

Sudan Professional Association: the 'ghost battalion' at the centre of the revolution

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On the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) the organized force behind the revolutionary uprising in Sudan.

The force that drove recent protests in Sudan, known as *Tajamoo al-mihanyin al-sudaniyin* or the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), remains an alliance of independent professionals shrouded in mystery. The Sudanese revolution found its driving force in this mysterious nebula that brought together a group of trade unions and committees, whose internal organization (structure), and the identity of its members, is largely unknown. This trait has been key in helping the group avoid both repression and arrests in a decidedly authoritarian environment.

The SPA emerged in 2013, in the aftermath of heavily repressed protest movements. It reappeared, taking part cautiously [in strikes over teacher salaries in 2018](#) against the backdrop of Sudan's recession, and again in the aftermath of the uprisings in the town of Atbara in northern Sudan in mid-December of the same year. The movement's roots, however, are decades old. The SPA arguably represents a sign of a "past in the present" with links to two similar political bodies that appeared under circumstances of "insurrection" in 1964 and 1985. It follows the example of the Revolutionary Committees Front of October 1964 (*jabhat el hayaat el thawriya*), a group of trade associations that emerged in the wake of the 1964 uprising. This group initiated general strikes and a broader movement of civil disobedience and decisive negotiations that eventually ended General Ibrahim Abboud's military regime. They would go on to become part of the fragile civil power that was ultimately replaced by a coup d'état in 1969.

In 1985, the Trade Union Assembly (*altajamoo al-naqabi*) played a similar role as initiators of the protest and as a central driving force in the fall of Jaafar El Numeiry. Trapped by internal disputes and infighting, the group (allied with other opposition political forces) failed to hold its own against the military government of the time, which was able to hold onto their monopoly of political and state power. These two "antecedents" succeeded in removing two regimes but could not ensure more than an uprising, followed by a new regime, followed by a military coup d'état.

Described as the "ghost battalion" by the now-deposed president Omar al-Bashir, the contemporary movement led by the SPA has attracted a large audience. It has exerted influence on mobilizations and protest movements through sustained appeals, and has reactivated the unfinished uprising of January 2018. These "masked entrepreneurs of mobilization" have built broad appeal and demonstrated a know-how of protests, drawing from a fresh and dynamic repertoire that is applied within the movement across the country. They have initiated civil disobedience, rallies and marches focusing on women, the displaced and exiled, social justice and life on the margins. Moreover, they have taken the call to protest beyond the limits of major cities like Khartoum and across sectors—from resignation marches in outlying towns and provinces to the mobilization of dock workers in Port Sudan. Their work is reinforced by the neighborhood resistance committees, a sort of pacifist vigilant group that counters the so-called neighborhood popular committees, local forces

used for surveillance. The resistance committees have continued to improvise, ensuring night rallies have taken place, counting the damage caused by repression, and also preventing infiltration attempts.

This sustained activity culminated in a sit-in in front of the army headquarters, which led to the dismissal of Omar al-Bashir. The SPA continues to mobilize under the transitional military council and its members, ensuring that pressure for effective and meaningful change is sustained.

The language of resistance has been captured and creatively appropriated by the SPA. "*Tasgot bass!*" ("Fall, that's all!"—in reference to al-Bashir) and "*Lam tasgot baad!*" ("Not fallen yet"—in reference to the Transitional Military Council). Calls to action have become watchwords of the revolution—whether in Arabic, local dialects, or *randouk* (the urban slang) they are now embedded lyrical motifs. The "ghostwriters" who compose these calls/hybrid statements are still the best kept secret in Sudan, but they have captured the imagination of citizens across the country. So much so that "*Eltajamoo youmathilouni*" ("the SPA represents me"), has become the rallying call for many.

What is the reason behind their ascent?

Speaking directly with demonstrators in Khartoum in April, the reasons behind the ascent of the SPA differ. Some praise the SPA's clarity. Other more pragmatic types stress its power to weaken the regime still in place (the Transitional Military Council), or to limit the influence of *Kizans* (a slang term for the regime's acolytes).

For F (29), from Niyala (Darfur), the SPA represents him politically only in terms of "action, nothing more," because it remains associated with the center of power and does not fully represent people at the margins. Although the slogan "We are all Darfur" is a leitmotiv of the movement, F is not yet convinced. Indeed, the attempts by the SPA to negotiate with the Transitional Military Council in April discredited it amongst some.

For most of the respondents, it has certainly brought another way of doing and undoing the political field in Sudan, something unprecedented in the past 30 years. Yet, to say it is a political vanguard, as some commentators claim, is perhaps misplaced.

Y, a young Sudanese activist is categorical. Y contends that talking about political vanguard is a little "old school... they are just really different." Ultimately, the SPA is a political body that has very quickly bypassed and blown up the traditional political leadership—the "dinosaurs" and other armed factions historically trapped in the compromise and interminable negotiations with the regime. With its growing importance, the SPA has joined the political game, vying for power, along with the Transitional Military Council.

On April 21st, the SPA declared the suspension of all dialogue and negotiations with the Transitional Military Council, contesting their legitimacy, and thus categorically refusing any compromise with men who perpetuate the confiscatory nature of the regime. It also called for mobilization based solely on the legitimacy of the street. In this climate of renewed intensity, the visibility of the "professionals" in the public space after the removal of al-Bashir was a gauge of its role and relevance going forward. It demanded the creation of a transitional civilian government with the list of members of this government to be made public immediately. It called for accountability from the various actors in the country's complex security architecture: the popular defense forces, the Rapid Support Forces, paramilitary forces, the NISS (Sudan's infamous intelligence and security services), along with the regime's senior officials.

One visible member of the movement, Naji al-Assam, noted in a video posted online on April 21 that

this period was probably the most “sensitive and dangerous” of the entire mobilization, given that “negotiations with the military council that is obviously trying to buy time.” He added that “there have been some victories but the real battles continue.” Al-Assam has been there from the start—his [video](#) posted on New Year’s Eve 2018 was a turning point as it was the first time a face of a “professionals” member appeared publicly. He expressed the need to bring down the regime, denouncing, among other things, the repression of demonstrators and lauded the importance of women in the protests. He read the “Call for Freedom and Change” which brought together the movement’s first clear demands. A few days later he was arrested.

In the last few months the negotiations with the TMC have gradually been imposed as a last resort, with no other alternative for political action. The Sudanese professionals have merged slowly into the largest coalition in the history of Sudan. The Forces of Freedom and Change has emerged as a Noah’s ark of an organization, bringing together the country’s different political sensitivities, historical “dinosaurs” parties, civil coalitions and armed factions.

F, a youth, cynically notes that this is not about to be unanimously accepted by all Sudanese:

It is as if the professionals and the FFC were still negotiating with Omar al Bashir, but now with the unnecessary loss of life and missing since the beginning of the movement and after the massacre of June 3, they remain in Addis to self-negotiate power between them.

Y expressed similar concerns:

The rush to negotiations is a mistake from the beginning, it was necessary to find another way of putting pressure on the TMC, whose members are responsible for war crimes and crimes against revolutionaries over the last two months and its responsibility in the June 3 offensive in the sit-in dismantlement.

The Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, has now become the stage for this group “lost in transition” after the signing of the “political deal” between FFC and TMC on 17 July in Khartoum under the aegis of Ethiopian and African Union mediation.

For J, the political deal is an “agreement in principle” that organizes at least the transitional political life; “it is a minimal political compromise that carries with it some success but innumerable dangers of failure.” It can be viewed as a memorandum of understanding already carrying with it a set of flaws—especially its absence of a constitutional declaration.

New, parallel negotiations have since played out between public figures of the “professionals” like the young Naji El Assam, other representatives of the FCF and the revolutionary front that brings together a set of leaders from the armed groups who were excluded in the signing of the original deal.

For Y:

The SPAs have moved from the camp of mobilizations, from the street and revolutionaries to the opposite camp of the transition and political calculation. It would have been preferable for them to withdraw definitively from the negotiations without necessarily positioning against the FFC.

Y argues that the most dangerous issue is:

The SPAs are no longer the “engine” of the revolution. Taking part in the negotiations

puts them under the influence of other political forces, and keeps them further away from the street, without considering other alternatives to exert pressure on the military government. It would have been better to stand on the side of the street, guarding the original spirit of the call for freedom and change instead of being part of the forces of freedom and change.

The “real battle” indeed continues for the SPA, and challenges to its survival are many. Will the original spirit of the “professionals” continue to protect it from being weakened and eventually exhausted? Will it cement itself as the guardian of this transition? Will it mutate into the political watchdog of Sudan, haloed with revolutionary credit, or be reduced to a set of revolutionary songs, slogans and incantations—a symbol of the indelible law of politics in Sudan, where everything changes so nothing changes?

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