

Kenya and Sudan Fallout.

Unpacking the Kenya-Sudan Diplomatic Rift.

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At a Glance

Kenya and Sudan have shared a symbiotic relationship over the years. However, things have quickly changed recently due to Kenya's controversial decision to host the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) leaders in Nairobi. This decision put Kenya's impartiality to question. Furthermore, due to this act Sudan has taken some retaliatory measures including calling back their ambassador and imposing a ban on Kenyan imported goods. This text unpacks the fallout between these two countries. It then highlights the impact on Kenya's reputation due to the RSF engagement such as loss of credibility as a mediator, association to human rights abuse, loss of trust and economic loss. Lastly, the text provides recommendations on how Kenya and Sudan can get back to their previous symbiotic relationship.

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Kenya's relationship with Sudan

Kenya has a multifaceted relationship with Sudan. Historically, Kenya is one of the key players when it comes to peace building in the region especially with war torn countries such as Sudan and Somalia. This falls line with the first pillar of the Kenya Foreign Policy i.e. Peace Diplomacy. The peace diplomacy pillar entails that Kenya will collaborate with other African countries to strengthen conflict prevention, management and resolution capacity of regional institutions such as the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Further, support peace efforts by the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN) by providing leadership in peace keeping missions and lending troops within the continent and globally.¹ Thus, Kenya plays a great role in conflict prevention, peace building and peace keeping in the region.

Kenya has been instrumental in shaping the modern history of Sudan as it played a critical role in the Sudanese peace efforts. For instance, it was a major mediator in several peace talks between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). It spear headed the Machakos Protocol agreement and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) which eventually lead to the formation of the world youngest nation and the 54th African country South Sudan.² Therefore, over the years Kenya has subsequently gained the reputation of being a mediator in the region where its approach to peace building is characterized by soft power diplomacy.³ It has been revered for its non-interference and neutral diplomatic approach.

Beyond peace diplomacy Kenya and Sudan have shared a mutually beneficial economic relationship. Sudan has been a major trading partner with Kenya. According to the Observer of the Economic Complexity (OEC) Kenya made \$48.2M from its exports to Sudan where tea was the major export commodity with gains of \$29.6M in 2023. Other main exports included Processed Tobacco and Seed Oils which made \$3.66M and \$1.84M respectively. However, the data also indicates that over the years there has been a significant decrease in exports from both countries.⁴ This can be attributed to Sudan's instability.

In general Kenya and Sudan have shared a symbiotic relationship where their relationship can be characterized by two main areas i.e. mediation and economic trade. Traditionally, Kenya has had the reputation of neutrality and impartiality which made it the perfect partner to mediate peace in Sudan. However, in the recent Sudan civil war Kenya's perceived neutrality has been put to question. Thus, the text unpacks the events of the fallout and highlights the impact on Kenya's reputation regionally and internationally.

Understanding the current situation in Sudan

Sudan has experienced several civil wars from the time of its inception. In recent decades the war escalated drastically even causing a spilt between the Northern and Southern region, where the Republic of South Sudan was formed in 2011.⁵ Even after the formation of South Sudan there has not been sustained peace in Sudan. Recently there has been a crisis since April 15th, 2023, where the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) is at war with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) fighting for civilian leadership. The RSF is a paramilitary group which was formed in 2013 and has originated from the Janjaweed militias. It is led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo also known as 'Hemedti' or 'Little Mohamed.' The RSF was granted legitimacy by law as an independent security force.⁶ The RSF was created to wedge a revolution against the Darfur region and was originally formed by the former President Omar al Bashir.

SAF on the other hand is the main army of Sudan headed by General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan who is the current President of Sudan. The two SAF and RSF had previously joined forces to overthrow the longest serving President Omar al Bashir. However, currently Al-Burhan and Dagalo are at logger heads on the direction of the country. The two are fighting for power to secure wealth and interests. Over the years tension has risen between the SAF and the RSF. The main cause of the tension is the continued refusal of the RSF to integrate into the regular armed forces. Experts claim that the RSF has resisted integration into the army because they understand it is going to lose its power.⁷

According to the UN the recent conflict has created the world's largest displacement crisis where 12.5 million people have been displaced and over 3.3 million have fled the border.⁸ Many civilians have been murdered, horrific human rights violation and international crimes have been committed such as torture, mass rape and arbitrary arrests.⁹

Kenya hosting the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) leaders in Nairobi

On the 18th of February 2025, Kenya's President Ruto surprisingly hosted the RSF leaders in Nairobi. This controversial decision is the main cause of the recent rift between Kenya and Sudan. The RSF were suspected to announce their plans to form a parallel government, however, they did not go through with said plans in Nairobi. Sudan was not pleased with Kenya's decision of hosting the RSF. Therefore, Sudan decided to retaliate against Kenya. Firstly, the Sudanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the swift recall of their ambassador from Kenya via Sudan News Agency (SUNA). They also criticized President Ruto for his decision and claimed it violated Sudan's sovereignty.¹⁰ Furthermore, Sudanese officials criticized President Ruto who they accused of putting precedence on personal and commercial interest over bilateral ties.¹¹

Kenya quickly defended the decision through the Prime Cabinet Secretary Musalia Mudavadi. He insisted that hosting the RSF was in line with Kenya's role in peace negotiations. He reiterated Kenya's solidarity to the people of Sudan. The RSF also put out a statement denying their desire to form a parallel government in Sudan. Special Advisor to RSF Commander Ezzadin ElSafi insisted that the RSF were not in Kenya to form a parallel government. He further insisted that Kenya is neutral and is there to help address the root problems plaguing Sudan.¹² Although Kenya and RSF tried to justify their meeting, the damage had already been done. Sudan had perceived this act as Kenya taking RSF's side.

Furthermore, a month later Sudan decided to ban all imports from Kenya. Omar Ahmed Mohamed Ali, Sudan Minister of Trade and Supplies issued a decree on the ban of Kenyan goods via SUNA. The decree from Sudan is based on the Cabinet Decision No. 129 of 2024, meaning that all imports from Kenya through ports, border crossings, airports and entry points were banned. The statement from the Ministry claimed that the decision was necessary to protect Sudan's national interest and security. They insisted the ban was to take effect immediately and will remain in effect until further notice.¹³

This decision to host the RSF was not only criticised by Sudan but also domestically in Kenya. In a statement to Agence France Presse, politician Mukhisa Kituyi stated that President Ruto is moving away from the traditional and dignified way of Kenyan diplomacy. He criticized President Ruto for this decision and termed it as criminally irresponsible.¹⁴ Former Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua has also heavily criticized President Ruto's involvement with RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. He claimed that President Ruto had put precedent on his personal commercial interest over national interest. He insisted that President Ruto's actions could damage the country's diplomatic relations and tarnish Kenya's reputation internationally. He further accused Ruto of having business dealings with RSF leaders. He claimed the business involves the selling of gold, bringing it to Kenya and later transporting it to Dubai.¹⁵

Impact on Kenya's reputation following the RSF engagement

Kenya could face various repercussions for its involvement with the RSF. A major impact is the loss of credibility as a mediator. Kenya has consistently led peacekeeping efforts in Sudan currently with President Ruto heading the IGAD Quartet. The IGAD Quartet is a group of four countries i.e. Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia and South Sudan which were formed by IGAD to address the conflict in Sudan.¹⁶ Despite being at the helm of the Quartet and trying to foster peace, Kenya has faced criticism from Sudan. On the 11th of September 2023 for example Sudan released a statement through its Embassy boycotting Kenya's Chairmanship in the IGAD Quartet. It claimed that Kenya has sided with the rebel militia and hosting its leadership. Sudan has severally accused President Ruto of having business dealing with the RSF. Ruto has since denied the allegations. Furthermore, Sudanese leaders had called for the replacement of Ruto and refused to cooperate with the Quartet Group. Their main reason for the standoff was because the Quartet Group led by Ruto suggested that troops should be deployed in Sudan to protect the civilians and secure humanitarian corridors. The suggestion was shut down by Sudan as they claimed that it would be an invasion of the country. The assistant commander-in-chief of the Sudan Armed Forces Lieutenant General Yasser Al-Atta criticized President Ruto for interfering with the Sudan's internal affairs.¹⁷ Such incidents could set a bad precedence for Kenya as a lead peace maker in the region. If Kenya is removed at the helm of the IGAD Quartet it risks losing its credibility as a mediator and influence in IGAD and the region as a whole.

Hosting the RSF has raised a lot of questions on Kenya's traditional perceived neutrality and impartiality. Also, Kenya is known for its non-interference approach when it comes to peace building in Sudan. However, it seems not to be the case in the current conflict between SAF and the RSF. Sudan has remained critical of Kenya's involvement with the RSF for some time. Sudanese leaders have mostly criticised President Ruto claiming that he has business ties with the RSF leaders. Therefore, Kenya

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hosting the RSF leaders in Nairobi was the last draw for Sudan as they took it as a sign of Kenya siding with the RSF. A recent investigation by *the Nation* a Kenyan media group and *Bellingcat* an investigative journalism group discovered that some SAF captured crates of ammunition from the RSF which were Kenyan labelled. Thus, this further tarnishes Kenya's reputation of neutrality. The Ministry of Defence, however, has since denied the allegations and claimed it did not to recognize the crates.¹⁸

Kenya also runs the risk of being complicit to human rights violations and international crimes. The United States secretary of state Anthony Blinken formally declared that the RSF have committed genocide during the on-going civil war in Sudan. He described the genocide as systematic atrocities perpetrated in West Darfur and announced sanctions on the RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. He reported that the RSF had killed civilians as they tried to flee and blocked access to essential supplies. Blinken further explained that the RSF and aligned militia have systematically murdered men, boys and infant boys on ethnic basis. They also purposely raped women and girls from certain ethnic groups.¹⁹ From the finding of the United States, it is clear that the RSF have violated human rights on many levels. Thus, it is not a good look for Kenya to associate with the RSF because it runs the risk of being seen as an enabler of human rights violators.

Additionally, Kenya may face scrutiny and lose of trust from international stakeholders. It could risk losing diplomatic support from these actors. The United States for example has already declared that the RSF have committed genocide in Sudan. The US might increase scrutiny on their collaboration with Kenya, especially on matters related to peace and security in the region. Other actors such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been vocally against the attempts of the RSF creating a parallel government and emphasize Sudan's sovereignty. Saudi Arabia reiterated its firm position in supporting Sudan's territorial integrity, stability and security. While Qatar through their Foreign Ministry called an all parties to avoid division and prioritize national interests.²⁰ Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar are important trade and investment partners to Kenya. Loss of trust and interest misalignment from these partners could reduce investments and diminish their economic interest in Kenya.

Economically, Kenya is already facing economic repercussions due to the all imports ban imposed by Sudan. The agricultural sector has taken a hit because of this as tea was one of the largest export commodities to Sudan. Kenyan tea traders are estimated to face over Sh21.5 million losses because more than 200 containers remain stranded at the Mombasa port due to the ban. This has destabilized the entire tea supply chain i.e. from the farmers, producers, transporters and sellers. The prolonged import ban on Kenya may cause long term losses as Sudanese buyers may seek alternative buyers.²¹ Kenya stands to lose significant revenue until the tea export ban is lifted. Meanwhile, countries like Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are poised to overtake Kenya as leading tea exporters to Sudan.

Recommendations

Kenya should maintain its neutrality as it has traditionally done. It should remain impartial and refute the perceptions of taking RSF's side. Although Kenya has defended its decision to host the RSF through a statement by the Prime Cabinet Secretary Musalia Mudavadi there needs to be a formal clarification. Mudavadi claimed that Kenya's action was in line with its wider peace building role. However, given that the RSF are toying with the idea of forming a parallel government, Kenya should out rightly condemn this sentiment. There should be a clear message that indicates Kenya respects and fully recognises Sudan sovereignty. This would at least give Sudan reassurance as currently there seems to be a loss of trust.

In order to regain Sudan's trust, there needs to be high level diplomatic meetings and engagements. Kenya could also host the Sudanese officials as they hosted the RSF leaders. The meeting agenda should include diplomacy, peace building and trade relations as these are key areas where their relationship has weathered. Moreover, Sudan should be given the opportunity to air out their grievances calmly and Kenya should put emphasis on rebuilding its relationship with them. The two could then come up with solutions together.

As the head of the IGAD Quartet Kenya could leverage its position to engage both parties SAF and the RSF in peace talks in Nairobi. Also, both sides should be represented equally so as to avoid any accusations of partiality. Kenya should involve key stakeholders such as the AU, IGAD and the UN could be involved facilitating the peace dialogues.

Additionally, Kenya should also come forward and condemn the human rights atrocities committed by the RSF. This would signal to Sudan and other international stakeholders on Kenya's continued efforts to support the Sudanese civilians. Currently, Kenya is actively taking initiatives to support the Sudanese civilians caught in the war. The government through its spokesman Isaac Mwaura recently revealed that it

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has donated \$2 million to assist in on-going peace initiatives and support civilians affected by the crisis.²² Despite this support Kenya could offer more humanitarian support to the victims such as supplying food, provide shelter programs and supplying medical assistance.

In conclusion Kenya involvement with the RSF has caused a significant diplomatic strain between the two countries. Kenya's long held reputation of neutrality has been eroded and its mediator credibility questioned. Moving forward Kenya has a steep mountain to climb in order to regain trust not only from Sudan but also from regional and international stakeholders. Kenya must now actively demonstrate its commitment to genuine neutrality. Lastly, Kenya should affirm its commitment to international laws and non-interference principles. Engaging all partners, fostering transparent communication and maintaining impartiality are all vital for Kenya to rebuild its credibility both regionally and globally.

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Imprint

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

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Publisher: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V., 2023, Berlin

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