

Sudan: “The Military to the Barracks, and the Janjaweed Dissolved”

Sudanese women’s grassroots struggle for peace

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At the 2023 Historical Materialism conference in Montreal, Quebec, Duha Elmardi detailed the present state of struggle and refugee crisis in Sudan with particular attention to the role of women. We are delighted to present to our readers this transcript of Elmardi’s reflections.

Glory to the martyrs of the Sudanese Revolution. May those who are injured heal and may those who are missing return.

I will start by contextualizing the reality in which the feminist struggles in Sudan exist in order to produce a better understanding of the situation. For the past few decades, Sudan has experienced massive political instability: from the conflicts in the Darfur region, to the secession of South Sudan in 2011, to years of ongoing neglect and abuse from the central government in Khartoum, to the oppressive nature of the regime that has ruled the country from 1989, all the way to the overthrow of the Bashir regime in 2019. (Al-Bashir’s political party is known as the National Congress party, but is sometimes referred to as the Islamist front or the Islamist party.)

Of course, this political instability extends all the way to the devastating situation of the ongoing war that began a little over a month ago, on April 15th, between the Sudan Armed Forces and the Janjaweed militia known as the Rapid Support Forces. I will touch on this a bit later. But with this background and history, Sudan has also been a site for both historical and contemporary resistance, popular uprisings, and rebellion against tyranny and state violence. The uprising of December 2018 is a continuation of similar uprisings in October 1964 and April 1986. There are incredible examples from which to draw that show the courage and determination of the Sudanese people in the face of all of this—and especially the courage and determination of Sudanese women. The role of Sudanese women in all of this goes really far back, even before the establishment of the Sudanese Women’s Union in 1952 and its huge contribution to the anti-colonial struggle against the British.

Now, more specifically, I will focus on the introduction of Shari’a law in Sudan in 1983 by the Nimeiri regime. A lot of people think that Shari’a was introduced by the Bashir regime, but it was actually introduced in 1983 during the preceding regime under Nimeiri. But the Bashir regime absolutely intensified this law and specifically used it to police women. Article 153 of the Sudanese criminal code, also known as the morality law or the public order law, denies women’s bodily autonomy. Women’s bodies are criminalized through what they wear, how they behave in public, how they behave in their households, and in their everyday lives more generally. And of course with that, these issues are still persistent, but they’ve been there for a while: issues of child marriage, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, and assaults. Women’s bodies continue to be used by the state as a war tactic, but also as a counterrevolutionary tactic during uprisings. Now, women and gender diverse activists are especially targeted through these laws, as

are journalists, as in the case of the journalist and women's rights activist Wini Omar, who was arrested in 2018 and charged with prostitution and violation of public morals. There are millions of cases like this, many of which we don't even know about.

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Of course, with all of that, the existence of a huge wealth gap and economic crisis, combined with these oppressive gender-based laws, meant that working-class women, women who work in the informal sector, day laborers (including street vendors), liquor sellers, domestic workers, construction workers, and countless refugees from South Sudan and Eritrea, or else internally displaced people from different parts of Sudan that had to come to Khartoum. They were especially targeted on a constant basis, imprisoned, fined, and flogged in accordance with these laws. Women street vendors, mostly the tea and food sellers, have been a direct target not just by the police, but also by the locality administrators who use these laws as a form of economic extortion. Women's belongings are often confiscated from them and they are required to pay an exorbitant fee to receive their equipment back, or else they end up spending nights in jail where they are subjected to sexual violence from police officers. Now, the precarity of the situation of women in Sudan was a driving force for many of them to rebel continuously against al-Bashir's regime and to create alternative spaces in which to organize and educate each other. And it also made it unsurprising that seventy percent of the protesters during the December 2018 revolution were women.

Women day-laborers were also very well organized through the Food and Tea Sellers Association, which dealt with much of the legal situation regarding their specific conditions. These women have to organize underground most of the time because of the looming threat of state violence, but also due to intergenerational conflicts within the movement. There are also struggles with less radical approaches or liberal forms of feminism. And on top of that, the persistence of patriarchal practices and beliefs within Sudanese opposition political parties, even within leftist parties, have limited women's participation and excluded them from many roles. This could be seen even during the revolution, such as the 2020 Juba peace talks, and even with regard to protest and civil disobedience. A response to these internal struggles was the building of the *Khush el Lejna* campaign, which means "join the committee," in regards to the resistance committees, which I will speak a little bit about in a moment. But *Khush el Lejna* was a campaign that young women in Sudan led to ensure that girls join their neighborhood resistance committees, which is where popular governance was taking place, and also from the advocacy of women's rights groups for the political involvement of women.

Another group that was also quite active are refugees in Khartoum, the majority of whom are women. They have also been organizing sit-ins and protests regarding their conditions. A recent example of this was the long sit-in in 2020 in front of the UNHCR headquarters in Khartoum, demanding an immediate resolution to perpetually delayed refugee cases. I have met Eritrean refugees who were born in Khartoum, and have remained refugees into their adult lives. Their cases are still not resolved. And so there's been many sit-ins and direct actions to push towards immediate resolution. But unfortunately the UNHCR collaborated with the authorities and removed protesters to the edges of the city in an area without any services.

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Now, this level of economic precarity continued with the peace agreement between the civilian faction of the revolution and the transitional military council, the latter of whom are waging the ongoing war in Sudan. Economic precarity continued during Prime Minister Hamdok's time in office

with the imposition of neoliberal austerity measures that were carried out in 2019 and 2020, through the IMF, while he shared power with the generals, al-Burhan and Hemedti, who eventually orchestrated a coup in 2021. Now these generals are fighting each other for power, as they have been since April 15 of this year. And of course, these austerity measures were bringing even more precarity to Sudanese women and the groups that I just discussed.

But again, during all of this, Sudanese women and neighborhood resistance committees continued to mobilize. I really want people to learn more about neighborhood resistance committees, which are a particularly sophisticated form of organizing. Their history begins just prior to the revolution, though their current form developed during the revolution. And basically, it is a revolutionary, popular form of democratic political governance that has been at the forefront of the uprising, organizing marches, strikes, mutual aid, and community safety measures. The committees continue to this day to be in the frontline of the war and to stand by their slogan of “No negotiation, no compromise, and no power sharing with the military.” The resistance committees worked together for months to create the Revolutionary Charter for the establishment of people’s power, which is a bottom-up governance roadmap that has garnered signatures from more than eight thousand neighborhood resistance committees all over Sudan.

These committees continue to be excluded from the talks by the US and Western governments, who took the approach of propping up the generals and representing them as reformers, despite the loud and clear rejection of characterization by the Sudanese people. In fact, the UN-brokered talks have actually led to the *escalation* of the existing conflict between the militia and the Sudanese Armed Forces, which has now become a full-blown war resulting in hundreds dying in Khartoum, Jneina, and other parts of Sudan. Thousands of people have been injured, close to seven hundred thousand people have been displaced and the number continues to increase as the violence continues to this day. The healthcare system, which was already fragile, is completely decimated right now. Millions of families have been living in absolute terror in the face of bombardments, aerial strikes carried out by the military, and artillery shelling day and night—all with very little support from the rest of the world. And of course, needless to say, this war has an even more damaging impact on women, especially with the increased risk of gender-based violence that we’re seeing right now. This has also taken an especially large toll on women in the informal sector and day laborers, women in IDP camps, and refugee women, among others. And keep in mind that Sudan is one of the largest hosts of refugees on the African continent, so these are massive numbers.

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For these populations, not only is their limited source of income now gone due to the war, but they have also become increased targets of sexual violence. They don’t have housing infrastructure that can shelter them from the airstrikes or the artillery shells, so they are forced to walk for long hours in the scorching heat and amidst the violence to try to find safety because most of them cannot afford bus tickets to leave Khartoum. Many of them are now twice-displaced. Some South Sudanese refugees had to return to South Sudan, a country that they fled because of war. A similar reality can be seen with Eritrean refugees in Sudan, who are mostly women and domestic workers.

Now, the left and the rest of the world needs to especially support the resistance committees and grassroots organizations, who are on the frontlines of struggle right now in Sudan. This stands in stark contrast to the international organizations, most of which fled Khartoum within days. And though they had adequate transportation to leave Khartoum, they failed to use that capacity to deliver any form of aid. A lot of people don’t have the privileges of escaping this right now. A lot of women *can’t* leave. The left also needs to put in more efforts for financial support of vulnerable groups, such as the tea sellers, and street vendors. They can be supported through existing

community-based organizations. And my last point is that the left needs to push against this form of international diplomacy that favors generals and civilian leaders who push a neoliberal agenda. Instead, we must echo the chants of the Sudanese Revolution: Al-'askar lilthakanat w-al janjaweed yinhil, which means, "The military to the barracks, and the Janjaweed dissolved."

Duha Elmardi is a Sudanese activist and grassroots organizer currently based in Montreal.

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