

'Silence From the International Community Is Killing Us': Union Activists on the Sudanese Uprising

Saturday 2 February 2019, by [ABDEL GALIL Sara](#), [EL-MUGAMAR Husam](#), [HAYNS Joe](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2019).

Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets of Sudan since late 2018, in what protesters are describing as a revolution [1].

The "*Tasqut Bas!*" (Just Leave!) movement against president Omar al-Bashir's 30-year regime has spread across the entirety of the north-east African country, since union group the Sudanese Professionals' Association (SPA) responded to spontaneous protests by calling for mass mobilisation on 19 December.

Solidarity demonstrations have since taken place across the world, including in London, where hundreds of people gathered in Trafalgar Square on Sunday 27 January in support of the uprising.

Doctors', engineers' and lawyers' unions, working together through the SPA, have been integral to the movement in Sudan. In London, as well, the protest was organised by members of the Sudan Doctors' Union (SDU) UK branch.

After the demonstration, Novara Media met Dr Sara Abdelgalil and Dr Husam el-Mugamar, President and Vice President (respectively) of the SDU in a cafe, to find out how the uprising has developed and how the UK-based diaspora has responded.

Who is protesting and why?

Husam el-Mugamar (HM): Some people have said the uprising is mainly about food, gas, and things like that – necessities of life. But, soon, it turned into a demand that the government itself should go. People have quite rightly recognised that the problem is not only the cost of food or gas – the problem is a political one, and people are now demanding: "Freedom! Peace! Justice!"

Sara Abdelgalil (SA): Who is involved? Everyone. Women, children, old and young people. The youth has been very active. The majority of those who have lost their lives are – sadly – young, because they have been targeted by the militia and the police.

But, it includes all sectors – professionals, politicians, and civil society, community leaders of sufi groups, [tribal] shaykhs, and the imams of the mosques. At the moment, it is a united movement.

Husam, before the interview, you suggested the SDU had been organising against the regime since 1989; so why is this happening now?

...Was it the split from South Sudan in 2011, and resultant loss of oil revenue? Or maybe the 2016 Khartoum Process – EU money, in exchange for Sudan policing its own borders

more thoroughly?

SA: The separation from South Sudan and the loss of oil money is insignificant compared with corruption.

There is corruption in this government. They have a lot resources they have not utilised, and they have destroyed all other development opportunities in Sudan. The loss of oil is not enough to explain today's financial crisis.

On the Khartoum Process, yes, the EU has provided money to the Sudanese government to control irregular migration, but human trafficking has increased; the Khartoum Process is a failure.

HM: To tackle the root cause of migration, you need to remove this regime. They are pushing people to the brink. People are desperate so they try and leave.

SA: I think the British government and the public have to know, as taxpayers, that their money, through DFID — which we would welcome, because we want to develop Sudan — is going to a corrupt country, a corrupt government.

[We have seen] no improvement in healthcare, in education — none. The money you are giving is not being used right.

In Sudan, the SDU is one of the most important organisations for the uprising. Today you've brought together hundreds from the Sudanese diaspora. Could you give a sense of your organisation's history in the UK?

SA: We've always worked closely with the SDU in Sudan. If there is any sort of pressure on them, we will be their voice in the media.

We have another role too: training in Sudan, dealing with injuries, giving logistical advice. At this moment, because they are at the frontline — being arrested, detained, targeted, shot dead, and on strike now for four weeks — we feel it is our responsibility to help.

HM: Anytime we have a national emergency like this, we will set up a committee. For example, when we had outbreaks of chikungunya fever [in October 2018], we set up a committee of doctors to help people back home. And now, we have set up a committee to help protestors with injuries. We risk our lives to go back.

Are there other active organisations among the wider Sudanese diaspora in the UK?

SA: The Sudanese diaspora has got a long history [in the UK], at least since the 1960s. It used to be that people came here for training, to get skills, and then the majority would go back.

However, in the last two or three decades, more people have settled here, because of the situation back home. There are professionals, and also refugees and asylum-seekers. It's a big community. We aim to speak the language, we integrate. In the SDU, most of our members are senior clinicians in the NHS.

There are very active groups, but it depends on where you are based. London is, of course, the centre.

HM: We are trying to engage the second generation. My kids were born here, raised here, and we are trying to get them engaged with Sudan's issues. They are not as engaged as us, but they are

getting to understand, and spreading their understanding within the universities.

Why did a group of Sudanese and British-Sudanese people meet with parliamentarians recently?

SA: Sudanese members of the Labour Party submitted a letter to Jeremy Corbyn on Sudan. We have also launched a petition, asking the British government to sign the Declaration of Freedom and Change, which is what everybody is talking about and gathering around in Sudan right now. It has nine points; it's a roadmap, from [al-Bashir's government] stepping down, up to democratic elections. It's basic, very basic.

And, we have been in touch with the Foreign Office. All of the diaspora are presenting together; we want to be a united voice. Today, we've been talking to the TUC. We have been talking to Channel 4, BBC World. We are trying to use our connections, but it is difficult in the UK, with Brexit, to get the media interested in what is happening in Sudan.

You've been effective at organising amongst the diaspora, and reaching out beyond it. But al-Bashir, too, is able to operate effectively at the international level. Are you concerned about the continuing support for the regime from regional powers?

SA: I always say, when people ask me: "we have hope, but also fear". We are not underestimating the challenge that we are facing. Given all the evidence that's coming from Bashir's last visit to Qatar [\[2\]](#), we're expecting Qatar to be supportive [of the regime]. Now he is in Kuwait, but it doesn't look like such a successful trip. In the Middle East, we cannot ever predict what will happen, what Saudi will do.

The problem is the silence of the British government, and the United States. They are very hesitant to make any decision. They are just watching over their own interests.

HM: One chant in Sudan, in the Sudanese dialect, is "al-Ṭilqah mā bi-taktul, bi-yaktul sukāt al-Zūl", which means "bullets don't kill people, silence does". What we are facing from the international community is silence, which is killing us.

Many people will see similarities between Sudan today, and the protests across the wider region in 2011 and 2012 – what are the differences?

HM: There is, I think, a difference between this revolution and the Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring was a series of movements against dictatorships, with some involvement from the Islamist parties. This is a revolution against an Islamist regime. This is a revolution against an Islamist regime — a brutal, fundamentally right-wing regime.

Would you say the majority are of protestors are secularists?

HM: I think people will be looking for something like a civil transition, which does not exclude religion — I don't think anybody is saying now "we have to exclude religion".

SA: Yes, a civil state, with a constitution, and a parliament, like we had before 1989. That is what people are aiming for.

Are there any groups in Sudan would currently be capable of taking control of the state?

SA: This is a very tricky question.

In 2013, there was an intifāḍah, an uprising, but it was aborted, because of violence. They identified the leaders, and they put them in jail, and the guidance was lost.

Now, people are trying a different tactic. The Declaration of Freedom and Change that I mentioned is signed by several major [civil society and union] groups. They are working together to introduce something called “Reconstruction and Rebuilding”. They are organising who will takeover, and a transition period, until everything is stable.

Parts of the leadership are in jail, other parts are working in secret. They are thinking of coming out, as a council. But, the fear is that as soon as they do that, they will be arrested. But if this revolution stops, it’s not going to come back again easily. The regime will go back to its black days, to its violence and its killings.

Everybody knows this is the last push, that we have to push for it.

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The author wishes to thank Mohamed Sameer.

More details of SDU UK’s petition to have the UK government acknowledge the Declaration of Freedom and Change can be found [here](#); the petition is [here](#).

P.S.

• Novara Media. Published 1st February 2019:

<https://novaramedia.com/2019/02/01/silence-from-the-international-community-is-killing-us-union-activists-on-the-sudanese-uprising/>

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 47707), [Begginning December 2018, Sudan’s third uprising: is it a revolution?](#).

[2] <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/1/23/sudan-seeks-uae-aid-after-leaving-qatar-empty-handed>