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Razaz Basheir

Abstract

Military forces are attempting to quell Sudan's revolution, unfolding since December 2018, through a senseless war that has raged in Khartoum since 15 April 2023. The article examines the events of the revolution and the demands of different actors through the lens of citizenship rights, which are a major site of conflict in the modern nation-state, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Critical discourse analysis is used to consider key actors' stances on social change and their implications for citizenship rights over the course of the revolution and the ensuing armed conflict. In this, the essay relies on a collection of social media texts and documents, and revolutionary chants and slogans. The article argues that the threat posed by these various revolutionary expressions, when used by those historically excluded from citizenship, has led the dominant elite to push the country to this moment, in which the conditions for civic political action have been wholly suspended, and drag it into a ruthless war.

Keywords: Sudan; Postcolonialism; Citizenship Rights; Sudanese Revolution; War of Khartoum

Introduction

Observing the trajectory of the Sudanese revolution that erupted in December 2018, even the non-specialist will clearly see that the revolution has fallen prey to various military forces that have been striving to crush it from the outset. When this proved difficult, these military forces staged a counterrevolution, plunging the country into a senseless war, which began in Khartoum in April 2023 and later extended to other fronts. This article examines the events and demands formulated into texts by various actors from a citizenship rights perspective, whether those expressed through direct practice by engaging in protests or various revolutionary activities, or citizenship as a set of rights that are embedded in political declarations and charters. This study argues that the threat posed by the various revolutionary expressions of those historically excluded from the realm of citizenship is what prompted the dominant civilian and military elite, in collusion with the international powers controlling the global economy, to lead the country into successive waves of

violence, culminating with the outbreak of war and the suspension of conditions for civic political action.

The article uses critical discourse analysis, a method that proceeds from an explicit socio-political position that is biased towards victims of the dominant discourse, their position reinforced by unequal power relations, and taking into account the relationship between the texts under study and social perception, power relations, and society and its culture, according to Van Dijk.¹ From this standpoint, the article analyses the positions of key actors over the course of the revolution and the ensuing armed conflict in relation to their historical position in the modern state's structure of citizenship, their vision of the desired change, and the translation of these visions into demands for fundamental civil and social rights. In this analysis, the essay relies on a collection of written texts gleaned from political and constitutional statements and declarations, multimedia sources, and revolutionary chants and slogans.

The article begins with a theoretical framing of the concept of citizenship, its connection to the emergence of the modern nation-state, and its manifestations in postcolonial states, Sudan in particular. Next, the article looks at the first wave of the revolutionary movement with a focus on the role of the discourses of civil society elites in diverting the movement from the path of socio-political change. The third part of the article focuses on the second wave of protests, and the active expression of the revolutionary masses belonging to 'political society' of their rights to citizenship, through direct engagement in the political process and the reformulation of the discourse of change. It then examines the post-war revolutionary landscape, reviewing the positions of its supporters and opponents while focusing on nationalist discourses that are invoked and employed to maintain the status quo, which entails the exclusion of broad social constituencies.

Reading Frameworks of Citizenship Rights in the Sudanese Context

Reflecting on the concept of citizenship requires examining the concept of the nation-state, which brought citizenship into existence in its modern form and whose essence and contradictions continue to be debated although it is the leading model of sovereignty worldwide. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri² argue that the concept of modern sovereignty, in its secular iteration in post-Renaissance Europe, began as a revolutionary project against the church and divinely inspired legal systems, which were replaced by systems that derive their legitimacy from the masses, or multitude, and the authority of reason and science. In light of the diversity and divergent interests of the masses, sovereignty, which is difficult to extend, was quickly overthrown by the nation-state in revolutionary reaction. In this, the state used its tools to exclude 'the other' by promoting the idea of the nation as a homogeneous group that shares history, language, race, or class, and always defines itself in opposition to an 'other'. Despite its exclusionary nature, the modern state nevertheless reclaimed its revolutionary dimension at various junctures, for example, in the struggle against colonialism as a moment of unity against the foreign other. Benedict Anderson argues that nations are merely 'imagined communities' that have imagined themselves into being in a process that coincided with the emergence of what he called 'print capitalism'. Print capitalism

bolstered the authority of some local dialects at the expense of others while also creating a homogeneous temporal experience through the publication of daily newspapers within the borders of a single state.³ Hardt and Negri invert this claim, positing that ‘the nation becomes the only way to imagine community’.

Partha Chatterjee complicates this analysis in postcolonial contexts.⁴ He asserts that the homogeneous temporal experience of these ‘imagined communities’, which is shared by societies under systems of capitalist production, does not apply to the postcolonial reality, which exists in a more heterogeneous temporality, under both modern systems of capitalist production and other, traditional systems subject to their own temporal rhythm. This dialectic is reflected in Chatterjee’s two main themes. The first concerns the trajectory of state formation,⁵ the success of which depends on the ability to reconcile multiple contradictions. On one hand, the state is fighting a war against the coloniser under the banner of nationalism, which is derived from the coloniser’s own sources; on the other hand, it is a modern sovereign state that derives its legitimacy from a predominantly pre-modern population. The second aspect of this heterogeneous temporality is a fundamental distinction Chatterjee applies to actors in the public space based on their involvement, or lack thereof, in sites of modern citizenship.⁶ Chatterjee proposes a distinction between civil society and political society, defining the former as ‘the closed association of modern elite groups, sequestered from the wider popular life of the communities, walled up within enclaves of civic freedom and rational law’. Despite the assumption embedded in theories of the modern state that all citizens can become part of this civil society, by virtue of their rights to equal citizenship, this society has, in fact, always been a bourgeois one, even in democracies based on the principles of liberty and equality. This fact is embodied in a number of institutions and practices that are confined to a few groups occupying clearly identifiable social positions, governed by the criteria of property and the social group to which individuals belong.

In the same context, the reality, especially in postcolonial states, is that the majority of the population exists outside social sites that are easily definable by the modern state’s lexicon and its classifications of what is official or legal. These populations are residents of informal areas or slums, or workers in informal or unlawful sectors. Despite their unclassifiable status and their deviation from the standards of modern citizenship, they remain part of the population subject to state’s bureaucratic machinery and its daily policies. The state, in turn, derives its legitimacy not from the active political participation of citizens, but through its increasing governmentalization.⁷ Political society is thus made up of vulnerable groups whose daily life is governed by this ambiguous relationship with the state; it involves much negotiation and manoeuvring, at times spurring political society to create networks and organisations for this purpose. Despite its varying goals and tactics and the patronising regard that ‘citizens’ of the modern state have for its actions, (which are not always compatible with the values of rational civil society), the different manoeuvres of this political society constitute the basis for many forms of resistance and changes in the balance of power in these communities.

This opposition between civil and political society finds echoes in the literature of the revolutionary movement in our contemporary societies. Dina Kiwan points out how poorly

organised grassroots bases were at the forefront of the events of the Arab Uprisings.⁸ While Western powers bet on civil society's ability to bring about democratic change, generously funding organisations to support civic participation, especially among young people, Kiwan argues that the marginalisation of youth, women, and refugee groups motivated them to take part in the Arab Uprisings and demand their full rights, as an active expression of citizenship. According to Nils Butenschon,⁹ from the perspective of institutional history, revolutions and uprisings represent a 'critical juncture' in which path-dependent institutional stability is questioned, as the potential arises to reformulate institutional structures and the terms of the social contract for citizenship as regards inclusiveness, exclusion, rights, and duties. These uprisings can thus be seen as the most appropriate moments of the struggle for the 'right to have rights', a concept explored by Andrew Schaap in his reading of Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière.¹⁰ Hannah Arendt formulated this phrase when writing about her scepticism of human rights frameworks, arguing that the right to have rights cannot be obtained outside a political framework in which the individual is first recognised as a citizen, which puts refugees, undocumented people, and stateless persons outside the umbrella of human rights. In contrast, Rancière argued that the struggle for the right to have rights is not an exceptional moment that takes place outside the political frameworks of citizenship, but rather a fundamental axis in the political struggle for equality in a situation in which inequality is the natural order of things.

The struggle for the recognition of citizenship and basic human rights in Sudan has been a major obstacle to peaceful coexistence and stability. Abdullah Bola explains that human rights violations against large groups of the country's population¹¹ have historically been reconciled by employing a hierarchical logic of citizenship that preceded the Bashir regime (1989–2019), which committed massive violations in the war with the south (1955–2005), as well as the genocide in Darfur in the west ongoing since 2003 and the war raging in the Nubian Mountains in the southwest of the country since 2011. According to Bola, 'The basic structures of human rights violations' are merely 'the mental, conceptual, social, cultural, psychological, and political structures that existed in our society before the Islamists seized power, which constituted bases of support, reservoirs, and shelters for aggressive energy and fostered psychological conditions conducive to human rights violations', which is clearly evident in the discourse that fuels the ongoing conflict.

To understand the lines along which the distinction between population groups and their right to citizenship are drawn in the socio-political context of postcolonial Sudan, it is useful to refer to Mahmood Mamdani's analysis¹² of the way in which British colonialism produced two population groups through a system of indirect rule at several colonial peripheries. One group of people, typically those living in major cities, was subject to direct rule and enjoyed a standard of living and services comparable to those provided to the coloniser. This group also had some experience with the principles of citizenship, being subject to the rule of law and governance, and we can therefore view them as citizens. The second group was isolated from the direct influence of the colonial government, coming instead under the control of traditional forces, such as native administrations, sheikhs, and clerics, and they can thus be seen as subjects from the point of view of the modern state.

The colonial government in Sudan (1898–1956) adopted a system of indirect rule to serve various ends. It would help to deter and contain opposition movements, whether traditional forces like the remnants of the Mahdi movement and Sufi orders in general or the nascent educated forces, especially after the 1924 revolution. At the same time, indirect rule spared the colonial government from having to delegate administrative and financial tasks to native administrations, especially in remote areas with limited extractive potential. The regions under direct rule, or citizen centres, were located in the major cities on the Nile River in northern, eastern, and central Sudan, which are economically or logistically attractive,¹³ while the rest of the country's inhabitants lived in regions where they were geographically designated as subjects.

The colonial system also rearranged the social hierarchy on an ethnic basis. Mamdani¹⁴ explains how Harold MacMichael's studies on the origins of population groups in Sudan transformed popular oral folktales about Arab dynasties and noble origins, and dubious genealogical testimonies, which underlined the ethnic superiority of some groups, into official state statistics and scholarly facts that were subsequently repeated by the educated elite who inherited the colonial archives. The colonial system relied on these geographic and ethnic divisions in their distribution of privileges, which have governed the balance of power in the country within a logic of 'divide and rule', reinforcing a bias towards northern and central Sudan and the ethnic groups that inhabit it. In turn, this exacerbated inter-regional development gaps and socio-economic disparities between ethnic groups. Mohammed Said al-Qaddal points to colonial education policies.¹⁵ Until 1946, the expansion of basic and intermediate education was confined to Omdurman, Khartoum, Halfa, Suakin and Wadi Madani, all cities located in central, northern, and eastern Sudan; until 1930, not one of the 555 students of Gordon College was from southern Sudan or Darfur.

This article considers the events that have disrupted Sudan's traditional balance of power since December 2018 in light of these dynamics, which shaped postcolonial Sudan and the sites of citizenship. First, the article examines the revolutionary movement that has endured for nearly five years, looking at it as two somewhat distinct revolutionary waves and exploring the drivers of each wave and the nature of the forces that came forth to lead it. The first wave was initiated on 13 December 2018 by the first demonstration in Damazin, located in the southeast, against high prices and continued through the fall of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 and the formation of the transitional government led by parties and civil forces under the banner of the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC). The second wave began with the coup 25 October 2021 and was led by the grassroots resistance committees, which maintained their revolutionary momentum until the outbreak of war in mid-April 2023. Second, the article looks at the present conflict in the capital and western parts of the country and the acute polarisation that pits multiple groups of supporters of the war against advocates of a ceasefire, with each side advancing various claims.

Using Chatterjee's framework of political actors in the postcolonial state, the article contends that the first wave of the revolution was led by the historic institutions of civil society, represented by political parties, professional and trade unions, and non-governmental and community organisations of various kinds. Political society, embodied by the neighbourhood resistance committees,¹⁶ led the second wave. These committees began to form organically with the modest

activism that followed the Arab Uprisings in 2012 and became more organised and centrally coordinated with the October 2021 coup. The committees adopted flexible, geographically based organisational forms, with the residential neighbourhood making up the smallest unit. Although the form varies from one committee to the next, all the committees are horizontal and open to all, with some exceptions such as members of the old regime.

The article focuses on the revolutionary movement in Khartoum, the historic centre of civil society and the crucible for political society, as a result of which the movement there was better organised and had a greater ability to influence the course of events. The role of the capital as the most important urban centre in the country questioning the status quo intersects with Asef Bayat's analysis of urban social movements in the Middle East,¹⁷ which have in common that they experienced nationalist-populist post-independence regimes that won a measure of legitimacy through their relatively generous spending on subsidies for basic goods and social services, as well as the disruption of this social contract amid the neoliberal reforms that have gained steam since the 1980s and the resulting poverty and formulation of strategies to cope with it.

In Sudan, the protests that spontaneously erupted in response to the increase in bread prices were carried on by the urban masses in the capital, whose pre-war population reached nine million, or about twenty per cent of the country's population.¹⁸ These masses came to the capital in large waves, displaced by wars and famines or in search of a better standard of living. As Bayat points out, the newcomers to the city's poor classes and a middle class crushed by austerity policies have made a living through their 'quiet encroachment' on the city's exclusionary structure, moving stealthily into public spaces to practise informal or illegal crafts, or living in informal housing projects or slums that house more than half of the city's population.¹⁹ These 'noncollective' actors²⁰ found an opportunity to express their aspirations for broader rights through urban riots in moments of political crisis and the disintegration of existing systems of control. Those people coming from contexts where geographic and ethnic discrimination intersect, in addition to unemployed youth, women, workers in informal sectors, slum-dwellers, and other groups subject to various forms of exclusion, can be seen as the basic constituent elements of Chatterjee's political society.

The First Wave: Civil Society and Double Standards in Rights

The Sudanese Professionals Association took the lead after the spontaneous demonstrations that erupted in several regions of Sudan in December 2018. The Declaration of Freedom and Change, which formulated the movement's core demands, arose out of these actions and was signed by various political parties and the Professionals Association, which functioned as an umbrella for several professional bodies and other civic forces.²¹ The association used its Facebook page to steer the activities of the revolutionary movement, issuing regular statements that set the place and time of demonstrations, which were strictly followed by the demonstrators. Despite the widespread violations against the demonstrators including killings and arrests, protests of all kinds escalated, and coordination between the demonstrators in the capital and the provinces improved. All this

activity culminated in the sit-in at the General Command on 6 April 2019 and the subsequent announcement of the end of Bashir's rule on 11 April. Although this cosmetic change to the face of the regime did not substantially alter the reality of violations by security forces, it did change the way the civil elite dealt with them.

Despite the fall of Bashir, the sit-in continued as a means of pressuring the Transitional Military Council (TMC) to hand over power to civilians. With Bashir gone, the TMC attempted to change the face of the regime absent any fundamental change in its structure, which resulted in multiple attempts to end the sit-in. When the sit-in protestors erected new barricades in response to the prolonged negotiations, the security forces began to attack those barricades and directly target the protestors there. Meanwhile, the Sudanese Professionals Association issued justificatory statements about 'the boundaries of the sit-in'.²² For example: 'Therefore, we appeal to peaceful revolutionaries to abide by the boundaries of the sit-in as known and demarcated since 6 April 2019 and to stay clear of the crosshairs of bullets from unrestrained elements in the military services'.²³ With this, the sit-in that had begun spontaneously and extended organically was confined to the boundaries drawn by the statement. In the process, the statement implicitly differentiated two categories of revolutionaries: one that identified with the negotiations of civic forces and had the right to life and another group that refused to negotiate the demands for which it had turned out, and thus its right to life was contingent on assessments of the security forces.

In this context, during which protesters were categorised based on the requirements of the situation, the question of the Columbia area arose,²⁴ a district located on the banks of the Blue Nile in close proximity to the General Command and thus the centre of the sit-in. By virtue of the district's proximity to the sit-in, it became part of it, and residents of the area participated in revolutionary activities and helped to guard the barricades. At the same time, the nature of Colombia, as a district inhabited by marginalised city dwellers of various categories, who endanger themselves by engaging in unlawful transactions or those that go against the prevailing moral order in order to earn their fragile livelihood, made it easier to demonise the sit-in as a whole by demonising the district itself. One statement from the Professionals Association described how 'a number of rogue elements from the regular services and some civilians have habitually engaged in negative phenomena in Nile Street, below the Blue Nile Bridge, with the help of black marketeers, and then they have engaged in clashes with the military police responsible for controlling military personnel'.²⁵

Such justificatory statements were used as a pretext for police attacks on the sit-in, leading to the heinous massacre committed to break up the sit-in at dawn on 3 June 2019.²⁶ This is exemplified by a statement made by Shams al-Din al-Kabbashi, a TMC leader, to justify the massacre: 'There is a district called Colombia that has long been a hotbed of corruption and negative practices that are anathema to the conduct of Sudanese society and have become a major security threat to citizens'.²⁷ The statement explicitly excludes the residents of Colombia from the category of 'citizens' and the basic rights the category entails. The leaders of the movement gestured to the same attitude with their reference to conventional morals, which contradicted the values of citizenship that they claimed to represent.

In the wake of the massacre, the TMC suspended negotiations with civilians. Nevertheless, the revolutionaries were able to organise themselves despite the complete shutdown of the Internet. On the 30th of the same month, they took to the streets again, reconfiguring the balance of power in favour of civilians led by the FFC. The FFC, however, failed to exploit the massive momentum and the risks the street had taken after the massacre, choosing to return to the negotiating table to seek a power sharing agreement with the soldiers who had turned against them a few days earlier. The negotiations ended with the signing of the constitutional document in August 2019.²⁸

The signing of the constitutional document did not bring an end to the violations. Demonstrators continued to be killed and targeted, while security forces persisted in acting without restraint in areas not inhabited by ‘citizens’, leading to massacres in Foro Baranga, Krinding, and Misterei in the west of the country.²⁹ While Abdalla Hamdok, the highly popular technocratic prime minister, rarely addressed the public or commented on daily events during the transitional period, on one occasion he was keen to make a statement: ‘For five hours at dawn today, we all held our breath as we closely followed the civil defence forces’ heroic rescue of children and their families in the Riyadh-Khartoum Park’.³⁰ Riyadh Park, located in a district of the same name in central Khartoum, is an upscale area that has become the centre of nightlife, entertainment, and shopping in the city. In engaging specifically with an incident where a children’s game malfunctioned in Riyadh-Khartoum Park, Hamdok reaffirmed the hierarchy of citizenship embraced by representatives of the democratic transition.

At the same time, the priorities of representatives of that stage of the revolution were made clear by their disregard for the deteriorating standard of living of the majority of the people and by their adoption of liberal notions of change, promoted by Western development agents, which assume that the transition to the modern democratic state will take place as soon as the fundamental rights and freedoms of man are adhered to, the rule of law is enforced, and the groundwork laid for the free market. From their point of view, this will automatically unleash the country’s economic and human potential.³¹ Such a view completely disregards the economic structures inherited over decades of exploitation, lopsided development, and neoliberal reforms—legacies that are typically ignored in attempts to understand the dynamics of the revolutionary movement in the region, as Adam Hanieh explains.³²

This liberal outlook is reflected in the constitutional document, specifically in the confusing order of the basic transitional tasks it outlines,³³ which jumps from the first task of ‘working to achieve a just and comprehensive peace’ to the second task of ‘abolishing laws and statutes that restrict freedoms or discriminate between citizens on the basis of gender’. The prioritisation of women’s rights here can only be read as part of the liberal discourse of the West and donors; it does not arise from a genuine will to grant greater rights to women. It precedes the task of reforming rights and justice institutions, which would automatically lead to enactment of more just laws, or tasks viewed with more urgency by the general public, such as the deteriorating economic situation. Moreover, scant efforts were actually exerted to improve women’s political and legal conditions. Women remained underrepresented at the various levels of the transitional

government, and the personal status law, which discriminates against women, was not amended during the two years of civilian leadership.³⁴

In a related context, the narrow free market-based liberal vision for the transition can be observed in the way the Bill of Rights and Freedoms overlooked economic and social rights, which are elaborated in Article 14 of the constitutional document. While the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were reproduced in detail in this section, as commensurate with their imperilled status in the country, the document made no reference to the economic rights set forth in articles 22 or 25 of the declaration. The majority deprived of these rights is not a priority in the vision of change embraced by the civic elite, or even a public that merits addressing. This implicit disregard for the primacy of economic demands in the constitutional document was made explicit at the economic conference held in September 2020. The prime minister and members of his government, imported from UN organisations, found no remedy for the rapidly collapsing economy other than to go begging to development organisations, donors, and debt relief programmes—mechanisms typically conditional on severe structural reforms.³⁵ After the slogan of the resistance committees, ‘No to lifting subsidies’, was heard echoing in the halls during the conference, the government announced what it called ‘rationalizing commodity subsidies’.³⁶ This was welcomed by the international community, and António Guterres at the Paris conference declared, ‘I commend the government of Sudan for undertaking difficult economic reforms’.³⁷ It did not occur to ministers of the democratic transition to consider the practicality of demands to channel revenues from the army-owned Defence Industries System to the state treasury, for example, or to regulate gold exports, which are controlled by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF); it is estimated that \$390 million in gold is smuggled abroad annually.³⁸

The transitional government embarked on the austerity policies stipulated by these institutions. The Sudanese pound was floated, subsidies on wheat flour and fuel were lifted, subsidies on electricity tariffs were partially lifted, and the prices of goods and services increased exponentially in a brief period. All these reforms were instituted in the hope of receiving more funding from the international community, which was slow to deliver on many of its funding promises, likely given Sudan’s position at the bottom of its list of priorities. Until the coup of 25 October 2021, most of the promised funding had not come through, and after the coup, all forms of funding were suspended entirely pending the return to the democratic path.

It was the military partner in the transitional government that mounted the October 2021 coup, dissolving the government and cancelling the terms of the constitutional document that required partnership with civilians. This shifted the balance of revolutionary momentum from the civilian elite to the resistance committees. Riven by internal conflicts, the Professionals Association faded in importance, while the political parties took a back seat after coming under fierce attack by the military. In the early hours of the coup, the military leadership detained the prime minister and several of his ministers, members of political parties, and trade unionists, while also killing dozens of demonstrators within days. It was thus made obvious to all that the army and RSF leaderships had used the revolution as a Trojan Horse against Bashir—obvious, that is, to everyone except

civil society elites, who again returned to the table to negotiate with the military, their historical partners in the institutions of citizenship.

In the aftermath of the coup, the neighbourhood resistance committees took the lead, especially in the capital. The committees had become more tightly organised, forming high level horizontal and vertical coordinating bodies since their preparations for the demonstrations that followed the massacre of 3 June 2019. All the province's resistance committees gradually came under the umbrella of Khartoum Coordination Committees, which allowed them to communicate and synchronise actions even after the Internet was again cut off after the coup. Demonstrations followed, and three noes emerged in those early weeks: 'no negotiation, no partnership, no legitimacy', neither with nor for the military. The brief slogan encapsulated the revolutionaries' anti-coup stance and for long months served as the defining charter of the committees, dictating their actions and their response to appeals from other actors, especially in light of repeated attempts to drag them to the negotiating table with the military or to reduce the frequency of demonstrations, which were centrally and regionally planned on a weekly basis. The street was also highly disciplined in keeping to the protest schedule, even in the most violent moments of the coup.

In an attempt to absorb the anger of the street, and amid the continuous negotiations between civil forces and the military, Hamdok,³⁹ who had been ousted in the coup on 21 November 2021, was reinstated as prime minister. With this, the international community's condemnations of the coup d'état morphed into blessings, as successive congratulatory statements were issued by the UN mission to Sudan (UNITAMS),⁴⁰ the Troika and European Union,⁴¹ and the United States,⁴² hailing the reinstatement of the prime minister as a return to the constitutional order 'that paves the way for the democratic transition'⁴³. For the democratic international community, it seems the Sudanese people must accept the fact that a single actor possesses the power to suspend the constitutional order as he deems fit. 'Calling into question this particular solution... would be very dangerous for Sudan', as António Guterres said in a speech in which he appealed to 'common sense'.⁴⁴ This statement not only legitimised the coup against the constitutional order, but also the excessive violence meted out to the opposition to the coup.

Given the widening gap between the demands of the street and the ongoing political processes, the resistance committees began the task of translating their aspirations into concrete terms for political action towards a democratic transition. A call to write a charter⁴⁵ was first made by the resistance committees of Maerno, located in the far southeast of the country, followed by the resistance committees of Madani, located in the centre of the country, which issued the Revolutionary Charter for People's Power, ratified by several other states. The Khartoum Coordination Committees then issued the Charter for the Establishment of the People's Power.⁴⁶ The charters were finally unified in the Revolutionary Charter to Establish the People's Power (RCEPP),⁴⁷ which was officially released in February 2023.⁴⁸ Translating post-coup chants into detailed visions for a process of democratic transition, all these charters were formulated by small committees of delegates at various levels.

Not only did the RCEPP emphasise the need for the various military institutions to withdraw from politics altogether; it also provided a detailed analysis of the ways in which the instruments of citizenship were unequally distributed across the country. The preamble of the charter states:

The Sudanese political conflict cannot be understood absent an anatomy of the historical context of the formation of the Sudanese state in the era of colonialism (Turkish-Egyptian and Anglo-Egyptian), which, with the motive of looting and controlling local resources, engineered a new social fabric out of a group of culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse principalities and kingdoms along colonial lines, dismantling the core structure of societies and creating new geographical borders by which to distinguish these societies on ethnic, religious, and cultural grounds by making use of traditional and modern institutions. The postcolonial state in Sudan was and remains of a violent nature, based on policies of subjugation, assimilation, appropriation, and political, economic, and cultural subordination. The colonial structure of the modern Sudanese state is reflected in the operation of its institutions, the monopolistic nature of authority, the rentier economy, and inequitable relations of production, as well as the ongoing rotation of power between monopolistic elite regimes, which still constitutes an integral part of the structural pillars of the state. The perpetuation of traditional and modern elite institutions such as the army, civil service, communal administrations, various government institutions, and judicial systems in their postcolonial form is due to the lack of a national development project that meets the aspirations of the Sudanese people, as such a project contravenes the interests of local elites and foreign capital.

This relatively lengthy excerpt illustrates the difference between charters written by civil society elites to address themselves and charters arising from broad participatory processes in political society, in an attempt to accommodate its diversity and contain the mechanisms used to exclude its disparate groups. The charters also show how the few years of revolutionary ferment helped to disseminate sophisticated analyses of the nature of the country's crisis, which were previously the exclusive domain of the elite, found in books and in the corridors of high politics and culture. Such analyses entered the spaces of political society through its grassroots platforms, which adopted them in the participatory process of drafting the charters, guiding them through a series of ups and downs as drafts moved between the grassroots bases and the drafting committees via WhatsApp groups, internal meetings, and public events led by the committees.⁴⁹ These analyses were able to offer a vision of power structures as close as possible to direct representation. The governance structures set forth in the charter range from elected representatives at the level of administrative units, and representatives of local and state councils to the national legislature, which in turn democratically chooses the prime minister of the country as the highest authority.⁵⁰

The Declaration of Freedom and Change contains no vision for a comprehensive peace and a resolution to the problems of developmental disparities between social groups that questions the

existing division of wealth. In fact, it provides for their perpetuation with articles calling for ‘stopping the war by treating the roots of the Sudanese problem...and addressing the problem of land while preserving the historic hawakeer’.⁵¹ The hawakeer—traditional tribal land ownership rights—is another legacy that the colonial power used to place property ownership on tribal foundations, in order to tip the scales of power based on the degree of loyalty to the coloniser.⁵² In contrast, the RCEPP states, ‘The Transitional Legislative Council put in place agreed-upon procedures and solutions to the problems of land ownership, the hawakeer system, the tax and banking system, relations of production in the countryside, and the informal sector’. As part of this economic vision, the charter establishes the Commission for Dismantling Systems of Oppression and Dependence, whose most important task is to ‘fully retreat from structural adjustment programs to ensure a focus on development and social justice’.

While the membership of the resistance committees did not include all those who took part in revolutionary activities, they derived their legitimacy from the thousands of people who continued to respond to calls for demonstrations for more than a year, despite violent attacks by security forces. Even so, the committees naturally did not avoid fragmentation and at times a lack of coordination, and their institutional structure and accountability channels were weak due to the general novelty of the experience. As a result, the momentum and importance gained by the committees gave way to acute polarisation within their various bodies. Their horizontal and region-based nature also gave rise to a high degree of porosity and the divergence of interests within single committees, which in turn resulted a conflict between the advocates of what was known as the ‘soft landing’ (negotiation and partnership with military forces, to be led by the FFC) and the advocates of ‘radical change’ (opposition to any new partnership with the military, led by the Sudanese Communist Party). However, the general, precluded any direct mass loss of confidence in political parties, coupled with their weak influence at the grassroots level rallying around the position of the Communist Party.

Relatedly, the narrow horizon of the change demanded by civil society was evident in professional organs’ ambiguous stance on the post-coup events. The ongoing demonstrations and barricades managed to stop the coup from targeting trade unionists and professional organisations from the outset, which fostered a climate that allowed these unions and professional syndicates to stage a series of massive strikes demanding better wages amid the dire economic situation.⁵³ But the demands advanced by these bodies remained strictly sectoral, and their response to events that did not directly affect them was tepid. For example, when workers in the electricity sector announced a strike that cut off electricity to large parts of the country in September 2022, the barricades set up by resistance committees brought the city to a standstill and forced the authorities to respond to the strikers’ demands.⁵⁴ In contrast, workers in various sectors continued to ignore calls by the resistance committees to strike in rejection of the coup or when demonstrations were subject to severe violations like the use of live ammunition, which killed large numbers of people, for example, in the Omdurman massacre on 30 December 2021 or the massacre of 17 January 2022.

When the war erupted in Khartoum on 15 April 2023 between the Sudanese army and the rebel RSF, the differences between actors on the transitional landscape had reached a point that allowed for only limited bargaining. The resistance movement clung to the street with its charters, which were summarised in its uniform chant, ‘Power is the power of a people, revolution is the revolution of a people, the military to the barracks, and the Janjaweed [RSF] dissolved’. While the resistance committees rejected historical power-sharing arrangements between civil society and the military, civil society actors, led by the FFC—which monopolised the representation of civic forces by virtue of their institutional nature, which was legible to international and regional organisations—entered negotiations for the so-called framework agreement, which would engineer a new arrangement to share power and wealth with the military. The negotiations were headed up by UN envoy Volker Perthes who confided, ‘I am more optimistic, much more optimistic than I was a year ago’.⁵⁵

The War: Citizens and Subjects

The crux of the dispute between the RSF and the Sudanese army was the refusal of the commander of the former, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, to integrate the RSF into the army as proposed by the framework agreement. In addition to controlling wealth and weapons, the RSF, thanks to multimillion-dollar public relations campaigns,⁵⁶ has managed to attract savvy advisors who understand political rhetoric. Their discourse utilises the history of developmental injustice resulting from northern-riverine groups’ marginalisation of the rest of the country’s regions, especially the pastoral and nomadic groups in western Sudan, which since the colonial era have inhabited the geographic areas designated for ‘subjects’. Hemedti hails from these areas, which represent his social base and the source of a large number of his forces. His advisors come up with slogans such as ‘dismantling the 1956 state’⁵⁷ to diagnose the country’s crisis, in their view attributable to certain groups’ singular hold on power since independence in 1956 at the expense of the periphery. It is this same periphery, in Darfur, where the RSF committed atrocities under the command of the Sudanese army, and it is where the militia continues to engage in acts tantamount to genocide. Their recent attacks on the city of Geneina in the Darfur region are estimated to have killed 5,000 people in a matter of days.⁵⁸

On the other hand, although the Sudanese army has sustained terrible losses on the battlefield at the hands of the RSF, this has not stopped it from regaining its lost popularity among millions of residents of the centre of modern citizenship, who are experiencing the horrors of war for the first time. Even those who hesitated to support any of the parties in the early days of the conflict came over to the army’s side following the shock at RSF practices felt by residents of conflict zones in Khartoum and the western parts of the country. The RSF does not limit its attacks to military targets, but engages in all manner of violations against civilians, including looting, assassinations, arbitrary arrests, rape, and confirmed reports of taking female hostages for ransom in some cities of Darfur.⁵⁹ Ironically, the atrocities committed by the RSF are what first earned it

the trust of the army, which enlisted it to support its war against rebels outside the scope of its social base of ‘citizens’.

In addition to the populist mobilisation in support of the army, a good number of prominent intellectuals and academics from the right and left support the Sudanese army and the continuation of the war against the RSF, rejecting the anti-war discourse adopted by several resistance committees since the early hours of the conflict. The most prominent thinker who has fallen in behind the army is Mohammed Jalal Hashim, who has offered theoretical and moral rationales for the war to counter the influence of the revolutionary, anti-war discourse. Hashim is known historically for his adoption of cultural analytical approaches that centre concepts such as Afro-universalism and theories of the centre/periphery, which were adopted by some armed movements and attracted many revolutionaries, members of the resistance committees, and others after the fall of Bashir. For his part, Hashim focuses on history and theories of the modern nation-state, which he believes ‘...stands now, during this war, at a crossroads, between being and non-being’,⁶⁰ a discourse that can be read on multiple levels.

On the first level, the flaw in this discourse is found in the very frame of reference on which it is based—namely, the liberal frame of reference for modernity, which is the nation-state. Hashim writes that what is meant by this concept, according to philosophers and thinkers who have grappled with it, is:

the structural characteristics of the state established by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. These characteristics are the following: internationally recognized borders; the people as the source of authorities, even if they are confiscated from them by a non-patriotic system of government, even if it is colonialism (and, of course, before that treaty, the term ‘people’ had not acquired this meaning); independence; and finally, sovereignty, as the sum total of the people’s authorities delegated from the base to the political echelon. This is the structural sense of the ‘nation-state’.⁶¹

Firstly, the contradictions inherent in using the definition of the nation-state to describe the Sudanese reality are made evident in the fact that two of the four characteristics enumerated by the writer are lacking: the people as the source of authority and sovereignty as the sum total of people’s authorities delegated from the base to the political echelon. In the current coup situation, the people do not in any way constitute a source of authority or sovereignty. On the contrary, it is an illegitimate authority that the people have continued to reject at all levels, which in fact forced the authority to sit down to negotiate the framework agreement, as previously discussed. Moreover, the legitimacy of the modern Sudanese state in its current form has been the driver of all these rebellions and wars, starting with the war of the south that erupted before independence and ended with the secession of the south in 2011, and including the Darfur war, which still rages at this moment, and the so-called liberated areas in the Nubian Mountains that have escaped the control of the central state.⁶² As for the fallacies that transform characteristics from ‘structural’ properties

when they exist to ‘performative’ properties when they do not, Hashim does not explain how this fundamental change in the characteristic occurs.

A second level of contradictions inherent in the discourse of the modern nation-state is apparent in the ideological reference to Western frameworks of modernity, which are taken as scientific facts that we need only cut and paste into this specific context. Although Sudan does not meet many of the characteristics of this Westphalian state—the instability of borders, the constituent parts of the people or nation resulting from civil wars and secession, and the state’s loss of the monopoly on violence, manifested most clearly in militias—pathetic attempts to analyse the country within the pat frameworks of European modernity continue. A better alternative would be to critically dismantle these frameworks to enable us to understand the dysfunction as it exists on the ground. The problem with this discourse lies not only with the definition of the state at the political level, which is inapplicable to Sudan, but also that the concept of nationalism or nation is itself not devoid of ambiguity. Hashim argues later in the same piece:

We can say that given the Self-Determination Treaty of 1953 and the ensuing independence in January 1956 of a state called ‘Sudan’, independent and sovereign within its globally recognized geographical borders, necessarily resulted in the emergence of an entity called ‘the Sudanese people’. Thus, the structural conditions of nation statehood have been met with regard to this particular state and this particular people. All this was realised structurally the moment the birth of this state was proclaimed on 1 January 1956 and with the international recognition of it that followed.

The idea that the nation-state precedes the emergence of the people or the nation, as Hashim argues, and that any threat to the modern postcolonial state is an existential threat to the Sudanese people is a fallacy at best. Chatterjee⁶³ explains how nationalism is an ‘anthropological fact’ in the sense that it is a product of the spatial, temporal, and intellectual context of post-Enlightenment Europe. In other words, ‘Nationalist texts are “meaningful” only when read in terms of the rules of that larger framework of thought’.⁶⁴ The modern state in our postcolonial contexts has always devised its own paths to transcend internal contradictions, such as the dichotomy of ‘citizens’ and ‘subjects’ and the resulting disparities in economic development and access to social services, or, in short, to entering modernity as a capitalist system of production and way of life. In turn, the success of these experiments varies depending on the degree to which they assimilate their constituent elements based on an understanding of this reality.

Civil society elites argue that their support for the Sudanese army and for civilians taking up arms against the RSF is aimed first and foremost at preserving the modern state and its institutions. Hashim echoes this sentiment when he states that ‘I stand here not behind this army, but with the Sudanese people’. Meanwhile, he summarises this same army’s vision for engaging in the ongoing conflict as: ‘The *people* and the army can defeat the Janjaweed militias until they surrender or the last soldier is wiped out, or, short of that, until the *Sudanese people* are wiped out, down to the last

civilian citizen bearing arms'.⁶⁵ Hashim's logic here places the Janjaweed militia outside the bounds of the Sudanese people. Moreover, he sees no problem in supporting an army with this vision of how to solve a complex problem such as the RSF, which is made up of an ambitious tyrant with great wealth and a reserve of fighters driven by decades of poverty, marginalisation, and lack of options. In addition, Hemeti enjoys a broad social base among pastoral tribes who see him as a leader and their only hope of enjoying the attainments of the modern state, such as a comfortable lifestyle. Some fighters articulated this desire upon experiencing access to basic services for the first time when they stormed the homes of the citizens of Khartoum: 'The water's cold here, how can you ask us to leave?'⁶⁶ All of this is the product of the violence and exclusionary policies of the modern state itself, which Hashim defends.

It would be a mistake to assume that the Sudanese intelligentsia's defence of the modern nation-state or the concept of citizenship is the result of an intellectual failing, as demonstrated by previous years' experience of the revolution. The discourse of modern citizenship, in both its populist and theoretical sources, can be read easily as part of what Abdullah Bola⁶⁷ described as the national cultural identity that elite intellectuals continue to draw on to preserve their privileges. This identity has taken Arab-Islamic culture in its northern-riteration as an authoritative reference deployed against other cultural constituencies. This time, however, the task of the guardians of national identity was made more complicated by the fact that the RSF itself, as an ethnic group, is part of this same Arab-Islamic culture, although as nomadic, pastoralist tribes hailing from western Sudan, geographically they fall outside the boundaries of historical citizenship. The discourse of Muslim vs. Christian used in the war in the south, and the discourse of Arabs vs. non-Arabs from the Darfur war, has been replaced by these instrumental discourses about citizenship and the threat to the modern state.

Hence, social media is teeming with populist witticisms that ridicule the accent of RSF fighters or their lack of knowledge of the Arabic language, from which it may be concluded that they are foreigners. As Bola so aptly puts it: 'The best and most effective way to demean and minimize a person in a country where "high" Arabic is synonymous with clear expression and proper argumentation is to demonstrate his inability to perform it'. And this in a country with 500 cultural groups and 150 languages.⁶⁸ Calling Hemeti a 'herder' to highlight his ignorance or demean him in a country where more than forty per cent of the population works in agriculture and herding⁶⁹ makes clear the profound class bias embedded in this national imaginary, which esteems white-collar graduates of the University of Khartoum (formerly, Gordon College) and employees of international organisations, as illustrated by the hysterical popular celebration of Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok.

In contrast to this explicitly elitist position, 'no to war' is concise and tailored to the priorities of this stage. This is the official stance of the resistance committees that signed the RCEPP, articulated in its vision of this conflict as:

We understand that the conflict between the army and the Janjaweed is not a conflict over national issues as they claim, but rather a conflict within the political

and economic elite, who are dependent on regional powers and control the two military forces, as well as the political parties that support both factions, in order to achieve their interests. Accordingly, when we propose the tools to end the war, we proceed from the classification of both parties as enemies of the interests of our homeland and its people.⁷⁰

The anti-war position is a defence of a fundamental right to life that at the very moment is being denied to those outside of elite groups, who are being used as cannon fodder for the modern citizenship-based state that intellectuals cling to in their safe exile. Those who remain in areas under bombardment in Khartoum now are either displaced from other wars and do not have the luxury of the safe areas to which those of central, northern, and eastern origin have fled, or they cannot afford the costs of travel and living in other areas in the country or abroad.⁷¹ Those now under bombardment are the army's non-commissioned officers and infantry, who have historically been recruited from peripheral areas.

'No to war' was adopted by the resistance committees as a position calling for a return to the civic conditions for disagreement. They do not view the existence of the RSF as any more of a threat to the state than it was years ago, when they translated this into their charters and chants that the army met with bullets. 'No to war' is simply a position that asserts that 'the life of the land, the life of the nation, and the life of the state lay in the safety of its inhabitants'.⁷²

'No to war' is a position based on trust in the nation, not as defined in the coloniser's agreements, but as a group of people who have lived in this spot for thousands of years and understand that they have a single destiny governed by spatial proximity and shared knowledge and culture accrued over time. This enabled them to find formulas for coexistence. They made alliances and formed socio-political units in the form of kingdoms and sultanates that lasted for centuries, and they joined one of the greatest revolutions in the Global South against the weaponry of the Turkish-Egyptian coloniser.

Conclusion

The contradictions of the postcolonial state in Sudan have been most clearly manifested in the critical juncture that led to the series of uprisings in the country starting in 2018. The historical monopoly exercised by the alliance of the military elite and civil society, which have alternately led the country without bringing any genuine change in the distribution of economic, political, and social rights of citizenship inherited from colonial structures, has been interrogated in many ways. It began with peaceful expression, through which political society tried to formulate a progressive agenda for change that would open up spaces for the exercise of citizenship and rights by broader social constituencies. It has now reached this violent moment of reactionary armed expression, practiced by a rural militia that claims just demands for citizenship for the sake of a vision that is no less exclusionary and transgressive of the rule of law and the rights of the other, according to its own frames of references for the citizenship it is trying to articulate.

In conclusion, the responsibility for the country's slide into this bloody moment lies with the military-civilian elite alliance, which clings tightly to its historical privileges and has wholly disregarded and circumvented the demands of the revolution and the voice of the masses. Most of these masses come from cities involved in conduits of global exchange, and they have become more aware of their social positions through their experience with the practical exercise of citizenship in the five years of the movement. This means that emerging from the current crisis starts with acknowledging this responsibility and sitting down to negotiate new, more inclusive conditions for citizenship for this imagined community of the Sudanese people.

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