

The significance of the Sudanese case extends beyond national history. Sudan illustrates how elections and constitutional arrangements alone cannot guarantee democratic consolidation when party systems remain fragmented and military institutions retain political authority. By examining the interaction between party politics and civil-military relations, this paper contributes to broader debates on democratization, authoritarian recurrence, and institutional development in Africa and the wider Global South (Huntington, 1968; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Historical Institutionalism and the Formation of Sudanese Party Politics

Historical institutionalism provides an important framework for understanding Sudan's recurring cycles of democratic collapse and military intervention. Unlike approaches that focus only on individual leaders or short-term crises, historical institutionalism emphasizes how institutions shape political behavior over long periods of time (Steinmo, Thelen, & Longstreth, 1992). Political outcomes are therefore understood as products of accumulated institutional legacies rather than isolated historical events.

A central concept within this approach is path dependence. Path dependence refers to the process through which institutional choices made during earlier historical stages continue to influence later political developments (Mahoney, 2000). Once institutions become established, they tend to reproduce themselves because political actors adapt their behavior to existing structures and power relations. In many cases, even ineffective institutional arrangements persist because changing them becomes politically costly (Pierson, 2004).

In Sudan, the roots of political instability can be traced to the colonial and immediate postcolonial periods. During the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899-1956), colonial authorities governed Sudan through indirect rule, relying heavily on tribal chiefs, religious authorities, and local elites (Daly, 2003). Rather than encouraging integrated national political institutions, colonial administration reinforced regional and sectarian divisions. This legacy significantly shaped the later development of Sudanese party politics.

Modern political activity expanded gradually during the 1930s and 1940s with the growth of urban education, labor organizations, and intellectual networks. The establishment of the Graduates' General Congress in 1938 represented a turning point in Sudanese nationalist politics (Woodward, 2013). Initially a socio-cultural organization, it later became an important platform for nationalist mobilization and constitutional debate. However, the political parties that emerged from this environment did not develop primarily as modern ideological organizations. Instead, many became closely linked to sectarian religious movements and elite patronage networks.

The Umma Party developed through its connection with the Ansar movement and the Mahdist family, while the National Unionist Party and later the Democratic Unionist Party maintained strong relations with the Khatmiyya religious order (Warburg, 1990). These sectarian affiliations provided parties with electoral influence and mass mobilization, especially in rural Sudan. Yet they also weakened institutional party development because political loyalty often depended more on religious identity and personal leadership than on political programs or organizational discipline.

As a result, Sudanese parties remained weakly institutionalized. Leadership structures were highly personalized, while internal decision-making processes were dominated by elite families and sectarian authorities (Niblock, 1987). Political competition frequently revolved around short-term alliances and rivalries instead of stable ideological or policy-based programs. These characteristics later contributed to chronic parliamentary instability and ineffective coalition governance.

Another important weakness involved the limited integration of Sudan's diverse regional and ethnic communities into the national political system. Political authority remained concentrated largely within northern riverain elites, while peripheral regions experienced political and economic marginalization (Deng, 1995). Questions relating to regional inequality, national identity, and the relationship between religion and the state became increasingly central to Sudanese politics. However, civilian parties often failed to formulate inclusive national programs capable of managing these divisions.

Historical institutionalism is particularly useful because it explains how these early institutional weaknesses continued to shape later democratic experiences. The interaction between fragmented party politics and unstable civil-military relations gradually evolved into a self-reinforcing pattern. During periods of political crisis, military intervention increasingly appeared as a legitimate mechanism for restoring order. Over time, this normalized the military's political role within the Sudanese state.

The concept of critical junctures further helps explain Sudan's political trajectory. Critical junctures are historical moments during which institutional structures become more open to change (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). In Sudan, several major critical junctures shaped political development, including independence in 1956, the October Revolution of 1964, and the April Intifada of 1985. These moments created opportunities for democratic restructuring. Nevertheless, civilian political actors largely reproduced existing institutional patterns rather than transforming them. Consequently, democratic transitions repeatedly failed to establish durable political stability.

Through this historical institutionalist perspective, Sudan's coup cycles appear not as isolated interruptions to democracy, but as outcomes rooted in long-term institutional imbalance. Weak party institutionalization, sectarian politics, fragmented coalitions, and unresolved civil-military tensions collectively produced an environment in which democratic governance remained highly vulnerable to military intervention.

Sudan's Democratic Experiments and the Persistence of Coup Cycles

The First Democratic Period (1953-1958)

Sudan's first democratic experiment emerged during the transition from colonial rule to independence. The 1953 Self-Government Agreement established parliamentary institutions and prepared the country for self-rule (Daly, 2003). Elections held in 1953 brought the National Unionist Party (NUP) under Ismail al-Azhari to power. Although this represented an important moment in Sudanese political history, the parliamentary system quickly revealed deep institutional weaknesses.

One of the defining features of this period was sectarian political competition. The rivalry between the National Unionist Party, supported by the Khatmiyya religious order, and the Umma Party, associated with the Ansar movement, dominated parliamentary politics (Warburg, 1990). Political influence depended heavily on sectarian loyalties and personal leadership networks rather than institutionalized party programs. Consequently, political competition often reflected rivalry between sectarian elites instead of stable democratic governance.

Coalition instability became another major problem. Parliamentary alliances shifted repeatedly as political actors pursued short-term advantages through tactical bargaining (Niblock, 1987). Governments struggled to maintain stable parliamentary majorities, while cabinet reshuffles and leadership disputes weakened administrative continuity. Instead of consolidating democratic institutions, political competition intensified fragmentation within the civilian political sphere.

The new Sudanese state also faced serious challenges related to national integration. Deep regional and ethnic divisions inherited from colonial rule remained unresolved, particularly regarding relations between northern and southern Sudan (Deng, 1995). Political elites failed to develop inclusive institutions capable of integrating Sudan's diverse social groups. Southern grievances concerning political marginalization and cultural domination intensified during the years surrounding independence (Johnson, 2003).

Economic and administrative difficulties further weakened civilian authority. The government struggled to establish effective state institutions and coherent economic policies (Woodward, 1990). As parliamentary instability deepened, segments of the political elite increasingly viewed military intervention as a possible solution to political deadlock.

Civil-military relations during this period reflected the absence of firm institutional boundaries between civilian politicians and the armed forces. Rather than fully subordinating the military to civilian authority, political actors often involved military leaders in political disputes (Huntington, 1968). This gradually strengthened the military's political position and normalized its involvement in governance.

These tensions culminated in November 1958 when General Ibrahim Abboud seized power in Sudan's first military coup (Collins, 2008). The collapse of democracy was therefore not simply the result of military ambition. It also reflected civilian fragmentation, weak party institutionalization, and the inability of political elites to consolidate effective democratic governance.

The Second Democratic Period (1964-1969)

The second democratic experiment emerged after the October Revolution of 1964, which overthrew Abboud's military regime. The revolution was driven by students, labor unions, professionals, and political activists who opposed authoritarian rule (Woodward, 1990). Many Sudanese viewed the uprising as an opportunity for democratic renewal and institutional reform.

Despite these expectations, the restored democratic system quickly reproduced earlier weaknesses. Traditional sectarian parties regained dominance within parliament, while ideological polarization intensified between Islamists, communists, Arab nationalists, and sectarian forces (Warburg, 1990). Rather than strengthening democratic institutions, political competition increasingly revolved around ideological conflict and unstable coalition bargaining.

The Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) became one of the most influential political forces during this period, particularly among students, intellectuals, and trade unions (Ibrahim, 1999). Its growing influence generated

strong opposition from conservative and Islamist groups. Political conflict surrounding the Communist Party intensified polarization and weakened civilian cooperation.

One of the most important constitutional crises occurred in 1965 when parliament voted to ban the Communist Party and expel its members despite a Supreme Court ruling declaring the decision unconstitutional (Collins, 2008). This episode demonstrated the fragility of constitutional institutions and the willingness of political elites to sacrifice institutional norms for short-term political interests. The crisis significantly weakened democratic legitimacy.

At the same time, civilian governments continued to face serious governance challenges. Coalition instability, repeated cabinet changes, and factional rivalries weakened administrative effectiveness (Niblock, 1987). The southern conflict also remained unresolved, exposing the inability of political elites to establish inclusive mechanisms for national integration (Johnson, 2003).

Although the military formally returned to the barracks after 1964, civilian governments failed to establish durable civilian control over the armed forces. Political instability and governmental paralysis reinforced the perception among military officers that the armed forces remained guardians of national stability (Huntington, 1968).

The democratic experiment eventually collapsed in May 1969 when Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri seized power through a military coup supported by leftist and Arab nationalist forces (Woodward, 1990). Like the 1958 coup, the overthrow of democracy reflected deeper institutional failures within civilian politics. Fragmented party competition, ideological polarization, and weak governance once again created conditions favorable to military intervention.

The Third Democratic Period (1985-1989) and Comparative Analysis

The third democratic period (1985-1989).

Sudan's third democratic experiment began after the April Intifada of 1985, which overthrew the regime of Jaafar Nimeiri following 16 years of authoritarian rule. Similar to the October Revolution of 1964, the uprising reflected widespread public dissatisfaction with economic decline, political repression, and continuing civil war in southern Sudan (Woodward, 1990). The transition generated renewed hopes for democratic reconstruction, yet many of the structural weaknesses that had undermined earlier democratic experiences remained unresolved.

By the early 1980s, Sudan faced severe economic crisis. Inflation, foreign debt, declining state revenues, and shortages of basic commodities weakened the legitimacy of the Nimeiri regime (Niblock, 1987). At the same time, the reintroduction of Islamic law in 1983 intensified political and regional tensions, particularly in southern Sudan where civil war resumed after the collapse of the Addis Ababa Agreement (Johnson, 2003).

In April 1985, General Abdel Rahman Swar al-Dahab led a military intervention that removed Nimeiri from power while promising a return to civilian rule (Collins, 2008). A Transitional Military Council supervised the transition alongside a civilian cabinet responsible for preparing democratic elections. Although the military presented itself as a temporary guardian of stability, the transition nevertheless demonstrated the continuing political centrality of the armed forces within Sudanese politics.

Parliamentary elections held in 1986 produced a fragmented political landscape dominated by the Umma Party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), and the increasingly influential National Islamic Front (NIF) led by Hassan al-Turabi (Woodward, 1990). However, no single party achieved a decisive majority, making coalition governments necessary but highly unstable.

Political fragmentation became one of the defining characteristics of this democratic period. Coalition governments suffered from repeated disputes, shifting alliances, and frequent cabinet reshuffles (Niblock, 1987). Political leaders often prioritized partisan competition and short-term bargaining over institutional reform and long-term governance. Consequently, governments struggled to formulate coherent economic and political policies.

Economic deterioration further weakened democratic legitimacy. Civilian governments inherited a severe financial crisis from the Nimeiri era but lacked the political stability necessary to implement effective reforms (Collins, 2008). Public dissatisfaction increased as inflation, unemployment, and declining living standards continued to worsen.

The civil war in southern Sudan represented another major challenge. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) expanded its military activities during the late 1980s, while civilian political parties remained divided over the future structure of the Sudanese state (Johnson, 2003). Disagreements concerning Islamic law, regional autonomy, and national identity intensified ideological polarization inside parliament and society more broadly.

The growing influence of the National Islamic Front significantly transformed the political environment during this period. Unlike many traditional sectarian parties, the NIF possessed a relatively disciplined organizational structure and a coherent ideological project aimed at reshaping the Sudanese state according to Islamist principles (El-Affendi, 1991). Through its expanding influence within parliament, professional organizations, and sections of the military, the NIF gradually strengthened its political position.

Civil-military relations remained unstable throughout the democratic period. Civilian governments failed to establish effective institutional control over the armed forces despite the formal return to parliamentary rule (Huntington, 1968). The combination of civil war, economic crisis, and political fragmentation strengthened military perceptions that civilian politicians were incapable of governing effectively.

On June 30, 1989, Omar al-Bashir and a group of military officers allied with the National Islamic Front seized power in another military coup (Warburg, 2003). The overthrow of the democratic government once again reflected the interaction between military ambitions and structural weaknesses within civilian politics. Fragmented parties, ineffective coalition governance, unresolved civil war, and weak civil-military institutionalization collectively contributed to democratic collapse.

Comparative analysis of Sudan's democratic experiments.

A comparison of Sudan's three democratic periods between 1953 and 1989 reveals strong continuity in the institutional patterns that repeatedly undermined democratic consolidation. Although each democratic experiment emerged under different political and historical circumstances, all three experienced similar structural weaknesses that facilitated military intervention.

The most consistent feature across all democratic periods was weak party institutionalization. Sudanese political parties repeatedly failed to develop into durable programmatic organizations capable of sustaining stable democratic governance. Instead, political competition remained dominated by sectarian loyalties, personal leadership, ideological rivalry, and elite patronage networks (Warburg, 1990; Niblock, 1987). These characteristics weakened organizational cohesion and contributed to chronic fragmentation within the civilian political sphere.

Coalition instability also represented a recurring problem. In all three democratic periods, no political force succeeded in establishing stable parliamentary dominance. Coalition governments depended heavily on tactical

bargaining and shifting alliances rather than institutionalized cooperation (Woodward, 1990). Repeated cabinet crises and parliamentary disputes weakened governmental effectiveness and undermined public confidence in democratic institutions.

Another major continuity involved the inability of civilian governments to address Sudan's broader state-building challenges. Questions relating to regional inequality, national identity, religion, and ethnic diversity remained unresolved throughout the period under study (Deng, 1995). Political elites frequently failed to construct inclusive political frameworks capable of integrating Sudan's diverse social groups. The southern conflict became a persistent source of instability and exposed the limitations of civilian governance (Johnson, 2003).

The most important institutional continuity, however, involved civil-military relations. Civilian political actors repeatedly failed to establish durable institutional mechanisms capable of subordinating the military fully to democratic civilian authority (Huntington, 1968). Instead, the military gradually acquired political legitimacy as an actor capable of intervening during periods of civilian crisis. Each democratic collapse reinforced the perception that military intervention represented a solution to political instability.

From a historical institutionalist perspective, these recurring patterns demonstrate the operation of path dependence within Sudanese political development (Mahoney, 2000). Institutional weaknesses formed during the early post-independence period continued to shape political behavior across later democratic transitions. Although critical junctures such as the October Revolution and the April Intifada reopened opportunities for democratic restructuring, civilian actors largely reproduced pre-existing institutional practices rather than transforming them fundamentally.

Sudan's democratic failures were therefore not isolated historical accidents. They reflected the cumulative interaction of fragmented party politics, unresolved state-building crises, ineffective governance, and unstable civil-military relations. Together, these institutional dynamics produced a political environment in which recurring military intervention became deeply embedded within Sudan's modern political trajectory.

Political Parties and the Reproduction of Coup Cycles

The repeated collapse of democracy in Sudan cannot be understood solely through the ambitions of military officers or the immediate pressures of political crisis. Sudanese political parties themselves played a central role in reproducing the institutional conditions that enabled recurring military intervention. Weak party institutionalization, fragmented coalition politics, ideological polarization, and ineffective governance collectively weakened democratic rule and gradually normalized the military's political role within the state.

One of the most important factors behind Sudan's coup cycles was the failure of political parties to develop into stable institutional organizations. Throughout the democratic periods between 1953 and 1989, most Sudanese parties relied heavily on sectarian loyalties, elite patronage networks, and personal leadership structures rather than coherent institutional programs (Warburg, 1990; Niblock, 1987). Leadership authority often remained concentrated within narrow political circles, while internal factionalism weakened party cohesion and long-term organizational stability.

This institutional weakness limited the ability of parties to govern effectively within a parliamentary system. Coalition governments repeatedly suffered from instability, shifting alliances, and tactical bargaining (Woodward, 1990). Political actors frequently prioritized short-term political survival over institutional reform and national governance. As a result, democratic governments struggled to formulate coherent economic policies, manage

regional conflict, or establish administrative continuity. Public confidence in civilian rule gradually declined as democratic institutions appeared increasingly ineffective.

Sectarian political structures intensified these problems. Traditional parties such as the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party depended heavily on religious affiliation and communal authority rather than programmatic political competition (Warburg, 1990). While sectarian networks provided strong electoral mobilization, they also reinforced political personalization and weakened institutional democratic culture. Political loyalty frequently centered on sectarian leaders instead of constitutional institutions or policy agendas.

Ideological polarization further deepened instability during the second and third democratic periods. Political conflict between Islamists, communists, Arab nationalists, and traditional sectarian forces weakened prospects for stable democratic cooperation (Ibrahim, 1999). Rival political groups increasingly viewed one another as existential threats rather than legitimate competitors within a shared democratic framework. Consequently, political compromise became increasingly difficult, while tactical alliances and extra-institutional strategies became more common.

The unresolved crisis of state-building also contributed significantly to democratic fragility. Successive civilian governments failed to establish inclusive political arrangements capable of integrating Sudan's diverse ethnic, regional, and religious communities (Deng, 1995). Political authority remained concentrated within northern elite networks, while peripheral regions experienced continuing marginalization. The southern conflict exposed the inability of political elites to construct a stable national political project capable of managing Sudan's diversity (Johnson, 2003).

These structural weaknesses had major consequences for civil-military relations. Instead of firmly subordinating the armed forces to civilian authority, Sudanese political parties often contributed to the politicization of the military. During periods of crisis, civilian politicians frequently involved military leaders in political disputes or viewed the military as a temporary solution to governmental paralysis (Huntington, 1968). Such practices gradually legitimized military intervention and reinforced the military's self-perception as guardian of national stability.

The coups of 1958, 1969, and 1989 therefore emerged within broader contexts of civilian fragmentation and declining democratic legitimacy (Collins, 2008). Military intervention did not simply interrupt stable democratic systems; rather, it developed through the interaction between military ambitions and the institutional weaknesses of civilian politics itself. Democratic fragility became historically embedded within Sudan's political order.

Historical institutionalism helps explain why these patterns persisted across successive democratic transitions. Through path dependence, earlier institutional weaknesses continued to shape later political behavior (Mahoney, 2000). Each democratic collapse reinforced the institutional legitimacy of military intervention and further weakened confidence in civilian governance. Military regimes themselves failed to resolve Sudan's structural problems, yet subsequent democratic transitions repeatedly reproduced many of the same patterns of sectarianism, fragmentation, and coalition instability.

Critical junctures such as the October Revolution of 1964 and the April Intifada of 1985 temporarily reopened opportunities for democratic restructuring (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Nevertheless, civilian political actors largely failed to use these moments to transform the institutional foundations of Sudanese politics. Instead, earlier political practices and organizational structures were reproduced during later democratic periods. Consequently, transitions remained incomplete and vulnerable to renewed authoritarian intervention.

The Sudanese case therefore demonstrates that military coups cannot be explained only through the internal dynamics of military institutions. Recurring authoritarian intervention emerged through the interaction between military power and weak civilian political institutions. Political parties not only failed to prevent military rule, but in many respects contributed directly to the reproduction of conditions that enabled repeated democratic collapse.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between political parties and recurring military coups in Sudan between 1953 and 1989 through the framework of historical institutionalism. The study argued that Sudan's repeated democratic breakdowns were not simply the result of military ambition or temporary crises, but rather emerged from long-term institutional weaknesses embedded within party politics and the broader postcolonial political system.

The analysis demonstrated that Sudanese political parties remained weakly institutionalized across all three democratic experiments. Instead of developing into durable programmatic organizations, parties relied heavily on sectarian loyalties, personal leadership structures, elite bargaining, and fragmented coalition politics (Warburg, 1990; Niblock, 1987). These characteristics weakened democratic governance and prevented the consolidation of stable parliamentary institutions.

The paper further showed that unresolved state-building challenges intensified democratic instability. Successive civilian governments struggled to address regional inequality, ethnic and religious diversity, and the crisis of national integration (Deng, 1995). The southern conflict in particular revealed the inability of political elites to construct inclusive institutional arrangements capable of managing Sudan's diversity (Johnson, 2003).

At the center of the study's argument was the persistent imbalance in civil-military relations. Civilian political actors repeatedly failed to establish effective institutional control over the armed forces (Huntington, 1968). Instead, military intervention gradually became normalized within Sudanese political life, especially during periods of governmental paralysis and civilian fragmentation.

Using the concepts of path dependence and critical junctures, the paper explained how Sudan's coup cycles became historically reproduced institutional patterns rather than isolated political events (Mahoney, 2000; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007). Democratic transitions repeatedly reopened opportunities for reform, yet civilian actors largely reproduced earlier institutional weaknesses instead of fundamentally transforming them.

More broadly, the Sudanese experience demonstrates that elections and constitutional frameworks alone are insufficient for democratic consolidation without strong civilian institutions, effective mechanisms for political conflict management, and durable civilian control over coercive institutions (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The case therefore contributes to wider comparative debates concerning democratization, authoritarian recurrence, and institutional development in postcolonial states.

Ultimately, Sudan's modern political history illustrates how weak party institutionalization and unstable civil-military relations can produce recurring cycles of democratic collapse and authoritarian intervention. Sustainable democratic governance requires not only political transitions and elections, but also the construction of durable institutions capable of managing diversity, maintaining political stability, and preventing the concentration of power within military institutions.

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