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After the uprising: Including Sudanese youth

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The youth were the backbone of the protests that led to the fall of Sudan's president Omer al-Bashir in April 2019. Yet, two years after the uprising they are still largely excluded from the political decision-making and suffer severely from the economic hardship in the country. This brief is based on interviews of youth activists in Khartoum in early 2020, and discusses what must be done to include the youth in Sudan.

The importance of young people

Africa has the youngest population in the world. 41 per cent of the population is under the age 15 and another 19 per cent are between ages 15 and 24 (UN 2018). In Sudan, the age segment between 15 and 30 constitutes 60 per cent of the population. But 'youth' is not simply defined by age. Age-based definitions of youth are often in tension with society's perspectives on who classifies as a 'youth' or 'adult'.

In social and cultural terms, the transition from youth to adulthood are often defined by social markers such as marriage or economic independence. Social adulthood is therefore unattainable for the majority of youth in Africa due to failed public policies and the multiple political and economic crises they experience, leading to a prolonged youthhood before transitioning into adulthood (Sommers 2012; Honwana 2012). A slogan in the Sudanese protests, 'It will fall – and then we will get married', referred exactly to this: How the current policies and dire economic situation have hindered youth in obtaining independence as adults, ultimately establishing their own families.

Youth are also excluded from other arenas of adulthood. Globally, political participation is lower among the younger generations, at least in formal politics (Resnick and Casale 2011). The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250 on Youth, Peace and Security addresses the interaction between the economic and political exclusion of youth. The Progress Study on UNSCR2250 call for a greater focus on understanding how youth stay out of violence, especially because the majority of unemployed youth remain peaceful, and focuses on how to support their political participation (UN 2018).

Youth activism in Sudan

- The generation of people from 15 to 30 years of age were all raised under the authoritarian rule of the Islamist party National Congress Party (NCP, 1989–2019), and have not seen a Sudan without Omer al-Bashir as president. Their interaction with the state and attitudes towards government have therefore been highly influenced by the Islamist project.
- Lessons drawn from the organisation of voluntary charity work and previous resistance and repression under the NCP became instrumental for the success of the uprising in 2019, where underground organisation through neighbourhood committees and the use of social media were key.
- The youth activists do not see the established political parties as meaningful arenas for political participation, as the parties are dominated by elderly leaders and promote sectarian politics not

in line with the more civic perspectives of younger generations.

- The youth activists seem to have little faith in participation through conventional political channels and are weary of formalising the alternative networks and neighbourhood committees.

The recipe for success: Protest experience, neighbourhood committees and social media

The protests that led to the fall of the Islamist regime started in the regional town of Damasin on December 6, 2018, when students raised against the lifting of wheat subsidies, leading to price hikes on bread. The protests continued in Atbara, another regional town, on December 19, and then spread to the capital Khartoum and other regional towns in the following days.

When organising the protests in Khartoum, the protesters relied on the experience of voluntary work and alternative networks that had evolved over the last decade. During the NCP rule, many youth were afraid of being political. NCP had created the image that politics was dirty and dangerous, and politically active youth were frequently harassed and arrested. Youth were instead increasingly involved in voluntary work as a way of being engaged. As frustration with the traditional parties increased, alternative political youth networks, like Grifna and Sudan Change Now, also emerged, with one message – overthrow the regime! Some of those who had taken part in voluntarism became engaged in these groups.

The political youth networks were key organisers of protests during 2012, 2013 and 2016, but were harshly suppressed by the regime. While learning from past failures, the practical and logistical experience from both charity work and protests was instrumental in the success of demonstrations in 2018 and the sit-in in 2019. The voluntaries were essential in organising supplies, the politically experienced taught the others how to mobilise, and both groups knew how to crowdfund. They had for instance learnt how to handle tear gas and how to practically shield themselves from gunshots from the previous protests.

The networks, together with the key actor Sudan Professional Association (SPA – an association of health workers, doctors and lawyers), were however completely dependent and relying on mobilising through another structure: The informal neighbourhood committees in every corner of the capital. The members of these committees, also known as resistance committees, made up the numbers and constituted the big majority of the protesters in the streets, day after day, from December 2018 to the fall of Bashir in April 2019. Informally, young people in the capital's neighbourhoods would know about each others' sentiments against the

government, and had for some years already related to each other underground. Because of the danger of being known to be politically active, they often used social and cultural events as a cover up for meetings. During earlier protests, they had seen the value of being secretive and covert, managing to escape persecution from the security apparatus. From December 2018, the neighbourhood committees were coordinated by the SPA and the other networks, receiving messages about dates, time, meeting points and protest routes, thereafter swarming the streets with their members.

In addition to the experience and these organisational structures, social media was a game changer in the protests this time. When the first protests started 500km from Khartoum, the activists got to know about it instantly through social media. As explained by one of the organisers in Khartoum: 'We can even watch it live, like we did when it started in Atbara. The pictures of the burning NCP building were distributed immediately, and we acted'. Protesters were assigned to document the unfolding events with their mobile phones, and pass photos and videos on to information hubs in the networks. These were eventually distributed around the country and among the diaspora, demonstrating the resilience of the demonstrations to the outside world, garnering further support for the cause.

Resisting formalisation while demanding voices to be heard

When asked whether the aspirations of the Sudanese youth had been met after the demise of Bashir, most youth activist hesitated to say yes. 'It is complicated', they would reply. The Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), a coalition of various political groups engaged against Bashir, negotiated a power-sharing plan with the Transitional Military Council for a transition to return to democracy. Many dismissed the collaboration between the military and the civilians and the power given to the military leaders Hemeti and Burhan. Others argued that this was the best of all options available. The discussions on youth participation in the transition reflected this friction.

- The activists were divided on the participation in the FFC. While some argued that FFC participation was a way of bringing in demands from the streets, others saw it as a way of legitimising a continued collaboration with the oppressors, the military. Both the Sudan Change Now and Grifna were initially part of the FFC, while Grifna chose to leave after a while.
- Sudan Change Now initiated a plan to create a Youth Council, a shadow institution to coordinate youth in the neighbourhood committees. There

were also suggestions in the social media that representatives of the neighbourhood committees should be nominated to have seats in the transitional assembly.

- The neighbourhood committees did not want any formalisation for strategic reasons. They wanted to keep a more loosely organised structure to prevent the government from cracking down on the youth. The committees have continued their activities responding to immediate everyday challenges of for instance bread shortages, and are less inclined towards working for long-term political strategies.
- Across the political spectrum, youth activists have no trust in established political parties. The parties are still led by elders and their programmes and ideologies are based on former generations' conflict lines. Even the youth sections in the parties are led by old men.
- The civil society forces in FFC proposed a 40 % youth quota in the new legislative council, where youth were defined as under 35 years of age. But this did not become part of the declaration and there is no demand for youth quotas in the new parliament.

Conclusions and recommendations

The activists interviewed in Khartoum recognise that the key to success in the struggle against the Bashir government has been the clever way of informal and clandestine organisation and the use of social media. Still, they realise that the neighbourhood committees have limited visions of how to deal with the future, and about what the government should look like. There is a lack of experience as the youth have grown up under a system where all kind of political involvement has been impossible. In order to fight for the political change that can accommodate the political and economic concerns of the youth, they need to learn how to continue resisting in an efficient way, as expressed by a Grifna-member: 'The challenge of the youth now is to transform the tactics that lead to the revolution to lead and work politically. We need to improve our capacity to deal with politics, to administer our associations, also even to be part of the parliament, in order to play a larger role in politics'.

Based on the studies of political participation of youth elsewhere and the situation in Sudan after Bashir, the following practical steps are recommended to enhance the political influence and representation of youth in transitional Sudan:

- Youth quotas in parliament should be introduced. By assigning a specific number of seats to youth

representatives, youth's collective representation rather than to counter individual discrimination will be fostered (Reyes 2015). The inclusion of youth into parliaments can also contribute to the change of a state's political culture, render political institutions more inclusive, and strengthen democratization (UNDP 2013).

- The introduction youth quotas should be accompanied by a change in the political culture of the Sudanese parties. If the dominance of elders and elders' issues are not eradicated the youth quotas will simply act as a way of co-opting and controlling the youth. In other contexts the increase in youth's share in parliament has been described as "fencing" the youthful population in formal and restrictive political structures (Belscher 2018). This is also a concern for youth activists in Khartoum today. The political parties are for instance very interested in recruiting the members of neighbourhood committees into their organisations. This has been condemned by youth activists in social media.
- Unless the political culture of established parties is changed, the organisation of youth wings within political parties may not be a solution. In the few studies of youth wings in sub-Saharan Africa, youth sections are often presented as mobilisers for well-placed party leaders rather than a group of youth representing the interests of those in the same age cohort. Consequently, youth are there to facilitate political positioning of older members in the political parties, and as mere "campaigning staff" expected not to have opinions of their own (Aalen, Muriaas and Orre 2020).
- Experiences from the mobilisation for equal opportunities for women in politics globally and in Sudan show that the success is dependent on strong alliances to civil society organisations (al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017). The international donor community should therefore continue and reinforce its support to civil society associations working for youth, and the government of Sudan should guard and strengthen the freedom of association and expression.



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