

Gendering the Revolution: Analysing Women's Role in Sudan's Revolutionary Transition

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Introduction

The 2019 Sudanese Revolution highlighted women's role in bringing down Omar al-Bashir's authoritarian regime that had ruled Sudan for thirty years. Historically, women – as actors, bodies, and symbols – have been central to the construction and control of political regimes and, equally, to their deconstruction through protest and revolutionary change.¹ Research on the role of women in Sudan's 2019 revolution reveals their importance in driving the protest movement. Scholars have highlighted both women's empowerment through their central roles as protestors on the streets and as leaders of civil society organisations.² Moreover, they have underlined the gendered violence women experienced throughout the revolution.³ While the continuation of Bashir-era power structures in Sudan's economy and military raises the question of whether the uprising constitutes a political 'revolution', this paper deploys this term for two reasons. Firstly, the protestors claimed the label of 'revolution', and secondly, the spread of protests across geographic and cultural divides can be understood as part of a societal revolution in the previously deeply divided country. This article shows the different ways in which men and women experienced the revolution, by analysing gender politics in Bashir's Sudan and women's role in the Sudanese revolution and beyond, and argues that, for women, the revolution is incomplete.

Gendering Revolution: Theoretical Background

Women have a history of participating in revolutionary struggles which are often gendered and contested, circumscribing 'acceptable' roles for men and women. Feminised roles, such as distributing food and medicine are depoliticised and seen as natural extensions of women's domestic responsibilities, while the contribution of feminised work in the private sphere is rendered invisible. Assigning women particular 'respectable' roles in revolution is tied to discourses associating women and their bodies with national honour. This relationship has been highlighted by feminist scholarship that emphasises how gendered discourses of women, as societal and biological reproducers of culture, have been central to the construction of the nation. Yuval-Davis argues that women's cultural and biological reproductive work – raising children, transmitting cultural values, and preserving collective memories – creates, perpetuates, and sets the boundaries of a nation.⁴ In Sudan, the construction of female bodies as symbols of the

¹ Nadje Al-Ali, "Gendering the Arab Spring," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5 (2012): 26-31.

² Nagwan Soliman, "Sudan Spring: Lessons from Sudanese Women Revolutionaries," *Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security*, 11.04.2020, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/sudan-spring-lessons-from-sudanese-women-revolutionaries/>.

Sydney Young, "The Women's Revolution: Female Activism in Sudan," *Harvard International Review*, 25.05.2020, <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-womens-revolution-female-activism-in-sudan/>.

³ Sarah Nugdalla, "The Revolution Continues: Sudanese Women's Activism," in *Gender, Protest and Political Change in Africa*, ed. Okech, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁴ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), 14.

nation has roots beyond the Bashir-era; throughout Sudan's history, women have been cast as the "keepers of culture".⁵ During the colonial period, women's dress was used as a symbol of resistance to British as well as Western standards, casting women as the embodiment of authentic Sudanese culture.⁶

As nationalist revolutions seek to reorganise the state and reconstruct national identity, they formulate a vision of an ideal society, often entailing the politicisation of gender relations, with women becoming markers of societal ideals and political goals.⁷ Scholars have commented upon the hegemonic role of the patriarchy in shaping the projected future of revolutionary movements. So-called 'women's issues', such as sexual and gender-based violence, are often postponed in favour of the movement's collective goals which prioritise issues of men's power.⁸ In the 2019 Sudanese revolution, the marginalisation of women's voices in the transition process has highlighted the risk of patriarchal frameworks dominating the construction of the post-revolutionary state.

Authoritarianism and Gendered Repression in Bashir's Sudan

The street protest and military coup that led to Bashir's ousting on 11 April 2019 put a provisional end to his authoritarian rule. Bashir's power grab was accompanied by a systematic 'civilisation' of state institutions and Sudanese society in the name of Islam. What was known as *al-mashru al-hadari*, the 'civilisation project',⁹ had decidedly gendered outcomes that negatively affected women.¹⁰ *Shari'a* law had been in place since 1983, and it formed the basis of Bashir's Islamisation project.¹¹ However, the regime's discourse of Islamic law and its interpretation of religious provisions were arguably less about religious doctrine than about Bashir's political objectives of consolidating power and expanding the state apparatus. At the heart of the accompanying comprehensive Islamisation of public life were gender-specific laws mixing criminal and moral prohibitions in the name of public order.¹² The 1998 Khartoum Public Order Act policed clothing, appearance and behaviour in the public sphere, enforcing strict gender segregation in public spaces and transportation, prohibiting women from 'religiously or morally indecent' singing and dancing in front of men in public and at home.¹³ While the law targeted both male and female behaviour, for example, by prohibiting alcohol consumption, it disproportionately affected women,¹⁴ particularly those from ethnic and

⁵ Sondra Hale, *Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism and the State* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1996), 77.

⁶ Hale, *Gender Politics in Sudan*, 107.

⁷ Valentine Moghadam, "Revolution, Religion, and Gender Politics: Iran and Afghanistan Compared," *Journal of Women's History*, 10(4) (1999): 178.

⁸ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (London: University of California Press, 2014), 111.

⁹ Sudan Democracy First Group, "Sudan's Islamist Regime: The Rise and Fall of the 'Civilisation Project'," 10.07.2014, <https://democracyfirstgroup.org/sudans-islamist-regime-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-civilization-project/>.

¹⁰ Nugdalla, "The Revolution Continues," 108.

¹¹ SIHA & REDRESS, "Criminalisation of Women in Sudan: A need for Fundamental Reform," (Kampala: SIHA Network, 2017): 5, <https://redress.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/report-Final.pdf>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Khartoum Public Order Act 1998, Art.7(b)(d), Art.9, Art.20, http://www.pclrs.com/Khartoum_Public_Order_Act_1998.pdf.

¹⁴ Asma Abdel Halim, "Gendered Justice: Women and the Application of Penal Laws in the Sudan," in *Criminal Law Reform and Transitional Justice*, ed. Lutz Oette (London: Routledge, 2016), 238.

religious minorities.¹⁵ Beyond legitimising the state's intrusion into the private sphere, the law created a distinctly masculine public space in which women's presence was only tolerated if their behaviour and bodies conformed to specific standards of 'decency.' Women's clothing was controlled by banning trousers, and employers in hair salons were obliged to verify women's 'good reputation' before hiring them.¹⁶ The policing of women's behaviour and appearance in the name of public morality and state-building points to the construction of female bodies as symbols of the Islamicised Sudanese nation.

Despite women's marginalisation under Bashir, women's movements flourished.¹⁷ Strict registration requirements for NGOs and restrictions on political parties severely shrank Sudan's civic space.¹⁸ Nevertheless, women's movements formed, initially as neighbourhood solidarity networks which then developed into various civil society organisations that tackled issues of legal inequality, rape laws, and the Public Order Act.¹⁹ Indeed, women's movements constitute the most active part of Sudan's civil society, despite targeted harassment and repression of female activists.²⁰

A Women's Revolution: Gender Politics in the 2019 Sudanese Revolution

Women played a key role in the Sudanese revolution since its inception in December 2018.²¹ The protests, triggered by deteriorating economic conditions, were driven by youth; women, in particular, formed the majority of protestors in the streets.²² Given their exclusion from the public sphere, female presence in this masculine space became a revolutionary act in itself. As the protests spread and became more formalised, the Forces of Freedom and Change alliance (FFC) emerged as a broad coalition of civil society actors, including the notable No to Oppression against Women Initiative and Women of Sudanese Civil and Political Groups (MANSAM).²³

The attention given to women by the movement and the regime reflects their symbolic association with the revolution and the new Sudan.²⁴ This is captured by the omnipresent and powerful symbol of 'Kandaka', the title given to women protestors, referring to the term used for the queens and queen mothers of the Nubian kingdom of Kush.²⁵ Translated as 'strong woman',²⁶ and coupled with the widespread wearing of the traditional white *toub*, a garment worn by Sudanese women activists in the 1940s-50s,

¹⁵ SIHA, "Gender Briefing Sudan," (Kampala: SIHA Network): 6-7, <https://sihanet.org/gender-briefing-sudan/>.

¹⁶ Khartoum Public Order Act 1998, Art.16(a).

¹⁷ Akram Abdel Gayoum Abbas, "The Gendering of Spaces and Institutions of Islamic Sovereignty in Contemporary Sudan," *The Arab Studies Journal*, 23(1) (2015): 359.

¹⁸ Nugdalla, "The Revolution Continues," 112.

¹⁹ Abbas, "The Gendering of Spaces and Institutions," 362-363.

²⁰ Sondra Hale, "Sudanese Feminists, civil society, and the Islamist military," *Open Democracy*, 12.02.2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/sudanese-feminists-civil-society-and-islamist-military/>.

²¹ Soliman, "Sudan Spring: Lessons from Sudanese Women Revolutionaries."

²² Young, "The Women's Revolution."

²³ Tønnessen and al-Nagar, "Patriarchy, Politics and Women's Activism."

²⁴ Nugdalla, "The Revolution Continues," 108.

²⁵ Miriam Engeler, Elena Braghieri and Samira Manzur, "From White Teyab to Pink Kandakat: Gender and the 2018-2019 Sudanese Revolution," *Journal of Public and International Affairs*, Princeton University, <https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/white-teyab-pink-kandakat-gender-and-2018-2019-sudanese-revolution>.

²⁶ Ibid.

the term celebrated women's agency and their historical legacy of power.²⁷ The symbol, however, has also been criticised for reflecting a single romanticised facet of women's activism steeped in the history of northern and central Sudan.²⁸

Showing a similar casting of women as symbols, the state used targeted gender-based violence to discredit the protest movement; hospitals in Khartoum reported at least seventy cases of rape in the aftermath of the brutal crackdown on the main protest site on 3 June 2019.²⁹ The regime's message to its security forces was clear: "Break the girls, because if you break the girls, you break the men."³⁰ The violation of women's bodies was used strategically to dishonour female protestors and to break the spirit of the revolution. Women, however, not only experienced violence from the state security forces, but also from other protestors. This reflects the pervasive misogyny throughout Sudanese society and complicates the movement's narrative of honouring women protestors, eroding the friend versus enemy dichotomy in women's experience of the protests.

Unequal Transition

On 17 August, a power-sharing arrangement between civilians and the military who had taken over in April 2019 was established under the Sovereign Council with the signing of the Constitutional Declaration.³¹ Despite the declaration's aims to repeal the public order laws and guarantee forty percent female representation in Sudan's legislative assembly, women have been largely marginalised in the transition processes.³² While women made up two of the eleven members of the Sovereign Council, women were excluded from critical meetings leading up to the signing of the power-sharing agreement.³³ The sidelining of women in transition processes has been a common feature of post-conflict and post-revolutionary settings. Often, transition processes are all-male; where they are not, women are only invited to the negotiating table as token guests.³⁴ Despite women's centrality to revolution, patriarchal structures prevent them from taking a full and meaningful part in shaping the society they fought for.

Conclusion

Women and gender relations have been central to the Sudanese revolution, with the gendered repression of Bashir's dictatorship providing a major incentive for revolt. The Sudanese experience has shown that despite praise over women's role in bringing down the Bashir regime, revolution remains a gendered experience. As actors, symbols, and

²⁷ Shirin Jaafari, "Here's the story behind the iconic image of the Sudanese woman in white," *The World*, 10.04.2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-04-10/heres-story-behind-iconic-image-sudanese-woman-white>.

²⁸ Nesrine Malik, "She's an icon of Sudan's revolution. But the woman in white obscures vital truths," *The Guardian*, 24.04.2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/24/icon-sudan-revolution-woman-in-white>.

²⁹ Leela Jacinto, "Sudanese activists seek justice for mass rapes after militia 'breaks the girls,'" *France 24*, 21.06.2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190619-sudan-rape-reports-militia-protest-justice>.

³⁰ Nima Elbagir et al., "They tried to use rape to silence women protestors. It didn't work," *CNN*, 17.05.2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/17/africa/sudan-protests-asequals-intl/index.html>.

³¹ ICG, "Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution" *Crisis Group Africa Report N°281*, 21.10.2019, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/281-safeguarding-sudans-revolution_0.pdf.

³² Tønnessen and al-Nagar, "Patriarchy, Politics and Women's Activism."

³³ Young, "The Women's Revolution."

³⁴ Cynthia Enloe, *The Big Push* (Oxford: Myriad Editions, 2017), 47.

bodies, women have been celebrated, but also marginalised and violated. Regardless of their central role in the revolution, they continue to face exclusion from decision-making roles in Sudan's transition process. The notion of a 'post-revolutionary' transition is, in itself, reflective of a male-centric perspective. While major steps have been made, such as the legislative banning of female genital mutilation, necessary societal change can only happen if women and their voices are meaningfully included.³⁵ As such, women's activism in Sudan continues to flourish, showing the strength and tenacity of women protestors in Sudan who refuse to acquiesce until a true revolution is realised.³⁶

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