

A ROUNDTABLE

The Future of the Resistance Committees in Sudan

Sunday 17 April 2022, by [ABBAS Sara](#), [AKRAM-BOSHAR Shireen](#), [ALNEEL Muzan](#), [GIZOULI Magdi el](#), [MINDAS Abdelsalam](#) (Date first published: 14 April 2022).

“In recent months, several resistance committees have led the issuance of political charters based on widespread consultation of their neighborhoods, regions, and with other revolutionary bodies in their areas. Given the rapid process of the committees’ evolution, a question poses itself: What role will the resistance committees play in the revolutionary process going forward? We posed this question to three Sudanese leftists: Magdi el Gizouli, Muzan Alneel, and Abdelsalam Mindas.”

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2018, a mass uprising took place in Sudan that began an ongoing revolutionary process, which has taken shape in two major waves thus far. For the first four months, protests swelled, until in April 2019, mass sit-ins brought about the fall of Omar al-Bashir, the head of the military regime that had devastated the country for 30 years. The military, seeking to retain power, responded to this first wave of revolutionary activity with brutality, most infamously on June 3, 2019, when its violent dispersal of the sit-in in Khartoum left more than a hundred protestors dead and destroyed the lives of many others. The civilian opposition, under the umbrella of the Forces for Freedom and Change, responded by signing a deal with the military in August 2019. This deal, in the form of a constitutional document, ushered in a “transitional period” of power sharing between the military and the civilian opposition, at the end of which power would have ostensibly moved to an elected, fully civilian government. Protests continued sporadically however for the two years that followed, as the military remained the dominant player in politics, and as the government—under the civilian Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok—ignored the calls for justice and accountability. Instead, it pursued a politics of neoliberal economics.

On October 25, 2021, the military seized power once again, declaring a state of emergency and beginning a campaign of terror in an attempt to reclaim full control of the country. This sparked a second wave of revolutionary activity. In this wave, the leadership of the resistance has shifted from its 2019 center—the Sudanese Professionals’ Association (SPA)—to neighborhood-based resistance committees across the country. The committees have thus far stood in clear and steadfast opposition to the military, as well as to attempts by regional and western powers to return to the power sharing agreement of 2019. The resistance committees’ two loudest slogans, which the Sudanese street has adopted as its own, encapsulate their position on the political situation: “Going back is impossible”

and “no negotiation, no partnership, and no legitimation” with the military.

What is most instructive for social movements worldwide are the various structures for resistance that exist in Sudan today, particularly those of the resistance committees. The SPA, the leading body in the first wave of the revolution, composed of mostly white-collar unions, was able to carry out mass general strikes and effectively mobilize and coordinate civil disobedience. However, this body ultimately negotiated with, and conceded to, the military. The resistance committees, which also played an important role in the first wave, have moved in the past two years of “transition” to a central leadership role that embraces a more radical politics and refusal of the status quo promoted by elite political actors in Sudan.

In recent months, several resistance committees, most notably Mayrno resistance committees (Sinnar state), Wad Madani resistance committees (Jazira state), and Greater Khartoum resistance committees, have led the issuance of political charters based on widespread consultation of their neighborhoods, regions, and with other revolutionary bodies in their areas. The charters not only link the question of social and economic inequity, war and political repression, and the extractive colonial state and its post-colonial iterations, but they also chart out a bottom-up process of participatory democracy that contrasts sharply with the various power-from-above models championed by the military, by civilian elites and by western powers. The most recent draft of [the Revolutionary Charter for People Power](#) (in Arabic) was circulated publicly earlier this month (April 2022) for final suggestions, comments and critiques. As this charter has evolved, resistance committees in 15 of Sudan’s 18 states, along with other revolutionary bodies in each locality, have made inputs, provided critiques and advocated for changes. The aim is to issue a final charter that will be open to endorsement by political forces across the country, and that would act as the blueprint for the revolutionary movement’s vision for change.

Given the rapid process of the committees’ evolution, a question poses itself: *What role will the resistance committees play in the revolutionary process going forward?* Are they likely to transform into political parties, form the seed of local governing councils, or might they fade away once the military has been unseated and the current demands have been met? This of course depends to a large degree on the organic conditions on the ground, as those are what has shaped the committees more than anything else. But the question is critical for many reasons, not least the diversity of the committees themselves, which, besides their unified rejection of the military, tend to reflect their local communities in terms of class interests and regional concerns. Given the importance of the committees, there have also been attempts, unsuccessful so far, to “capture” them and harness them to serve various agendas, whether those of the military, western funders or Sudanese political parties that feel displaced politically by them.

We posed this question to three Sudanese leftists: Magdi el Gizouli, Muzan Alneel, and Abdelsalam Mindas.

Magdi el Gizouli is a well-known Sudanese intellectual, whose blog, [StillSudan](#), has been a platform for commentary and analysis on Sudanese affairs since 2009. Magdi is currently a fellow at the Rift Valley Institute. Among his many publications is the report [Mobilization and Resistance in Sudan’s Uprising](#) (2020).

Muzan Alneel is an engineer and Sudanese activist who has written widely about the Sudanese revolution. She is a cofounder of the Innovation, Science and Technology Think Tank for People-Centered Development (ITSinaD)-Sudan and a nonresident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP). Her articles include [“The People of Sudan Don’t Want to Share Power With Their Military Oppressors”](#) (2021). For the Arabic-speaking readers of this article, we recommend watching the following [video](#) of Muzan speaking to a crowd of protestors at the Khartoum sit-in in

front of the Military General Command in 2019. It is a lesson in organizing to foster class consciousness.

Abdelsalam Mindas was the official spokesperson for the coordination of the Ombada resistance committees and one of two official spokespersons for the resistance committees of greater Omdurman. He is an agronomist with a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Studies from Sudan University of Science and Technology.

MAGDI EL GIZOULI

Apart from the extrinsic threats of cooptation and capture, I think it might be worthwhile to highlight the intrinsic threat of fetishization of the committees as such and of the sacrificial mode of operation in their struggle against a brutal state order.

I would claim that the resistance committees are the biggest, youngest, and most active political agent in the country. They might be described as “*an sich*.” Through the few years since 2019 the committees have evolved from mobilization and maneuvering units against the coercive apparatus of the state to an archipelago of political and organizational experiences and orientations.

The category *an sich*, translated in English as “in itself,” is drawn from the Hegelian lexicon and contrasts with the reflexive explicit self-comprehending and full-blown *für sich* (or “for itself”) of self-consciousness that a reader of Marxist classics would encounter in Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*. The Hegelian categories are not a mere flourish of theory but are acutely necessary to deal with the divergence between the potentiality and the actuality of the committees, a divergence that can to my mind only be adequately addressed through a dialectic of praxis. This is no easy task though and should not be underestimated. Marx himself did not articulate a theory of class consciousness. Volume 3 of *Capital* ends with a short fragment titled “Classes” that poses the question “what constitutes a class?” Marx challenges the self-evident definition around the identity of revenues and sources of revenue as an unsatisfactory “at first glance” explanation. The manuscript breaks off here, and the question is suspended, one that haunts many a reader of *Capital*!

Why is it important to raise the problem of (class) consciousness at this juncture? In their initial stages of emergence, the resistance committees of Khartoum’s impoverished working-class neighborhoods that were critical in the mobilization and sustenance of popular anger against Bashir’s regime mirrored the informality of their livelihoods. The committee in this context had an open-access character akin to *ad hoc* neighborhood football teams, constituted at the hour of play and reconstituted anew the next day as convenience dictates. The word committee confers a factional solidity that is at odds with the fluid nature of the actual formation of these structures and invites hasty parallels with the commune and the soviet.

There is a precise northern Sudanese Arabic term for *ad hoc* afternoon football games in neighborhood squares: *dafoori*. In contrast to the formal game *dafoori* is not bound by the definite formal rules of football. Teams are constituted of the available numbers of players, the ball could be a ball-formed mass of rags, and the referee, if he exists, does not necessarily have the last word in matters of dispute. There is no boss in a *dafoori*. The timeline of the game is not defined by an intrinsic rule but by the energy of the players and possibly the availability of lighting, players opt out of the game when exhausted or when they can't stomach defeat. An injured player is readily replaced by an onlooker who is cheered upon to join the game. Relations between *dafoori* players are predicated on a "moral economy" that involves mutual recognition, trust, social and sporting skills and of course male camaraderie. Once in the game, social stratification is suspended, and an egalitarian ethos of performance predominates.

The resistance committees of Khartoum's working-class neighborhoods were in many ways constituted as *dafoori* teams for political agitation and hence the challenge they continue to pose to the mechanics of the security apparatus. Thanks to this particular conformation, the resistance committees proved a magnetic field for political engagement. The peddler, the artisan, the day laborer, the school-dropout, as well as the student and the politically seasoned university graduate – both with and without waged employment – teamed up in the neighborhood-based resistance committee with the protest march as their theater of operation. The protest march also defined the egalitarian plane of the committee and the skillset required for distinction. In the face of state brutality, an ethos of steadfastness, heroism, and sacrifice became a characteristic feature of the committees and their outlook. The committees acquired names reminiscent of male-sporting teams, for instance the Lions of al-Barrari and the Tigers of al-Abbasiya.

In this milieu of male sacrifice, the sharp edge of the committees was bound to be directed against young women who were called upon to excel in confrontations with the security apparatus, like their heroic male peers, or accept their protective mantle at the proverbial rear end of the revolutionary trail. This important contradiction was on display in the utterances and actions that clouded the protest marches of March 8 on the occasion of International Women's Day in Khartoum. The mainstream of the committees announced a protest march titled the Million March of Women, rejecting the coinage "Feminist March" declared by cohorts of young women whose horizon of liberation encompassed emancipation from patriarchal strictures. The result was considerable confusion and consternation around what constituted revolution. The mainstream of the committees spoke a language of priorities around confrontation with state power and their detractors from the feminist bloc were informed by ideas of social conflict and gender relations. This is but one demonstrative example of antagonisms in the monstrous interregnum of revolution and counter-revolution in Sudan. Apart from the extrinsic threats of cooptation and capture that you mentioned in your question I think it might be worthwhile to highlight the intrinsic threat of fetishization of the committees as such and of the sacrificial mode of operation in their struggle against a brutal state order.

MUZAN ALNEEL

I believe this threat can only be minimized by anchoring the people's power as a main objective and guiding principle, focusing on organizing and seizing power

from the bottom up, and experimenting in organizing and state-building guided by revolutionary principles.

I find Magdi's observation on the potentials and threats of the intrinsic characteristics of the committees quite important. The analogy of the *dafoori* team is helpful in understanding how the values and positions of a resistance committee are formed; that in addition to external circumstances impacting them, these values are also directly impacted by the composition of the committee/team. This adds to something I often highlight regarding the geographical nature of the committees and how that frequently has a larger impact on their positions than a set and defined political vision, up until now at least. Magdi correctly added the personal traits of the members as another factor on top of the interests and compositions of the groups within the neighborhood's geography. The analogy also expands to the decision-making mechanisms utilized by the committees that are more fluid than mechanisms observed in political parties or state institutions. Unlike the first impact on political positions, this one regarding the mechanisms is one that I find positive and creates space for practicing and theorizing on new models of organizing that can better respond to the requirements and realities of organizing in neighborhoods, if addressed, critiqued, and developed with due seriousness.

Going back to the main question regarding the role that the committees should play in the revolution going forward, I believe that the progress of the revolutionary process and the roles of several political actors - not just the committees - in it, will be shaped by how and how seriously we will address the questions of rebuilding state structures from the bottom up. This issue is widely discussed and directly mentioned in the [Revolutionary Charter for People's Power](#) proposed by a number of resistance committees. This proposed charter suggests the formation of a federal legislative body starting from local councils to municipal, state and then federal levels, and it is this body that then selects the head of the executive branch of the government. The model flips the usual top to bottom approach proposed by the ruling class under all its different labels. The way in which the Sudanese people attempt to practice this model on the ground, and its mutations and evolution - as it must undergo a lot of changes in the process of its formation if this process is truly responsive to community needs and interested in creating the best way possible to realize the "people's power" - will define the new roles of many if not all actors. The committees might evolve to become the seed of these local councils, or they might become political parties, or a structure of people's representation parallel to the state, among many other potentials, or they might indeed disappear as well.

I find the question of neighborhood and workplace organization and restructuring the state from the bottom up to be the main question of the Sudanese revolution now. This bottom-up organizing suggested in the revolutionary charter is a road map to forming the new government and regime, and presents the clearest steps towards realizing the "all power and wealth to the people" slogan. The biggest threat to it is the possibility of ignoring this question for the sake of more familiar elitist models, as seen currently in attempts of the elite and regional and international powers to select and appoint a government from the elites-however this has seen little success due to the commitment of the resistance to the "3 Nos" slogan: "no negotiation, no partnership, no legitimacy." "Fetishization of the committees," as Magdi phrased it, is part of the threat, as it can stifle other forms of organizing or can turn the tide towards preserving the committees above all else, while making it more difficult to critique the committees. I believe this threat can only be minimized by anchoring the people's power as a main objective and guiding principle, focusing on organizing and seizing

power from the bottom up, and experimenting in organizing and state-building guided by revolutionary principles. Currently, that is embodied in the attempts to create local councils and utilizing them to take over service provision and resource management in their areas. This is a task to be approached with an open revolutionary mind willing to experiment, critique, evaluate and evolve these new organizations/governments.

ABDELSALAM MINDAS [\[1\]](#)

The success of the revolution in achieving its goals depends upon the extent to which its organizations are able to continue, which in turn depends upon their connection to their mass bases that give them their real strength.

Since its start on December 6, 2018, the Sudanese revolution has provided an exceptional framework. It has provided an accumulation of struggle, gifted the revolutionary educational space new tactics, added a new chapter of knowledge and redefined the concepts of revolution, resistance, people, power, struggle, forces, interests and allies. It put an end to the imbalance and the rule of inverted logic while popularly disseminating these redefined concepts among the masses, applying them to the reality of revolutionary democratic practice and using them as a general criterion for configuring revolutionary agendas. In this regard, the Sudanese people created various organizational forms as well as tools of peaceful resistance and revolutionary learning. Resistance organizations emerged in communities and workplaces, among them the resistance committees, which are grassroots organizations that are deeply based on the principle of mass democracy along with the recognition that there is no traditional leadership within the committees. Decisions are taken with the participation of everyone in a way that is similar to the general assemblies of trade unions, such that the assembly is the highest authority within the organizational structure of the resistance committee.

The question raised above leads me to refer to the legacy of the revolutionary teacher, the avant-garde resistor and architect of struggle, Amílcar López da Costa Cabral, one of the greatest anti-colonial leaders. Cabral was an agitator, an inspirer, a fighter, a revolutionary theorist and political leader. He charted an expanded course for revolutionary theory by developing the works of Marx and Lenin to fit the African reality, through adding his analysis of the economic and social factors that affect colonized peoples. Cabral realized early on that the anti-imperialist movements at the time needed a revolutionary methodology and pointed out that “the ideological deficiency, not to say the total lack of ideology, within the national liberation movements — which is basically due to ignorance of the historical reality which these movements claim to transform — constitutes one of the greatest weaknesses of our struggle against imperialism, if not the greatest weakness of all.”² Cabral went even further than this, clarifying the importance of the organic relationship between revolutionary practice and theory. He concluded that “every practice produces a theory, and that if it is true that a revolution can fail even though it be based on perfectly conceived theories, nobody has yet made a successful revolution without a revolutionary theory.”³

After many decades of Cabral's legacy, however, I see that the historical context is the common factor, as it did not differ from our current context, i.e. that we still inhabit and live in the context in which Cabral formed his views. This is because our decisive battles have been deferred. About this, Cabral said that the worst thing about the phenomenon of colonialism is that it removes the colonized peoples from the circle of history, and when it takes them out of history, it does not allow the relationships of local forces to form and develop according to local relations and local historical movement, in a way that no coherent dialectical analysis method can derive the laws of local development except through a distorted lens provided by colonialism and directly influenced by the laws of the colonizer's society itself.

In other words, the colonizer, in his quest to control a particular country, seeks to erase the existence of the colonized, either by exterminating or assimilating and dispossessing the indigenous population. The latter is the most dangerous weapon of colonialism, as it gradually assimilates part of the local population into its culture. According to Cabral, in its quest to make the exploitation of the resources of the country its eternal matter, colonialism not only creates a complete system of suppression of the social life of the colonized people, but also induces and develops cultural alienation in a part of the population. And that is either by merging and hijacking members of the indigenous population to create a class gap and social hierarchy. This new elite then begins to represent the mentality of the colonizer, to consider itself superior to the people and to form the most loyal allies of the colonizer, preferring to live in its shadow than living in a liberated homeland. Here Cabral sees the imperative to confront colonialism and the assimilated elites alike – what he calls a challenge to colonial domination through revolutionary education, through building a revolutionary theory that besieges the colonial mentality and gives a national consciousness to the divested elite by integrating it with the masses through struggle and mass organization.

What Amilcar Cabral has concluded can be read in the current Sudanese revolution. Since the Sudanese revolution is a revolution of national liberation and since its slogan is clear, deeply-rooted, and moves towards dismantling the inherited colonial state structure, the hijacked elites intended to reduce it to and present it externally as a movement of resistance to totalitarian power. The hijacked elites also succeeded in depriving the mass movement and its organizations of revolutionary theory, by confiscating the masses' ability to theorize and by demonizing the theorizing process and its analytical approach. They also used other methods to separate the mass movement from its own issues, to limit its political consciousness and to confine politics to the upper echelons and to "what is possible." The elites sought in practice to separate the resistance organizations from the unions in places of residence and work by initiating an inverted concept of grassroots structure that rests on monopoly and elections, the opposite of the principle of mass democracy as put forward in 1970 by the Sudanese thinker; martyr Abdel-Khaleq Mahjoub. According to Mahjoub, mass democracy is fundamentally linked to social interests and pushes the masses to continuously engage in achieving their interests. He pointed out the need for the masses to participate clearly in shaping power, drawing up and implementing policies, and not only in electing representatives in a procedural manner as is the case in neoliberal conceptions.

This leads to the following assertion: that the role that mass organizations can play in workplaces and residences, in order to protect the revolution and help it continue to achieve its goals, begins firstly with realizing the historical reality and possessing the tools of struggle and analysis to transform this reality. Secondly, it begins by applying the principle of grassroots mass democracy starting with organizations, local government, and all levels of power, so as to increase the opportunities for the masses to create a political agenda that represents their interests and which results in the unity of tools and goals, common interests, the unity of housing and workplace issues and of their organizations on the basis of a political vision of the masses. Finally, it begins from the mass movement ceasing to waste its efforts by building alliances based on the lowest, most basic of

compromises. Instead, it should direct its efforts towards the development and prosperity of its organizations by expanding the broad participation of genuine contributors to deepen and root the tools of struggle in society.

The success of the revolution in achieving its goals depends upon the extent to which its organizations are able to continue, which in turn depends upon their connection to their mass bases that give them their real strength. This requires expanding the interests of the masses by seizing the institutions of power from the bottom levels to the top, and that the masses occupy this power by localizing and democratizing it through local and state councils and through all their executive and judicial structures. This is the only guarantor and the main motive for the masses to guard their revolution and protect and develop their grassroots organizations. Any departure from this inevitably means the setback of the revolution and the demise of its organizations. And if some have thought to turn these organizations into political parties, this does not go beyond a temporary adaptation to the status quo. It is worth underlining that the resistance organizations are built and consolidated by organized work, revolutionary learning, basic democratic practice, and a clear political vision.

P.S.

- Spectre. April 14, 2022:
<https://spectrejournal.com/the-future-of-the-resistance-committees-in-sudan/>
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Footnotes

- [1] TRANSLATED FROM ARABIC BY SARA ABBAS)