

## Sudan's revolution at a crossroads

**Sudan /**

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Gilbert Achcar grew up in Lebanon. He is currently Professor of Development Studies and International Relations at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. A regular and historical contributor to the press of the Fourth International, his books include *The Clash of Barbarisms. The Making of the New World Disorder* (2006), *The Arabs and the Shoah. The Arab-Israeli War of Narrations* (2012), *The People Wants. A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (2022). His most recent book – *The New Cold War. United States, Russia and China, from Kosovo to Ukraine* was published in 2023. He is a member of Anti\*Capitalist Resistance in Britain.

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Sudan is transitioning from a grassroots revolution to a post-revolutionary governmental structure, and from military to civilian control, and doing that in a world where protest has been put on hold. Will the revolution have a hard landing?

Khartoum is a city where North Africa blends with Sub-Saharan Africa, dark-skinned Arabs with black Africans, town with countryside, relative wealth with abject poverty. Contrasts fade in this huge, relatively flat city, made up of the three distinct conurbations of Khartoum, Bahri (North Khartoum) and Omdurman. [1] Among its mainly low-rise buildings, the spinnaker-shaped 18-storey Corinthia Hotel, built by the Libyan government under Gaddafi, looms like an Eiffel Tower.

The only other structures that stand out are relics of British colonial rule or recent Chinese-constructed official buildings (China was the accredited partner of ex-president Omar al-Bashir's regime). The most imposing are the unsightly headquarters of the various branches of Sudan's armed forces, all in a massive General Command compound. Huge crowds gathered outside the compound on 6 April 2019, the anniversary of the overthrow of another military dictator, Gaafar al-Nimeiry, in power 1969-85. Next day, Sudan was paralysed by a general strike and on 11 April, Bashir was deposed after 30 disastrous years as president.

The uprising began on 19 December 2018, when the price of bread rose by decree of a government determined to follow neoliberal precepts and replenish public coffers by extracting money from the poorest. The protests grew in size and radicalism until the sit-in outside the General Command on 6 April 2019, explicitly intended to encourage the armed forces to oust their supreme commander. The oldest or best educated Sudanese remembered that the officers who deposed Nimeiry in 1985 had only held power for a year before handing over to a democratically elected civilian government; but nearly everyone recalled thrilling scenes from the 2011 protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the epicentre of the popular uprising that drove the Egyptian military to depose President Hosni Mubarak, likewise after 30 years in office.

The demonstrators in Sudan had learned from the Egyptian experience, as had those in Algeria, who followed suit in February 2019 and got their armed forces to oust the president on 2 April. This encouraged the Sudanese to demand in turn that their army, despite its far more repressive relationship with the people, do the same. Algerians and Sudanese know too well, however, that military supervision of government is the keystone of the 'system' that 'the people want to bring down' (a common slogan of popular uprisings in the region).

### Where the army has political power

Egypt, Sudan and Algeria are the three states in the region where the army is the fundamental political institution. It was clear that the changes at the highest levels of the Egyptian state after 2011 had not altered the foundations of the regime, so that the dictatorship returned with a vengeance three years later. This made the popular movements in Algeria and Sudan wary: they continued to protest vigorously after their presidents were ousted, demanding a civilian

government with full executive powers. The enthusiastic reaction to the army's removal of Mubarak in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood was the main organised force within the popular movement, strongly contrasted with the defiant, rebellious reaction of the popular movement in Sudan (which had official representatives, where Algeria's did not). The Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change (FDFC) issued a statement on 11 April 2019, after Bashir's deposition, that began, 'The regime's authorities have carried out today a military coup through which they intend to reinstate the same faces and institutions that our courageous people have revolted against.'

Besides the lessons learned from Egypt, the radical nature of the Sudanese movement has been sustained by its organisation. The role played by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) and the FDFC is well known. [2] The SPA emerged by stages during the 2010s from the struggles of professional groups: in turn, doctors, journalists, lawyers, veterinary surgeons, engineers, and school and university teachers. It was formally established in October 2016, when doctors, journalists and lawyers adopted a charter, though without gaining government recognition. Ammar al-Bagir, a member of the SPA council, describes the association as a product of the educated middle classes (though he concedes that schoolteachers are not properly speaking middle class, nor are many journalists).

Like other countries emerging from a prolonged dictatorship with state-controlled trade unions, Sudan has witnessed since last year an extensive restructuring of the labour movement and farmers' associations. The left has been pressing for legislation to replace the corporatist enterprise unions, imposed under the Bashir regime, with occupational unions. Advocates of union pluralism have been pitted against those who want to maintain union unitarism and make it democratically answerable to general assemblies. In any event, the working class was considerably weakened under the Bashir regime, by extensive deindustrialisation in favour of a rentier economy based on extraction of natural resources (oil, until the secession of South Sudan in 2011, gold and other metals and ores), and by the dismantling of the public sector and externalisation of its services, all this leading to a rapid expansion of the informal sector.

The SPA quickly showed it could centralise information through social media, and from December 2018 became the voice of the struggles and of a revival of trade unionism. In June 2019 the military high command shut down the Internet while trying to suppress the protests by force, but had to restore access in July after this attempt failed. Activists in the Sudanese diaspora had meanwhile stepped in to handle SPA communications.

Through the formation of the FDFC, by a declaration adopted on 1 January 2019, the SPA allied itself with a wide range of political coalitions and civil society organisations opposed to the Bashir regime, from secular or moderate Islamist liberals, such as the Sudanese Congress Party and Sadiq al-Mahdi's National Umma party, to Communists, Arab nationalists and regionalists.

## Weight of tradition

Asha Elkarib, a feminist typical of the 'educated middle class' that the SPA represents, regrets that it joined the FDFC on the same footing as the other members. She would have preferred it to continue as federator of the labour movement in parallel with the FDFC, as this would have given it greater influence over the direction of events. Moreover, the balance of power between the different political affiliations within the SPA, where they are not represented as such, is not the same as within the FDFC, where the weight of tradition prevails over the renewal resulting from the uprising.

The divides between generations, and between men and women, are clearly apparent in the field of political and social action in Sudan, where young people and women, and hence especially young women, complain of patriarchal domination in political life and parties. They see themselves as democratic forces keeping a critical eye on a political process led by traditional parties of the opposition, and they have considerable political weight.

Sudan's December Revolution, as the uprising is known, shows just how much social media can strengthen the influence of social and political grassroots. There was a wave of protests after the FDFC named its delegates for negotiations with the military after the deposition of Bashir: it was forced to issue a public apology for only having included one woman, though women were a majority in the popular movement.

Women are represented in the movement primarily by the Civilian and Political Feminist Groups (the Arabic acronym is Mansam), a coalition, formed during the uprising, of women's organisations linked to opposition political forces, including the influential and long-established Sudanese Women's Union, which is close to the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP). The dynamic created by bringing together women from different political groups and associations represents feminist demands more strongly than women from the individual parties could have done separately. Mansam and the No to Oppression Against Women Initiative, founded in 2009 and also represented within the FDFC, have secured a 40% quota of seats for women on the legislative council, which has yet to be formed. However, feminists are shocked that there are only four women among the 18 cabinet members designated by the FDFC (the defence and interior portfolios are the military's preserve) and are demanding parity at every level.

One aspect of the December Revolution that has attracted little comment outside Sudan is the role of the Resistance Committees. These committees lead the process and are its critical conscience; they are the organised force of rebellious youth who were at the heart of the uprising, and its most radical element, maintaining revolutionary pressure. The December Revolution mobilised young people as revolutions have always done (the 'revolution of the young' cliché used in the media since 2011 is a pleonasm), but the movements in the region since the Arab Spring, like other youth movements across the world since then, are novel in their greater degree of self-organisation, made possible by new communication technologies.

## Hoping for horizontal organisation

Business management experts have told us for some years, with elementary materialism, that these technologies will lead to horizontal networks replacing pyramidal structures. This is particularly true of revolutionary organisations. The technological revolution came at just the right time to help mobilise a generation highly suspicious of the centralised (and male chauvinist) form of political party that presided over the left's 20th century disasters – and the flaws of such political parties were extreme in this part of the world. In every country that saw the Arab Spring, as well as the 'Second Spring' that began in Sudan, millions of young people mobilised using a network-based form of self-organisation independent from political parties. The centralised organisation of the past was replaced by 'coordination committees', which played an important role in the early phase of the Syrian uprising, as they do in the Sudanese uprising today, where local coordination committees link neighbourhood resistance committees in a nationwide network.

This network has grown strong, taking advantage of the paralysis of the repression apparatus early in the uprising, and of the consolidation of newly acquired freedoms, especially since the failed attempt at repression last June. Neighbourhood resistance committees have been formed in major cities and rural communities, bringing together many people, mostly young and previously politically unorganised. For example, Bahri (North Khartoum) is thought to have nearly 80 resistance committees, each with several hundred members. These grassroots committees have established local coordination committees; they reject any kind of centralisation and are keen to preserve their autonomy. This is why they have delegated to the FDFC the right to speak on behalf of the popular movement, of which they have rapidly become the spearhead, but are keeping watch on the political parties in an uncertain transition that relies on a compromise with the military.

The resistance committees have also been quick to fill the void left by the collapse of the corrupt 'people's committees' of the Bashir regime, which combined the provision of municipal services with surveillance at neighbourhood level. These have been replaced by 'service committees' tasked with organising local services, especially the equitable distribution of commodities in short supply, such as bread or fuel. [3]

There was a sharp reaction last November when the new federal government minister attempted to institutionalise the resistance committees by renaming them 'service and change committees' and placing them under the supervision of the FDFC. A communiqué signed by 40 coordination committees and local resistance committees criticised the minister and the FDFC, warning them against any attempt to undermine the independence of the resistance committees, their role in fighting the forces of the former Bashir regime, and their self-assigned mission to monitor the political transition.

The committees would have to be tamed or suppressed before the revolutionary dynamics could be interrupted or stalemated in a compromise with the forces of the old regime. The Sudanese call

this a 'soft landing' for their revolution; the alternatives are either a continued journey or a crash landing, depending on one's political viewpoint. The December Revolution has remained at the crossroads of these possibilities since the 17 July 2019 agreement between the FDFC and the military, which formalised power-sharing between the armed forces and the popular movement. Success for the revolution

The agreement provoked a split in the FDFC, between the liberal and reformist parties and the Communist party which, under radical pressure from younger members, rejected it. Al-Shafi Khodr, a former member of the SCP expelled in 2016 for insubordination, is only moderately optimistic about the success of the revolutionary process. He is regarded as the éminence grise of transitional prime minister Abdalla Hamdok, former deputy executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa, and likewise a former member of the SCP.

The future of Sudan's revolution rests on economic policy and the transfer of power to a civilian government. Like the governments that emerged from the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, the transitional government in Sudan has until now tried to stick to the neoliberal precepts that led to the fall of Bashir. Finance and economy minister Ibrahim Elbadawi, for many years an economist at the World Bank before heading research centres in Dubai and Cairo, announced in December 2019 that fuel subsidies would be phased out in 2020. After popular protests, the FDFC persuaded him to backtrack. He also had to reassure the people that subsidies on other staples, including bread, would be maintained.

The economic situation is deteriorating. Inflation is out of control, the Sudanese pound on the black market is worth only half its official value, youth unemployment is over 30%, and many people eke out a living in the informal sector or precarious jobs (Sudan, too, suffers from Uberisation). All these are made worse by the coronavirus pandemic. Though the transitional government's response to its spread was quick and vigorous, the economy is likely to slow sharply.

As with Tunisia and Egypt, the Sudanese government seems to be counting on handouts from rich countries and the benevolence of pillars of the global economic order headquartered in Washington. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, former chairman of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and current chairman of the Sovereignty Council (SC), used the prospect of US aid to justify meeting Israel's Binyamin Netanyahu in Uganda this February (see *Cosying up to Israel*, in this issue). The meeting was sharply criticised in Sudan. Before the pandemic changed everything, Sudan's hopes of international economic aid were greatly diminished by the social radicalism of its protest movement. It is impossible to predict whether this radicalism will survive the pandemic, which has halted protest movements worldwide, from Hong Kong to Algeria, France and Chile.

## Threat of the army

There is another, even greater threat to the future of the compromise in Sudan: the military. Liberals and reformers are trapped between the radical grassroots, which demand that all executive power be transferred to a civilian government, including putting the armed forces under the control of elected institutions, and the military's attachment to its autonomy, if not to its control over civil institutions. Sadiq al-Mahdi believes he can reconcile these positions by spreading the transition over an extended period. This cultivated 85-year-old religious and political leader (a graduate of Oxford) is the leading advocate of a soft landing. He believes in compromise, and not in politics alone. On the issue of secularism, for instance, he envisages a peaceful coexistence between sharia and optional individual civil status. But mediating on the status of the armed forces means betting on their goodwill.

Many would justify such a gamble on the basis of the alleged rift between the regular army, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces, former paramilitaries implicated in the Darfur genocide and now a full part of the armed forces, led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka Hemetti, deputy chairman of the TMC and the SC. The attempt to assassinate Hamdok on 9 March, and the mutiny in January by a section of the security forces nostalgic for the Bashir regime, were reminders of the diversity of local counter-revolutionary forces: they are not limited to the two factions of the army supported by the triple alliance of the Saudi kingdom, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

The revolutionaries have made no organised political overtures towards the lower ranks of the armed forces, although fraternisation between the military and the popular movement was a decisive factor in the high command's decision to depose Bashir, as it was in the decision to halt

repression last June. Yet popular political action aimed at the armed forces flared up again recently. In February the forced retirement of young officers who had refused to use violence against protesters – among them, Lieutenant Mohamed Sidiq Ibrahim, who became a popular hero – triggered huge protests that ended in clashes with the forces of repression. The military high command was forced to reinstate the officers.

The revolutionaries' greatest asset is their determination. When I pointed out that the military would not hesitate to kill to defend their privileges, Kasha Abdel-Salam, head of the Organisation of Martyrs' Families whose son was killed early in the uprising, replied, 'They are prepared to kill, but we are prepared to die.'

*Translated by Charles Goulden for [Le Monde Diplomatique](#), May 2020.*

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[1] My thanks go to Anwar Awad, Mustafa Khamis, Khadija el-Dewehi, Mohamed Abd-el-Gyom and Talal Afifi, for their help this February, and to others whom I could not quote in this article.

[2] See Gilbert Achcar, 'The seasons after the Arab Spring', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, June 2019.

[3] See Aidan Lewis, 'Revolutionary squads guard Sudan's bakeries to battle corruption', Reuters, 19 February 2020.

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