A Revolutionary Way of Doing Politics Is Taking Shape in Sudan

written by Muzan Alneel | January 30, 2023

Four months after a historic popular upsurge in Sudan in December 2018 and the government repression that followed, the military deposed long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir. Civilian and military forces then governed in partnership, with democratic sectors pressing for an all-civilian government. But then on October 25, 2021, the military launched another coup. Popular pressure forced the military to back down, and a deal was announced to reinstate a military-civilian partnership. The deal was widely rejected by protestors and the general public in Sudan, but it found overwhelming support from the international community. The Sudanese people's rejection of any form of military rule met patronizing statements from international diplomats, such as the UN secretary general's "appeal to common sense,"[1] as he argued for accepting military generals in power.

The continuation of protests rendered that deal pointless, and the prime minister who signed it announced his resignation and left the country. The deal has failed, and so did many other attempts to legitimize military rule in Sudan that came wrapped in different names and with different national and international advocates. More than a year after the coup, the military generals are yet to form a government and protestors are in the streets chanting against the coup almost daily around the country. The resistance front was sustained and strengthened by new political actors, committed to a revolutionary way of doing politics and providing daily evidence that their way, not the way of backroom elitist agreements, is the path to realizing the slogan of the revolution: freedom, peace, and justice. The evolution of the Sudanese resistance front in the past few years is worthy of serious attention and support. It provides crucial lessons in a world where the questions of revolution are highlighted on a daily basis.

Four Years of Reshaping Sudan

The year 2022 was the fourth year of the Sudanese December Revolution, which was ignited in December 2018 by dire economic conditions and which managed to pressure the military generals into toppling their leader, and the country's president for almost 30 years, in April 2019. What started in December 2018 as spontaneous protests by citizens angered by price hikes slowly moved into more structured forms. For a couple of weeks at the beginning of the month, the protests took place on Fridays, following the pattern of the "Arab spring." This was followed by the grand entrance of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) on the scene. The newly announced association of parallel unions of white-collar workers (doctors, engineers, and others) took leadership of the protests and announced weekly schedules, which were followed by thousands around Sudan. Faced by the brutality of the state's tools of violence, the killing of protestors, and violent dispersals of peaceful protests, the SPA called for the formation of neighborhood resistance committees (RCs). These committees were intended to take charge of mobilizing and planning protests in their neighborhoods, in an effort to decentralize protests and minimize the ability of

security forces to suppress them all. The committees were a concept that the Sudanese resistance front had experimented with in past decades, but their widespread use after the SPA's call was unprecedented.

The protests grew stronger in the following months, and the state forces struggled to maintain control. The announcement of emergency laws and a nationwide curfew in mid-February 2019 inspired what can only be described as street festivals, which started before the soon-to-be-ousted president had even finished his speech. It was clear the people were not leaving the streets soon. In these same months, the SPA issued The Charter of Freedom and Change, signed by the SPA and the major political alliances in the country, who then became known as the Forces of the Charter of Freedom and Change (FFC). As the protests continued, the SPA called for marches of millions toward military headquarters around the country, to take place on April 6, 2019. On that day, what started as marches of millions turned into sit-ins surrounding military headquarters, and in less than a week the Military Council announced that it was taking power in Sudan. However, protestors were not satisfied with what the Military Council offered, and this was expressed with one word that became the most repeated in chants and discussions around the country for the following months and years: *Madaneya* (civilian). Protestors displayed their commitment to a fully civilian government by maintaining their sit-ins, by more protests that announced the sit-ins in every city as their destination, and by facing violent attacks from security forces on the sit-ins.

The success and growth of the resistance front culminated in a two-day strike at the end of May 2019 that brought the entire country to a halt. The strike, which closed markets, schools, ports, airports, and even oil production sites, raised the slogan "Madaneya 100%" (100% civilian). This slogan was the popular response to proposals for power-sharing that were coming out of negotiations between the FFC and the Military Council. A short four days after the end of the strike, in the early hours of June 3, 2019, security forces attacked peaceful sit-ins in 14 cities around Sudan including the capital. Security forces killed more than a hundred people on that day alone, with the bodies of many victims tied to bricks and thrown into the Nile. Dozens were raped and hundreds remain missing to this day. The brutality was designed to ignite fear among the Sudanese population and institute full military control. However, it instead ignited more resistance, and despite a full nationwide internet shutdown for more than a month after the June 3 massacre, the RCs worked and communicated on the ground, mobilizing protests and organizing for another march of millions. The march's success was undeniable, and so was the public rejection of military rule.

In a clear contrast to public opinion, the FFC chose to re-enter negotiations with the military. A power-sharing agreement between the two sides was signed as a result, and a new transitional government was appointed in August. Although the FFC struggled to convince the Sudanese population that this arrangement could lead to achieving the demands of the revolution, resorting to "stopping the bloodshed" as their main justification, the public was skeptical. Nevertheless, the set-up was widely praised by international actors from regional to Western governments and institutions. These same actors continued to praise the transitional government over the following two years, even as its economic policies copied the previous regime's, which had ignited the protests in the first place.

The year 2020 was rich with economic debates in Sudan, as the government pushed for implementing economic liberalization and minimized the state's role in providing for its citizens. This year also brought Sudan a new peace agreement, not unlike the ones the previous regime signed, giving some governmental positions to the leaders of the armed resistance but producing minimal impact on the lives of people in conflict areas. Most of these renewed old policies were passed on the back of political messaging that characterized any critique of the transitional government as an act of support for the toppled regime.

In 2021, as the economic reality worsened and inflation exceeded 300 percent, tensions between the partners in the government escalated as well. Their disagreements were not related to the people's dire reality or the partners' failure to provide the basic needs of the population but were over government appointments, distribution of ministries, and other technicalities. The coup that took place at the end of that year came as no surprise to the general Sudanese public nor to the RCs. The protests that started as a direct reaction to news of the coup in the early hours of October 25, 2021, were then led and organized by the RCs. By this point, public trust in the SPA and the FFC had significantly diminished. The committees had the faith of the public: They had spent the previous two years supporting the residents of their neighborhoods as they faced economic hardship, organizing distribution of bread and fuel, and initiating maintenance of public utilities, while also leading protests against the government's divergence from the demands of the revolution and the lack of justice for martyrs killed by the military during the revolution. The RCs had taken on these tasks while carefully phrasing each slogan and demand to avoid being characterized as enemies of the "government of the revolution" and supporters of the toppled regime. The experience, capacity, and trust gained by the RCs in those two years supported their ascendance to the leadership of the resistance front.

In the year since the coup, RCs announced no less than one major protest a week, and that doesn't include the smaller neighborhood protests. They announced the Three No's slogan: "no negotiations, no partnership, and no legitimacy for the military."[2] The committees' work continues to disrupt the attempts of the national elite and the international community to force a return to the military-civilian partnership. The elite are faced with a new way of doing politics in Sudan mainly shaped by the RCs. The lessons of this experience are worthy of attention and careful study by those aware of the need for revolutionary change.

The Bourgeoisie Will Not Lead the Revolution

A revolution that delivers to the working people will not take place under the leadership of a class with interests that contradict those of the working people; the bourgeoisie cannot and will not lead the revolution. Although a self-evident statement, its manifestation in reality can come with noise disturbing the obvious fact and is thus worthy of study.

The formation of the FFC faced public questioning from its early days. The new alliance of old forces included the classic bourgeois parties that controlled Sudan's political scene since its independence, among them the old sectarian parties, the newer liberal ones, and the Sudanese Communist Party. Many of them had joined the governments of the previous regime or signed alliances with them at different times. Some renounced the concept of the revolution a short few months before the first protest and were advocating for participating in another rigged election controlled by the regime. Public apprehension was understandable. Yet the position that the majority of the resistance took toward the FFC is better summarized in a phrase that went viral in response to news of one of the sectarian leaders joining a protest in person. The yet-to-be organized resistance front responded, "He is welcome as comrade, not a leader." The leadership titles were bestowed by the public upon the SPA.

The Charter of Freedom and Change, issued by the SPA and published with the signatures of what became known as the FFC, was received positively. It started with a call to overthrow the existing regime and the appointment of a transitional government with defined priorities. However, a more careful reading of the charter reveals its contradictions. For example, the point related to ending the war closes by stressing the preservation of the existing land tenure system. This minimizes the chance of effective wealth and land redistribution for the benefit of the majority, a redistribution that contradicts the interests of the existing elite. The authors of the charter revealed their alignment with the interests of the elite on this matter and many others in the months that followed.

As soon as official spokespersons of the FFC started appearing on mainstream regional media, they dressed the popular anger in the morals of the bourgeoisie and they were often offended by any indication of the Sudanese revolution being ignited by poverty or hunger. They used phrases such as "revolution of consciousness" and insisted the demands of the protestors were democracy and freedom, not affordable food and a decent standard of living. These phrases were also later used by the transitional government as a justification for deprioritizing economic concerns. Democracy is on the line, and the transition must be protected at all costs.

Glorification of Western praises and visits bestowed upon the government, emphasis on decency and an English-speaking prime minister as a great gain of the revolution, and using the "difficult legacy" of the old regime as an excuse were among the many messaging tools used to muddy the reality of continuing divergences from the priorities of the revolution and the government's alignment with the interests of the rich. The success of these messaging tools in taming the public highlights the gap left by the lack of a revolutionary party at present in Sudan. It is among the most important tasks of a revolutionary party to accumulate revolutionary knowledge and further clarify the contradictions of the interests of the oppressed and those of their oppressors.

One who believes that political party names represent their true values might imagine the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) would take on the role of the revolutionary party. The SCP was a founding member of the FFC, an alliance of sectarian and liberal parties. And for months after this alliance was created in early 2019, FFC statements and positions varied in their level of tolerance to ideas of partnerships with the military. SCP statements often condemned such positions and sometimes exposed details of the negotiation process. This position of the SCP, joining an alliance with the bourgeoisie and condemning their bourgeois positions, is aligned with the philosophy adopted by the SCP advocating for an alliance with the "national" capitalists. Instead of clarifying the contradictions between the interests of the FFC parties and those of the people, the SCP joined the alliance, promoted it, and theorized a path to ending oppression that included alliances with the oppressors. Logical and historical evidence that alliances with the bourgeoisie further only the bourgeoisie's interests and deepen the suffering of the oppressed were ignored by the SCP. Their position is best explained by a clarification provided a little over a hundred years ago regarding other communists-in-name:

> The "mistake" of the leaders I have named lies in their petty-bourgeois position, in the fact that instead of clarifying the minds of the workers, they are befogging them; instead of dispelling petty-bourgeois illusions, they are instilling them; instead of freeing the people from bourgeois influence, they are strengthening that influence. (V. I. Lenin, *Pravda* No. 28, April 9, 1917)

Under the leadership of the bourgeoisie and its allies, the revolution was mostly alive in name only. The words of the revolution were used by counter-revolutionary governments and parties to justify one divergence from its demands after the other. This situation repressed the potential of structural revolutionary change. The revolution was halted by its bourgeois leadership.

A New Way of Doing Politics Is Emerging

In the months that followed the SPA's call for creating neighborhood RCs, the framework behind the call manifested itself. The communication taking place between the SPA and the RCs was limited to a top-down approach, with the SPA putting out protest schedules and the RCs expected to implement them on the ground. No clear tools were created for feedback from the RCs, and although a form of inter-RC network was mentioned in the first call, there was no promotion of collaboration between RCs of even adjacent neighborhoods. In hindsight, these actions alone are enough to show that the SPA, and the FFC behind it, only considered the RCs as pawns to be utilized

in street confrontations, with no intention of democratically including them in political decision-making. However, this is further confirmed by the repeated answer from FFC leaders to the question of what guarantees they have that the military will uphold their part of the partnership agreements. FFC leaders often answered that the RCs are the guarantee, as they will come out—which can also be read, "they will be called out"—to the streets in the face of any betrayal. Bear in mind that the RCs were in no way included in the negotiations that created this agreement that they are expected to defend with their bodies in the streets.

However, the RCs outgrew the submissive role the elite wished for them. Their evolution was motivated and guided by necessity, starting from the protests they called a few weeks after the appointment of the transitional government. These were among the first countrywide protests to be called for not by the SPA but by the RCs, demanding justice for the martyrs of the massacre and trials for the military generals responsible for the massacre. Such justice never came, a logical result of the criminals being in power.

The committees provided a way for actors outside the elite to impact political reality. Young women and men, many unemployed, some low-wage workers and a few middle-class professionals, not requiring ancestral privilege or technocratic credentials, could join their neighborhood committee and join a meaningful discussion on the RCs' joint stance toward the decisions of those in power—a large step in the revolution.

At the end of 2019, the new transitional government was preparing to issue its first national budget. Upon news of more austerity measures, the RC in the Ministry of Finance sought to inform several political actors of the disastrous impact of such policies as well as of alternative approaches. The RCs being the actor most reflective of the interests of the majority were logically the most responsive. Together with the RC in the Ministry of Finance, the neighborhood RCs organized against the austerity budget and forced the transitional government to place it on hold and hold a national conference for a more democratic discussion of economic policies. The government eventually passed its intended, disastrous policies. However, the RCs gained unprecedented capacity as a result of engaging in the economic discussion and the education they received from the Finance Ministry's RC for more than seven months in preparation for the conference.

The transitional government tried to absorb and contain the RCs in several ways, the most notable of which was enacting a law that changes their name to Service and Change Committees and including them in the municipal structure. The reaction to this move differed from one RC to the other. Some saw the move as an attempt to depoliticize the RCs and rejected it vigorously, some accepted it, and some compromised by creating another committee for that purpose or creating a service office within the existing RC. Nevertheless, austerity measures and governmental failure to provide basic goods and services forced the RCs into the role of service provision. This greatly educated the committees on matters of local governance and strengthened their bonds to the community, and as a result, the communities' trust and faith in them grew.

All these developed capacities and learned lessons factored into the RCs' response to the coup. The Three No's slogan adopted by the committees against the military coup (no negotiations, no partnership, and no legitimacy for the military) revealed a departure from the elite's ways of negotiations and compromises among themselves with total disregard for the interests of the majority. And while international actors and the national elite spent the following year recreating negotiations under different names, the RCs maintained over a year of peaceful protests in the streets in the face of brutality that killed more than 120 protestors in that year alone. The RCs also announced early on that a new political alliance is required to lead the new revolutionary wave. However, with the memory of recent betrayals and the capture of their political will by the elite, they announced the issue of alliances would only be discussed after they had issued their own political

charter(s)[3] detailing their proposed solutions and their road map to defeating the coup and achieving the goals of the revolution. The RCs also clearly announced that they will only join alliances with parties that share their vision. This rational position spiked anger among the elite and the bourgeois parties for whom “unity” had become the new favorite word.

It is important to highlight that the positions of the different RCs varied on the aforementioned issues and many others; they are after all geographically based grassroots organizations with no pre-defined ideological stance. The different interests of neighborhoods that vary economically and socially will always impact the decisions and evolution of the committees. However, it cannot be denied that they engaged, and continue to engage, a historically larger percentage of the population in political decision-making, including by groups never provided this access in the past.

The new way of the RCs paralyzed a military coup for over a year and disarmed the tools of the international community in forcing elitist settlements and further exploitation on the population of Sudan.

Prospects of more revolutionary and democratic structures can also be seen in the RCs’ political charters, mainly the call for creating residents and workers councils. These councils are the first step toward democratic selection of delegates to higher levels of governance, leading to appointing the national legislative body and selecting the country’s prime minister. The new challenge currently facing the RCs is the implementation of this vision, with the councils functioning not just as a structure for the selection of delegates and governments, but also as a popular tool of self-governance and direct engagement of the people in making the decisions impacting their resources and needs. That is how “people’s power” can manifest itself. That is revolution.

notes

1. United Nations, “Press Conference by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.” Dec. 1, 2021.

2. Muzan Alneel, “The People of Sudan Don’t Want to Share Power with Their Military Oppressors,” *Jacobin* (Nov. 24, 2021).

3. Muzan Alneel, “The Charters of Sudan’s Political Landscape,” The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, Apr. 26, 2022.