

Don't Call Me "awrah¹", for I am the "thawrah²": Why Sudan's December 2018 Revolution was Named Women's Revolution

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Ahead of men, on the front lines, Sudanese women sparked an astounding revolutionary movement and until this moment they continue to play key political roles throughout its various stages as millions of people broke their silence and stormed out in the streets across the country demanding freedom, peace and justice. Sudan's December 2018 Revolution was indeed an amazing success and led to the toppling of a 30-year fundamentalist Islamic-military regime. Through their narratives of resistance and dissent, women take pride in such a historical transformation and in their ability to challenge the state and male-defined revolutions. Therefore, despite a predominance of patriarchy and the existence of asymmetrical power dynamics of gender systems in Sudanese society, women's contributions were widely acknowledged and praised, and the revolution itself was defined largely as a 'women's act'.

This is the third revolution in the history of Sudan since its independence in 1956. However, as 'revolution is a force of history'³, many have traced the leading positions of women in the revolution to a very long history of women's organizing, manifested in forming movements and bodies as early as the beginning of last century⁴. That said, in the middle of the post-revolution transformation process, women are now assessing and considering their venues and positions with a renewed struggle to fight

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against patriarchy and to reap ‘egalitarian’, rather than ‘patriarchal outcomes’⁵, of the revolution.

I

It was precisely the afternoon of 10 February 2019 when a chorus of ‘*zagroda*’, typically performed by women in Sudan to symbolize joy and celebration, was hurled and pitched at 1pm Khartoum time. This was a few weeks before a big day to come and remain engraved in the history of people’s revolutions as it marked the downfall of a three-decade long entrenched and oppressive dictatorship led by Omer El Bashir; The sound of *zagroda* came this time but not to announce the birth of a new baby nor a new couple getting married; instead these cries signified the official launch of the 1pm scheduled ‘*mawakib*’ (rallies; sing. *mawkib*) which had been going on every day in recent months and weeks. These *mawakib* were conducted with determination demanding first and foremost that Bashir step down immediately: ‘*allilah tasgot bas*’ (fall down today).

The 10th February *mawkib* was quite unique in terms of how it came to take place. Called jointly by the Sudanese Professional Association (SAP) and other opposition political powers, it was organized in solidarity with women activists and journalists who were arbitrarily detained in Omdurman Prison for Women. Detained women in Omduramn Prison and in other “ghost houses” such as *mawgaf Shandi* were heard with full lungs chatting in their cells after long hours of torture at the hands of the security officers, dreaming of a great victory to come and calling loudly for “*freedom, peace, and justice*”.

The ‘solidarity with detained women’ February *mawkib* was attended largely by women who were quite visible publicly and at the forefront of leading the protests. A conversation between two female protesters was heard in the background exposing their discontent because the number of men attending in solidarity was small. Another woman whispered to her

friend: let us make this *mawkib* a success, then men will be surprised and news of our success will spread.

An important component of Sudanese culture, the *zagroda* is now indispensable. Uniquely the whole revolutionary process was sparked by a *zagroda* bringing a collective voice of dissent. Women powerfully launched their *zagrodas* as a birth scream, as a defining moment, as an all-inclusive wake-up call against a long history of oppression, brutality, corruption and discrimination. This empowered them to own and inspire this revolution and to assert a leading role towards its success.

In fact, the participation of women in Sudan and in the diaspora in the political movement/revolution has to be considered in the larger context of the long history of oppression that was imposed by the Ingaz regime and its systematic attempts to undermine women's enlightenment and liberation. The revolution generation is ironically the same generation who grew up in the darkness of a fundamentalist project that impoverished the country and humiliated its people.

Women and men across the country stormed out in the streets despite the brutality of the regime that continued its oppression for three decades. It is not a surprise that a fundamentalist, 'Muslim' extremist regime like the one in Khartoum targets women and practices all sorts of control over their lives both in the public and in the private realm. It is not an exaggeration to say that the *Ingaz* regime saw women, especially those who did not conform to its Islamic-militant ideology as a 'sexualized-danger', as enemies whose bodies and existence should be regulated and oppressed through restrictive state control and structural violence. The regime employed this 'religious' discourse politically to please many in a largely conservative society that was proud of its Muslim identity.

If you are outside Sudan, the story of these revolutionary women contradicts the images of Sudanese women from mainstream media. Surely the first thing that comes to mind is the image of Sudanese women in courts being punished because they were wearing trousers; or because they were walking outside without a headscarf – no excuse if some of them were not even Muslims as if women in Sudan were an undifferentiated group; or being forcibly married underage since the law gives fathers the right to marry off their daughters at the age of 10⁶; or being physically tortured or raped in detention and sexually abused, or being sent back from the airport not allowed to fly because they don't have the permission of a male guardian to travel, or being flogged⁷ in the infamous 'public order' courts. All these gender-based atrocities were perpetuated under the name of Islamic Sharia⁸, and led by the NCP's three-decade strategy of adopting and enforcing full-fledged Islamization and Arabization processes, by promoting Islamic ideology and empowering Arab-origin tribes and imposing Arabic language over local dialects. The regime's brutality was in fact a manifestation of multiple-level institutionalized violence, suppressing voices of its opponents, and committing genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, including rape, which have all been referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for prosecution. Women were victims of this oppression, as their freedom of expression and movement were severely curtailed by restrictive "moral" laws and by dedicated public order security forces to ensure immediate enforcement. This extended to vulnerable street tea sellers, a whole class of ethnically and economically marginalized women who would sell tea and food to support their families. These women were systematically prosecuted by the security and their work equipment were always confiscated and stolen by the police.

The *Inagz* regime came as well to undermine decades of Sudanese women's struggle and gains towards social justice and equality, and regressed the role of women a few centuries back to the *Hareem* age and

to their solely reproductive roles. It is worth noting that the rise of the Sudanese women movement began as early as the 40th of last century and the first Sudanese Women Union was formed in 1952, meanwhile women's participation in political parties had increased remarkably. During the 30 years of the Ingaz regime, the women's agenda was the concern of a number of organizations including political parties and Civil Society Organizations e.g. the Sudanese Women Union, No to Oppression Against Women Initiative, SIHA, El-Manar, etc – many of whom were constantly at odds with the ruling regime.

The voice of women as *awrah* is what Bashair and his people wanted to foster and maintain, but to their surprise the revolution came to assert that the voice of women is not *awrah* or sinful but in fact it is *thawrah* (revolutionary) and that women's voices in this incredible wave of change are vigorously indispensable. Female revolutionary actors used the avenues of the revolution and constantly reminded Sudan and the world that this revolution is an important milestone to create change that would lead to a more accommodating and gender-sensitive place for women in Sudanese society, and to denounce the existing ideologies and practices that subordinate them.

II

For 30 years, women in Sudan lived resentfully against a vicious regime and ruthless political leadership that harassed and targeted them in every aspect of their lives, with unprecedented cruelty violating their pride and dignity. Things reached a deadlock and the government in its isolation appeared staggered and incapable. The 'General in His Labyrinth' tightened his grip; corruption became appallingly rampant, regime oppression aggravated and manifested itself via an abusive security apparatus and unfair and humiliating trials. Women from across all backgrounds were targeted, but working-class women, mainly street

vendors and tea sellers, were the most affected. The government was moving into lifting subsidies from basic goods, including bread and fuel, which mounted the burden on the shoulders of the people. President Bashir had nowhere to go but to resort to his military and security leaders to enforce order and to take vicious measures to suppress anti-government voices.

The sentiments against the regime mounted and came to a boiling point when women and men stormed out in prolonged peaceful and organized street protests. The 2018 December uprisings were not exclusive to political activists. Sudanese women across different class, religion, and ethnic backgrounds rallied in the streets across the country, acting as leading agents of change, and calling for radical transformations through various techniques of non-violent resistance.

Women proactively took part and shouldered additional burdens to achieve desirable outcomes of freedom, social justice and regime change. Their belief and contribution to what was perceived as an improbable revolution is immense, and despite the risks they challenged the regime apparatus and were present and visible in large numbers over four-months long demonstrations until the overthrow of the notorious dictatorship. Bold and beautiful, they consciously took the road to engage in *double* revolution -- rebelling against the military state as well as the patriarchal social system and ideology -- that is intertwined and reinforced by conservative state discourse and behaviors. Thus, during the *mawakib*, especially the earlier ones, girls in particular were confined to their houses and their participation in the rallies was prohibited by family members. But young girls exchanged stories on how to smuggle themselves out of the house and join the protests without being noticed by their parents and brothers. One of the girls who was not allowed to go out by her father decided to make posters and hung them all around the house as a sign of dissatisfaction with her father's decision.

In the whole process of the revolution, whether at home or outside, women's presence and role was overwhelmingly remarkable. They were represented in the revolution's leading forces, most importantly the neighborhood resistance committees. Older women at home prepared food and beverages for the protesters and provided them with shelter and protection during the riots of the security forces. For those who were physically there in the crowds, they marched, launched their *zagroda* and showed astonishing bravery that shocked the regime and its affiliates. One of the slogans of the revolution states, '*kandaka*'⁹ *came, police ran away*', which directly subverts the ideology and gendered associations of the passive helpless homemaker woman. A stunning picture depicts a young lady named "Rifqa" in one of the rallies while she grabbed a *bomban* (tear-gas bomb) before it exploded and threw it back to the security men. On social media, the well-known Facebook women's group *monbarshat* did a magical job and specialized in disclosing the identity of the security personnel, using the photos that are taken for them during the rallies. *Monbarshat* profiled these men and shamed and named them. Their action scared the security officers to the point that they started to be seen in the streets oppressing the protesters with their faces covered with scarfs. To shame a man in the Sudanese culture as not being brave enough or un-masculine, he would be told to 'wear scarf and stay at home – *like women*'. Hence, these security men appearing with a scarf on their faces presented a target of mockery and sarcasm by the public. As a result of the humiliation, some of them insisted to go on leave and some others quit their jobs altogether.

Yet, this was not an easy journey as detention campaigns began to seize the activists and resulted in the largest number of female martyrs and detainees in the history of Sudan. Despite the fact that women were determined to make the revolution successful and were willing to die in the streets rather than go home and surrender to more repression, this is one of the most popular slogans chanted during the revolution '*the bullet*

does not kill ... kills the silence of the people'. In these times of adversity, they showed solidarity with each other and collectively chanted '*Oh girls be resilient ... this revolution is a girls' revolution*'.

The big day came when tens of thousands of protesters, who later became millions in what's known now as *mawakib* 6 April, arrived in the vicinity of the Military Headquarters and embarked on a long peaceful sit-in. A few days later Omer El Bashir was forced to step down and a transitional government to be led by the military was announced. Not trusting the army and the security forces and fearing a duplication of the post-Arab Spring scenarios, the protesters rejected the new military government and decided to prolong their sit-in until a full handover of power to civilians, namely the Forces of Freedom and Change¹⁰ (FFC) alliance was in place. It is important to mention that women's groups such as *mansam* and *No to Oppression Against Women Initiative* continued to be represented in the FCC alliance. In the wake of this, the head of the recently announced military government General Awad Ibn Aouf stepped down within only 30 hours, and a temporary military government led by the Transnational Military Council (TMC) was appointed to launch talks with FCC and arrange for a transition of power to a civilian government.

The peaceful sit-in was regarded as a utopia by the protesters, a republic inside the republic, a holy city where the revolution's martyrs are honored and remembered via music, painting and all forms of art. It was considered a spot of light illuminating the way and promising of an auspicious future. Activities, celebrations, and services including food, health care, media, education, awareness raising, seminars, psychosocial support – all never stopped and were provided by volunteers, the majority of them were women. The massive congregation came together to unify based on shared, non-violent cultural values and narratives that inform the ways they aspire to live and act in the world, creating a 'political culture of creation' (Forman, 2014 in Perrin, 2015). A vibrant life where talents

exploded and expressed themselves, people for the first time breathed hope and freedom, and the sit-in witnessed the emergence of new young and female leaders.

The sit-in lasted from 6 April until the TMC and the Rapid Support Forces (RSP) – formerly the Janjaweed¹¹ - brutally evacuated the military headquarters on June 3rd on the eve of Eid El-Fitr. This resulted in the death of more than 300 protesters by torture, and the disappearance of many others many of whom remain missing to this day. Both women and men were also sexually assaulted and figures identify 60 women as victims of rape on that bloody day. Some of those women went on to commit suicide as a result. Both the TMC and the RSF denied they were behind these horrendous atrocities and investigations are still under way.

Despite the tragic end of the sit-in and the trauma and pain left, women's presence there and then later in the *mawkib* 30 June and in all political events leads to the legitimate question: how can women guarantee fair representation and political roles in the post-revolution leadership?

III

The negotiation between the TMC and the FCC took place under the auspices of the African Union, and both delegations were dominated by men, until women activists mobilized and exerted pressure on the FCC to add a female member to the civilian team. After the negotiation rounds were complete, a deal was concluded and resulted in a power sharing agreement between the civilian powers and the military, yielding in a transitional government to rule the country for the next three years with three main structures of governance: 1. a Sovereign Council (11 members); 2. an Executive Cabinet of Ministers (20 ministers); and 3. a Parliament (300 representatives). At the beginning, women were neglected in high-level politics, as political powers didn't fulfill their promise of giving

women 40% of the seats in the cabinet. The FCC prepared lists that had no female names, but after a lot of pressure, two seats were secured for women in the Sovereign Council, and one of them is a Coptic Christian. As for the cabinet, the newly appointed Prime Minister (Dr. Abdallah Hamdoug) insisted that the lists offered to him by FCC should be amended and updated with women nominees. Currently, there are four women ministers out of 20. Regarding the appointment of the regional states governors, women activists and bodies such as *mansam* and *No to Oppression Against Women Initiative* prepared a massive roster of women's CVs and brought up a list of women nominees to avoid what happened before, but the political forces insisted on a 'women-blind' list. Paradoxically, a statement was issued by women affiliates of the political parties and announced their support of the men's list, and they signed the statement as 'Women Politicians'. Finally, it was decided that the Parliament – still to be formed - according to the Constitutional Document¹² should dedicate 40% of its seats to women.

The example of the 'Women Politicians' statement and the tension between women it created reminds feminist movements that they 'must also address the balance between organizing outside the patriarchal institutions they aim to change and avoiding co-optation when working within those institutions' (Kampwirth, 2004; Kaufman & Williams, 2010 in Perrin, 2015:40).

Sudanese women objected to the fact that they were not consulted nor represented in the peace talks with the armed groups of the margins (who did not accept the FCC-TMC deal). Women were also excluded from the main political and security bodies and special committees such as the Empowerment Elimination Anti-Corruption and Funds Recovery, a special committee mandated to dismantling the structures of the previous regime, remove empowerment¹³, and bring its convicted leaders to justice.

Some women activists decided to use social media and mobilize for an increasing representation of women in senior political positions. They exhibited profiles and CVs of massive numbers of women. Social platforms were flooded with such profiles and CVs were posted everywhere. This act found criticism and was described as being unprofessional, ineffective and bringing to light only a superior class of women who have historically enjoyed privilege and power. Some even went further and condemned Sudanese feminists and their contemporary movement as lacking vision, and they critiqued the movement as elitist, hierarchal, fragile, fragmented, and working only on behalf of women who belong to certain classes and ethnicities. Regardless of how the public reacted, what led to this online market of CVs was the highlighting of the weakness of existing formal channels, and the seemingly unequal women's representation within the main political powers.

That's not all. Women activists also were criticized for being divided among themselves and along the lines of their political affiliations which sometimes conflicted with the interests of mainstream women. The engagement of women activists in politics was also regarded as being historically manipulated by male-dominant political ideologies and structures. As such, the contemporary feminist movement is portrayed to be lacking a viable all-encompassing vision to foster the principles of gender justice and equality. Finally, the dominant feminist discourse is seen as distracting and deviating from the real problems: focusing on elitist or western notions of feminism is exclusionary and overlooks the class, ethnicity and other heterogeneities and hierarchies that differentiate women in Sudan. It is noteworthy to mention that this same criticism targeted the women's movement and activists in other countries in the aftermath of their revolutions e.g. Egypt, Turkey, Eritria and also in earlier revolutions in Latin America.

Despite their leading role during all the stages of the revolution, the efforts that women activists have put forth to realize gender balance in the transitional government have received minimal attention or support. This is indeed disappointing but not surprising, as the culture of patriarchy regardless of the cultural context typically tends to view human and women's rights issues as marginal and trifling. This is again not unique to women in Sudan. Feminists remind us that 'inclusion of female participants is part of a careful balancing act between losing followers of the revolution and avoiding women's rights becoming a priority that could threaten patriarchal power' (Randall, 1992; Tétreault, 1994). Pioneering feminist theorist Sheila Rowbotham (2013, p. 205) observes that while it may be necessary to call on women to participate, often male revolutionaries envision 'women "put back firmly in their place". Thus, women's participation is often only valued for as long as it supports the interests of men who, historically, oversee the agenda and outcomes of revolution'. This is exactly what's happening now in Sudan. What is promising though is that women have not stopped and will continue their struggle demanding full rights and equal representation as the main 'owners' of this revolution. There is still a long walk ahead of us, but achievements have begun to trickle down, including drafting a national plan of action for women 2025, enforcing the anti-FGM law, and relinquishing freedom-restrictive laws such as the infamous public order law. Hence, the revolution was not the penultimate goal. Rather, it represents the beginning of a longer trajectory of progressive change. The aspiration of the revolutionary women is to make this revolution an egalitarian process that results in women's liberation and a total transformation of Sudanese society.

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Notes

¹ Awrah (Arabic: عورة) is a term used within Islam which denotes the intimate parts of the body, for both men and women, which must be covered with clothing. Exposing the awrah is unlawful in Islam and is regarded as a sin.

- ² It means “revolution” in Arabic. <https://islamic-dictionary.tumblr.com/post/5658467793/awrah-arabic-%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9-is-a-term-used>
- ³ Hannah Arendt (1963) in Perrin (2015: 41).
- ⁴ Integrated into the primary school system as early as 1907, female Sudanese students joined the university for the first time in 30 years, paving the way for women to contribute to scholarship and activism in areas of concern to their sex.
- ⁵ Moghadam 1997 & 2013 in Perrin, 2015:41.
- ⁶ One in three women are married before the age of 18.
- ⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wn_61qUxbq0
- ⁸ Few days before the separation of the South, Omer El-Bashir publicly announced that: "If south Sudan secedes, we will change the constitution, and at that time there will be no time to speak of diversity of culture and ethnicity ... Sharia and Islam will be the main source for the constitution, Islam the official religion and Arabic the official language." In this statement he presumed that with the separation of the south the impediments to the full realization of an Arab and Islamic Sudanese state should be naturally removed.
- ⁹ *Kandaka* is the title given to ancient Nubian queens who were known to be brave fiercely fought and defeated the county against the invaders and the enemies.
- ¹⁰ The alliance consisted of political parties and entities such “Sudan Call” and “the Forces of National Consensus”, in addition to women’s associations, youth groups, community groups, and trade unions.
- ¹¹ The Janjaweed is an Arabic word means a *jinnī* (spirit) and *jawad* (horse) i.e. “a sprit/man on a horse”, is a militia that was formed in 2003 and supported by the Sudanese government after the insurgency escalated in the Sudanese western region Darfur. The Janjaweed comprised Sudanese “Arab” tribes who were mobilized to fight against the rebels from “African” tribes i.e. the Movement of Justice and Equality and the Sudan’s Liberation Movement. The Janjaweed were led by Shiekh Musa Hilal and Ali Kushayb who voluntarily surrendered himself for arrest in the Central African Republic in June 2020 and was in ICC custody on 9 June 2020. This Janjaweed militia committed horrendous atrocities in Darfur leading to the killing of 300,000 people and the displacement of three million. As a result, the ICC issued an indictment warrant against al-Bashir and a number of top-ranked officials in the government and the Janjaweed leaders in 2008. In a later stage, with the bless of Omer Al-Bashir, Mohamed Hamdan Daglo “Hemidti” led and restructured the Janjaweed into a para-military force called the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).
- ¹² The CD’s provisions explicitly outline the protection of the economic rights of Sudanese women. That declaration indeed raised the threshold on gender-sensitive provisions of Track I peace agreements in Africa. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/sudan-spring-lessons-from-sudanese-women-revolutionaries/>
- ¹³ The term empowerment was used by the ousted regime to provide privileges for those close to the regime.