

Ansar al-Sunna and Women's Agency in Sudan: A Salafi Approach to Empowerment through Gender Segregation

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Abstract

This article explores the possibilities, limits, and paradox of Salafi female agency at a time when Ansar al-Sunna is assuming a new political role under the rule of an Islamizing state in Sudan. The Islam Ansar al-Sunna preaches is Salafism and is based on the idea that there is a unitary Islamic doctrine and only one correct understanding of the Quran and the Sunna. That one correct understanding of Islam dictates gender segregation. Introducing new empirical data on a largely understudied movement from Sudan, the article argues that in its attempt to introduce gender segregation Ansar al-Sunna has provided (perhaps unintentionally) a space for women's empowerment. Despite Ansar al-Sunna disavowing women's political participation based on arguments that women are more emotional and less rational than men, the women have begun to challenge this stance of the unitary Islamic doctrine. Women have begun to participate politically as a consequence of: (1) the opening of a segregated Ansar al-Sunna women's center in which leadership fall to women themselves and therefore constitutes a parallel form of governance within the movement, and (2) the political context in which Ansar al-Sunna are entangled within Sudan's Islamic state, in which they struggle to distinguish themselves from Islamism. While women are challenging the male leadership's position that women's biological makeup excludes them from making sound political decisions, they are simultaneously maintaining and inhabiting norms of gender segregation and thus implicitly and explicitly critiquing state-induced gender mixing in the name of Islam.

Introduction¹

This article focuses on the Salafist movement in Sudan called Ansar al-Sunna. The movement's name literally translates as "followers of the Sunna," that is, of Prophet Muhammad's teachings and actions. Ansar al-Sunna's main focus is *dawa*, that is, Islamic missionary and preaching activities. Ansar al-Sunna calls for re-Islamization in order to purify and standardize Islam. The Islam the movement's followers preach is Salafism and is based on the idea that there is a unitary Islamic doctrine and only one correct understanding of the Quran and the Sunna. That one correct understanding of the Quran and the Sunna dictates gender

segregation and mandates women to wear the niqab. Readings of the Islamic texts that do not conform to this interpretation are quickly deemed "un-Islamic."

Giving advice (*nasiha*) in state politics is regarded as an important part of how members of the Ansar al-Sunna movement engage in *dawa*. Accordingly, Ansar al-Sunna has recently started to engage more directly in conventional state politics with members of parliament and some ministers. Members of the movement ran as candidates on the ruling Islamist political party list in the 2010 general elections. The movement currently supports President Omar al-Bashir, who faces multiple internal armed conflicts in Sudan, Arab Spring-like demonstrations across the country, and external pressures (particularly after his 2009 arrest order from the International Criminal Court).² Although the movement has assimilated into the state in many ways - in part to revitalize Islamism in support of the president - Ansar al-Sunna remains highly critical of the Islamists' reign over the past 23 years.

Introducing new empirical data on a largely understudied movement from Sudan, I argue that in its attempt to introduce gender segregation Ansar al-Sunna has provided (perhaps unintentionally) a space for women's empowerment. The movement believes that gender mixing causes sexual temptation and moral chaos; thus, this necessitates that women take responsibility for spreading the Islamic call to other women, while men address a male audience. While involvement from Ansar al-Sunna in conventional state politics remains a purely male enterprise, women's *dawa* forms an important part of the larger project of re-Islamizing a Sudanese society corrupted by gender mixing. At the heart of re-Islamization lie implicit and explicit critiques of an Islamizing state that has instigated a particular interpretation of religion and gender relations forced upon Sudanese citizens top-down. Women have a particular role in implicitly critiquing the state induced gender mixing through wearing the *niqab* - the very symbol of the unitary Islamic doctrine - which stands in opposition to the state's official dress code for women.³ Despite being excluded from conventional politics, these women exhibit political agency in ridiculing the state's complete misunderstanding of Islam.

The paradigm of gender segregation in *dawa* demanded the establishment of a separate Ansar al-Sunna women's center in 2008 to provide Quran classes by women for women. This has further facilitated women's entry into the Ansar al-Sunna movement's decision-making. The prevailing ideological stance,

postulated by the male leadership, is that women cannot participate in conventional state politics because they are more emotional and less rational than men. But the women at the Ansar al-Sunna center are now challenging this position, thereby showing that the Salafist doctrine is perhaps more dynamic than its reputation and that diverse opinions thrive in spite of the fact that Salafism claims to preach a unitary Islamic doctrine with everlasting implications.

This article begins by discussing my fieldwork and the data upon which I base my analysis. I also define Salafism and situate Ansar al-Sunna within the context of rivaling Salafist movements in Sudan. Next, I present my theoretical perspective by discussing the concepts of women's empowerment, agency, and the politics of veiling, as well as how these terms relate to ideas of feminist consciousness. Third, I detail the Islamist model for women's empowerment. It is launched as a "modern" Islam juxtaposed to a "traditional," "backward," or "Bedouin" Islam. Two areas of primary concern arise from this model, namely, women's political participation and women's public morality (including dress standards). Fourth, I present Ansar al-Sunna women's participation in Islamic *dawa* and the *niqab* as an everyday critique against the gender mixing induced by the state. Finally, the article explores how Ansar al-Sunna is challenging the male monopoly in political decision-making (*nasiha*). I analyze the limits, possibilities, and paradoxes of a changing Salafist discourse at a time when Ansar al-Sunna is assuming a new political role in Sudan.

Pursuing fieldwork among Salafists in Sudan

My analysis is based on my engagement with gender politics and work on women's rights in Sudan during the last nine years. I spent between one and three months in Sudan each year from 2006 to 2014 (with the last visit occurring in October 2014). During my time there, I conducted over 200 interviews in both English and Arabic. I posed open-ended questions to a range of women activists, government representatives, politicians, religious actors, and intellectuals.⁴ I employed both formal and informal interview technique depending on the interview setting.⁵ In other words, my material ranges from formal interviews (semi-structured) with for example government officials inside Sudan's national assembly or in the republican palace to more informal conversations and discussions with key informants on repeated occasions.⁶ In addition, I observed public debates, political rallies and meetings, as well as various seminars and workshops.

Adherents to Salafism are just one of many groups I engaged with in Sudan. In this article, I rely on two categories of interviews to give insight to the agency of Salafist women. The first category provides the *outside in* perspective of how Islamists relate to the growing political influence of Salafism in contemporary Sudan and how they differentiate *their* Islam from the Salafist version. Here I rely on interview material from Islamists, particularly women. The second category provides the *inside out* perspective of the agency of Salafist women, especially focusing on how they view their role in politically contesting the state and its policy of gender mixing. For this perspective, I rely on interviews of Salafist actors, in particular, women from the Ansar al-Sunna center. Classifying the interviews in terms of these two perspectives allows me to analyze Ansar al-Sunna women as they are situated within the political context of an Islamist state that both constrains and enables their agency.

Sudanese Salafism is largely understudied. I therefore took an exploratory approach. Only two book chapters by Salomon (2009) and Ahmed (2007) explore this topic and even fewer works investigate women's participation specifically.⁷ The Sudanese scholar Salma Ahmed Nageeb is one of the few individuals who has examined women's mosque groups in Khartoum, arguing that mosque groups form a social space for women, which leads to the appropriation and transformation of a public-religious and highly masculine space such as the mosque.⁸ In contrast, I emphasize the role of an exclusively women's space in empowering women by allowing for political critique of state Islamism through *dawa*.

The study employs the term "Salafism" first and foremost as "a label that Sunni purists use to designate their approach to Islam" in order "to ensure the purity of Islam as they define it".⁹ The word "Salafi" stems from the Arabic *al-salaf al-salih* ("the righteous pious ancestors") and signifies a link back to what is perceived by Salafists as the pure, true, and authentic Islam. My informants expressed a strong sense of self-identity as Salafists, coupled with a complete rejection of the label "Islamists."¹⁰

I interviewed a broad spectrum of Salafist actors, including both men and women. In Sudan, the spectrum of Salafists movements is wide and includes Ansar al-Sunna as well as The Islamic Liberation Party and the Legitimate League for Religious Scholars. I conducted interviews among each of these groups, but mainly with Ansar al-Sunna.¹¹ There are important differences between these three groups of Salafists.

- (1) Ansar al-Sunna represents the *politicos*, that is, those who “emphasize the application of the Salafi creed (also) to the political arena”.¹²
- (2) The Islamic Liberation Party advocates the return to the model of Caliphate of the late Othman Empire and exemplifies the *purists* who refute any involvement in politics.
- (3) The Legitimate League for Religious Scholars supports the *jihadists* who legitimize violence as means of politics. Many Salafi figures in the Legitimate League for Religious Scholars are engaged in issuing legal opinions (*fatwa*) that legitimize violence in the form of *jihad* and allow for the excommunication of public figures considered to be apostates.¹³

Ansar al-Sunna is the largest, most prominent, and oldest of these Salafi groups. Ansar al-Sunna does not embrace violence in any form as means of change or political tactic. The movement is primarily engaged in Islamic missionary and preaching activities.

Well aware of the challenges involved in cross-cultural interviewing¹⁴, I interviewed male and female members of the Ansar al-Sunna movement. By adhering to a conservative dress code and behavior, I was able to gain access to both the men and the women.¹⁵ They saw the interview as an opportunity to convert me to Islam and this enabled me to ask questions about the basics of their particular view on Islam. With regards to men, I was able to interview the leader in 2008, and I also sought out men who have been actively involved in conventional state politics as members of parliament, governors, or ministers in 2008, 2009, 2012 and 2013. As far as women are concerned, I focused on individuals associated with the newly opened Ansar al-Sunna women’s center. I first visited the center in 2008. In 2009, I conducted two interviews of Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, the leader of the center who is also pursuing a master’s degree at the Islamic University of Omdurman, where she is specifically looking at the reciprocal relationship between rights and obligations in Islam. My data collection at the center also included a series of informal conversations and discussions with female Quran teachers as well as some women who attended the Quran classes offered at the center. When I asked for interview appointments, these women repeatedly referred me to the leader, Kheir. I therefore decided to engage in participant observation while also pursuing interview appointments with Kheir. I found myself discussing and interacting with the center’s volunteers. Over the course of two months in 2009, I had the

opportunity to speak to and interact with the same Quran teachers, students, and volunteers on repeated occasions.¹⁶

Empowerment, agency, and feminist consciousness

The idea of power is at the root of the term "empowerment".¹⁷ The term entails a process in which a person or group alters hierarchical power relations by obtaining a place or a voice in decision-making at different levels ("power to") through negotiation and/or resistance against domination ("power over") at the individual level ("power within") or the collective level ("power with").¹⁸ In terms of women's empowerment, feminist scholars have traditionally understood the term as women's resistance towards male domination and other intersecting hierarchies. Religion is more often than not seen as an obstacle to women's empowerment in secular theories of feminism.¹⁹

The research on Muslim women's empowerment has gone through different stages in order to expose the inadequacies of this particular understanding of women's empowerment in feminist theories. The first bulk of writings on Muslim women have focused on women's agency in opposing or resisting patriarchal hierarchies and norms embedded in Islam. The main aim has been to de-construct Orientalist assumptions about Muslim women's oppression under Islam and showcase their agency.²⁰ The ethnographic evidence from Muslim societies points to numerous examples of women's collective as well as "everyday resistance"²¹ to patriarchal hierarchies.²² But Muslim women who are opposing patriarchal hierarchies, whether in a collective fashion or in the everyday, might not necessarily hold feminist goals defined as "(...) aspiring to women's equality".²³ But women may nonetheless be aware "of constraints placed upon women because of their gender and attempt to remove these constraints and to evolve a more equitable gender system involving new roles for women and new relations between men and women".²⁴ It is this broader understanding of women's empowerment, I employ in this article. In this understanding, Ansar al-Sunna women are aware of a particular oppression of women (exclusion from politics) and they actively seek to rectify this oppression by recourse to Islamic principles without necessarily being active seekers of gender equality.²⁵

The veil, often reduced to the core symbol of Muslim women's oppression under Islam in orientalist depictions, has assumed center stage in the debates on women's agency. I will not engage in discussion as to whether veiling is Islamic or not except to note that there is no consensus in the literature on the meaning of the veil.²⁶ Rather, in this article, I rely on

the literature on veiling, unveiling, and re-veiling that suggests that the meanings of the veil as a marker of personal and collective identity are shifting over time as political circumstances change.²⁷ In other words, the meanings of the veil must be seen against the backdrop of particular political contexts.

For example, unveiling constituted a political statement during anticolonial struggles.²⁸ The veil has also played a central symbolic role in nation and state building projects.²⁹ Debates about veiling gained new ground with the rise of Islamic movements during the 1970s and 1980s, thus becoming an Islamic identity marker vis-à-vis the West.³⁰ I follow the authors who regard the veil as a modern phenomenon rather than a revivalism of tradition³¹ and argue that veiling itself must not be confused with, or made to stand for, a lack of agency.³² While I acknowledge the possible and multiple meanings of the veil (such as to indicate a class position, make a fashion statement, or attempt to avoid sexual harassment), I am first and foremost concerned with its political meanings in the context of an authoritarian and Islamizing state. During the Bashir regime in Sudan, the *hijab* has been instrumental in a state campaign to build an Islamic state through coercion. Islamists look at the *hijab* as women's entry ticket into the public domain by creating new spaces for women's participation,³³ but making the *hijab* and other aspects of an Islamic dress code mandatory by state law has inevitably evoked everyday resistance in a variety of ways.

In regard to Iran, Asef Bayat has argued that women there, rather than overtly confronting the authoritarian regime through organized protest, defy, resist, and even circumvent patriarchy through the "power of presence" - simply by being involved in ordinary daily practices of life deemed inappropriate or immoral by the Islamic republic (for example, putting on a "bad hijab" that does not entirely cover the hair).³⁴ Similarly, wearing the *niqab* in Sudan also demonstrates the power of presence; however, in Sudan resistance against the Islamist state does not circumvent gender hierarchies. While the veiling has often been entangled with the West as a marker of Muslim identity, in Sudan it also signifies the difference between different stands of Islam. The *niqab* embodies the unitary Salafist doctrine, which at times stands in stark contrast to state Islam.³⁵

Studies focusing on women's resistance to male domination have been critiqued for "romanticizing resistance," to use the title of the famous article by Lila Abu-Lughod.³⁶ The second bulk of writings on Muslim women

have noted the challenge of analyzing Muslim women's agency within the framework of feminist theory.³⁷ According to Bracke, this turn emerged as a response to the problematic reliance on false consciousness as an exhausted mode of thinking about agency and subjectivity among Muslim women.³⁸ For example, in studying women's mosque movements in Cairo, Saba Mahmood challenged the view of women's agency as defined by classical feminist theorists³⁹, refusing to see it solely as "a synonym for resistance to relations of domination"; rather she explained that agency is "a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create."⁴⁰ Abu-Lughod has similarly insisted on the need to look at resistance as a diagnostic of power, arguing that we should analyze resistance "as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their positions, find out their points of application and the methods used".⁴¹ She argues for developing theories that give women credit for resisting power in a variety of ways without misattributing to them feminist consciousness.⁴²

This article explores empowerment at different levels, not only as women's resistance to male domination, but also as seen from the perspective of a previously marginalized religious movement vis-à-vis an authoritarian Islamic state. In Sudan, the *niqab* signifies resistance against state-induced gender mixing, not feminist consciousness. Nonetheless, women from Ansar al-Sunna challenge patriarchal norms within the movement in some ways (for example, when it comes to women's inclusion in politics), while at the same time maintaining these norms in other ways (for example when it comes to women's primary and biologically conditioned roles as mothers).

Islamism and gender politics: The construction of the "modern" Muslim woman

The current Islamist government in Sudan came to power through a coup d'état in 1989. That coup instigated a process of Islamization based on the assumption that Islam and Arabic represented the foundation of the country's national identity and should define its legal, political, cultural, and economic systems. Leaders of this coup called it a "civilization project" (or *al-Mashru al-Hadari* in Arabic) that set out to shape the behavior, lives, and thoughts of women and men with a view to constructing an Islamic society from above by policing public and private spaces and transforming Sudan into a model Islamist state.⁴³ The level of repression the Islamist government has carried out is unprecedented in Sudanese history. Defiance against the Islamist legal architecture has been

regarded as disobedience not only against the state, but also against Islam itself.

In the state's effort to implement the civilization project, Muslim women have borne a heavy burden. Islam and women's rights were reconstructed in a particular way. New laws introduced from above significantly changed women's citizenship rights by for example limiting their rights to travel without a male guardian⁴⁴, restraining women's rights within marriage⁴⁵ and by imposing an official dress code.⁴⁶ The Islamist regime in Sudan employed its particular understanding of Islam to foster a "gender-equitable" state in which women are granted full equality before the law within the public sphere (as long as they follow proper moral conduct) and male guardianship (*qawama*) is reinforced in the private sphere. Women may participate in political life, work and earn wages, become educated, and participate in economic life alongside and equal to men, but men are the financial and legal decision-makers for families and guardians of women and children. This is the essence of the Islamists term *insaf*, which my informants told me is the essence of the modern Muslim women's empowerment model.⁴⁷

The principle of complementarity lies at the heart of gender equity: women and men are biologically different, but equal in the eyes of Allah. Because of their different biological make-up, the sexes are assigned different rights and obligations, particularly within the private sphere of the family. Men are the financial breadwinners and protectors, while women are the caretakers. In present day Sudan, the legal architecture of state-induced gender equity is resisted in many ways and from multiple fronts. On the one hand, women activists call for gender equality in all legal spheres. Their primary concern is the codification of male guardianship within the family law under the Muslim Family Law of 1991. They argue that women cannot fully exercise their political, economic, cultural, and social citizenship rights as long as male guardianship prevails in the law. On the other hand, Salafists do not object to male guardianship within the family, but argue against the role women have been afforded in political decision-making. They are against any gender mixing in politics.

In presenting the modern face of Islam, the Islamist model of Muslim women's empowerment is juxtaposed both against the Western model (where women activists are often used as a proxy) and against what they call backward or Bedouin Islam. Bedouin Islam has, in their opinion, wrongfully excluded women from public participation and wrongfully secluded her in a face veil. Since this article is concerned with Salafism, the remaining

part of this section concentrates on how the Islamists differentiate their Islam from the Bedouin Islam often associated with Ansar al-Sunna and the unitary Islamic doctrine. When asking Islamist and Salafist informants about what makes their religious beliefs different, women are always one of the key issues raised. Opinions about women's dress and morality are particularly polarized, as are opinions on gender mixing versus gender segregation. Islamists and Salafists take very different positions on women's participation in the public domain, in particular, in political decision-making.

Women's political participation

Unlike in other Islamic states, women have never been formally excluded from public participation in Sudan. The 2005 constitution allows for a woman to become president of the country. According to Hasan al-Turabi, an influential Islamist ideologue and one of the leaders behind the 1989 coup d'état, "a woman can be a leader, a head of state, and a minister. She can be everything a man can be."⁴⁸

Islamists legitimize women's participation in politics and economic life with reference to Islam. For example, in 1973 al-Turabi published a short book, *Women between the Teachings of Religion and the Customs of Society*, in which he presented the foundations of Islamist gender ideology and presented evidence in Islam for women's public participation.⁴⁹ In this book he explained that during the Prophetic Era women were allowed to participate in congregational prayer and took an active role in military expeditions. They also took part in the circumambulation ritual alongside men during the pilgrimage, were present at public festivals, and were free to receive and entertain guests in their homes. Muslim women could own property, participate actively in the community's economic life, and acquire education. When the opinions of Muslims were sought to decide on a caliph after the assassination of Umar Ibn al-Khattab, women were included in the consultation process.⁵⁰ In short, religious arguments figure strong in the Islamists' justification for women's entry into public domains such as politics.

Given this history, it is not surprising that the 1998 constitution of Sudan reiterated and reinforced the equal political rights that had been defined in the 1973 constitution. A 25 percent women's electoral quota for women in the national assembly was introduced in the draft constitution, but this provision was not included in the final version of the text.

However, in 2008, Islamists, together with women from oppositional parties and civil society organizations, successfully lobbied for an electoral quota that reserved 25 per cent of the seats for women in the national and state legislative assemblies. In connection with this campaign, which was codified in the 2008 National Election Act, Suad Abu Qashawa explained that "it is important for women to participate in politics" because "it is part of the religion."⁵¹ In the elections in 2010, the ruling Islamist political party won all the seats reserved for women in the national assembly. While including women in the political sphere has helped the Islamists to reinforce their power, it has also served an important symbolic function in showcasing the modern face of Islam.

The Islamists postulate a view that promotes women's empowerment within an Islamic frame as a modern alternative to both Western secular feminism and traditional Islam - what they call Bedouin or backward Islam. Presenting a modern Islam that includes women in politics draws a clear boundary between modern and Bedouin Islam. According to Islamists, Bedouin Islam has systematically and wrongfully excluded women from public life. Sudanese Islamists often refer to Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan under Taliban rule as examples of Bedouin Islam, where the basic rights of Muslim women to public participation have been forsaken. According to Ghazi Salah al-Diin, the former advisor to the Sudan's president, "There is nothing in the Quran which supports an entirely patriarchal society; this is merely found in . . . what we call the Bedouin or desert form of Islam, as in Saudi Arabia, where women cannot drive cars."⁵² Islamists in contemporary Sudan often view Salafism as a doctrine imported from Saudi Arabia, thus pooling it together with Bedouin Islam and pointing to the seclusion of women as the primary evidence for their wrongful oppression and exclusion from public life. These contemporary Islamists consider women's exclusion from public life in Muslim societies to be a deviation from Islam. The civilization project is thus an attempt to close the gap between the realities of Muslim women and the desired model of Islam.

Women's Islamic dress

Women's participation in the public realm is conditioned upon adherence to certain moral codes, including in the area of Islamic dress. State laws define appropriate men's and women's dress, interaction outside the family, and behavior in public spaces - including in educational institutions and workplaces, as well as leisure spaces such as restaurants, parks, streets, and public transportation (Nageeb 2004). For example, in December 1991, the

hijab became part of the official dress code for women by presidential decree. The Public Order Act, which was issued by decree in 1996, sets restrictions on music and dancing at public and private parties and requires gender segregation in public transportation in order to avoid the promotion of un-Islamic values and sexual temptation (*fitna*). Under the title of "indecent and immoral acts," article 152 of the Sudanese Criminal Law of 1991 states,

Whoever does in a public place an indecent act or an act contrary to public morals or wears an obscene outfit or contrary to public morals or causing an annoyance to public feelings shall be punished with flogging which may not exceed forty lashes or with fine or with both.

Islamists have built their public order regime on the concept of preventing indecent acts, but they also distinguish between good and bad gender mixing. While gender mixing between young unmarried couples without supervision is clearly bad, gender mixing in politics is good because it serves the greater purpose of making sound political decisions based on both male and female perspectives.

By making women's dress the main factor in assessing the proper moral conduct of women in public spaces, Islamists have made how women dress a matter of state politics. On the basis of the above laws and regulations, the public order police are mandated to arrest women and girls for "shameful clothing." How women dress has thus become a symbol of loyalty (or disloyalty) to the state project. Women who do not comply are subjected to flogging.

Modest and moral Muslim women are clearly differentiated from Western women, who are considered to be promiscuous, causing sexual temptation at every turn. For example, the head of the public order police in Khartoum explained,

The law is based on religion. It is a good law. Sudan is different from European societies. It is not accepted to hold hands, to kiss in the street and to have a boyfriend before marriage. The law protects women and their morality.⁵³

In matters of public morality, my interviewees were quick to state that when it comes to issues of sexual freedom, Muslim societies are different

from and far better than the West, which is stereotypically portrayed as being in the midst of sexual chaos. As such, veiling was an instrumental part of the civilization project and marked the Islamic-ness of the nation. Unveiling is seen as Western and as such is a threat to the Islamic nation.

While the veil is entangled with the West as a marker of Muslim identity, it is also a boundary marker between different stands of Islam. In the Islamic state, the *hijab* is regarded as "modern" while the *niqab* is viewed as "backward." For those I interviewed, the *niqab* in Saudi Arabia and the burka in Afghanistan represent women's oppression under a complete misunderstanding and misuse of Islam. In the views of Islamist (but not Salafist) women interviewed for this study, the wearing of the *niqab* and gloves was exported from Saudi Arabia and is alien to Sudan. The Islamic evidence put forward for it being un-Islamic is that a woman cannot cover her face during the Islamic pilgrimage.⁵⁴ The Islamist leader Hasan al-Turabi, for example, denounces the Salafist use of the *niqab*, using this dress code to label Salafists as both un-Islamic and non-Sudanese:

Niqab was never known in Sudan. . . . It is very ugly. There is no temptation. There is only disgust. I do not look at a woman's face to get tempted when I am a judge in court and she is a witness. I do not care how she looks. I do not look at her face but to what she has to say to the jury and to the judge. It is like the Ku Klux Klan. They also cover their faces, because they are committing a crime. It is because they [Salafists] do not read the Islamic texts intelligently. Niqab is a misrepresentation of Islam. It is something negative, a crime, in fact.⁵⁵

According to Afaf Ahmed Abdel Rahman, "Sudan is different from other Islamic countries because there is no segregation in public; women and men go together side by side. Women have respect in Sudan."⁵⁶ Thus, the *niqab* and pious practices associated with it (such as not shaking hands with men and segregating genders in public spaces) thus signifies a marker of identity within Sudan that distinguishes Islamists from what they deem to be Bedouin Muslims (or Salafists).

While conveniently ignoring the stipulations on gender segregation in public transportation in the Khartoum Public Act⁵⁷ and the fact that conservative Islamist men also do not shake hands with women,⁵⁸ Islamists are attempting to differentiate themselves from a backward Islam that

advocates gender segregation rather than gender mixing. According to Islamists, gender mixing (when conducted in a proper and moral manner) is necessary in political decision-making. Because women and men are complementary, they represent soft and hard elements in politics both of which are needed to make good and sound decision for the country.

A marriage of convenience between Islamists and Ansar al-Sunna

Islamists are stigmatizing Salafists as a backward strand of Islam, paradoxically, at the same time as President Bashir has invited a movement to incorporate this Bedouin Islam into the current government to give it Islamic legitimacy. Although there is some ideological convergence between Salafists and conservative Islamists (especially on women's sexuality, circumcision, and rights and obligations within marriage), Ansar al-Sunna's newly acquired political influence has created a lot of internal debate among Islamists. While conservative Islamists might regard it as beneficial, reformists regard Ansar al-Sunna as blocking political reform, including within the area of women's rights. This is all happening against a background where the president is experiencing a lot of turmoil, including within his own political party. There are calls for political reform and dialogue with the opposition, but the president remains hesitant after the International Criminal Court's indictment. The president's Salafist turn is described by the one spearheading the reformists as the "acts of a drowning person clinging to a straw."⁵⁹

Nonetheless, including Ansar al-Sunna in Sudanese politics might provide Islamic legitimacy at a time when the president is under immense pressure. The un-Islamic card is surprisingly convenient as the joker in a political play. As critics are rumbling from within the regime, the president is attempting to polarize the West against Islam in order to create unity against a common enemy. In the views of the Islamist women interviewed by the author, the Salafists are blocking initiatives for taking women's rights forward. It is clear that the Salafists' entry into the current government is strengthening the conservative block and thus marginalizing reformists. In the words of Amira al-Fadil, "Even the president is afraid if they [Ansar al-Sunna] say it is not Islam. The Salafists have access to the President and the Speaker of Parliament who does not want their names attached to something that is against Islam."⁶⁰

While Islamist women have attempted to spearhead reform, often against the will of conservatives within the ruling party, Salafists have been allowed

to enter the political arena to claim the un-Islamic nature of these initiatives to the point that Islamist women have been accused of running the errands of the West. The most cited example in this regard is related to the National Child Act of 2010, which attempted to criminalize female genital mutilation (FGM).⁶¹ Members of Ansar al-Sunna sparked a fierce public debate claiming that Sunna circumcision is allowed in Islam and is in accordance with the Prophet Muhammad's deeds. In their opinion, eradicating Sunna circumcision would westernize Muslim society: women would become promiscuous and sexual chaos and moral disorder would prevail. Ultimately, the president himself demanded that the article criminalizing FGM be removed from the final version of the National Child Act.⁶² In the views of Islamist women, this is what happens when you invite Bedouin Islam into the corridors of power. These women are trying to create a new frontier between their Islam, which is not only modern but also open to reform and change, and Bedouin Islam, which stands against any reform because it is based on a rigid interpretation of Islam: "[T]he extremists, the Salafists (...) say Islamic law is the Quran and Sunna and it cannot be changed."⁶³

The relationship between Islamists and Salafists in the political arena is fraught with contradiction. On the one hand, Ansar al-Sunna has been included to give the regime Islamic legitimacy. On the other hand, Salafists have been stigmatized in the Islamist discourse as backward. It is against this backdrop that Ansar al-Sunna women are participating in *dawa*. While Islamists see them as suffering from a false consciousness for participating in a Bedouin Islamic movement, in their opinion the Islamists have completely misunderstood Islam. While the Islamists are sending mixed signals, the power balance between the two parties has certainly changed. Whereas Ansar al-Sunna was severely marginalized and suppressed by the Bashir regime (particularly when the ideologue Hasan al-Turabi played a key role in the regime between 1989 and 2000), they are now in a completely different position. The leader of Ansar al-Sunna acknowledged in interview with the author that participation in state institutions is pragmatic; it is an opportunity to work from within the regime to call Muslims (including the president himself) to good and to steer them away from error (*amr bi all maruf wa al-nahdy an al-munkar*).⁶⁴ The marriage of convenience Islamists offer, allows Salafist women to do *dawa* freely without much interference from the state.⁶⁵ They would be fools not to accept the invitation, as the alternative is worse. After all, a secular alternative to the present government might provide an even a more difficult working environment for them (as seen in Egypt under Mubarak). In the views of Ansar al-Sunna, the

negative picture propagated by Islamists on, for example, the *niqab* is merely a sign that Islamists have not yet embraced the unitary Islamic doctrine.

The Ansar al-Sunna women's center: Women's participation in dawa

Piety from within; Islamization from below

While Islamist women regard the Salafists as backward, Ansar al-Sunna women critique Islamists for being un-Islamic. One of the main points of criticism is that the Islamist state has Islamized from above through violence. Muslim women will not become pious if they are merely forced to wear the *hijab*. Piety must come from within, and a pure Islamic state can only develop from the bottom up. This occurs through *dawa*, by preaching the unitary Islamic doctrine.

Ansar al-Sunna's aim is to purify Muslim beliefs and practices through such preaching. "The main activity of Ansar al-Sunna is *dawa*, to teach people the Quran and the right way of Islam. . . . [W]e want to make our voices heard, to deliver our Islamic message," says Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center.⁶⁶ Thus, the center primarily focuses on preaching and educating individuals to follow the correct path of Islam. The processes of purification of Islam start with each individual Muslim, not with the state. The goal is to make "Muslims better Muslims by acquainting them with Islam, teaching them the Quran and the right way of Islam."⁶⁷ The political role played by Ansar al-Sunna men as advisory (*nasiha*) is only a small part of the larger call for *dawa*. This is the reason why Salafists perceive themselves as a religious movement rather than as a political party.

The inevitable end result of this process would be an Islamic state built from the bottom up. According to Kheir, "[A] good Muslim will contribute to a wholesome Muslim family; this in turn will help bring about a good Muslim society, which culminates in a good Muslim or Islamic state."⁶⁸ Women at the center express strong doubts that the current government can create an Islamic society from above through the civilization project. According to Ansar al-Sunna, by ignoring the unified Islamic doctrine preached by the Salafists in order to rally Muslims around a political project, as the Islamists have done, the Islamists are destroying Islam.⁶⁹ Ansar al-Sunna believes its role is to un-teach the people what the Islamists have wrongfully taught them about Islam and then start the process anew.

While women for the time being are excluded from *nasiha* (because of the views of male leaders of the movement), they play an instrumental part of the larger call for *dawa*. The prevailing paradigm of gender segregation necessitates that women take responsibility for spreading the call to other women and children, while men address a male audience. Gender mixing (*ikhtilat*) on the other hand, causes sexual chaos (*fitna*). Islamic arguments for this are legitimized in several Quran verses, including *surat al-nur* (24), verses 30-31. It states,

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: And God is well-acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: and they should not display beauty and ornaments except what [must ordinarily] appear thereof; that they must draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husband's sons, or their women, or their slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their ornaments.

Indeed the Islamists build their public order regime on the concept of preventing indecent acts and situate it within the same Quranic verse. However, in their ideology gender mixing is only bad when it is undertaken with bad intent. For Ansar al-Sunna, gender mixing is always bad even if the purpose is pure (for example, mixing genders in a Quran class would always be bad). The women's center offers Quran classes (*khalwa*) that teach women how to recite the Quran by heart, following the correct rules of pronunciation, intonation, and caesuras established by Prophet Muhammad. This is an instrumental part of doing *dawa* at the women's center.

In contrast to the Quran classes offered by Islamists at the local branches of the Sudan Women's General Union (the main Islamist state organization for women⁷⁰) women at the center have studied and reached the required level of religious knowledge to hold the Quran classes themselves.⁷¹ Women at the Islamist centers invite male *shaykhs* to teach them, but the Ansar al-Sunna women's center trains women to become Quran teachers in order to uphold gender segregation in religious learning and education. Partly because of this arrangement, some of the students at the Ansar al-Sunna center thought

Quran classes there were far better than those offered by Islamists, simply because they could look to the face of the *shaykha* in the learning process, something they deemed invaluable in getting the correct pronunciation. To look directly at a male *shaykh's* face, they said, would be immoral and could potentially cause sexual chaos. Only offering Quran classes with male *shaykhs* was therefore seen as encouraging gender mixing and thus sexual temptation.⁷²

While gender segregated Quran classes attracted female students, they were not only taught the formal text of the Quran, but also how to become pious. The Quran classes at the women's center are a part of Ansar al-Sunna's activities to educate and guide people to the correct path of Islam. This entails not merely learning about Islam, but also learning how to be a pious Muslim. Women are trained to perform a series of practices concerning body, thought, and conduct. One of the most important of the bodily practices is wearing the *niqab*.

The niqab as everyday resistance against gender mixing

Women from Ansar al-Sunna are easily recognizable in public spaces because they do not wear the traditional Sudanese *tobe* (a colorful wrapper) or the Islamist *hijab*. Rather, they wear a black or dark-colored cloak (*abaya*), the *niqab*, and gloves, and thus are fully covered in public.⁷³ The *niqab* has been virtually unknown in Sudan until recently. Only the Rashaida people in northeastern Sudan, who immigrated to the country from the Arabian Peninsula in the nineteenth century, traditionally followed the practice of covering the face.⁷⁴

According to my informants, the choice to wear *niqab* should be made on the basis of piety (*taqwa*). Ansar al-Sunna women explained that the veil does not carry any meaning if it is simply worn for appearance's sake or if the state requires women to wear it (as in Saudi Arabia). It can only truly contribute to the process of re-Islamization if it reflects an active personal choice to become pious. These women are equally critical of the top-down nature of Sudanese state's gender policies. In their view, the state cannot force Sudanese citizens to become pious through forcing women to wear the *hijab*. Only by making an active choice to be a pious, can a modest Muslim woman truly be regarded as a building block for a pure Islamic society and state. Since wearing the *niqab* is an active choice based on piety, the more women who wear it, the more women have committed to the unitary Islamic doctrine. Each *niqab*-wearing woman becomes a

stepping stone for Ansar al-Sunna to re-Islamize the society and state in its image.

One Quran teacher at the center told me she was married to her husband for five years before she decided to wear the *niqab*. Most students do not wear it when they start taking Quran classes, nor does the center teach them that it is obligatory. But it is highly recommended, and pious women at the center lead by example. If a student chooses to wear the *niqab*, they will celebrate her choice by giving gifts to their new sister. There have been instances in which husbands and fathers have not approved of a woman's decision to wear the *niqab*, and women active at the center will try their best to mediate these situations and convince the family to let her choose for herself. Thus, some women must go against their families' wishes in order to wear the *niqab* and thus to excel in piety. I also talked to women at the center who had taken off their *niqab* because they felt they were not deserving of it and that they were not pious enough to wear it. Wearing the *niqab* is an active choice, illustrating the agency of the women involved. It is an agency that should not be forced into a frame of feminist consciousness, but seen as power within or religious empowerment.

Ansar al-Sunna calls for increased segregation between women and men and modest dress for both genders in order to avoid *fitna*, the sexual chaos that characterizes a morally corrupt, un-Islamic and Westernized society. Hiba, a central character in Salma Ahmed Nageeb's book *New Spaces and Old Frontiers* (2004), describes the *niqab* as a "friend" keeping her away from Satan by keeping her from being sensually identifiable and thus violating and contaminating the space of Muslim men.⁷⁵ The *niqab* and the accompanying dress effectively hide the skin color and body shape of a woman so that she does not become a slave to beauty ideals.⁷⁶ Also, the *niqab* "regulate[s] the process of identity formation".⁷⁷ A woman who presents herself in public spaces as a *niqab*-wearing woman sets herself apart from "ordinary women" who are "'cheaply selling themselves' by exposing their bodies in the mixed-gender space".⁷⁸ In the opinion of Ansar al-Sunna women, the Islamists' acceptance of gender mixing in public spaces is polluting and destroying Islam.

In my Salafist informants' opinion, women bear the responsibility of reducing sexual contamination in the mixed-gender space. Women at the center made clear that the burden was on their shoulders to avoid sexual chaos (*fitna*). Of course, men are obliged, according to *surat al-nur*, to "lower their gaze," but the primary responsibility is women's. In their

opinion, the observance of practices such as the *niqab*, believed to follow the example of the pious forefathers, is pivotal in restoring moral order in an Islamist state that has failed to Islamize.

Wearing the *niqab* becomes political under the rule of an Islamizing state in Sudan that has made women's Islamic dress a matter of loyalty (or disloyalty) to the civilization project. It signifies "political (...) resistance to Islamization".⁷⁹ In re-Islamizing from below, Ansar al-Sunna women are transforming and purifying gender mixed spaces put in place by Islamists and thus decreasing sexual temptation. For example, Islamists have encouraged women to take higher education, but in a gender mixed setting. Wearing the *niqab* in Sudanese public universities becomes a way of purifying that space until gender segregation in schools and universities is restored. Through the "power of presence" to use Asef Bayat's term (2007), the *niqab* marks an act of resistance to the mixed-gender space and the sexual temptation such a space creates, which in my Salafist informants' opinion is contrary to correct Islamic gender arrangements.

While the establishment of the center has facilitated women's participation *dawa*, it has also stirred internal debates about women's role in *nasiha*.

Ansar al-Sunna and women's exclusion from politics

Women as emotional and irrational beings

According to male leaders of Ansar al-Sunna, women should not take part in *nasiha*. They frequently cite the *hadith* stipulating that "those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity." This *hadith* appears in the Sahih al-Bukhari, one of six major *hadith* collections in Sunni Islam. According to Fatima Mernissi (1991), "[T]his hadith is the sledgehammer argument used by those who want to exclude women from politics."⁸⁰ She adds that "this hadith is so important that it is practically impossible to discuss the question of women's political rights without referring to it, debating it, and taking a position on it".⁸¹ Within the political landscape of today's Sudan, the Salafists are the only groups still arguing for women's exclusion from conventional politics by referencing this *hadith*; the Islamists, even the conservatives, have accepted and promoted women's political participation for a long time.

The reasoning behind the *hadith* is linked to ideas about complementarity rather than equality between women's and men's rights, duties, and roles. It is based on an understanding that the biological makeup of the two

genders matters: men represent rationality and reason, which is important for decision-making, while women represent emotions and care, which is good for bringing up children (but not for assuming leadership). Khalid Shaykhna, a preacher on Sudanese TV who is associated with Ansar al-Sunna, stated:

I am quite astonished that people always speak about women's leadership. Women have so many opportunities to express themselves. The main task of a woman in an Islamic society is to be a mother and to raise children, a task a man cannot carry out. . . . ".⁸²

The women at the Ansar al-Sunna center agree that before a woman can assume a role in spreading the word of Allah to the female constituency through Quran classes and other activities at the center, she must first have fulfilled her role as a mother and educator of her children (the future leaders of Sudan). According to Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, "the struggle for the woman is in her house, in the *dawa*, and in spreading the teachings of Islam."⁸³

In this regard, the views of Salafist women are strikingly similar to those of Islamists. My Islamist informants also regard the most important role of women to be motherhood. According to them, it is in their biology. Only *after* a woman has fulfilled her role in the Muslim family, can she assume a role as a leader in society and state. According to Wisal al-Mahdi, the wife of Hasan al-Turabi,

The mother is important; she is the nucleus of the family and the Islamic nation. Women are superior to men in Islam, especially mothers. The root of everything is women. . . . [B]ringing up your family is a contribution to society. God's intended job for women is the family.⁸⁴

But this does not exclude women from participating in paid labor, in politics, or even in the military. Wisal al-Mahdi says further,

Islam gives women their rights: the right to choose their husband, the right to inheritance, and the right to participate in administration of the government, and in the military. Women can do whatever men can do, even go to war. . . .⁸⁵

Islamists base their arguments in the idea of complementarity, that women and men are "different, but equal."⁸⁶ This means that women and men have different rights and responsibilities within the family. But both perspectives are needed to make sound political decisions - the female and the masculine, the soft and the hard. My Islamist informants did not view women as less rational and more emotional, but as more caring for children and the elderly and the vulnerable in society. They argue that there is a need for more care in policy-making.

While Islamists and Salafists both employ the concept of complementarity, grounded in the different biological makeup of the two sexes, they understand it differently in terms of a woman's ability to make political decisions. The biology and complementary argument is thus not unique to Ansar al-Sunna; it has frequently been employed by the Islamists as well. But Islamists use it to argue for complementarity in politics, not exclusion of women from it.

When Ansar al-Sunna lobbied against the article in the National Election Act reserving seats women inside Sudan's legislative assemblies, they did so based on arguments about women's emotional nature and lack of rationality. But they saw little success as the only group advocating against it. This is partly related to the fact there is a strong consensus among Islamists - male and female, conservative and moderate - on the importance of women's participation in political decision-making. The "un-Islamic card" seems to work better regarding women's issues in which there is disagreement within the ranks of Islamists. Thus, the president and his allies have been selective in giving Ansar al-Sunna the opportunity to pull this card in policy making. In addition, there is even disagreement within Ansar al-Sunna on the issue. Despite the fact that their ideology builds on the idea that there is a unitary Islamic doctrine with no room for diversity,⁸⁷ there are multiple and conflicting views on the role of women in politics.

The empowerment role of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center

Even though Ansar al-Sunna women are excluded from *nasiha* due to their alleged emotional nature, gender segregation has served the unexpected purpose of giving them experience in political organization. The principle of gender segregation dictated a need for a separate women's center in order to avoid unnecessary encounters with men at the main Ansar al-Sunna center. Therefore, a women's center was built attached to the main center

in 2008, but with a separate entrance. This center has provided a space for women to gain empowering leadership experience within the paradigm of gender segregation, as the center has enabled Ansar al-Sunna women to take an active part in the internal organization of the movement. According to Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, "we are [now] represented and have the right to vote."⁸⁸ This is something new within Ansar al-Sunna, according to the Kheir,⁸⁹ and represents a change in the internal organization of a movement from which women were previously excluded. Given that male leaders claim women are less rational and more emotional than men, the women's voices are thus far only limited to women's issues and not to other topics, so their power remains limited. However, this could change.

The leader of Ansar al-Sunna, Ismail al-Uthman, diplomatically suggested in an interview that "some have negative opinions about women's political participation inside the group. Women are emotional beings."⁹⁰ He agreed with the view that a woman's biology excludes her from holding certain positions in an Islamic state, explaining that "women have many rights in Islam, but because of her emotional being, she cannot be a leader of a country."⁹¹ At the same time, though, he said he would not oppose women's participation if Ansar al-Sunna were a political party (but since it is not, the question is moot): "Ansar al-Sunna is not a political group. If we were a political party, women would be included."⁹² He seemed to be indirectly claiming that excluding women would be counterproductive, since that would cause Ansar al-Sunna to lose the female seats in the elections under the 2008 National Election Act. (In essence, if Ansar al-Sunna were a political party but excluded women from politics, Ansar al-Sunna would lose the opportunity to fill the 25 per cent of seats reserved for women.) This suggests that al-Uthman is politically pragmatic: he is willing to compromise the unitary Islamic doctrine for the purpose of politics. If so, he might be said to follow in the footsteps of the Islamists he is accusing for being un-Islamic by corrupting religion for political purposes.

Women at the center, however, are starting to question whether it is indeed un-Islamic to deny them a role in *nasiha*. They certainly do not share the view that they are less rational than men. When I confronted the leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center with the statements of her male counterparts, she laughed out loud. In her view, there is nothing wrong with women's rationality. But although the Sahih al-Bukhari *hadith* is taken as evidence against women's political participation, Kheir stated that "there is no Islamic argument against women's political participation and representation in parliament."⁹³ Nonetheless, although the women at the

center view the idea of women's political participation positively, they are clear about the fact that they regard their primary duties to be maintaining the family as an institution by serving in their households as mothers and wives. While they object to the view that women are inherently irrational, they do agree that women as a rule are more emotional, particularly during the menstrual period. According to these women, this excludes them from having the highest position in a state. In short, while they challenge some aspects of the male discourse on the issue, they also maintain it with a strong emphasis on biological differences.⁹⁴ And if they are to assume a role in *nasiha*, they would use the stage to preach many of the same ideals as Ansar al-Sunna men - supporting Sunna circumcision and gender segregation in education and standing against divorce and family disintegration. Based on the same biological arguments about women's emotional nature, men should have the prerogative of divorce.⁹⁵ For these women, it is important that the political arena is not only filled with women advocating for Western-type equality or Islamist equity. They would like to present their views on gender segregation, and they prefer to do it themselves, not through the voices of their male colleagues.⁹⁶ While they are challenging some norms of the unitary Islamic doctrine related to women in politics, they are at the same time maintaining norms of gender segregation. This can be termed women's empowerment not in the sense that these women are pushing for gender equality, but they are challenging constraints placed upon them because of their gender and they are attempting to remove these constraints.

Nonetheless, when a Salafist woman ran for election on the list of the ruling Islamist party in 2010 and won a seat in the national assembly, she was expelled from Ansar al-Sunna. According to a Sudanese lawyer and activist, "[W]hen she was elected, they told her she was an apostate so she left them. She is still in parliament, and she has kept her niqab."⁹⁷ This suggests that women's de facto inclusion is still a long way ahead. But a counter discourse is nonetheless brewing among women as the political role of Ansar al-Sunna in Sudan is changing. At the very least, this shows that the Salafi doctrine is not entirely unified, but is open to multiple interpretations with a dash of political pragmatism. The context in which this debate on women's political participation has surfaced has been in a period of Sudanese political history when Ansar al-Sunna has started to engage in conventional state politics. One possible understanding of this shift is that the movement must now appeal to female voters: because of the paradigm of gender segregation, women are pivotal in targeting the female groups that are rallying support for Salafist candidates in the election.

Following in the footsteps of the Muslim Sisters?

Ansar al-Sunna appears to partly mirror the development of the Muslim Brotherhood from a religious movement to a political party. While the Brotherhood's main aim was *dawa* and included a Muslim Sisters branch headed by Suad al-Fatih and Thuraiya Umbabi, the Brotherhood's initial standpoint on women's political participation was that it was against Islam. The Sudan Women's Union, established in 1952, put women's political rights on the agenda during the 1950s and initially included both secularists and Islamists. But the Muslim Sisters left the Union because they were principally against granting women political rights. At the time, the Brotherhood was postulating a view that domesticated women: they were encouraged to get an education, but not to work outside of the home and certainly not to participate in politics.

In 1964, during the October Revolution, the political wing of the Brotherhood was established, namely the Islamic Charter Front and with it a women's branch called the Islamic Women's Front. The constitution of the Women's Front included among its many objectives women's rights of suffrage and candidacy.⁹⁸ Hasan al-Turabi spearheaded this new discourse on women and political participation, partly as a political strategy to counter the Sudanese Communist Party⁹⁹, which was competing with the Islamic Charter Front for the female vote.¹⁰⁰

Despite the fact that this platform created discontent among the more conservative members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Women's Front participated in the 1964 revolution through demonstrations and marches. They also participated in the June 1965 election campaign. Thuraiya Umbabi ran as a candidate, but did not win a seat. Some members of the Muslim Brotherhood were hesitant to nominate a woman as a front candidate. For example, Mohamed Sadiq al-Karuri "called for denying women their right of vote and candidacy on the grounds that women were like bottles, and a bottle would break if it underwent friction or collision, therefore women should stay at home and assume their duties of maternity, nursing and family care".¹⁰¹ In short, there was no consensus on women's political rights among Islamists at the time. In fact, the reaction of al-Karuri in 1965 was not so dissimilar from the reaction of Ansar al-Sunna to the woman Salafist who won a seat in the 2010 election.

This glance at the early history of the Islamists suggests that the Ansar al-Sunna might be following in a similar track to a certain degree. It suggests that Islamic ideology, whether we are talking about the Muslim Brotherhood or Ansar al-Sunna, is capable of moderation with changing contexts. Certainly, as long as Ansar al-Sunna remains a religious movement rather than a political party, the leadership can get away with excluding women from *nasiha*. However, this is conditioned upon a healthy working relationship with the Islamists. The question is whether the women will accept this in the long run.

Conclusion

In this article I have explored the possibilities, limits, and paradox of women's agency and empowerment within the unitary Salafist Islamic doctrine at a time when Ansar al-Sunna is assuming a new political role in Sudan. Ansar al-Sunna's new political role in present day Sudan has enabled a particular Salafi female agency that must be analyzed against the specific historical moment and political context in which it has emerged.

Possibilities

In 1994, the two principal *shaykhs* of Ansar al-Sunna, Abu Zayd Muhammad Hamza and Muhammad al-Hadiyya, were detained after declaring the regime un-Islamic in 1994. The same year five men killed 26 worshipers inside an Ansar al-Sunna mosque. The government blamed anti-regime groups for the attack, while the gunmen maintained that Hasan al-Turabi had given them direct orders to carry it out.¹⁰² Since that time, the Ansar al-Sunna movement has grown from being a marginalized group to an established political force.

Ansar al-Sunna has now established a center, something that was previously difficult in an environment of state oppression. Women's *dawa* forms an important part of Ansar al-Sunna's re-Islamization of Sudanese society. The paradigm of gender segregation in *dawa* has demanded the establishment of a separate Ansar al-Sunna women's center. This center has opened a space for women's religious empowerment. Women have been assigned positions as Quran teachers in order to target the female constituency and in fulfilling this duty, they have played a central role in implicitly critiquing state-induced gender mixing. Leaders of the center have encouraged wearing the *niqab* as a means of circumventing state-induced gender mixing, thus resisting state Islam in the everyday.

Despite being excluded from conventional politics, the establishment of the center has given women Salafists leadership experience. They have gained a voice in the internal organization of the movement because they report on the center's activities and represent women's views. This has created an internal debate about the unitary Salafist doctrine's view on women in politics. Salafist women themselves do not accept the position taken by their male colleagues that women cannot make sound political decisions due to their emotion and irrational biological makeup. On the contrary, the leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center asserts that nothing in Islam legitimizes excluding women from politics.

Limitations

While the women at the Ansar al-Sunna center are challenging the male monopoly in political decision-making, they nonetheless embrace the principle of complementarity, including the fact that women's more emotional nature excludes them from top political positions. This creates a problem: If women accept that their biology restricts their ability to make sound political decisions, how do they expect men to take their political views seriously (rather than sidelining them as being overly emotional)? Although a counter discourse is brewing, women remain excluded from providing substantive input. Thus women's input in the internal organization of the movement has related only to women-specific issues. Acceptance of women in politics remains a future goal, as demonstrated by the Ansar al-Sunna woman who was declared an apostate after winning an election in 2010. Although this mirrors the development of women's participation in other Sudanese political parties, as in other parties, women will not be fully integrated into the political discourse until the male party leaders give women more decision-making power.¹⁰³

Paradox

The marriage of convenience between Islamists and Salafists remains somewhat contradictory from the perspective of both groups. While Islamists deem Ansar al-Sunna as backwards, Islamists have engaged the movement to give the regime more Islamic legitimacy. At the same time, while Ansar al-Sunna regards the regime un-Islamic, it nonetheless engaging with Islamists because it affords Ansar al-Sunna a space to do *dawa*. The jury is still out in determining who has ultimate power over whom, but it is becoming clear that both groups are operating through the lens of political pragmatism, and this causes friction within both camps.

The paradox of the story is as follows: the more Ansar al-Sunna engages in politics, the more apparent it becomes that there is no such thing as a unitary Islamic doctrine. The debate on women's political participation illustrates the diversity of views. The Ansar al-Sunna movement is being forced to take a stand on a range of political issues, for example, the national budget (for which it is difficult to find specific Islamic verses to justify a certain position over another). As Ansar al-Sunna descends into the quagmire of Sudanese politics, the burning question is which Salafi doctrine it will follow. The diverse opinions on women in politics shows that the unitary Salafi doctrine may be more dynamic and apt to change than its leaders and followers would like to admit.

NOTES

¹ Acknowledgement: The fieldwork and research behind this article has been funded by the Norwegian Research Council on the project "the moderation of Islamist movements". In addition, I have received funding from Muwatin to write the article and to discuss and present it at a workshop on *Gendering Faith* in Istanbul in 2013 and the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies in Ankara in 2014. I have also received additional funding from the ARUSS (Assisting regional universities in Sudan and South Sudan) project funded by the Norwegian Embassy in Khartoum. A special thanks goes to Hilde Kj stvedt and Rasha Abdel Hafez.

² ICC issued an arrest warrant for Sudan's president in March 2009 indicting him on five counts of crimes against humanity (murder, extermination, forcible transfer, torture and rape) and two counts of war crimes (pillaging and intentionally directing attacks against civilians).

³ The niqab is a black face veil that Ansar al-Sunna advocates strongly for, while the Islamists insist on the hijab which is a headscarf.

⁴ In this article I have anonymized interviewees either when they have explicitly asked for it or if their statements are of a nature that might put them at risk.

⁵ Being in the field over a substantial time period, the relationship with many of my informants have change over time. While the first interview typically was inside Sudan's national assembly, several interviews and years later I have been introduced to family members and invited to lunch.

⁶ I have not used a tape recorder and rely entirely on fieldnotes

⁷ Noah Salomon, "The Salafi Critique of Islamism: Doctrine, Difference and the Problem of Islamic Political Action in Contemporary Sudan" in

Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement, ed. Roel Meijer (Hurst&Company: London, 2009); Einas Ahmad, "Political Islam in Sudan: Islamists and the Challenge of State Power (1989-2004)" in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, ed. Benjamin Soares and Rene Otayek (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007)

⁸ Salma Ahmed Nageeb, *New Spaces and Old Frontiers: Women, Social Space, and Islamization in Sudan*. (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2004); Salma Ahmed Nageeb, "Approaching the Mosque: Women's Religious Groups in Khartoum." *Africa Spectrum* 42 no.1 (2007): 5-27.

⁹ Henri Lauziere, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 42 no.3 (2010): 369-389, 370

¹⁰ I thus rely on and to a large extent agree with Noah Salomon (2009), who argues that Islamists trace their intellectual genealogy through the Muslim Brotherhood and are distinguished historically and ideologically from Salafism.

¹¹ E.g., interview with the leader of the Islamic Liberation Party (2012); interview with Shaykh Muhammad Abdel Karim, leader of the Legitimate League for Religious Scholars, University of Khartoum (2009); Interview with Ismail al-Uthman, leader of Ansar al-Sunna (2008).

¹² Quintan Wiktorowicks, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement" *Studies in conflict and terrorism* 29, no. 3 (2006):207-240

¹³ Wiktorowicks, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", 208.

¹⁴ I am here referring to insider/outsider dilemmas. Being a white Western researcher studying Islam makes me an outsider on several dimensions. But because women's rights is a politicized topic in Sudan and most academics are either active in political parties or NGOs, it is perhaps easier for me to get access to the group as I am regarded as someone who are standing outside national political disputes. However, being a Westerner I was not regarded neutral or objective and the biggest challenge was to disassociate myself from Western geopolitics. I made my perspective on Islam crystal clear; that I do not start my research from the position that Islam is oppressive to women and that Muslim women are suffering from false consciousness. I take a constructivist approach to Islam; what constitutes Islam or Islamic law varies according to who interprets it and interpretations of Islam vary over time and across different contexts.

¹⁵ By conservative dress code I mean clothes that are covering all body parts and are not clinging to my body. I wore a black hijab and black

socks in my sandals. The only body parts showing were my hands and my face. In the interviews with the men, I would make sure not to look to their face during the interview and I would never interview a man from Ansar al-Sunna without bringing a male or (older) female to act as a guardian as this would be considered immoral and inappropriate, even if I am not a Muslim.

¹⁶ I have visited the center on later fieldworks, but I have not been able to conduct another interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir. I attempted to involve her in a workshop on women's rights and Islam together with a range of Islamists and women activists as she expressed to me in an interview in 2009 that the Ansar al-Sunna women felt excluded from such events, but she declined the invitation for un-known reasons. I have talked to the women at the center since 2009, but I have not engaged in participant observation. I have followed the political role of Ansar al-Sunna and I was able to interview some of the men; the latest interview was in 2013.

¹⁷ Naila Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millenium Development Goal 1", *Gender and Development* 13 no. 1 (2005): 13-24

¹⁸ Jo Rowlands, "Empowerment examined", *Development in Practice* 5 no.2 (2010): 101-107

¹⁹ One characteristic example of the inadequate treatment of the category of religion in feminist theory is to be found in the work of Susan M. Okin. She projects a view on religion (and culture) that is exclusively seen as unfavorable for women's rights and as contrary to any idea of feminism. She asserts that religious acts such as wearing the *hijab* is motivated by a false consciousness. S. M. Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?", in: S. M. Okin, J. Cohen, M. Howard, M.C. Nussbaum(eds.), *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999) 9-24

²⁰ Mounira Charrad, "Gender in the Middle East: Islam, States, Agency", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 37, (2011): 417-37

²¹ I refer here to James Scott's concept of "everyday resistance". James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

²² (e.g., Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women Author(s)." *American Ethnologist*, 17 no. 1 (1990): 41-55; Deniz Kandiyoti, Bargaining with Patriarchy." *Gender and Society* 2 (1988): 274-290; Asef Bayat, A Women's Non-Movement: What it Means to Be a Woman Activist in an Islamic State."

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 27 no. 1 (2007): 160-172; Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009)

²³ Valentine M. Moghadam and Elham Gheytauchi "Political Opportunities and Strategic Choices: Comparing Feminist Campaigns in Morocco and Iran", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 15 no.3 (2010): 267 - 288, 269.

²⁴ Margot Badran derived that definition from Egyptian feminists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Margot Margot, *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 19-20. For a similar definition, see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Lila, Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 16

²⁵ It is in this understanding Azza Karam employs the term. See Azza Karam, *Women, Islamism and the State; Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998)

²⁶ "The meanings are so varied, shifting, and at times contradictory for both the wearer and the observer that they cannot be reduced to any single statement" Mounira Charrad, "Gender in the Middle East: Islam, States, Agency", 428

²⁷ Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007)

²⁸ Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (Routledge, 1994)

Mounira Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001)

²⁹ Nilufer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (University of Michigan Press, 1997)

³⁰ Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence from the Middle East to America* (Yale University Press, 2012)

³¹ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992)

³² Lila AbuLughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1986); Lila Abu Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104 no. 3 (2002): 783-790.

³³ Faribah Adelhah (1991) makes a similar argument based on the Iranian case. In a similar vein, Hanna Papanek (in Abu Lughod 2002), who

worked in Pakistan, described the burka as a liberating "portable seclusion" because it enabled women to venture outside of the home while still observing the moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men. Fariba Abdelkah, *La revolution sous le voile: Femmes islamiques d'Iran* (Karthala, 1991) Lila Abu Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"

³⁴ Bayat, "A Women's Non-Movement"; Bayat, *Life as Politics*

³⁵ Siapno (2002) makes the distinction between "resistance Islam" and "state Islam. Jacqueline Aquine Siapno, *Gender, Islam, Nationalism in Aceh: The Paradox of Power, Co-optation and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 2002)

³⁶ Abu Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance"

³⁷ Sarah Bracke, "Author(iz(ing Agency: feminist Scholars Making Sense of Women's Involvement in Religious 'Fundamentalist' Movements." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 10 no.3 (2003): 335-346; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005)

³⁸ Bracke, "Author(iz(ing Agency)"

³⁹ For example Judith Butler and her definition of agency. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Anthropology*, 16 no.2 (2001): 202-236, 203

⁴¹ Abu Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance", 41

⁴² Abu Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance", 13

⁴³ Abdullahi A. Gallab, *The First Islamist Republic: Development and Disintegration of Islamism in the Sudan* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 11.

⁴⁴ The Passport and Emigration Act of 1994 stipulated that women needed the written approval of a male guardian (husband, father, or brother) in order to travel

⁴⁵ The woman needs a male guardian (*wali*) to validate the marriage according to the Muslim Family Law (1991). This follows the practice of the Maliki school of law, revoking a judicial circular from 1960 based on the legal preference of the Hanafi school, according to which a woman can contract marriage herself without a male guardian

⁴⁶ Nageeb, *New Spaces and Old Frontiers*; Sondra Hale, *Gender politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism and the State* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997); Sondra Hale, "The Islamic State and Gendered Citizenship in

Sudan" in *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, ed. Suad Joseph (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000); Sondra Hale, "The New Muslim Women: Sudan's National Islamic Front and the Invention of Identity." *Muslim World*, 86 no. 2 (1996):177-200; Sondra Hale, "Sudanese Women in National Services, Militias, and the Home" in *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society* ed. Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2003); Liv Tønnessen, "Between Sharia and CEDAW in Sudan: Islamist women negotiating gender equity" in *Gender, Justice and Legal Pluralities: Latin American and African Perspectives* ed. Rachel Sieder and John McNiesh (Routledge, 2013); LivTønnessen, *The many faces of political Islam in Sudan: Muslim women's activism for and against the state* (PhD dissertation University of Bergen, Bergen, 2011); Nagwa Mohamed Ali Al-Bashir, *Islamist Women's Politics and Gender Activism: A Case Study from Sudan* (Vienna: Dissertation submitted for the degree of PhD in political science, Department of Political Science, Vienna University, 2003); Karin Willemse, "On Globalization, Gender and the Nation-State: Muslim Masculinity and the Urban Middle Class Family in Islamist Sudan" in *The Gender Question in Globalization: Changing Perspectives and Practices* ed. T. Davids and F. Van Driel (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Karin Willemse, *One Foot in Heaven: Narratives on Gender and Islam in Darfur, West-Sudan* (Leiden, Bosten: Brill, 2007)

⁴⁷ Correctly translated, the term "insaf" means "equity or justice"; however, my informants insisted that the correct translation is "equity."

⁴⁸ Interview with Hasan al-Turabi, Islamist ideologue and leader of Popular National Congress Party (2009).

⁴⁹ Hasan Al-Turabi, *Women between the Teachings of Religion and the Customs of Society (Al-Mar'a bayna Ta'alim al-Din wa Taqlid al-Mujta'ma)*. (Jeddah: Al-Dar al-Su'udiya li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 1973)

⁵⁰ Hasan Al-Turabi, *Women between the Teachings of Religion*

⁵¹ Interview with Suad Abu Qashawa, Sudan Women's General Union (2008).

⁵² Interview with Ghazi Salah al-Din, former advisor to Sudan's president (2008).

⁵³ Interview with Brigader Abubekr A. Hussein, head of public order police (2011).

⁵⁴ Interview with Maha Freigoun, Sudan Women's General Union (2009).

⁵⁵ Interview with Hasan al-Turabi, Islamist ideologue and leader of Popular National Congress Party (2009).

⁵⁶ Interview with Afaf Ahmed Abdel Rahman, former state minister of social welfare (2007).

⁵⁷ The Act stipulates gender segregation in public transportation, but this is no longer enforced in contemporary Sudan.

⁵⁸ When I interviewed the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood (Sadiq A. A. Majid, 2008) and the president's advisor for Sharia affairs (Ahmad Ali al-Imam, 2007), they made it clear that they did not shake hands with women.

⁵⁹ Interview with Ghazi Salah al-Diin, former advisor to Sudan's president (2012).

⁶⁰ Interview with Amira al-Fadil, former minister of social welfare (2013).

⁶¹ There is no consensus among Islamists on this issue. Whereas some defend it as Islamic, others argue against it as being un-Islamic.

⁶² Interviews with various representatives at National Council for Child welfare (2009).

⁶³ Interview with Suad Abdel Aal, Ministry for Social Welfare and Security (2012).

⁶⁴ Interview with Ismail al-Uthman, the leader of Ansar al-Sunna (2008).

⁶⁵ Interview with Ismail al-Uthman, the leader of Ansar al-Sunna (2008).

⁶⁶ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁶⁷ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁶⁸ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁶⁹ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁷⁰ I visited Quran classes in Jebel Awlie, at the outskirts of Khartoum, at a Sudan Women's General Union center in 2009.

⁷¹ The *shaykhas* also give *fatwas* (legal opinions) on different topics to students and visitors at the center. If they are learned enough to give a *fatwa*, they will. If not, they will bring the student's question to someone who can, preferably a woman. "If we cannot find a woman, we will ask a male shaykh, but we will always look for a woman first" (informal conversations with *shaykhas* at the Ansar al-Sunna women's center, 2009).

⁷² Informal conversation with students at a Quran class at the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009).

⁷³ I am not suggesting that only women from Ansar al-Sunna are wearing the *niqab*. Women from other Salafist groups also wear it. Also, I do not want to exclude other motives for wearing the *niqab* in public in Sudan. Some might wear it for pragmatic reasons (to avoid sexual harassment for example). Others might be forced to wear it by their husbands or other male figures. This analysis, however, builds on my informants from the Ansar al-Sunna women's center

⁷⁴ Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Islamic Law and Society in the Sudan* (London: Frank Cass, 1987), 94-95

⁷⁵ Many Sudanese women use skin creams to bleach their skin, and some even use tablets to gain weight. The beauty ideal is a woman who is fair-skinned (indicating Arab ethnic descent) and curvy.

⁷⁶ Many Sudanese women use skin creams to bleach their skin, and some even use tablets to gain weight. The beauty ideal is a woman who is fair-skinned (indicating Arab ethnic descent) and curvy.

⁷⁷ Nageeb, *New Spaces and Old Frontiers*, 40

⁷⁸ Nageeb, *New Spaces and Old Frontiers*, 40

⁷⁹ Nageeb, *New Spaces and Old Frontiers*, 159

⁸⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1991), 1

⁸¹ Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 4

⁸² Interview with Dr. Musab Abdel Gadir, professor at Nileen University and member of Ansar al-Sunna (2008) [author's translation].

⁸³ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁸⁴ Interview with Wisal al-Mahdi (2008).

⁸⁵ Interview with Wisal al-Mahdi (2008).

⁸⁶ Interview with Wisal al-Mahdi (2008).

⁸⁷ This refers to the principle of *ikhtilaf*. Ansar al-Sunna does not agree with this principle, which is an Islamic scholarly religious disagreement. Under the principle, when there is disagreement on a religious issue, you cannot condemn a person who chooses to follow a position that is different from your own.

⁸⁸ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁸⁹ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁹⁰ Interview with Ismail al-Uthman, leader of Ansar al-Sunna (2008) [author's translation].

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⁹² Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁹³ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁹⁴ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁹⁵ Informal conversation with Quran teachers at the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009).

⁹⁶ Interview with Surayha Ahmad Muhammad Kheir, leader of the Ansar al-Sunna women's center (2009) [author's translation].

⁹⁷ Interview with Samia al-Hashmi, female activist and lawyer (2011).

⁹⁸ Nagwa Mohamed Ali al-Bashir, *Women in Public Life: The Experience of al-Akhwat al-Muslimat (Muslim Sisters): A Case from Sudan* (Khartoum: Dissertation submitted for the degree of master in political science, University of Khartoum, 1996)

⁹⁹ Hasan al-Turabi, *The Islamist Movement in Sudan (Harakat al-Islamiya fi al-Sudan)* (Khartoum, 1989)

¹⁰⁰ The Sudanese Communist Party was the first political party in Sudan to open up for female membership (in 1946).

¹⁰¹ Quoted in al-Bashir, *Women in Public Life*, 91

¹⁰² Ann Mosely Lesch, *Sudan: Contested National Identities* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998)

¹⁰³ Samia El-Nagar and Liv Tønnessen, *Women's Rights and the Women's Movement in Sudan (1952-2014): Focus and Strategies for Adopting Legal Feminist Action*" (unpublished paper, 2014)