

Sudan's revolution enters its second phase: disrupting the state

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Resistance committees are mobilising at grassroots level to bring about a fundamental transformation of the state

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A few hours after the military coup in Sudan on 25 October 2021, its leader, Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, appeared on television to announce the dissolution of the Sovereign Council, the governmental body composed of military and civilian representatives, which had been formed in the wake of the 2018 revolution. In a typical justification for coups in the country, Al-Burhan declared a state of emergency, describing the takeover as a “corrective step”.

The 2018 revolution was the third in Sudan's modern history. They have all followed a pattern of ousting a dictator, followed by a transitional period, elections, and then a new military coup that once again interrupts the path towards democratic rule.

This repetitive cycle reveals the real extent of the country's crisis and the tasks awaiting today's revolutionaries. The 52 years of military rule show that revolution is the easiest part of the long process of political and social change. Rebuilding the state and breaking this vicious cycle requires learning from the country's history. Are today's revolutionaries doing that?

The first phase

The spark for the 2018 revolution occurred amidst an economic crisis which had its roots in the 2011 independence of South Sudan and the loss of its oil. Revenues from this oil had been the main driver of Sudan's economic recovery during the years that followed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 between Omar al-Bashir's government in Khartoum and the southern Sudanese rebel movement, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). This agreement ended years of civil conflict.

The peak of the economic crisis came when, on 6 December, the government lifted wheat subsidies. In response, schoolchildren took to the streets in Maiurno, a city in the state of Sinnar, some 300

kilometres south of Khartoum, the nation's capital. The protests spread to cities across the country, including Khartoum, becoming a true mass uprising. In April 2019, al-Bashir was deposed, and replaced by General Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf, the army's choice to replace the fallen dictator, but he was in turn deposed within a day.

In August 2019, the Forces of Freedom and Change, the alliance that led the political process, reached a power-sharing agreement with the Military Council, leading to the formation of the Sovereign Council. The political parties justified the deal as the only way to stabilise the country and stop the bloodshed. But for many on the streets, it was no more than a return of power to the military.

Revolutionaries not reformists

For two years following the signing of the power-sharing deal and before the military coup of October, the civilian-appointed prime minister, Abdallah Hamdok, promoted the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank while ignoring any demands related to real democratic transition, justice for the revolution's martyrs, or social and economic rights.

But the military coup which deposed him led to a new form of resistance and a second phase of the revolution. This resistance developed in a way that linked revolutionary practice with revolutionary thought. It is led by the resistance committees which first appeared during the 2012-2013 protests against al-Bashir. Now, however, they exist all over the country, organised around neighbourhoods.

The revolutionary awareness of the resistance committees and their ability to learn from the political reality around them are reflected in a popular slogan known as 'the three Nos'. Directed at the military, they are: no partnership, no negotiation, no legitimacy.

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The resistance is seeking justice as a basic human right, in contrast to the political parties, which are trying to attain what little incremental changes are possible under the conditions of the coup.

This second phase of the revolution calls for pushing to achieve what seemed to be impossible at one point. It marks a shift from the apologetic and unimaginative mindset of political parties which led to the compromises of 2019 and blocked the change that is in the interest of the majority for two years.

A wave of sit-ins

Currently, protests and mobilisation are happening all over Sudan. Resistance committees are engaged in daily confrontations with violent security forces and their lethal weapons. And as well as

mass demonstrations, the committees are organising sit-ins.

Sit-ins bring people together over food and drinks in their neighborhoods, in a public space where they can exchange ideas but also receive services such as health checks. This is important in light of the privatisation of the health sector, which restricted access to quality health and medical services to those wealthy enough to pay for them.

Sit-ins began in urban and rural areas across Sudan in 2020. That year, thousands gathered in front of their localities' buildings or in public spaces for days at a time, demanding the right to decide how to use resources and space in their cities, towns and villages, and protesting over local issues.

The sit-ins revealed that people knew the solution to their problems, but officials did not want to listen. The transitional government had given promises to some of these protestors that their demands would be addressed, and ignored the rest – wasting what could have been a golden opportunity to address and respond to major demands fuelling the ongoing protests.

For example, in Abu Jubeiha (a resource-rich but poor city in the Kordofan region), people protested against the mining of 'dirty gold' by companies affiliated with the Rapid Support Forces militia and the government, which used toxic chemicals at a high cost to health and the environment.

People also protested for the right to choose the decision-makers in their localities. In Karari, Umbadah, Jabal Awliya in Khartoum state and elsewhere in the country, people demanded the dismissal of former regime employees who were still in positions of power. Protesters asked for general assemblies where financial and performance reports would be discussed. For them, participation at this level of power was a real stepping stone towards controlling public money.

Other key demands focused on historical grievances, such as calling for justice for the martyrs who died years earlier during popular resistance to dams built after evictions.

In the northern part of the country, sit-ins demanded internet access and the good communication services that are essential to participate in today's globalised world. In Darfur, the heavily war-affected region in western Sudan, there were similar demands, in addition to calling for the right to safety and the disarming of militias.

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In Nirteti, protestors demanded a single national army, and the rebuilding of schools and hospitals. They emphasised the rule of law and demanded that perpetrators of crimes and human rights violations be held accountable. They also called for an end to the felling of forest trees and the deliberate destruction of the environment.

The motivation behind the organisation of the 2020 sit-ins was to highlight people's right to reshape their environment in a way that accommodates their needs and responds to social and political changes, through decisions made jointly, collectively and democratically. The revolution gave people

the right to speak, and these sit-ins – led by resistance committees – expressed it in full force.

Democratic practice

Resistance committees have always demanded the right to elect local government officials; it is a demand aimed at strengthening the democratic process at grassroots level.

In a move away from the classic elitist model of Sudanese politics, in which political parties view the people merely as ‘the masses’, resistance committees are engaged in politics at a community level, using genuinely participatory practices.

For resistance committees, becoming genuinely democratic involves building broader connections and membership among the residents of their neighbourhoods, and collectively building the ethics and principles of their struggle.

To ensure transparency and information-sharing, the resistance committees in Bahri (or Khartoum North), for example, publish pamphlets about the current political situation, their positions on issues and their activities.

Focusing on daily struggles does not mean forgetting strategy. The committees’ eyes have always been on Sudan’s old and persistent problem: that wealth and power are monopolised by a political and military elite that does not pay attention to the interests and demands of the majority.

Issues of local governance and the democratisation of resistance committees can be understood as a step in the historical process of the revolution, in which each phase builds on the previous one. Learning from the first phase of the revolution, which started in December 2018, the second phase is using organising not only to mobilise and protest, but as a tool to access wealth and power.

These structures represent a continuity of colonialism itself, which plundered and monopolised the state’s resources. This is why many activists have described the current wave of protest and acts of resistance as a “battle for liberation”

One recent victory shows how grassroots organisation is reaping rewards. In October 2021, workers in Khartoum North, one of the biggest industrial hubs in the country, managed to make the Workers Model Hospital operational again.

The hospital, founded in 1971 by the Minister of Health at that time to improve the health of workers and treat workplace injuries, had been converted into offices for the administration during the rule of the previous regime by the al-Bashir regime. The workers wanted it back. To achieve this, there was coordination between the resistance committees and workers’ trade unions. Collective action led to the hospital’s reopening in October 2021.

Revolutionising the model

Continuous and accumulated learning, and collective leadership, has allowed the model of grassroots organisation to continue to move forward. Grassroots organisation has asserted the right of those in the countryside and on the margins to speak, a right that is always in danger of being hijacked by local elites.

It's a decolonial mode of organising that unlocks the value of local knowledge by linking political actors to their local contexts. It is building democracy as an everyday practice, opening the door to deeply rooted and genuine social innovation, governed by people's need to improve the quality of their lives. By promoting the common good through local governance models and integrating those into the state, the committees are building new visions and political alternatives.

During the transitional period and especially since the 25 October coup, extensive discussions have been taking place between the various resistance committees. They reflect an increased awareness of the importance of their roles.

They have been working to formulate a political charter that expresses their shared positions on the main issues.

The charter will also address the building of an alliance based not only on rejecting what exists now, but on a political imagination that will create the future it wants collectively, working with and among the people, not behind closed doors.

Achieving a vision is a political process, not an organisational one, and the difference is a critical one. There is a tendency towards depoliticising the democratic transition's tasks and dealing with them merely as procedural processes.

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This perspective obscures the revolutionary reality by ignoring the fact that we are facing these grave tasks because thousands of people revolted against injustice and oppression and wanted fundamental change. The transitional government's passive responses to the demands of the 2020 sit-ins is evidence of a mentality that deliberately ignores any agenda aimed at redistributing wealth and power.

Pedagogy of hope

Standing against the current hegemony of the military, Sudanese activists are mobilising to fulfil their demand for a civilian government, and against the involvement of the military in political life. They have learned the lessons of history, that sharing power and wealth requires challenging and

deconstructing the old power structures that have dominated Sudanese political life since its independence in 1956.

These structures represent a continuity of colonialism itself, which plundered and monopolised the state's resources. This is why many activists have described the current wave of protest and acts of resistance as a "battle for liberation".

The second wave of the revolution taking place now is characterised by hope, and continuous and cumulative learning, all based on the great idea that change must happen, and that the lessons of history must be learned. The process of grassroots organising and the development of a local governance model based on the people's needs and interests is a long-term process in which people exchange experiences and experiments to test the best ways to build and organise a genuine democracy.

An important lesson in this long struggle seems to have been learned from the Arab Spring revolutions and their fate over the past ten years. The lesson is that unless we change the structure of the state fundamentally, no real change will take place.

Simply changing the figurehead, or dissolving one government to put another in its place, will not bring about real change. Long-term change needs to disrupt the structure of the state itself, to destroy its foundations, which have been devoted to creating grievances and monopolies, and to abolish the political clientelism that has always robbed the people. Rebuilding the state requires building alternatives and challenging old political practices in order to redefine politics. This is the hope around which Sudan's revolutionaries organise.

Wini Omer

** Shireen Akram-Boshar and Sara Abbas contributed to the editing of this article.*

P.S.

• Open Democracy. 21 January 2022, 12.00am:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/sudans-revolution-enters-its-second-phase-disrupting-the-state/>