

Lessons from Sudan's December revolution

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The revolution in Sudan did not end with the ousting of al-Bashir — people in the streets continue to keep the pressure up until all their demands are met.

The peaceful, mass uprising which began in Sudan in December 2018 was sustained for nearly eight months in the face of widespread state violence. A [constitutional charter](#) was signed on August 4, 2019. It repealed the federal and state constitutions of the fallen regime of Omar al-Bashir and established several transitional bodies: a “Sovereignty” Council, a cabinet under a civilian prime minister, an appointed legislative assembly and several independent commissions.

The charter is essentially a compromise, setting the framework of co-governance by civilian administrators and the military for a period of 39 months. During that time, the Sudanese people have been assured, peace would be achieved, the networks of the ruling party and its security apparatus dismantled, economic collapse stemmed, the military and militias reformed, transitional justice begun in earnest, the civil service rebuilt, independence of the judiciary restored, women's rights safeguarded, a permanent constitution written and credible elections held — amongst other things. This process is currently ongoing.

In the early months of the transition, it appeared that there was a shift from protest politics to state-building. Although protests did not abate, especially on the issue of transitional justice and, later, around economic issues, there was a period in which public opinion was highly in favor of giving the civilian component of the transitional government the space to effect change.

The government, led by ex-UN economist Abdalla Hamdok and composed mainly of technocrats, has made some important moves in the direction of fulfilling the revolution's demands. In particular, it has reformed the budget towards a focus on education and health instead of security and defense. In addition, it has been working through its “Committee to Remove Empowerment” to attempt to break the hold of Bashir's National Congress Party on state institutions and state assets. Key repressive laws, such as the Public Order Laws, were removed and the former ruling party has been dissolved.

However, by August this year, patience had begun to wear thin and exploded into protest as the military continued to play a disproportionate role in governance. People in the war-affected areas continue to live with violent militias, the economic situation had deteriorated further, peace negotiations with the armed movements have not yet been concluded, and almost a year into the transition the Transitional Legislative Assembly — the third “leg” of the transitional government — has not yet been formed. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the situation more explosive, especially for the poor whose already precarious livelihoods have been jeopardized even further.

A New Wave of Protests

There are, however, strong indications of the continued vibrancy of the revolutionary movement. The year since the power-sharing deal came into force has seen a proliferation of “demand-based” organizations and coalitions, as well as wide-scale union restructuring. As Gilbert Achcar [writes](#), there has also been “an extensive restructuring of the labor movement and farmers' associations.

The left has been pressing for legislation to replace the corporatist enterprise unions, imposed under the Bashir regime, with occupational unions.”

The role of the resistance committees — the thousands of neighborhood-based grassroots bodies that coordinated local resistance during the revolution — has only strengthened during the transition, with many having formed coordinating bodies. They have been the entities confronting the triple disaster of COVID-19, economic meltdown and continued violence by militias and state security. They have also refused to let the civilian administrators or the military sideline the issue of justice for the victims of the fallen regime’s violence.

In some of the war-affected areas, resistance committees, frustrated by the lack of action by the central government, have confronted the local commissioners and governors. Almost a year into the transition, current prime minister Abdalla Hamdok has replaced al-Bashir’s military governors with civilian ones. Women’s groups have continuously protested for the principle of gender parity in transitional structures. As in Egypt and elsewhere, civilian and military patriarchal power structures have worked to exclude women post-uprising. Fierce resistance by women activists is the main reason they have only been partially successful.

Recently, sit-ins led by the resistance committees, the committees of the displaced and the civil (tribal) administration took place in Nertiti, a town in Central Darfur. Protesters there are demanding that the Khartoum government remove the al-Bashir-era local administration, secure the safety and security of the area’s inhabitants from raiding militias, protect farmers and pastoralists and bring mining operations under government control.

Nertiti has inspired other sit-ins across the country, some of which have been brutally dispersed — a reminder that the repressive apparatus of the state has only been partially dismantled. The fact that the revolution is witnessing a new wave of protests complicates the narrative of “protests leading to transition and state-building” that the international community along with the Sudanese elite promotes. If anything, this wave of protests shows stronger features of class struggle.

Lessons Learned — and Applied

While it may be too early to speak of the lessons of Sudan’s December revolution, it is worth reflecting on what we have learned so far. In countries as diverse, complex and divided as Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon, the striking aspect of this second wave of uprisings is two-fold.

First, it does not adhere to the normal modes of political mobilization, based on constructed identities of “ethnicity,” “sect” or “religion.” Rather, diverse groups that traditionally did not, or rarely, mobilized together have joined around common demands. Second, there appears to be a clear understanding, learned in part through the first wave of uprisings, of the need to sustain these movements over the long-term if they are to be effective. The demands of today’s movements are sharper and more clear-eyed when it comes to the roots of inequality and the ways in which counter-revolution works.

These movements, including the one in Sudan, are cognizant of the lessons of 2011 to 2012 — that movements should not demobilize too soon. While the smartphone has opened a whole new world of organizing potential — the ability to communicate, network and document has also been countered by the ability of regimes to cut-off the internet. These new technologies, which were spoken of rather simplistically in the first wave of Middle Eastern and North African uprisings, show that grassroots revolutionary structures with actual presence and organization on the ground are as necessary as ever.

At different instances during Sudan's December revolution, especially in June 2019, the movement would have been quashed without the existence of the resistance committees and their ability to mobilize without the internet. Rather than the binary of leaderless or "clearly-led" uprisings, Sudan shows that leadership can — and should be able to — shift depending on the exigencies of the revolutionary struggle. The same can be said of culture in the struggle: without the use of poetry, art, music, dialect and the symbolism of past struggles, it would have been difficult to sustain the civil disobedience for months while being faced with the extreme brutality of the state.

Put simply, Sudan's primary lesson has been the importance of grassroots organizing and communication between different levels of the movement, the importance of building not one nucleus of leadership but several, and the importance of culture, arts, poetry and the ability to draw on political and social symbolism and traditions and blend it with innovations to make a new protest culture.

Additionally, the trajectory of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) — the formerly banned union that played a leading organizing and mobilizing role during the revolution — and the other bodies which emerged from previous protests and social struggles, shows how long-term organizing is necessary to be able to direct these energies into concrete demands and tactics in moments when the streets erupt.

Another lesson from Sudan is the importance of building specific class-based and feminist movements within the broader national struggle. While mobilization based on nationalism is effective, Sudan shows that, from April 2019, class interests within the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) — the umbrella group of civilian political forces which negotiated with the military on behalf of the people — played a strong role in the trajectory that it pursued, namely, to seek a "soft(er) landing" with the military.

The innovations of the revolution, of decentralized and mutual governance in spaces like the sit-ins, were cast aside by the political class in favor of what they know best: the well-trodden path of traditional, liberal democracies, which has proven unwilling or incapable of delivering social justice and equity.

A Precarious Balance

The working class struggles we see since the start of the transition — the resistance committees, labor activism and the proliferation of demand-based groups and sit-ins are cause for optimism and further proof of the importance of grassroots organizing to protect and expand revolutionary gains. But they should not be romanticized. Resistance committees should become participatory spaces for political education and consciousness-raising, rather than be thought of as tools — such as "a safety valve," as they are often referred to in Sudan.

Time will tell whether the FFC will hold together and whether its gamble on the power-sharing deal with the military will pay off. Missing a clear mechanism for the dismantling of the military, much of the transitional political settlement assumes the backing of the international community, especially Western countries like Germany and the United States.

However, past experiences call for caution. As the years following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which was signed in 2005 between the al-Bashir regime and then southern Sudanese rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement show, the international community is fickle. Once its goals are accomplished or no longer deemed a priority, countries like Sudan and South Sudan can be discarded, or marginalized. Thus, a dependency on international guarantees, while understandable given the structural collapse that the transitional government has inherited, can

never be a primary strategy.

International support also typically comes at a high price. For example, with Sudan's heavy foreign debt burden accumulated through decades of dictatorship and with an economy in tatters, Sudan is vulnerable to the International Monetary Fund and its western backers. Thus far, Hamdok's government has shown a neoliberal bent that does not bode well for the country.

One way in which to begin to address the state deficit is to aggressively pursue the billions looted by the previous regime and stashed or invested overseas. The other is to take serious steps to take gold and other resources away from the Rapid Support Forces militia (RSF), the military and front companies belonging to ex-regime members, and to place those resources under civilian, governmental control and community oversight. For many impoverished communities around the country, this is urgent, especially given the devastating impact of these operations on public health and the environment.

In terms of the military, a restructuring has been taking place internally since October 2019, with the military chair of the Sovereignty Council, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, making moves to side-line or remove Islamist generals. However, no matter who is in charge of the army, it is always wise to assume — given Sudan's history — that there will be attempts by the military or elements within it to seize power.

This complicates the situation both for the civilian administrators in the government, as well as for the protest movement. Challenging the civilian government, an argument goes, means weakening it and making it easier prey for the remnants of the regime, the military and the RSF, which is also represented in the Sovereignty Council. Many entities in the movement practice a dual politics of supporting the government in its efforts to dismantle the regime and its legacy, while simultaneously challenging it to do better and move faster when it comes to issues of peace, justice and economy.

A recent change in Hamdok's cabinet and a battle within the SPA after its last internal elections have also pointed to the fragility of the FFC. Which direction the contestation goes within civilian power structures is unclear, but as the masses have recently reminded the civilian administrators and the military alike, the revolutionary movement is alive and well.

A Challenge for Activists and Scholars Alike

For countries like Sudan, Algeria and Egypt, where the military is in power, one small but important lesson from the confrontations in April 2019 is that we must look at the military through a class lens. Many lower-level soldiers took the side of protesters, defending them against the RSF and security services.

These soldiers are mostly from poor and working-class backgrounds and do not benefit from the bounty at the higher levels of the military establishment. They also have to stand in breadlines and struggle to make ends meet. Difficult as it may be, organizing within the military's lower ranks seems like an important strategy to consider in these countries.

In addition, while women mobilized during the revolution to a striking degree, subsequent attempts to marginalize them indicate that this is not enough to secure their rights. There needs to be parallel, wide-scale intersectional feminist organizing as well, something that was not effective in the December Revolution. The Nertiti sit-in has been a challenge to the elitism of the Khartoum-based women's movement. The rural and displaced women in this wave of sit-ins are pointing to more than representation in political structures — they are asking for basic safety and the ability to practice their livelihoods and to live without fear.

Finally, we would like to note that for us as Sudanese, both the Middle East and North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa uprisings — that have not received as much attention — are key to our own struggles. We would like to ask a question. How can we support each other's movements across borders?

This is not only important for our political education and solidarity, but because we face many of the same foes — imperialism, militarism, capitalism, racism and patriarchy. These are global structures that cannot be defeated by any of us alone. Why have we not built our own media and networked activists and revolutionaries in the region? Can we build cross-border movements too? This is a challenge we pose to activists and scholars in our regions and beyond.

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P.S.

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The book can be purchased via [Daraja Press](#) at a discounted price and is available to download on a Pay What You Can (PWYC) basis. (An Arabic version of the book will also soon follow).

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