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LEVIATHAN

Sudan's Third Revolution: How Women are Rightly Paving the Way for a Democratic Era

__Guy Stewart__ explores the collapse of Sudan's longstanding Islamist political system and its subsequent transformation at the hands of the youthful, feminist movement that saw the regime's demise.

The viral image of female student Alaa Salah leading protests in 2019 through Khartoum, Sudan's capital, is an apt symbol of the importance and complexity of the nation's recent political revolution (Reilly 2019). The inspiring photograph demonstrates that women, comprising an estimated two-thirds of the tens of thousands of protestors, were undeterred by the violence and injustices served by government forces (BBC 2019). Salah led crowds in demanding an end to thirty years of dictator al-Bashir's dangerous and irresponsible Islamist governance and policy (O'Fahey 1996, 258-67). His mistreatment of the people and economy worsened after he assumed absolute power in 1999, manipulating a system already based on problematic ideology (Hassan and Kodouda 2019, 89-103). The revolutionary movement was strongly influenced by the inclusive ideals of feminism. Sudan's sisters, mothers, and grandmothers fought back against a long history of misogyny and violence against women (Copnall 2019). The revolution is arguably the most drastic development in Sudan since its independence form Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule in 1955; the nascent democracy should not forget the importance of guaranteeing the socio-political rights and freedoms denied to women.

Since gaining independence in 1956, Sudanese politics have been characterised by turbulence. A series of military coups, which ultimately led to unsuccessful and unstable governments, instilled a desire for political stability in Sudanese intellectuals. The idea of forming an Islamist Sudanese State was born in the 1960s, but only came to fruition with the formation of the Ikhwan, the Sudanese arm of the Muslim Brotherhood founded by a small group of Muslim, male intellectuals and politicians who had been incarcerated together in Khartoum under President Gaafar Nimeiry (Besançon 2017, 115). Sheikh Hassan al-Turabi, one of these men, engineered the coup d'état of 1989 that established President al-Bashir's totalitarian Islamist government, which survived until April 2019. For the Ikhwan, freeing themselves from their colonial history through political Islam was not synonymous with extremism (Besançon, 115). Their desire to present a politicised Islam in the modern world finds root in the historical opposition between modern Islam and Eurocentric Western modernity (Tayob 2016, 161-82). This tension, while not passionately felt by the majority of Muslims, may explain the manifestation of Islamist fundamentalist ideologies that deviate from the broader socio-political movement situating Islam in the modern world (Meijer 2005, 279-91; Euben 1997, 28-55). While the Ikhwan may have started pragmatically by offering opposition to the unfavourable postcolonial status quo, corruption exacerbated the fundamentalist ideals that allowed al-Bashir's totalitarian rule. Furthermore, as feminist scholarship has recognised, such anticolonial attitudes went hand-in-hand with extreme resistance to gender equality, a goal of Western feminism (Mir-Hosseini 2006, 639). These fundamentalist attitudes were also supported by a generation that believed Islam's teachings were integral to education and socialisation, and thus that they could create a successful harmony between religion and politics – a theocracy (Besançon, 126).

Therefore, more than forty years before the revolution of 2019, a select few Sudanese men were in a position to transform the state—and they did so with their own masculinist ideals. The group saw various iterations: the Islamic Charter Front, the Sudanese Islamic Movement, and finally, the bona fide political party,

the National Islamic Front (NIF). International critics vilified the group for violent Islamism, hosting bin Laden in the 1990s, and for their leader, al-Turabi, a 'decidedly controversial Islamist' (Besançon, 117). Though they cleverly survived criticism, the NIF was a minority party, so in 1996 the more inclusive National Congress Party (NCP) was formed with a relative majority of Islamist members (40%) but with the remaining 60% representing other parties and communities. This diversification of party membership allowed al-Bashir and his group to maintain power (Besançon, 124). The survival of the party meant that political and societal transformation would continue unabated.

This transformation proved harmful to women because the existence of the NCP permitted polarising and extremist ideologies. Islamic feminist discourse acknowledges that, for postcolonial states, the aim of eradicating all Western legacy from their independent national identity leads many to plunge deeper into fundamentalist clerical Islam (Majid 1998, 338). In Sudan, a political brand of Islam that professes an idealised opposition to colonialist projects has actually benefitted the power schemes of the men in charge (Temin and Murphy 2011). Under these circumstances, the emancipation of Sudanese women had been made nearly impossible.

The Islamists also aimed to integrate Sudan into the Arab world, despite its African geographical classification. Their intention was to build relationships with other Arab countries and legitimise itself as a player in Islamic politics (Besançon, 123). Efforts to unify Islamists, such as the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress (PAIC) attempted to persuade rebel, radical, and Islamic organisations to share common socio-political ideologies with Sudan. But for powers like Saudi Arabia, close involvement with such Islamist extremists was unfavourable, and Sudan subsequently became a sort of pariah in the Arab world and was viewed as a danger in the West (Besançon, 123). Affirmation by international players that the NCP's politics were dangerous confirmed that, for Sudanese society and specifically its women, a bleak road lay ahead. Political deterioration peaked when al-Bashir assumed dictatorial control in 1999, expelling even al-Turabi from party and government. Still backed by Islamist intellectuals and politicians, al-Bashir ruled with brutality, criminality, and extremism under his political rebrand, 'Salvation' (Hale 1997, 1-168; Hassan and Kodouda, 89-103). The former president was responsible for the violence of various civil wars that eventually lead to the secession of the South in 2011, and with it, the source of Sudan's economic wealth – oil (Hendawi 2019).

While prioritising religion in politics might have served as a unifying and guiding ideology, a theocracy that only prescribes to one school of thought is ultimately marginalising. This is most noticeable as it affects women, who have suffered a raft of injustices over the last three decades. As recently as 2015, a pregnant woman was sentenced to death for 'apostasy' and one hundred lashings for 'adultery' (Human Rights Watch 2016). While Sayyed Ahmed, one of the principal members of the NIF, believed that Sudan was unique in striving for an inclusive, equal Islam – he included his own daughter in government – the reality did not match the rhetoric (Besançon, 123). The promotion of female figures under Islamist rule was based on false pretences. This was, in reality, an example of manipulating women into becoming 'auxiliaries' in support of patriarchal ideology; in Sudan specifically, their duty was to promote the traditional Islamist roles of women (Peterson 1996, 878; Hale, 1-168).

The rights of women were curbed institutionally as well. After the coup of 1989, the constitution was suspended, and instead Public Order Laws and the Criminal Act were introduced. Influenced by the Saudi Arabian legal system, it purported to create an Islamist culture that was seen as more appropriate and would 'storm against society's immorality' (WLUML 1997). Women were the principal victims, and they found themselves at the mercy of the police, who had the legal power to arrest and abuse them without cause (Malik 2010). The 'immortality' also referenced the already limited freedoms that women had been afforded after Sudan's independence, when the inclusion of women in the workforce was considered important in building the economy (Hale, 1-168). In 1965, Sudanese women gained suffrage, and equal pay policy was introduced in 1975 (Hale, 1-168). However, as Sondra Hale points out, 'the development of capital-intensive economic schemes and the appearance of multinational corporations in [the late 1970s to the 1990s] had a drastic effect on gender arrangements' (Hale, 1-168). The N.I.F. further revoked women's rights and freedoms after they achieved power in 1989. Their introduction of Sharia (Islamic law) into the legal system permitted the violent oppression of women, practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), and the control of their individual and economic rights (Gaafar and Shawkat 2019; WLUML 1997).

It is clear, therefore, that the rights of Sudanese women have never been protected constitutionally or societally. While gender equality activists from the educated middle class made attempts at redefining women's position in society, the NIF supressed these attempts (Hale, 1-168). Sudanese women, like many others in Islamist states, were caught between two betrayals: abandoning either their Muslim faith or their desire for gender equality (Mir-Hosseini, 639). Moreover, the theocratic government has been able to control gender inequalities through the education of women in Sudan. While Khartoum University purports to have a female student population of 60%, this is unrepresentative of the greater picture (Besançon, 126). Female illiteracy in Sudan is up at 39% in rural areas (far higher than that of men) and UNICEF has found that 49% of girls are missing from primary education (Elbagir 2016 ; Global Partnership for Education 2018). The young girls that do make it to school find themselves in a male-dominated and 'hostile' learning environment that indoctrinates them with misogynistic Islamist ideology (Borgen Project 2019).

With a society suffering the oppression of al-Bashir's rule and the economy deteriorating to the point where the price of bread increased three-fold, Sudan in early 2019 was at its breaking point (BBC 2019). In Khartoum, protestors displayed an unstoppable determination for change. Tens of thousands encircled the military headquarters, refusing to disband until al-Bashir was removed from government (Copnall 2019). On April 11th, the dictator was overthrown by his own generals who installed the Transitional Military Council, claiming they would aid in the creation of a civilian government (Abdelaziz 2019). Revolutionaries were rightly unconvinced by the group that was made up of war criminals and old allies of al-Bashir (Abdelaziz, Head of Sudan's military council steps down, a day after Bashir toppled 2019).

Protests continued, and it was women who led the revolution. They knew the importance of staying active and having their voices heard; as shown by previous revolutions, allowing men to forget about their contributions and maintain the status quo was not an option (Peterson, 873). Women remained undeterred even as the government's paramilitary forces killed and raped protesters (African Feminism 2019). Women who were imprisoned and had their heads shaved returned to the streets once freed, demonstrating to their male comrades that they shouldn't be discouraged by the tyranny of the government forces (Gaafar and Shawkat 2019). Sudanese feminist journalism recognizes that '[women's] organization, tenacity and ability to reach people […] women, families and relatives – makes [them] especially effective' (Gaafar and Shawkat 2019). For young women in Sudan, and for the international audience, this was embodied in Alaa Salah.

Not only was this revolution modern in its diversity, but it was also modern in its ability to fight from all possible corners. Once again, female protestors were key in documenting the atrocities of government forces, sharing them on Facebook groups and publicly identifying the men that behaved criminally. The possibility of being personally identifiable led many of the paramilitary soldiers to cover their faces for fear of being named (Gaafar and Shawkat 2019). This shift demonstrates the power of the protestors and represents an ironic turn of the tables; those fighting on behalf of the government felt that the safety of their identity was compromised. The revolution online as well as in the streets made it hard for the government to police and censor protest. It gave Sudanese and international journalists the tools to report the facts and to allow those facts to be understood by every participant in the revolution, despite the chaos ensuing outside.

Having dismantled al-Bashir's government and prevented a return to military rule, Sudanese women should now enjoy the socio-political equality that they have previously been denied. The inclusion of women in the developing political system will help prevent Sudan from relapsing into its oppressive history. The appointment of Sudan's first female Chief Justice, Neemat Abdullah, and foreign minister, Asmaa Abdullah, are promising steps. As Alaa Salah said: 'given women's pivotal role in working towards peace and development, there is no excuse for us not to have an equal seat at every single table' (Reilly 2019). Considering the history of gender inequality and oppression, Sudanese women's right to power goes beyond their recent efforts in bringing about change.

The promotion of female voices in Sudanese politics is not only a fundamental right, but it will also aid a more comprehensive democratic transition and development of inclusive policy. Studies have shown that women in government work better together and in a less partisan manner, whereas men adopt more autocratic mentalities, as was apparent in the exclusivity of the NIF power nucleus (Eagly and Johnson 1990, 233-56). Furthermore, female politicians have been evidenced to spend more on health and education, a change that is desperately needed to improve equality of opportunity in Sudan (Ng and Muntaner, 2019). Women in power

are also beneficial for the political climate: 'levels of gender equality are strongly correlated with a nation's relative state of peace [and] a healthier domestic security environment' (Piccone 2017, 1-9). This is particularly important for a nation that has seen little but militant brutality in its history as an independent nation.

Having seen the triumph of Islamist ideology for over thirty years, Sudan faces a challenge in completely transforming as a nation. The appetite for gender equality is evident in a revolutionary movement lead by women and supported by thousands. The nascent government appears to be moving in the right direction, but with such deep-rooted fractures in society, only time will tell if Sudan can achieve the equality its women demand and deserve.

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