

Sudan's female revolutionaries must beware fate that befell women in Libya

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Alaa Salah's role in Sudan's protests was not unique, African women have long led change - and Libya's precedent is especially relevant

At the same time that images of female Sudanese revolutionaries were [going viral](#), the citizens of Tripoli were preparing for [an assault](#) on their city. The contrast between the two experiences – jubilation and determination in Khartoum, weary resilience in Libya – could not be greater. But the parallels between the uprisings in Sudan and Libya are much closer than one might think, with hard lessons to be learned.

Having protested against the regime of Omar al-Bashir for 16 weeks, Sudanese women like [Alaa Salah](#) became icons almost overnight. In much of the global coverage, the sight of an African woman leading crowds chanting for freedom and democracy was seemingly regarded as novel, even groundbreaking.

But for those of us from the region, it felt familiar indeed. Women were also leading figures in the Libyan revolution. This is little remembered now – for the same reasons people in Tripoli find themselves sheltering from bombardment.

Our own uprising against repressive, decades-long military rule started outside the courthouse in Benghazi in January 2011. There, just as in Khartoum now, it was women who led the chants for democracy. Women like [Salwa Bugaighis](#).

The regime of Muammar Gaddafi refused to bend in the slightest to the demands of the protesters. The peaceful uprising became an armed conflict, and it was then that women found themselves being pushed out of their own revolution.

During its time in power, the regime had squandered about [\\$40bn \(£30.7bn\) on weapons and ammunition](#). The chaos of armed conflict unleashed that armoury across Libya. Even more weapons flowed into the country, into the hands of militias and extremists thanks to the Nato military intervention. Supposedly based on the premise of protecting civilians, that intercession effectively became one of regime change.

A UN embargo failed to prevent the flood of arms that simply swept aside politics, taking the revolution's female leaders with it. Female politicians and activists were targeted specifically to silence them. Prominent women were harassed, attacked, and assassinated – including [Fariha al-Berkawi](#), Intisar al-Harisi, and Bugaighis, one of the first protesters in Benghazi.

The militarisation of Libya's conflict changed the equation. Non-violence and a strong social constituency no longer mattered; power was to be found at the end of a rifle.

Failure to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate militias and armed groups meant the country never

had a stable foundation from which to rebuild. As a result, warlordism has been empowered, making the [assault on Tripoli](#) by Khalifa Haftar an inevitability. In just two weeks, [the fighting](#) has killed 227, injured more than 1,100, and displaced tens of thousands – not enough, apparently, to warrant [a ceasefire demand from the UN security council](#).

For the past eight years, a cultural of warlordism and impunity has prevailed. It has not only derailed the democratic transition in [Libya](#), but also caused the exclusion of women from decision-making. The factions' willingness to use violence as a political tool has marginalised women, while the international community's discourse on "women's empowerment" has been tokenistic.

There are numerous examples of women leading [local mediation initiatives in the east and south of Libya](#). But there has been no serious attempt by the international community to turn its rhetoric on women's participation into reality and make their efforts properly inclusive. Not a single woman was invited to take part in the mediation between the [Awlad Suleiman and Tabu tribal communities in Rome](#).

Thankfully, the protesters in Sudan seem to have learned the lessons of recent revolutions. They have [refused to leave the streets](#), rightly unconvinced by the military's offer to lead a two-year transition period. Instead, they are sticking to their demand for a civilian-led transition. A military-led process would only facilitate the rise of another Bashir or Gaddafi.

Sudan is a country more than six-times the size of Libya. It is thought that [70% of government spending has gone on the military budget](#). A slide into civil war there would be unconscionable, and would inevitably lead to an attempt to erase Sudanese women from their revolution just like the one militias and warlords have tried in Libya.

Women in Libya have been robbed of their chance to build a democratic and inclusive state. Sudanese women must resist at all costs a similar fate, and the international community must put an end to the flow of arms into countries where leaders lack democratic legitimacy and are associated with war crimes. The world's leaders, who collectively failed to implement the [Responsibility to Protect doctrine](#), must commit to build a peaceful, resilient society.

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