HATE SPEECH IN SUDAN

A driver of conflict and displacement

Wala Mohammed

Abstract

Hate speech has significantly contributed to conflict and displacement in the current war in Sudan and remains a key barrier to finding solutions for peace. In this working paper, Wala Mohamed explores and contextualises the nature and root causes of hate speech in Sudan. This analysis aims to equip activists and pro-democracy actors with the evidence and analysis needed to effectively address the roots of hate speech in Sudan, both online and offline.

About the author

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About the Kenya Evidence Platform

To conduct this research, Wala Mohammed received a grant from the Kenya Evidence Platform (KEP), an initiative of the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS), in partnership with RLRH and Maseno University. The KEP is a three-year project (2023-2026) funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands that aims to ensure that refugee programming and policymaking in Kenya engages with and responds to locally driven and generated research on promoting durable solutions.

Contents

Acronyms

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
AI	Artificial Intelligence
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
FCC	Forces of Freedom and Change
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GIS	General Intelligence Service
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
JEM	Justice and Equality Movement
JPA	Juba Peace Agreement
NCP	National Congress Party
NIF	National Islamic Front
NISS	National Intelligence and Security Service
NLP	Natural Language Processing
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PDF	Popular Defence Forces
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
RTLM	Radio Télévision Libre des Milles Collines
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
SLA	Sudan Liberation Movement
SPA	Sudanese Professionals Association
SPLA/N	Sudan People's Liberation Army/North
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SSPLA	South Sudan People's Liberation Army
SSR	Security Sector Reform

Taggadum	Sudanese Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces
TFGBV	Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence
TMC	Transitional Military Council
UNITAMS	United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan
UAE	United Arab Emirates

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since the outbreak of the war in Sudan in April 2023, the warring parties – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and their respective allies – have manipulated online and offline media with fake news and ethnic hate speech to polarise communities, mobilise armed groups on their side, and secure power.

- This working paper explores and contextualises the nature and causes of hate speech in Sudan, to equip activists and pro-democracy actors with the evidence and analysis needed to combat hate speech in Sudan, both online and offline.

- There is a long history of incitement to violence against ethnic groups in Sudan. During the National Congress Party era (1989–2019), under Omar al-Bashir, the regime actively spread hate speech and stereotyping against non-Arab groups from Eastern, Western, and Southern Sudan through a tight control on the media. The emergence of social media amplified the government's ability to spread hate speech. Hate speech fuelled conflict, contributing to grave human rights violations in Darfur in 2003, the failure of the peace processes in the Western and Southern regions which eventually led to the secession of South Sudan in 2011, and conflict in Blue Nile and South Kordofan up until 2020. These conflicts were the results of the historical and legal marginalisation of Sudan's peripheries, dating back from the colonial era, along with unequal economic development and access to services.

- The pro-democracy groups that led the 2018 Sudanese revolution countered hate speech by promoting the unity of Sudan's ethnic groups. However, these civilian groups were eventually undermined during the transitional period by military groups that actively worked to silence civilian freedom of expression, spread misinformation against them, and shadow banned them on social media, with foreign support.

- Previous civil wars have severely damaged the social cohesion of communities in Sudan, and warring parties are currently exploiting historical grievances as a means of mobilising fighters and inciting violence. Although SAF and RSF are former allies in the Darfur war, they use ethnic hate speech and incitement to polarise communities. The RSF claims that they are fighting for democracy, and frame the conflict as a war between the Riverines and the people oppressed by power holders. As most African armed groups have joined the SAF, the RSF have incited and committed hate crimes and cleansing against members of related African tribes in the areas they control, highlighting the long-standing animosity against African tribes, and the role of historical grievances in this conflict.

- The SAF fuel ethnic discourse against the dominant tribes in the RSF (in particular, the Rizeigat and other Arab nomad tribes), and has accused anti-war advocates of supporting the RSF, which has paralysed peace efforts.

- Foreign countries are confirmed to have played a role in supporting the spread of disinformation and ethnic hate speech online, in addition to arming warring parties, to protect their interests (including exploiting natural resources, such as gold).

- By fuelling conflict, hate speech in Sudan has contributed to the world's largest displacement crisis. Nearly nine million Sudanese are internally displaced and nearly three million have fled to neighbouring countries. Public services and resources, already weakened by the war, have been overwhelmed by the large numbers of IDPs, leaving them in appalling living conditions.

- Ethnic lines used to incite violence have a direct impact on where IDPs can go and the risks they face at checkpoints and in areas controlled by RSF or SAF. Civilians choose their migration route and destination carefully, depending on how their ethnic group or origin is perceived in a given area. Some minority groups are more vulnerable than others to violence and discrimination during their displacement journey. For example, in Gezira State, displaced people from Darfur, South Sudanese, Nuba and Fur ethnic groups have been accused of being RSF spies and denied services.

- All actors involved in peace processes should take seriously the gender dimension of hate speech, online and offline. Sudanese women in the public sphere are vulnerable to digital attacks, including Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) of sexualised nature that may smear their reputation, and isolate them to the point that they cease their activism online and offline.

- Combatting fake news and hate speech requires a multifaceted and multi-stakeholder approach in the short and long term. Media organisations should promote and increase cooperation with online fact-checking organisations to verify content, while building the capacity of Sudanese online users through media literacy training. Civil society, research organisations and the media, with support from donors and international actors, should also continue their efforts to monitor and communicate the harmful effects of hate speech and disinformation, as this will be a crucial tool for transitional justice in holding leaders legally accountable for the dissemination of hate speech.

- The spread of hate speech online is enabled by the documented and growing inadequacy of content moderation on social media platforms (e.g. underpaid moderators, biased and ineffective automated mechanisms). Social media companies should adapt and improve their social media policies and efforts to combat hate speech by working with local fact-checking organisations, integrating fact-checking tools into their platforms, improving automated hate speech detection for under-resourced languages in partnership with local civil society organisations and researchers, and including TFGBV as part of their content moderation reporting mechanisms and transparency reports.

Introduction

Background and objectives

In 2018, Sudanese protesters started mobilising and organising demonstrations against the oppressive 30-year rule of Omar al-Bashir and his party, the National Congress Party (NCP). A mass sit-in at Khartoum's military headquarters precipitated a military coup led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (referred to as 'Hemedti') of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), who ousted Omar al-Bashir in April 2019.[1] The SAF and the RSF established a Transitional Military Council (TMC), and later shared power with civilians, forming the the transitional government to govern until elections could be held[2] but eventually both the SAF and RSF ousted the civilian members in 2021. The tensions between the SAF and the RSF escalated, and a full-scale war between the two started in April 2023.[3]

The human cost of this war has been devastating, with estimated casualties ranging from 20,000 to over 60,000 deaths as of November 2024.[4] Human Rights Watch has documented ethnic cleansing by the RSF in West Darfur.[5] Close to nine million Sudanese have been displaced internally, and close to three million have fled to neighbouring countries, as of January 2025.[6]

A critical dynamic of this war has been the use of hate speech by the warring parties. Both warring parties have manipulated, and continue to manipulate, online and offline media with disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and ethnic hate speech.[7] Previous research has demonstrated that the dissemination of hate speech is often one of the first steps to intergroup conflicts, genocidal violence, and forced displacement,[8] and therefore

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[1] Ayferam G (2023) *Sudan's conflict in the shadow of coups and military rule*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

[2] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (2023) *Sudan: Political process to form a transitional civilian government and the shift in disorder trends, situation update*.

[3] ACLED (2024) *The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) gains ground in Sudan.*

[4] Dahab M, AbuKoura R, Checchi F, Ahmed A, Abdalla O, Ibrahim M, Abdelmagid N, Zain Alabden I, Omer L, Alhaffar M and Ekoriko P (2024) *War-Time Mortality in Sudan: A Capture-Recapture Analysis*, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

[5] Human Rights Watch (2024) *Sudan: Ethnic Cleansing in West Darfur*.

[6] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) *Sudan Situation*, Operational Data Portal. Accessed on 14 January 2024.

[7] Beam Reports (2024) *A whole year of information war between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces*. Accessed on 21 January 2024.

[8] See for instance: Sineshaw T & Megersa T (2019) Exploring Ethnic Hate Speech through the Prism of Social Media in Ethiopia, *Ethiopian Journal of Behavioral Studies*, Vol 2 (2), 1 – 24; Chapman C (2014) The role of hate speech and hate crime in the escalation of identity conflict, *State of the World's Minorities*

requires close examination. Given the existing body of evidence on the significant impact of hate speech on conflict and displacement, and its role as a barrier to sustainable peace, it is important to understand and contextualise its nature and root causes in order to provide activists, pro-democracy actors, social media companies, and international actors engaged in Sudan's peace negotiations with evidence and analysis to effectively combat hate speech in Sudan, both online and offline.

To do so, this working paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of hate speech in Sudan?

2. What are the root causes of hate speech in Sudan?

3. How has hate speech contributed to the ongoing conflict and forced displacement in Sudan?

Research methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach. I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with activists and experts in hate speech from Sudan. I interviewed an equal number of men and women activists from Darfur, South Kordofan, as well as from the Northern and Eastern regions. All interviews were conducted remotely, and participants are anonymous. Data collection took place in May 2024. I also undertook an in-depth literature review (see Bibliography).

The situation in Sudan is volatile and evolving rapidly. While recent developments do not affect the historical analysis of root causes, I have not included events that occurred between September 2024 and January 2025, even if they are relevant to hate speech. I reviewed the recommendations in January 2025.

Positionality

My identity has played a significant role in sparking my interest in hate speech in Sudan. As a Sudanese woman who grew up in the capital, I was able to witness the marginalisations practised on us as women. Yet it was not until I started working in the humanitarian sector that I witnessed how Sudanese citizens in regions in both eastern and western Sudan were marginalised from social services, education, and opportunities for a better life.

Later on, as an early career researcher and digital activist, I have seen how social media

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and Indigenous People, 34–40; Vasist PN, Chatterjee D & Krishnan S (2023) The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A cross-country configural Narrative, *Information Systems Frontiers* 26, no. 2 (2024): 663–688.

has polarised communities in Sudan. I believe that while colonial powers bear some responsibility for disrupting social cohesion through discriminatory policies, successive Sudanese regimes bear greater responsibility for failing to address these issues and, in some cases, for exacerbating them through their own discriminatory practices. The ongoing conflict and the actions of the SAF and the RSF have further exacerbated ethnic divisions, and their use of hate speech continues to make peace agreements out of reach.

To reduce bias, I designed the study to be based on credible sources and interviews with activists from different parts of Sudan. Ultimately, my goal is to provide activists with evidence to counter divisive rhetoric and to achieve peace in Sudan.

Defining hate speech

Drawing from the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),[9] this working paper defines hate speech as 'incitement to violence'. It takes into consideration not only the **protected characteristics of individuals** but also the **historical and socio-economic factors** from which hate speech emerges.

This definition goes beyond definitions that focus solely on minority individuals and/or groups with protected characteristics, and the definitions used in social media guidelines. For instance, Meta Community Standards (which apply to Facebook and Instagram) define hate speech as "direct attacks against people – rather than concepts or institutions – on the basis of what we call protected characteristics: race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious disease."[10]

This is because those definitions fail to capture effectively how the rise and dissemination of hate speech can intersect with broader socio-political factors, including competition for resources, power dynamics, and historical grievances.[11] Marques (2023) demonstrates that hate speech can lead to genocide against non-protected groups when motivated by historical grievances, among other factors, using the Rwanda example. In this case, while the Tutsis held authoritative positions and influence over the Hutus from the colonial period, they were the target of hate speech by Radio Télévision Libre des Milles Collines (RTLM) and eventually of the 1994 genocide.[12]

Hate speech is closely related to the dissemination of fake news. Disinformation

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[9] See: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights

[10] See: https://transparency.meta.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/hateful-conduct/

[11] Marques T (2022) The expression of hate in hate speech, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 40(5).

[12] Marques T (2022) The expression of hate in hate speech, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 40(5).

further polarises groups and threatens social cohesion, laying the ground for the proliferation of hate speech.[13] State institutions in authoritarian regimes, often supported by foreign governments (e.g. Russia and Iran), and political parties in democratic states are the primary actors in orchestrating disinformation campaigns.[14]

Hate speech can be gendered. An emerging field of enquiry is Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), a form of online gendered hate speech.[15] TFGBV is the online continuation of systemic discrimination faced by women.[16] The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls outlined multiple online forms of violence against women, including "online mobbing, online stalking and online harassment".[17] Women in the public sphere are vulnerable to digital threats that may undermine their reputation and activism.[18]

Role of social media in spreading hate speech

The introduction of social media platforms has facilitated social and political change by allowing citizens to share and access information, and to mobilise online and offline to resist repressive regimes, as exemplified by the Arab Spring of 2011.[19] In Sudan, social media has been the main communication tool to facilitate information management, organise protests, and accelerate movement building and cyberactivism prior to, and during, the 2018 Sudanese revolution.[20]

However, these platforms can also be a double-edged sword. Social media algorithms

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[13] Vasist PN, Chatterjee D & Krishnan S (2023) The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A cross-country configural Narrative, *Information Systems Frontiers* 26, no. 2 (2024): 663–688.

[14] Vasist PN, Chatterjee D & Krishnan S (2023) 'The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A cross-country configural Narrative', *Information Systems Frontiers* 26, no. 2 (2024): 663–688.

[15] Hopes and Actions Foundation (2023) *Breaking Barriers: Examining the digital exclusion of women and online gender-based violence in Sudan.*

[16] Simonovic D (2018) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective.*

[17] Simonovic D (2018) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequences on online violence against women and girls from a human rights perspective.*

[18] Hopes and Actions Foundation (2023) *Breaking Barriers: Examining the digital exclusion of women and online gender-based violence in Sudan.*

[19] Fakhry B, Tarabasz A & Selakovic M (2023) *Social media & uprisings: The case of the Egyptian revolution in 2011,* MATEC Web of Conferences, 377, 02002.

[20] Daffalla A, Simko L, Kohno T and Bardas AG (2021) Defensive technology used by political activists during the Sudanese revolution, *2021 Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers symposium on security and privacy (SP)* (pp. 372–390).

recommend content to users based on their online interactions, enclosing users in polarised ideological bubbles.[21]In addition, the advent of social media has broadened the nature of actors who can engage in disseminating hate speech, particularly during conflicts.[22]

The dissemination of hate speech online is enabled by the documented inadequacy of content moderation of social media platforms. Social media platforms rely on AI and on third-party companies for human content moderation in non-English languages, but those moderators are underpaid and not properly trained to assess harmful content.[23] These third-party companies may not employ Sudanese moderators or work with local fact-checking companies that understand the context and local language. In addition, the poor quality and quantity of datasets in non-English languages hinders the accuracy of automated moderation.[24] Even with English content, algorithms can also be biased because of the biases of the people who designed them and fed them data.[25] In Sudan, social media platforms did not take the necessary steps to address hate speech, as argued by this research participant: *"Social media companies rely on foreign fact-checking companies to verify information, which are not really familiar with the Sudanese context, local language and slang. I have previously spoken to Meta about how employing third parties for content moderation is not effective in our context. So everything Meta did so far in terms of removing RSF pages and accounts from Facebook was because of individual efforts [not because of their own efforts] because our war is not even appealing to them."*

The emphasis on tackling hate speech on social media is threatened by recent decisions by social media companies. In January 2025, Meta decided to phase out its fact-checking programme, and to rely on AI[26] and community notes for content moderation at Meta, similar to content moderation at X.[27] The lack of independent fact-

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[21] Zeitzoff T (2017) '[How social media is changing conflict](#)', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61(9), 1970–1991.

[22] Vasist PN, Chatterjee D & Krishnan S (2023) '[The Polarizing Impact of Political Disinformation and Hate Speech: A Cross-country Configural Narrative](#)', *Information Systems Frontiers* 26, no. 2 (2024): 663-688.

[23] Center for Democracy and Technology (2024) *[Investigating Content Moderation Systems in the Global South](#)*; Peterson-Salahuddin C (2024) [Repairing the harm: Toward an algorithmic reparations approach to hate speech content moderation](#). *Big Data & Society*, 11(2).

[24] Center for Democracy and Technology (2024) *[Investigating content moderation systems in the Global South](#)*

[25] Peterson-Salahuddin C (2024) [Repairing the harm: Toward an algorithmic reparations approach to hate speech content moderation](#). *Big Data & Society*, 11(2).

[26] Meta (2021) *[Our New AI System to Help Tackle Harmful Content.](#)*

[27] Tech Policy Press (2025) *[Meta Dropped Fact-Checking Because of Politics. But Could Its Alternative](#)*

checking places the responsibility for combatting hate speech on users who may already be polarised and have their own agendas. This is alarming given the degree of freedom that perpetrators of hate speech already enjoy on the X platform.[28]

Nature of hate speech in Sudan from 2018 to 2023

National Congress Party era (1989–2019)

During the NCP era (1989–2019), under Omar al-Bashir, the regime actively spread hate speech and stereotyping relating to non-Arab groups from Eastern, Western, and Southern Sudan. This was done by the NCP's affiliated media actors. According to a research participant from South Kordofan, "*there was widespread hate speech among people about the tribes in Western and Southern Sudan. The NCP era was the period in which hate speech was most entrenched through theatre, drama, and social media.*" The NCP regime maintained strict control over media outlets using the Press Publication law of 2009.[29] This allowed for the perpetuation of racist discourse against African ethnic groups and the framing of armed resistance groups as "rebels". According to a research participant, "*hate speech is used as a political tool, as we noticed in 2019, when the security apparatus arrested Darfur students and said that they were members of armed movements, while in fact they turned out to be people who have nothing to do with anything, so the word "rebels" was used to justify the arrest of any person.*" Social media – in addition to traditional media outlets – amplified the government's ability to spread hate speech and stereotyping.

Hate speech and stereotyping fuelled ethnic divisions and communal clashes across Sudan and contributed to the failure of peace. During the civil war that started in 1983 and lasted until 2005, the NCP regime employed the state's official media channels for a daily 30-minute programme broadcast to promote jihad (a term used by NCP to intensify recruitment drives in Northern Sudan, leveraging its religious connotations to mobilise support for the war against the Southerners).[30] In Darfur, the NCP regime used ethnic hate speech and sexual violence against Darfurians in its counterinsurgency campaign, culminating in the Darfur genocide in 2003.[31] The divisive rhetoric discourse against

Produce Better Results?

[28] Mohammed O (2025) *Unleashing Misogyny: Online Gender-based Violence Fuels the Fires of War in Sudan*, Hopes and Actions Foundation.

[29] CIPESA (2021) *Sudan's Bad Laws, Internet Censorship and Repressed Civil Liberties*.

[30] Seri-Hersch I (2023) 'Chapter 20: Education, Violence, and Transitional Uncertainties: Teaching Military Sciences" in Sudan, 2005–2011', in Vezzadini E, Seri-Hersch I, Revilla L, Poussier A & Jalil MA (2023) *Ordinary Sudan, 1504–2019: From Social History to Politics from Below*, p.598.

[31] Hagan J, Rymond-Richmond W & Palloni A (2011) 'Racial Targeting of Sexual Violence in Darfur',

Southern Sudanese and African groups in the Western regions continued despite the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, hindering future peace processes.[32] One research participant mentioned: *"The succession in South Sudan was a result of state-employed media houses disseminating hate speech, even after the signing of the CPA. Thus, the lack of accountability of the state and individuals disseminating hate speech will undermine any future peace efforts".*

Box 1: short summary of conflicts in Sudan from 1983 to 2020

South Sudan

The First Sudanese Civil War (1955–1972) ended with the Addis Ababa agreement, which granted regional autonomy to Christian-majority South Sudan. However, conflict reignited in 1983 when this autonomy was revoked and sharia law imposed, infringing on Southern religious and cultural freedoms.[33] As a reaction, Southerners formed the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).[34] The Second Sudanese Civil War between the central government, supported by the Popular Defence Forces and the SPLM/A lasted until 2005, with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA failed to secure lasting peace in Sudan, and the majority of South Sudanese voted for succession in 2011.[35]

Blue Nile and South Kordofan

After the succession of South Sudan, SPLA split into SSPLA in the South, SPLA-North (SPLA-N) in Blue Nile, and the SPLA-North (SPLA-N) wing in South Kordofan.[36] Conflict between the central government and those groups in South Kordofan and Blue Nile continued until the Juba Peace Agreement in 2020.

Darfur

The war in Darfur was a conflict between non-Arab groups – the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) – and the government

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American Journal of Public Health, Vol 99(8): 1386–1392.

[32] Köndgen O (2010) '[Shari'a and national law in the Sudan](#)', *Sharia Incorporated* (pp. 181–230), Leiden University Press.

[33] Köndgen O (2010) [_"Shari'a and national law in the Sudan"_](#) *Sharia Incorporated*, (pp. 181–230). Leiden Univ. Press.

[34] Köndgen O (2010) [_"Shari'a and national law in the Sudan"_](#) *Sharia Incorporated*, (pp. 181–230). Leiden Univ. Press.

[35] Köndgen O (2010) [_"Shari'a and national law in the Sudan"_](#) *Sharia Incorporated*, (pp. 181–230). Leiden Univ. Press.

[36] The New Humanitarian (2015) [_The Nuba: prisoners of geography. Forgotten Conflicts – South Kordofan_](#).

forces supported by Janjaweed militia.[37] This conflict was marked by the Darfur genocide where government forces and Janjaweed militia killed over 200,000 Darfurians[38] and displaced millions inside and outside Sudan between 2003 and 2005.[39] The RSF were formed in 2013 from Janjaweed militias.

While the government actively propagated hate speech, they also used it to control journalists and activists through the Criminal Act 1991, and through the introduction of the Cybercrime Law in 2007. Article 66 of the Criminal Act 1991 criminalised the dissemination of fake news articles. Through this article, the NCP employed a strategy of delegitimising dissenting narratives by labelling them as fake news to create fear and self-censorship among journalists and activists.[40] Although Sudan's initial Cybercrime Law was passed in 2007, it was not until 2018, with the Sudanese revolution, that the NCP government introduced amendments to criminalise hate speech.[41] In the aftermath of the revolution, Sudan's military also used the Cybercrime Law to suppress dissent by suing activists. For instance, in 2021, Orwa Elsadig, a committee member working to dismantle the al-Bashir regime, was sued for allegedly criticising a military leader.[42] At the same time, a research participant mentioned that he had sued a journalist for spreading "misleading news that could have led to communal clashes", but the case never progressed.

Box 2: Laws related to hate speech in Sudan:

Article 66 of the Criminal Act 1991: *"Whoever publishes, or broadcasts any news item, rumour or report, knowing that the same is incorrect, intending thereby to cause apprehension, or panic to the public, or threat to the public peace, or diminution of the prestige of the State, shall be punished, with imprisonment, for a term, not exceeding six months, or with fine, or with both."*[43]

Article 14 of the Cybercrime Law 2018: "*Anyone who uses the information or communications network or any means of information or communications or applications to incite hatred, contempt or hostility between or against any sect, group*

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[37] Jok KM (2012) *Conflict of National Identity in Sudan*, Academic Dissertation, University of Helsinki.

[38] Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) (2021) *Sudan's Bad Laws, Internet Censorship and Repressed Civil Liberties*.

[39] Jok KM (2012) *Conflict of National Identity in Sudan*, Academic Dissertation, University of Helsinki.

[40] CIPESA (2021) *Sudan's Bad Laws, Internet Censorship and Repressed Civil Liberties*.

[41] Article 19 (2020) *Sudan: Cybercrime Law can restrict vital information during the pandemic*.

[42] CIPESA (2021) *Sudan's Bad Laws, Internet Censorship and Repressed Civil Liberties*.

[43] See: https://redress.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Criminal-Act-1991-English.pdf

or entity due to differences in religion, ethnic origin, colour or language in a manner that endangers peace or public tranquillity shall be punished with imprisonment for a period not exceeding four years or a fine or both. [44]

Article 24 of the Cybercrime Law 2018: *"Anyone who uses a telecom or information network or an application or any other communication tool to publish rumours or news or a report and he/she knows it is fake aiming to spread the fear to the people or threatening the public peace or decreasing the prestige of the state will be punished for one year or fine or both."* [45]

With the advent of social media, the NCP strategically expanded its tools of control in the online space. The Cyber Jihadist Unit was established by the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) in 2011, mainly to defend the ruling regime, weaken the opposition, and manipulate people's perceptions by spreading well-researched campaigns of disinformation.[46] When Sudanese activists attempted to overthrow the authoritarian regime in 2013 by organising protests, the Cyber Jihadist Unit used "smear campaigns, distractions, and trial balloons, among other tactics."[47] For instance, a research participant talked about how women who participated in demonstrations were labelled as "impolite" in official media and social media, in an attempt to pressurise families to restrict their daughters' involvement in protests.

Sudanese revolution (2018)

The 2018 Sudanese revolution, led by pro-democracy groups, celebrated the unity and diversity of ethnic groups in Sudan. Research participants from across the regions explained that protests had included slogans that focused on the unity of Sudanese citizens. For instance, according to a research participant in Eastern Sudan, *"the popular online discourse during the revolution was the discourse of unity, and recognition of the other and a celebration of diversity and symbolism. The first protest in Port Sudan was cheering for the people of Darfur from the far East to the far South of Sudan. So, it let people cling to the dreams of unity they wanted. The sit-in scenes in the military HQ in*

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[44] Article 19 (2020) *Sudan: Cybercrime Law can restrict vital information during the pandemic*.

[45] Article 19 (2020) *Sudan: Cybercrime Law can restrict vital information during the pandemic*.

[46] Mahgoub H & Adam M (2021) '*Clouds of Lies Obscure Sudan's Sky: Politics of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Hate in Times of Transition*', presented at the 10th International Conference on Appropriate Technology, Khartoum, Sudan.

[47] Mahgoub H & Adam M (2021) '*Clouds of Lies Obscure Sudan's Sky: Politics of Misinformation, Disinformation, and Hate in Times of Transition*', presented at the 10th International Conference on Appropriate Technology, Khartoum, Sudan.

Khartoum, and the other states, was a celebration of diversity and a festival of cultural differences." According to another research participant in South Kordofan, the positive discourse had a positive impact on coexistence among communities in South Kordofan by reducing communal clashes.

Pro-democracy groups also worked to counter disinformation campaigns led by the Cyber Jihadist Unit. During the 2018 revolution, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), along with the Forces of Freedom and Change (FCC), played a key role in disseminating information and countering state propaganda, establishing themselves as credible sources within the pro-democracy movement.[48]

Transitions in government (2020–2021, 2023)

The transitional period following the Sudanese revolution was marked by negotiations between military and civilian actors. As a result of the progressive organising of the resistance committees, SPA, and political parties represented by the FCC, the former dictator Omar al-Bashir was ousted in 2019 by a military coup led by SAF and RSF generals.[49] Following the coup, a Transitional Military Council (TMC) was established.[50] Civilians, represented by the FCC, engaged in negotiations with the TMC to ensure a transition to civilian rule.[51] This negotiation ended with a power-sharing agreement between the TMC and the FCC, forming the 'transitional government' which was later tasked with facilitating the return of internally displaced persons, and addressing resource conflicts through the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA).[52]

Box 3: Juba peace agreement

The peace agreement signed in 2020 during the transitional government had six tracks that covered "Darfur, Eastern Sudan, the Two Areas, the North, the Centre and the Tamazuj track (relating to groups from the border regions of Darfur and South

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[48] Daffalla A, Simko L, Kohno T and Bardas AG (2021) Defensive technology used by political activists during the Sudanese revolution, 2021 Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers symposium on security and privacy (SP), pp. 372–390.

[49] Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (2023) *Sudan: Political process to form a transitional civilian government and the shift in disorder trends, situation update*.

[50] Soliman M (2019) *A Troubled Road Ahead: 'Power-Sharing' and What It Means For the Future of Sudan*, Fikra Forum, an initiative of the Washington Institute for Near Policy.

[51] Soliman M (2019) *A Troubled Road Ahead: 'Power-Sharing' and What It Means For the Future of Sudan*, Fikra Forum, an initiative of the Washington Institute for Near Policy.

[52] ACLED (2023) *Sudan: Political process to form a transitional civilian government and the shift in disorder trends, situation update*.

Kordofan), with separate protocols for each."[53]

Because of the assignment of Hemedti as a lead of the negotiation with rebel groups, civilian delegates were marginalised, and two leaders of rebel groups abstained from joining the negotiation. As a result, many citizens lost faith in the agreement. The focus of the JPA was power-sharing among rebel group leaders, which intensified the polarisation of ethnic groups. The Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) processes of armed groups in the JPA were not implemented.[54] This undermined the peace process and fuelled further conflict. The conflict of interests among armed groups ignited hate speech, especially in the Blue Nile. Similarly, in South Kordofan, a research participant explained that *"an unprecedented conflict erupted between the Hausa and Hamag communities in South Kordofan, resulting in massacres and the burning of villages. This violence, fuelled by inflammatory hate speech surrounding the peace agreement and exacerbated by armed groups exploiting ethnic tensions, tragically undermined the very peace it sought to establish."* These factors empowered the RSF, who launched its "most aggressive recruitment campaign" in mid-2022.[55]

During the transitional period, the military groups actively worked to suppress freedom of expression. Pro-democracy groups expressed strong opposition to the inclusion of the military in the transitional government, because of the military's history of overthrowing civilian governments, and to the inclusion of RSF leader Hemedti in the civilian-military power sharing agreement because of his role in past atrocities and the violent dispersal of protestors in June 2019.[56] To respond to these criticisms, the RSF undertook "reputation laundering", using "misleading information to polish their image online,"[57] according to Beam Reports, a fact-checking organisation in Sudan (that has a widely acknowledged reputation for accuracy).[58] The transitional government also amended the 2018 Cybercrime Law in July 2020. These amendments – aimed at

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[53] Craze J & Khair K (2023) *The Remains of the JPA, the Unlearnt Lessons of the Juba Peace Agreement. Rift Valley Institute*.

[54] Craze J & Khair K (2023) *The Remains of the JPA, the Unlearnt Lessons of the Juba Peace Agreement. Rift Valley Institute*.

[55] Human Rights Watch (2024) *The Massalit Will Not Come Home" Ethnic Cleansing and Crimes Against Humanity in El Geneina, West Darfur, Sudan*

[56] Kurtz G (2024) 'Power Relations in Sudan after the Fall of Bashir', *SWP Research Paper* 2024/RP 05.

[57] Beam Reports (2023) *Share Mania: Mapping misinformation and disinformation in Sudan*.

[58] All quotations from Beam Reports have been translated from the original Arabic by the author.

combating "fake news" – introduced harsher penalties for online dissent.[59] This was followed by an official online statement by the military "confirming that they had appointed a Special Commissioner in May 2020 to take legal action under various laws, including the amended Cybercrime Law, against anyone, including activists and the media, in or outside Sudan, who insult or defame the military online."[60]

Pro-democracy groups were also victims of foreign and national disinformation and smear campaigns online, and shadow banned on social media (that is, in such a way that their social media content is not readily apparent to the user). Foreign countries are confirmed to have played a role in supporting the spread of disinformation online, in addition to arming warring parties, to protect their interests (including exploiting natural resources, such as gold).[61] Several local and international actors, including the NCP, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are reported to have created parallel pages for activists and pro-democracy groups, or downvoted their pages, leaving their content muted.[62] As a result, some users complained about pro-democracy groups' content disappearing from their timeline.[63] Pro-democracy groups have also been victims of smear campaigns based on disinformation. For example, a participant referred to the viral image on social media back in 2021 of an ambulance obstructed by protestors being prevented from enabling a woman to reach critical medical care. This image, later debunked - including by the author's informants - as fabricated, ignited public outrage and undermined the legitimacy of street blockades, a crucial tool of civil resistance.

Political parties in the transitional government did not intervene to counter disinformation campaigns. According to research participants, a key failing of the transitional government was that they underestimated the organised disinformation efforts orchestrated online by national and international actors. Some participants attributed the government's failing to the fact that the civilian groups engaged in the transitional government were prioritising the pursuit of political visibility to gain legitimacy, as there were no opinion polls to show support for political parties.[64]

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[59] Article 19 (2020) *Sudan: Cybercrime Law can restrict vital information during the pandemic*.

[60] Article 19 (2020) *Sudan: Cybercrime Law can restrict vital information during the pandemic*.

[61] Grossman S, Bush D & DiResta R (2019) *Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa*, Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University; Dagres H (2024) A diplomatic solution in Sudan demands greater US engagement with its Arab allies, Atlantic Council.

[62] Hamad K (2022) 'How Sudanese resistance committees are shadowbanned on Facebook', *Global Voices;* Ayesh M (2023) 'Arabic press review: Online network spreads UAE propaganda in Sudan', *Middle East Eye*.

[63] Hamad K (2022) 'How Sudanese resistance committees are shadowbanned on Facebook', *Global Voices*.

[64] Kurtz G (2024) 'Power Relations in Sudan after the Fall of Bashir', *SWP Research Paper* 2024/RP 05.

Participants in the research mentioned that political figures associated with the FCC did not sufficiently address online disinformation during the transitional government and in the ongoing war.

The transition is also described by research participants as a period of increased hateful and inciting discourse, mostly disseminated by former NCP elites in their communities across Sudan. Rights for Peace (a UK-based human rights organisation) documented the impact of hate speech both online and offline on communal clashes between ethnic groups during the transitional period in Sudan. In both Darfur and Kordofan Regions, NCP affiliates disseminated inflammatory messages over WhatsApp and Facebook to incite violence between Arab and African tribes.[65] This was confirmed by research participants from Eastern Sudan, one of whom said: *"as soon as the NCP was ousted, we saw its leaders becoming leaders of tribal strife".* This same participant argued that the dissemination of hate speech to trigger ethnic clashes was a tactic used by the NCP to paralyse the transitional government.

The military also used disinformation campaigns to prepare for the 2021 military coup on 25 October 2021 that dissolved the transitional government. Beam Reports concludes that rumours were spread to test public opinion before the coup. In their report, they describe the dissemination of rumours and fabricated content, including a rumour that Volker Perthes, head of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), had proposed dissolving the government. This disinformation campaign was further fuelled by a misleading video clip falsely portraying widespread support for a sit-in at the Republican Palace against the transitional government, as well as "*the fabrication of a message confirming the closure of Khartoum Airport, and not concluding by the fabrication of an electronic message attributed to the United States Embassy in Khartoum, warning its nationals of an expected change that will take place within the armed forces.*"[66]

Root causes of hate speech in Sudan

Marginalisation of non-Muslims/non-Arabs

Historical patterns of political exclusion play a major role in understanding how ethnic groups can be mobilised for violence by elites.[67] Hate speech in Sudan is rooted in the long-term marginalisation of non-Muslims/non-Arabs. This is summarised by a research

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[65] Rights for Peace (2021) *Discrimination and Hate Speech Fuel Violence in Sudan.*

[66] Beam Reports (2023) *Share Mania: Mapping misinformation and disinformation in Sudan*

[67] Sambanis N, Skaperdas S & Wohlforth W (2020) '*External intervention, identity, and civil war*', *Comparative Political Studies*, *53*(14), 2155–2182.

participant in those terms: "*The ongoing conflict in Sudan has torn open deep-seated wounds, exposing the raw and festering hatred that years of accumulated grievances and divisive rhetoric have fuelled. This war is a brutal reminder of the deep divisions between different segments of Sudanese society. While those in the capital, Khartoum, may experience a semblance of national unity, those on the periphery, such as the people of Al-Geneina in West Darfur, harbour very different sentiments, often rooted in marginalisation and historical injustices.*"

Historical grievances in Sudan can be traced back to Turkish rule (1820–1881), which empowered Arabs over other ethnic groups, and to British colonialism (1899–1956), which was based on a policy of divide and rule.[68] Colonial injustices continued after Sudan's independence in 1956, with successive governments perpetuating the dominance of Arab elites. In 1983, Numeiri introduced shari'a law to Sudan without consulting the general population and prosecuted political leaders who opposed this new legislation.[69]

This trend of marginalising non-Arabs/non-Muslims continued and intensified under al-Bashir (1989–2019). A research participant from Kordofan explained that *"the Bashir regime was able to control power through breaking the social cohesion in an ugly way, the same thing the colonisers did, yet the regime increased it, from imposing state policies allowing access to education and job recruitment based on ethnicity."* After the 1989 coup staged by al-Bashir and his allies in the National Islamic Front (NIF), al-Bashir strengthened Islamic legislation, neglecting the customary laws and traditions of non-Muslims. Non-Arab speakers and Christians were excluded from law professions, and Southerner judges were downgraded to lower positions between 1989 and 1991.[70] In addition to legal marginalisation, the NCP actively oppressed minorities, for instance in South Kordofan, as a research participant explained: *"One of the reasons for the war in South Kordofan was that the government imposed its policy of converting the identity of the Nuba Mountains to Arabism and Islam because most of them were Christians and they were trying to change the social structure in a process of replacement and substitution. They introduced the Islamic missionaries and forced people to convert to Islam and change their names because we had our own naming system. For example, Nubian children were forced to change their names in order to be admitted to schools."* The imposition of Islamic legislation and Arab identity created political lines based on ethnicity between

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[68] Rights for Peace (2021) *Discrimination and Hate Speech Fuel Violence in Sudan*.

[69] Hilhorst S (2009) '*Use of force in the Sudan: Between Islamic law and international law*', *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 5(1).

[70] Köndgen O (2010) '*Shari'a and national law in the Sudan*', *Sharia Incorporated*, pp. 181–230, Leiden Univ. Press.

Arabs and non–Arabs and fuelled ethnic conflict.

Land conflicts and environmental change accelerated the politicisation of ethnic lines in Darfur and Kordofan. Land disputes have been a central issue in the civil wars. Sudan has "both modern statutory land ownership and customary tenure features",[71] which are threatened by the state favouring private local and foreign business interests over local communities. In turn, this limits communities' access to resources, and has fuelled violent communal conflicts in Darfur, Kordofan, and Blue Nile regions.[72] In the 1980s, drought caused displacement in the Western region due to man–made deforestation to expand mechanised farm lands and to build pipelines for the petrol industry. This deprived local communities and pastoralists from their livelihoods.[73] It also resulted in soil degradation and intensified pressure and fighting between Arabs and African groups over both water and land resources.[74]

Socio-economic inequalities

Historical marginalisation led to unequal economic development across regions in Sudan. Regions marginalised by the British administration continued being marginalised by successive governments, with Riverines maintaining their domination of economic and political power.[75] As a result, poverty was prevalent in the periphery compared with the centre. As an illustration, in 2014–15, the poverty incidence in South Kordofan and Central Darfur was over 67%, contrasting drastically with the Northern State's 12.2% incidence.[76]

Marginalised populations also had limited access to good quality education, further hindering economic development. The introduction of Arabic as the national language in 1998 led to the exclusion of groups with insufficient Arabic knowledge to pass

[71] Elamin K (2016) 'The State, Land and Conflicts in the Sudan', *International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies,* Vol 3(1):7–18.

[72] Elamin K (2016) 'The State, Land and Conflicts in the Sudan', *International Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies,* Vol 3(1):7–18.

[73] Siddig EFA, El–Harizi K & Prato B (2007) 'Managing conflict over natural resources in Greater Kordofan, Sudan: Some recurrent patterns and governance implications', *RePEc: Research Papers in Economics.*

[74] Siddig EFA, El–Harizi K & Prato B (2007) 'Managing conflict over natural resources in Greater Kordofan, Sudan: Some recurrent patterns and governance implications', *RePEc: Research Papers in Economics.*

[75] Mihatsch MA (2023) 'Chapter 19: Liberation from Fear: Regional Mobilisation in Sudan after the 1964 Revolution' in Vezzadini E, Seri–Hersch I, Revilla L, Poussier A & Jalil MA (2023) *Ordinary Sudan, 1504–2019: From Social History to Politics from Below,* Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG. p.565–586

[76] African Development Bank (2018) *Sudan Poverty Profile: Summary Results of the 2014–2015 National Baseline Household Budget Survey.*

compulsory entry exams to public universities.[77] The NCP era was characterised by educational inequalities, with enrolment rates in primary and secondary schools showing stark regional disparities.[78] In turn, these educational disparities contributed to underdevelopment in these regions, hindering access to essential services such as healthcare and education due to a lack of qualified personnel.[79]

The combination of a militarised education system, widespread school dropout rates, and opportunistic recruitment strategies by warring factions made it possible to recruit youth by armed groups. Seri-Hersch (2023) gives several examples of how the Sudanese state has militarised the education system, such as through requiring the wearing of camouflage uniforms, use of martial vocabulary, and teaching of war songs to children.[80] Dropping out of school was also widespread prior to the war, and continues to increase. An update in 2022 from Save the Children, based on data from international groups working in Sudan, said that seven million children were out of school.[81] In April 2024, UNICEF reported that all schools were closed, leaving "more than 90 percent of the country's 19 million school-age children" out of school. As a result, "grave violations — killings and maimings, sexual violence, child soldier recruitment — have increased fivefold since 2022."[82] This makes it easier for both the RSF and the SAF to recruit young people to fight in the ongoing war.[83] *"A large percentage of youth fighting alongside the RSF are uneducated men. This is always linked to the fact that these groups are poor and have no opportunities in life other than carrying weapons and becoming soldiers. There are not many choices, and there are no role models that show there is a higher goal than carrying a weapon. Poverty and a lack of education are intrinsically linked, as is the fact that the presence of this discourse leads to a lack of awareness and stops us from realising*

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[77] Köndgen O (2010) 'Shari'a and national law in the Sudan' *Sharia Incorporated*, pp. 181-230, Leiden Univ. Press.

[78] Seri-Hersch I (2023) 'Chapter 20: Education, Violence, and Transitional Uncertainties: Teaching Military Sciences" in Sudan, 2005–2011', in Vezzadini E, Seri-Hersch I, Revilla L, Poussier A & Jalil MA (2023) *Ordinary Sudan, 1504–2019: From Social History to Politics from Below*, p.590-612.

[79] Seri-Hersch I (2023) 'Chapter 20: Education, Violence, and Transitional Uncertainties: Teaching Military Sciences" in Sudan, 2005–2011', in Vezzadini E, Seri-Hersch I, Revilla L, Poussier A & Jalil MA (2023) *Ordinary Sudan, 1504–2019: From Social History to Politics from Below*, p.590-612.

[80] Seri-Hersch I (2023) 'Chapter 20: Education, Violence, and Transitional Uncertainties: Teaching Military Sciences" in Sudan, 2005–2011', in Vezzadini E, Seri-Hersch I, Revilla L, Poussier A & Jalil MA (2023) *Ordinary Sudan, 1504–2019: From Social History to Politics from Below*, p.590-612.

[81] Save the Children International (2022) 'Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia and Mali top list of countries where education systems most at risk of collapse'.

[82] Buechner MM (2024) 'UNICEF issues urgent appeal for children caught in Sudan's civil war', UNICEF USA.

[83] Nashed M (2023) 'Sudan's civilians pick up arms, as RSF gains and army stumbles', *Al Jazeera*.

that our interests as Sudanese people are aligned," a research participant from Darfur summarised.[84]

Impact of hate speech on the ongoing conflict and forced displacement

Impact of hate speech on social polarisation and conflict

Participants and sources agree that the ongoing war in Sudan is a reflection of historical injustices and grievances. Previous civil wars in Sudan have severely affected the social cohesion of communities in Sudan, and warring factions can benefit from this by directly exploiting historical grievances as a means of mobilising fighters and inciting violence. Ongoing violence continues to amplify hate speech and entrench divisions. Participants spoke about the cracks in social cohesion in their regions, with sharp disparity and social polarisation. For instance, a research participant from Darfur explained: *"My friends and acquaintances on social media suddenly took extreme positions, advocating for the extermination of the other group because they have experienced violations by either one of the warring factions. They have become blind to the impact of their polarisation on their tribe, despite their education, our friendship, and our shared hometown. However, due to the violations committed by both warring factions, everyone ends up siding with their tribe and adopting its stance; for them it is an existential war on their tribe's resources, and their family's home. They believe that it is safer to side with their tribe and ensure its victory."*

Since the start of the war, the warring parties have both fuelled ethnic discourse. The RSF and the SAF have employed content publishers on social media, and have exploited the information vacuum, to intimidate ethnic groups from each party.[85] Both warring parties also use historical grievances to build narratives about the war. The RSF claims that they fight for democracy and frame this war as one between the Riverines (referring to the people from the River Nile who historically have held power) and the people oppressed by the centralised powerholders,[86] due to the SAF's association with the NCP. According to a research participant, *"Hemedti was inciting against the people of*

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[84] This is not to say that only people with lower levels of education are susceptible to disinformation. While uneducated individuals may lack the skills to fact-check, educated individuals may fall prey to disinformation because of overconfidence in their analytical skills, or pre-existing beliefs that are hard to shake. See: Nygren T & Ecker UK (2024) '_Education as a countermeasure against disinformation_', Lund University Psychological Defence Research Institute Working Paper 2024:3

[85] Beam Reports (2023) _Beam Observatory monitors the most prominent disinformation campaigns during six months of war in Sudan_.

[86] Beam Reports (2024) _Hate speech and incitement on social media amid Sudan war_.

Khartoum, mentioning that the Darfurians should have unity against the Jalaba (people from Khartoum and Northern State)." The NCP and the RSF (formerly Janjaweed) were allied in Darfur (see Box 1), and the NCP provided arms to the Janjaweed to fight against African groups, in order to maintain its power in the region. This alliance was broken during the post-Revolution transition.[87] The SAF fuel ethnic discourse against its former allies in Darfur, the dominant tribes in the RSF (in particular, the Rizeigat and other Arab nomad tribes). Ultimately, their objectives are to polarise communities, mobilise armed groups to their side, and secure power.

The RSF have incited and committed hate crimes and ethnic cleansing against members of African tribes in their controlled areas. Several armed groups who previously fought for autonomy have joined the SAF,[88] including the JPA signatories, SLM-MM separated factions, and SPLA-N from Blue Nile.[89] According to research participants, members of African ethnic groups who are in RSF-controlled areas but whose ethno-political groups have joined the SAF are at risk of being accused of being spies, similar to SAF accusation of RSF affiliated tribes linking them all to RSF. This has notably propelled the war into ethnic conflict between Arab and African tribes in Western regions, due to the ethnic cleansing of the Messalit tribe by the RSF in West Darfur.[90] This highlights the long-standing animosity against African groups, and the role of historical grievances in shaping this conflict.

Both the RSF and the SAF have actively sought to control information by targeting journalists and seizing control of telecommunication infrastructure. These efforts are aimed at controlling public narratives and support for the war. Both warring parties have targeted journalists in their controlled areas: the RSF have killed at least two journalists, while the SAF have detained others.[91] According to a research participant, all media channels have stopped operating except for Sudan TV (which backs the SAF), creating an information vacuum. Both warring factions have also damaged civilian telecommunication infrastructure.[92] In response to the SAF cutting telecommunications access in Darfur Region, the RSF seized control over Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Khartoum, which

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[87] Makonye, F. (2023). *Political Reflections on the Sudanese Civil War 2023: A Qualitative study. African Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies,* 12(3), 71–82.

[88] ACLED (2023) *Sudan Situation Update: August 2023. Heightened violence in Kordofan region as more militia groups step into the conflict.*

[89] ACLED (2023). Sudan: Unraveling the Conflict Dynamics in Darfur.

[90] Human Rights Watch (2024) *Sudan: Ethnic Cleansing in West Darfur.*

[91] International Press Institute (2024) *Sudan: Two journalists killed by paramilitary forces.*

[92] Access Now (2024) *#KeepItOn in times of war: Sudan's communications shutdown must be reversed urgently.*

led to a telecommunications blackout across Sudan in February 2024.[93] Although ISPs managed to restore services by setting up data centres in Port Sudan (SAF-controlled area), some geographical locations are still in total blackout in RSF-controlled areas.[94] According to participants, there continues to be an absence of any verification of news because journalists are without access to the internet due to outages.

The NCP and the SAF used disinformation campaigns to silence anti-war advocates, including women, and closed civil spaces. At the beginning of the war, the NCP declared their support for the SAF and accused their political opponents in the FFC of collaborating with the RSF. Among other accusations, the NCP accused the FFC of having caused the war by introducing the political framework agreement that aimed to integrate the RSF into the SAF.[95] A fake audio clip created by artificial intelligence (AI) technologies circulated on X (formerly Twitter), sharing a conversation at a meeting between the FFC and the RSF Commander about their intention to seize control of the country.[96] This audio was also published on Sudan National Television the next day.[97] Since then, SAF disinformation campaigns have started to target politicians with claims that they are the political wing of the RSF, encouraging citizens to feel animosity towards politicians as well as categorising citizens who are anti-war/peace advocates (including women's initiatives) as the enemies of the state – "rebels" – and linking to them to the RSF.[98] These peace advocates are also subjected to threats, detention, and torture by Sudan's General Intelligence Service in SAF-controlled areas.[99] In South Kordofan, a research participant mentioned that *"four women were arrested in Kadugli, three in Al-Dalanj, and five in Rashad for voicing their demands online as part of the peace initiatives they are leading to stop the war in their region,"* and added that *"the intelligence services interrogated me by phone about my online activities and posts, especially about the posts I wrote about the violations committed by the SAF against civilians in prisons."*

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[93] Access Now (2024) *#KeepItOn in times of war: Sudan's communications shutdown must be reversed urgently*.

[94] Access Now (2024) *#KeepItOn in times of war: Sudan's communications shutdown must be reversed urgently*.

[95] Beam Reports (2024) '*A whole year of information war between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces*'.

[96] Beam Reports (2024) '*Artificial Intelligence… A New Chapter in the Media Disinformation Wars in the Sudanese Digital Space*'.

[97] Beam Reports. (2024) '*Artificial Intelligence… A New Chapter in the Media Disinformation Wars in the Sudanese Digital Space*'.

[98] International Service for Human Rights (2024) *Sudan: Protect lives, stop death sentences and execution of civilians*

[99] Ayn Network (2023) '*Sudan's warring parties war against peace*'.

SAF-directed disinformation campaigns against political opponents have paralysed peace efforts. In January 2024, the Addis Ababa Declaration was signed. It aimed to end hostilities by warring parties and to open humanitarian corridors in their controlled areas, and was organised by the Coordination of Civil and Democratic Forces alliance (known as the Taggaddum coalition), headed by the former prime minister, political parties, the SLM democratic movement, and the FCC.[100] Furthermore, according to the research participants, the Taggadum establishing conference met with SAF-directed disinformation campaigns targeting those politicians and peace advocates who were calling for an end to the war; this campaign implied that Taggadum politicians were cooperating with the RSF and therefore were associated with their wide scale atrocities against citizens.[101] This is currently having a detrimental effect on peace initiatives, and has contributed to the distrust of political figures associated with the FCC. Signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement (SLM-MM and JEM) have also been absent from ongoing peace talks, as they are siding with the SAF in their negotiating position.[102]

Hate speech could also threaten stability in the Eastern Region, which has become a safe haven for many displaced Sudanese. The Eastern Region is under the control of the SAF who have deployed large military forces and intelligence, with support from allied armed groups.[103] However, hate speech has fuelled ethnic divisions, especially between the Hadandawa and Beni Amer ethnic groups who share long-term grievances over access to land, power, and basic services.[104] According to a research participant from the Eastern Region, *"the insecurity in the Eastern regions is the result of a former director of the security service in Kassala State [NCP- affiliated] disseminating hate speech on the national radio. While he encouraged different groups in the East to be mobilised and join the army forces, he immediately excluded Beni Amer and Alhabab groups, referring to them as non-Sudanese – as Eritreans."* As a result, those tribal groups organised, armed themselves, and started training at the Eritrean borders to protect East Sudan, without aligning themselves with the RSF or the SAF.[105] The militarisation of this pre-existing conflict could lead to further devastation in a region that has been spared up till now.

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[100] Reuters (2024).*Sudan's RSF open to talks on immediate ceasefire with army.*

[101] Marsden R (2024) '*A strong civilian coalition is vital to avert Sudan's disintegration',* Chatham House.

[102] Marsden M (2023) '*A critical juncture for Sudan's democratic transition',* Chatham House.

[103] The Youths Citizens Observers Network (2024) *Special report: The implications of war and multiple armies in Eastern Sudan.*

[104] The Youths Citizens Observers Network (2024) *Special report: The implications of war and multiple armies in Eastern Sudan*

[105] The Youths Citizens Observers Network (2024) *Special report: The implications of war and multiple armies in Eastern Sudan.*

Hate speech and displacement

Hate speech fuels conflict and forced displacement. There is extensive literature on the impact of hate speech on conflict and the subsequent displacement of minorities or non-minorities, for instance in Rwanda, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia.[106] In Sudan, the war has displaced millions of Sudanese who have fled violence internally and internationally. This war in Sudan has resulted in the world's largest displacement crisis, due to the targeting of civilians. Over nine million have been internally displaced.[107] Public services and resources, already weakened by the war, have been overwhelmed by the large number of arrivals, leaving IDPs in what the International Organisation for Migration describes as "appalling living conditions".[108]

Civilians choose their migration route and destination carefully, based on how their ethnic background or origin is perceived in a given area. Ethnic lines that are used to incite violence have a direct impact on where they can go and the risks they face at checkpoints and in RSF- or SAF-controlled areas.

Box 4: Choosing migration routes

"My friends decided to flee from Elfashir in North Darfur State after the RSF carried out ethnic cleansing against Massalit in West Darfur State, accompanied by incitement against them on social media [the RSF told Massaliet that it was not their home but the home of Arabs]. They knew that the RSF would carry out a big revenge campaign against them too, because they are an African tribe in Darfur. They were also afraid of the SAF because of their arrest campaigns against African and Arab ethnic groups linked to the RSF, so they decided to flee Elfashir before it fell into the hands of the RSF."

"I came across a family who wanted to flee the war in Khartoum and emigrate to Egypt, but because the father was from the Arab ethnic groups supporting the RSF, he abandoned the options of crossing the SAF-controlled areas in Northern Sudan and decided to go to Darfur, despite it being a conflict-affected zone, as he considered it a safer option because of his ethnicity, and let his children flee to Egypt, as their mother

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[106] Morada NM (2023) Hate Speech and Incitement in Myanmar before and after the February 2021 Coup. *Global Responsibility to Protect*, *15*(2–3), 107–134; Sineshaw, T, & Megersa, T. (2019). Exploring Ethnic Hate Speech through the Prism of Social Media in Ethiopia. *Ethiopian Journal of Behavioral Studies*. Vol 2 (2), 1 – 24

[107] UNHCR 'Sudan Situation', Operational Data Portal. Accessed on 14 January 2024.

[108] International Organisation for Migration (2023) *Sudan Faces World's Largest Internal Displacement Crisis.*

> *was from the Northern State."*
>
> *"If you travel knowing that you will pass through RSF and SAF checkpoints, you could be killed because of your ethnicity. The SAF, for example, target Arab tribes affiliated with the RSF, while the RSF target civilians from the North or River Nile, as well as African tribes affiliated with armed groups that join forces with the SAF,"* said a research participant.

Some minority groups are more vulnerable than others to violence and discrimination during their displacement journey. A leaked document circulating on Facebook, verified as a fake letter linked to the General Intelligence Service (GIS) in Gezira State, states that the GIS is monitoring the mobile phones of displaced people from the Darfur and Kordofan regions, as well as members of the Resistance Committees and FCC groups, whom they denounce as RSF spies.[109] This influenced the decision of indigenous communities in Gezira to deny services to IDPs from Darfur, South Sudanese, Nuba, and Fur ethnic groups, according to a research participant.

Spotlight: Gendered hate speech

Displaced women are victims of sexist hate speech and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Sudan. Human Rights Watch reports significant sexual violence committed by the RSF in the areas they control.[110] A research participant who leads relief efforts for SGBV victims mentioned that *"the majority of victims of GBV (rape, assault, beating, etc.) in RSF-controlled areas are tea vendors; it is just not talked about very much. The same goes for the army, which has a constant hatred for tea and food vendors."* In SAF-controlled areas, displaced women from the western regions who work in the informal sector are reported to be targeted, for their alleged cooperation with the RSF.[111] Similarly, in the Eastern Region, *"displaced women from western regions working in the informal sector are often subjected to arbitrary arrest and violations by military intelligence and state authorities,"* according to a research participant in the Eastern Region.

Women activists are also direct targets in SAF-controlled areas. A research participant from Khartoum who was forcibly displaced to Gezira State spoke of feminists who were

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[109] Beam Reports (2023) *Documentary exposes public opinion through forgery of documents targeting the US Armed Forces and their supporters.*

[110] Human Rights Watch (2024) '*Sudan: Widespread sexual violence in the capital'.*

[111] Middle East Research and Information Project (2024) *Khartoum's Women Street Vendor Cooperatives and the Politics of Care.*

attacked by citizens of Gezira when they tried to set up a feminist centre. The undermining discourse targeted women from Khartoum, accusing them of being the reason for the war in Khartoum and declaring that their feminist activism was not allowed in Gezira State. She also mentioned that "*the army soldiers at the checkpoints used to judge women's outfits, such as trousers.*"

TFGBV was prevalent during the revolution and continues to silence women's voices during this war. Women played a major role during the December 2018 revolution against the NCP regime that had long oppressed them. During the revolution, online platforms became tools to suppress women's political activism.[112] Women activists were targeted by state and non-state actors (e.g. state media, activists) to discourage their participation in protests.[113] Furthermore, those from marginalised ethnic groups, feminists deviating from traditional dress codes, those speaking out against gender-based violence, and women in the public sphere, especially journalists, faced heightened vulnerability to TFGBV.[114] According to research participants, online attacks on women activists and those in leadership positions have been significant in comparison with their male counterparts. Women have also been excluded from decision-making. According to the Women's International League for Peace and Security, political parties in Sudan have "*used conservative social norms in arguing against women political participation in leadership positions.*"

Box 5: TFGBV quotes from research participants

"*At the beginning of my appearance in the media, there were threats of rape from online users in Sudan and abroad, while death threats were also extended offline to my parents and my brothers at school. In 2018, the threats forced me to leave Sudan altogether.*"

"*During the transitional government, Asha Musa, a civilian member of the Transitional Council, was undermined by some people who called her Haja Asha [Haja is a Sudanese word used to refer to old women]. Even though she is an educated woman, to associate her name in this way was a way of disrespecting her; it may be from a place of ignorance, but we shouldn't let this go.*"

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[112] Hopes and Actions Foundation (2023) *Breaking Barriers: Examining the digital exclusion of women and online gender-based violence in Sudan*.

[113] Hopes and Actions Foundation (2023) *Breaking Barriers: Examining the digital exclusion of women and online gender-based violence in Sudan*.

[114] Hopes and Actions Foundation (2023) *Breaking Barriers: Examining the digital exclusion of women and online gender-based violence in Sudan*.

> *"Maryam Alsadig, the former Sudanese Minister for Foreign Affairs, was subjected to a targeted smear campaign that leveraged deeply ingrained societal biases against women. She was derisively labelled 'the nomad merchant' due to her frequent travels, exploiting a cultural context where women who travel independently are often stigmatised and perceived as 'decadent' for defying traditional gender roles. This character assassination served to undermine her authority and reinforce patriarchal norms that seek to control women's mobility and limit their access to leadership positions. The campaign against Alsadig exemplifies how misogynistic attacks are weaponised to discredit women in public life and perpetuate gender inequality in Sudan."*

TFGBV, particularly of a sexualised nature, has been increasingly weaponised against women since the beginning of the war. Perpetrators exploit intersecting factors like race and political affiliation to further marginalise and harm their targets. For instance, according to a research participant, pictures of girls at the recent Taggadum founding conference in Addis were circulated on social media to smear their reputation, a demonstration of the use of sexualised TFGBV content against peace advocates. The prevalence of TFGBV is a reflection of Sudan culture that has normalised violence against, and the exclusion of, women.[115] A research participant mentioned that *"post-independent Sudan continued to exclude women systematically in laws, politics, culture, and social norms, besides labelling, stereotyping, and marginalising them."*

TFGBV has a direct impact on women's participation in peace efforts. According to previous research by the Hopes and Actions Foundation, TFGBV has limited the online participation of Sudanese women, or in some cases women have ultimately ceased their online presence as a result of TFGBV spreading offline.[116] Coordinated TFGBV attacks specifically targeting girls participating in peace talks may further limit the women's movement's ability to be active during this critical period of the war in Sudan, as the way in which perpetrators attempt to impute attributes of a sexualised nature to them may cause the girls' families to limit their activism for fear of TFGBV spreading offline. Public shaming is then used as a tactic to portray women or their professions as contrary to family values. This isolation from their primary support network leaves women vulnerable to physical and psychological harm.

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[115] Hopes and Actions Foundation (2023) *Breaking Barriers: Examining the digital exclusion of women and online gender-based violence in Sudan*.

[116] Hopes and Actions Foundation (2023) *Breaking Barriers: Examining the digital exclusion of women and online gender-based violence in Sudan*.

Conclusion and recommendations

Hate speech has contributed significantly to conflict and displacement in the current civil war in Sudan and remains a key obstacle to finding solutions for peace. It has created a vicious cycle in which historical grievances are exacerbated, social cohesion is fractured, and achieving peace becomes increasingly difficult.

Tackling hate speech requires a multifaceted and multi-stakeholder approach in the short and long term. This working paper focuses on recommendations specific to the dissemination of hate speech and disinformation, but recognises that there are important overarching needs to protect civilians from harm (e.g. through the delivery of aid and the deployment of security missions) and to achieve sustainable peace (e.g. through the extension of arms embargoes, the inclusion of civilians in peace and transitional justice processes,[117] and the prosecution of the RSF and the SAF by the International Criminal Court on the basis of documented extensive human rights violations[118]). Ultimately, countering hate speech is just one piece of the puzzle, and there will be a great need to address the root causes of socio-economic disparities across regions (e.g. through free and accessible education, promoting the access of marginalised communities to leadership roles, and economic development programmes) and to tackle the root causes of conflict.

In addition, all actors involved in peace processes should take seriously the gender dimension of hate speech. The manifestations of war and hate speech affect women differently from men, so women's experiences and voices online, as well as their offline participation in peace talks, are critical to the design and implementation of peacebuilding efforts.

This working paper recommends that:

1. **Media organisations should promote and increase engagement with the content of online fact-checking organisations** such as Beam Reports, Sudan Monitor, and Sudan Fact Check, and use their services by requesting verification of information and news. This will help counter misleading and fake news. In turn, fact-checking and media organisations should work to build the capacity of Sudanese online users by providing public media and information literacy training to develop the use of basic and publicly available tools and methods for verifying information.

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[117] Inclusive Security (2013) *Nine models for Inclusion of civil society in peace processes.*

[118] OHCHR (2024) *Sudan: UN Fact-Finding Mission outlines extensive human rights violations, international crimes, urges protection of civilians*

2. **Social media companies should adapt and improve their social media policies and efforts to combat hate speech.** The current approaches to combatting hate speech are likely to continue to fail to reduce hate speech and its impact on conflict in Sudan and globally. This requires several steps:

    a. First, social media companies should broaden their definitions of hate speech, focusing not only on protected characteristics but also on any incitement to violence.

    b. Second, social media companies should incorporate gender-specific reporting guidelines as part of social media content moderation policies. Social media companies should also focus their efforts on tackling TFGBV by removing content that targets women's freedom of expression and promotes harmful patriarchal norms. They should also report on TFGBV in their transparency reports.[119]

    c. Third, social media companies should invest in employing (for good wages) local content moderators who are familiar with local languages and cultural contexts.

    d. Fourth, social media platforms should improve automated hate speech detection by developing Natural Language Processing (NLP) models for under-resourced languages in collaboration with local communities, local civil society organisations, and researchers.[120]

    e. Fifth, social media platforms should empower users to fully understand hate speech reporting guidelines (including community notes). This could be done by integrating warnings messages and account suspensions into their platforms to educate users about the impact of their actions and encourage them to report harmful content.

    f. Finally, social media companies should reverse their decision to end their agreement with global fact-checking organisations[121] because of the impact this would have on conflict-affected areas such as Sudan. Instead, social media companies should work with local fact-checkers. Instead of deleting fake news or misleading content, social media

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[119] See for instance: https://transparency.meta.com/reports/

[120] Hopes and Actions Foundation (2023) *Breaking Barriers: Examining the digital exclusion of women and online gender-based violence in Sudan*.

[121] Tech Policy Press (2025) *Meta Dropped Fact-Checking Because of Politics. But Could Its Alternative Produce Better Results?*

companies can integrate a fact-checking tool into online posts that displays messages of verified content by local fact-checkers to determine whether the content is classified as false, disinformation or misinformation. This will help users to correct information that has already been disseminated, even after it has spread on social media.

g.   These measures should be combined with broader education and awareness campaigns that promote digital literacy and responsible online behaviour, proactively prevent online harassment, and conduct regular impact assessments to create safer and more inclusive online spaces.

3.   **Civil society, research organisations, and the media need to continue to expand their efforts to monitor and communicate on the effects of hate speech and disinformation.** Monitoring hate speech is critical both to exposing culpable actors, fake news, and social media accounts to raise user awareness, and to understanding the impact of their promoted ideologies in the social and political environment of Sudan.[122] Monitoring hate speech will also be a crucial tool for transitional justice to hold leaders legally accountable for disseminating hate speech. Some participants also recommend the development of hate monitoring projects that engage citizens from different regions of Sudan in reporting hateful messages and crimes, and the actors that perpetrate hate speech in their communities, by providing hotlines or other compatible communication channels that can enable users to report such incidents. This requires a collective effort by civil society and its allies to understand hate speech and its indicators, which could be supported by the dissemination of simple guidelines to assist users in reporting accurate information.

4.   **Civil society should promote counter-narratives that focus on peaceful coexistence.** Existing initiatives have shown that peaceful coexistence across ethnic lines is possible – for example, the emergence of emergency kitchens in conflict zones[123] during the war, as one research participant explained: "*We should reflect on the role emergency kitchens and spaces have played in responding to war atrocities by facilitating access to food, health, and education regardless of ethnicity in different neighbourhoods.*" To build these narratives and ensure that they are evidence-based, civil society should engage communities in participatory

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[122] Siapera E, Moreo E & Zhou J (2018) *Hate Track: Tracking and Monitoring Online Racist Speech*, Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

[123] Ahmed K (2024) "Deeply inspiring and humbling': how neighbourhoods in Sudan are coming together to fill gaps left by foreign aid', *The Guardian.*

research on the roots of local hate speech and on solutions for peaceful coexistence, while raising awareness about transitional justice, peace processes, democratic rights, and the negative impact of hate speech on their lives. Any social media campaigns should also focus on the importance of civilian voices in ending the war and expressing their expectations for transitional justice.

5. **International stakeholders involved in peace building in Sudan must take seriously the role of hate speech and fund initiatives to monitor and denounce hate speech.** Stakeholders such as the United States, the United States Institute of Peace, the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) should work with civil society to support the monitoring of hate speech and can play a role in advocating with social media companies for better moderation of content.

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