

## Sudanese Women Leading Revolution: Impact on Transformation

Badri, Balghis

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## Sudanese Women Leading Revolution: Impact on Transformation

BALGHIS BADRI

On 19<sup>th</sup> of December 2018 a revolution started throughout Sudan. It lasted for eight months until July 2019 and ended the 30 years of dictatorship of President Omar al-Bashir. Both, the hope for a better future within Sudan and a critique of the corrupt government that misused Sudanese wealth – e.g. important resources such as petrol or gold, the fact that 80% of the gum Arabic is produced in Sudan or the fertility of the land for agriculture – were main reasons for almost all in Sudan to aspire for change. In this revolution, Sudanese women played an important role. Moreover,

their participation and engagement have substantially contributed to changes after the end of the revolution and the establishment of the transitional democratic government.

### Women's Roles in the Sudanese Revolution

Sudanese women participated in and shaped the revolution in various ways. These women were of different age, classes, regions and ethnicities. They have shown courage in participating in and leading the peaceful revolution. Several factors may offer an explanation why women have played a prominent role within the revolution: Women had lived in displaced camps for years. They had to experience that armed rebellions did not produce regime change that would improve their living standards. They had also faced restrictions to human security and freedom in their every-day lives, for example by being arrested or being fired from work due to their activism for rights and democracy.

Furthermore, many Sudanese women and men perceived themselves as second class citizens in their own country because only those Sudanese who belong to the ruling Islamist dictatorship regime were capable to lead a dignified life in Sudan, and they were a minority. The majority experienced different levels and types of discrimination, harassment and marginalization, which the political regime justified with references to religion. Before the revolution, women had already participated in the public: as workers in the informal sector, as university students in large numbers, as well as in the private sector, in political parties and civil society. Despite the restrictions imposed on political parties and civic associations, Sudanese people had not resigned themselves to the Islamist dictatorship.

Hence, it was no surprise that women were leading the demonstrations across Sudan and the sit-ins from 6<sup>th</sup> of April to 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 2019. The peaceful sit-ins took place in front of the Ministry of Defence headquarters and symbolized the request towards the military to both protect and align itself with the demonstration. The sit-ins were accompanied by daily marches where people demanded a transfer of power to civilians, the installation of a just judiciary system independent from the government, the end of corruption of the Islamist regime, transitional justice and retribution for the bloody war in Darfur. The protesters also called for justice and freedom and for freeing detainees, as well as for gender equality and empowering rural women, the protection from rape and sexual harassment of internally displaced women and women in war zone areas, and in general to respect the rights and diversity of Sudanese people. That was summarized in the revolution slogan "Freedom, Peace and Justice".

In this revolution, women played a substantial role as speakers but also as guards at the entrances to ensure security during the sit-ins. Moreover, they were at the forefront as medical doctors and psychologists, providing support for those who faced violence during the demonstrations and to the families of those who had been killed during the Islamist dictatorship. They also led women-specific demands dur-

ing the demonstrations, holding posters for their empowerment and rights, and organized marches along the main roads. They formed a coalition of women in civil society, professionals, and political parties. The coalition was abbreviated in Arabic as “Mansam”, symbolic for “giving fresh air”. Mansam held rallies on gender inequalities and on violations of women’s rights by the state forces. Another coalition of young women activists named itself “50% 50%” and stood for the generation below 30 years demanding overall equality with men. The two groups worked together in harmony. Other women’s groups, formed before the revolution, were also active, and so were young female activists. In addition, older women were supportive by offering their homes to demonstrators fleeing from the police, offering food or money and encouraging the younger generation to be part of the demonstrations. These dynamics could be experienced across all towns of Sudan and were not confined to the capital.

During the revolution some women, especially the youth, gave themselves the name “Kandaka”. Kandaka had been a brave queen that had conquered the invaders during Nubian Ancient History. The name became a symbol for all brave revolutionary and decision-taking women who are willing to lead the country as did their ancient queen ancestors. Consequently, the public image of Sudanese female youth has changed: from the image of not being concerned with the future of their country, of being desperate or pursuing an individualistic agenda, to a new identity of being conscious, knowledgeable and determined to organize for a better future of the country they want to live in.

### **Transformative Dynamics after the Establishment of the Transitional Democratic Government**

The transformation was not only symbolic or focused on identity discourse about female youth, but it produced changes in gender roles, relationships and the positioning of women in the new Sudan that they revolted to change. The women’s demands during the revolution and sit-ins resulted in major achievements after the establishment of the transitional democratic government. The new transitional constitution document indicates that women should have at least 40% representation in the new parliament to be formed by the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). The FFC is a coalition of political parties, civil society organizations, and professionals that took the lead of the revolution and its success. Women are represented in all three bodies of the coalition and had been involved in the negotiations that finally led to the new constitution. Many women, however, feel that their representation in the final negotiations did not really reflect their contributions. Nonetheless, hopes were high that their contributions would lead to positive results when the new transitional government was formed.

The new government under prime minister Abdalla Hamdok appointed four female ministers. One of them is Asma Mohamed Abdalla, who became Sudan’s first female

minister of foreign affairs. Two other women, one of them Christian, are members of the presidential council. For the first time, the supreme judge is a woman, namely Nemat Abdallah. As women participated in the peace negotiations, they demanded more representation. The transitional constitution document included the establishment of eleven commissions. One of them is the Woman and Gender Equality Commission. Women's groups held workshops to discuss the mandate structure and functions of five of these commissions. The Regional Institute of Gender, Diversity, Peace and Rights at Ahfad University for Women initiated these workshops. An agreed-upon framework for the commissions was submitted to the prime minister. The women groups have also formed a specialized gender-experts-group and made an appeal to the prime minister council to allocate gender-expert advisers at all the ministries and one at the prime minister's office. The aim of this initiative is to ensure that during the transitional period policies, programs and budgets of each ministry will have positive effects for women's primary and strategic needs. The goal is to achieve women's empowerment, close the gender gaps and end any form of discrimination or violence against women. The gender-experts-group developed terms of reference and job descriptions for the gender advisers at the prime minister office. The women groups "Mansam", the youth "50% 50%", the "Harisat Women group" and the "Revolutionist group" are all various women's groups formed during the revolution. They used distinguishable strategies to achieve their demands including lobbying, writing appeals, organizing marches and demonstrations as well as promoting advocacy through social media. The different groups created Facebook pages and formed WhatsApp groups. The "50% 50%" group demanded equal representation in all bodies at national and local levels of government as well as in the parliament. The claims also included the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and changes in law, especially articles in criminal law that were tailored to restrict and harass women. They also called for new laws to be enforced such as ending all forms of genital mutilation. Furthermore, they contributed to articulate new policies in the areas of education, economy and peace.

### **The Positive Impact of the New Female Ministers**

With regard to the new female ministers, one of the major steps was undertaken by the minister of higher education, Intisar al-Zain Saghyroun, a former professor of archeology, by appointing three female professors as vice chancellors at public universities, including at the oldest and largest university, the University of Khartoum. Furthermore, another vice chancellor appointed 60% women as deans of colleges. Most of the colleges are considered non-stereotyped colleges such as Engineering, Mining and Petroleum, Medicine and Technology, hence the STEM colleges. The minister of labor and social development, Lena el-Sheikh Mahjoub, formed an expert team to develop the workplan for the implementation of the United Nations

Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) by the ministerial council before March 2020. A draft law was submitted to the ministry of justice on the issue of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Furthermore, the female minister of youth and sports, Wala'a Essam al-Boushi, a former activist, agreed to a female soccer team that already started competitions.

### **Women's Activism and the Need to Continue Fighting for Change**

Women's activists of all generations fought for legal reforms that led to the repeal of what is known as the public order law, a law that was previously tailored to subordinate and harass women. They are still demanding changes to other laws, especially the family law, and they support the new law to prohibit FGM. These claims were accepted by the FFC groups. The UN offices in Khartoum and the African Union are positive about the changes that happened in Sudan and sent high-level representatives to meet the Sudanese women's groups. The minister of justice, Nasreldin Abdelbari, a former human rights activist, promised to follow up on these demands. However, there is a risk that some groups – as for instance the Islamist fundamentalist groups who resisted any reforms – may stand against complete secular laws and system of governors once the parliament will be formed.

The revolution has led women activists to unite and to achieve the change they have been striving for for decades. Their activism needs to continue. Likewise, support from the Sudanese diaspora and the international community is needed to continue these struggles. The road to achieve the demands and hopes of the different women in Sudan is still long, but the will and determination to date are scaling up and not diminishing.

## **Ikone oder Hassbild? Greta Thunberg und die Fridays for Future-Bewegung**

ANTJE DANIEL. PATRICIA GRAF

Im August 2018 begann die 16-jährige Greta Thunberg vor dem schwedischen Parlament mit einem Schild mit der Aufschrift „Skolstrejk för klimatet“ (Schulstreik für das Klima) wöchentlich für Klimagerechtigkeit zu demonstrieren. Aus diesem Protest entstand eine globale Protestbewegung unter dem Schlagwort Fridays for Future (FFF), welche im September 2019 laut Organisator\*innen 163 Länder und über vier Millionen Menschen erfasste. Am 20. September 2019 organisierten sich in Deutschland allein 1,4 Millionen Menschen in 557 Städten (Denkler 2019). In ihrem Ausmaß ist die FFF-Bewegung mit der 1968er-Bewegung oder der Occupy-