The Third Sudanese Revolution Reinstates Women from all Walks of Life onto the Map of Sudanese Public Life

Interview with Azza Ahmed A. Aziz by Khadidja Medani

A cry reflecting the hope for the promise of a voice for Sudanese women rather than the tangible social realities of the majority of them. ©Ali Jafar
Where do women stand in the midst of the large number of Sudanese who participated in the revolution and what motivated their emergence at this juncture?

One of the prominent characteristics of this revolution is that it animated by youth. One might venture to ask why the Sudanese were so patient and how they endured 30 years of tyranny under a ruthless regime. Why had these efforts, unlike previous ones, culminated in the ousting of Bashir? The response might lie in the fact that the major protagonists had finally come of age. The courage of youth in their early teens to their mid twenties could well have been a catalyst for the accumulative involvement of larger swathes of the Sudanese population.

It seemed that shared grievances resonated shrilly with the youth, and they elected to enflame the battle. By doing so they seemed to encourage diverse others to join the ranks of revolt. It was noteworthy that young people maintained a sustained presence that imbued the revolts with a youthful tinge embodied in the widespread cries they expounded: *Nahn al jeel al ma bitghashi* (we are the generation that cannot be duped) and *nihn al jeel al rakib ras, ma bihkumna rais ragas* (we are the stubborn generation, we will not be ruled by a dancing president - an allusion to Bashir’s penchant for dancing during official ceremonies in defiance to formal protocol and presidential decorum).

In Khartoum the proportion of males to females participating in regular demonstrations was to all intents and purposes quite equitable; yet it is perhaps the extre-
mely unexpected presence of young women from all walks of life that made for a hyperbolic depiction of women as being at the forefront. This perception symbolizes the nature of the revolution and the transformations it has wrought on the urban landscapes of Sudan and specifically Khartoum.

The fact that women feature so strongly in this revolution is not tied to actual numbers. It is more apt to link it with the fact that during an extensive era of Islamist rule women bore the brunt of the wrath of the state. On the one hand men were shamed through the indignities that their women folk endured (rapes in Darfur, public order laws that ensured that women were subject to the arbitrary gaze of the state and its overzealous officials and punished for petty issues such as donning clothing deemed unsuitable or wearing trousers); and on the other, only women swearing allegiance to the regime were afforded jobs placing them in positions of power. Even then such efforts were tokenistic and perfunctory, and hence did not permit women to wield a significant say in decision-making processes undertaken in government. Even those women who held seats in parliament were either complicit with the policies of the regime: motivated by personal gain or succumbing to pressure and therefore constrained and unable to effectively address the multiple everyday issues that different women in Sudanese society confront. Women hailing from diverse classes and ethnicities in Sudan held grievances against the modalities of governance adopted by the state. For instance middle class women - who were perhaps in a more advantageous structural position to engage with official political channels - still remained underrepresented in government (with 25 percent of the seats in parliament allocated to a separate women’s party list in 2008). Therefore women did not have the same visibility within civil society or political parties as men. They are not adequately represented in the judiciary. They are not highly visible in the terms set out by peace agreements that have been convened (Naivasha pertaining to peace with South Sudan and Doha pertaining to Darfur). Women working in the public sector had to toe the line and not agitate any vocal criticism of government policy. Anything to the contrary, could mean being threateningly approached by the security apparatus and even having reports written against individuals who were in due course labelled subversive. This led to some being kept down in terms of job promotions, while those loyal to the regime (in keeping with the terms stipulated by “total institutions”) got promoted irrespective of their technical achievements.

As regards the position of women hailing from diverse less privileged socio-economic statuses - with a disproportionate number originating from underdeveloped regions of Sudan - they generally contended with precarious living standards. The contribution of women working on the small scale of the political economy: rural female farmers,

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1. For example the well publicised case of Lubna sentenced to 40 lashes for wearing trousers in public, she fought her battle in court in 2009.
2. This policy was known as _tamkin_: entrenchment and empowerment of loyal partisans.
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women in urban centres working as tea sellers (subjected to harassment within the public space at the hands of the authorities) women as heads of households during protracted periods of conflict, and the fate of displaced women remained largely ignored by the state. Women prisoners’ rights were systematically violated (advocated through the march of 10th February). Eventually, women from conflict zones would increasingly invoke their right to live in peace and their need to offer adequate protection and shelter to their children. It became unacceptable that the nature of their contributions to the patterns of lives that exist in Sudan at large had yet to be exposed. All these constellations would ignite the spark that saw dispossessed women join the demonstrations in different parts of Sudan.

Paradoxically, the failures of the state brought together previously divergent population groups and classes who would transform Khartoum into a microcosm of a diverse Sudan making it acrucible for calls for freedom. Ultimately, urban realities and challenges lead to the strengthening of civil society groups working to elevate the position of women. Beneath the surface, issues pertaining to women festered awaiting the opportune moment to erupt. The scarcity of bread and lack of currency that characterized the year preceding the popular outcry of December 2018 represent the last straw that propelled so many women to join the revolutionary ranks alongside their male counterparts.

Why did the presence of women elicit such strong commentary and what imagery anchored the presence of women in the streets?

The over spilling of resentments and a sense of injustice, articulated by women as doubled for them, in a society that still tends to facilitate male lives, make it easier to understand the claim that the revolution taking place is a “girls’ revolution”. This is based on sheer need, which is reinforced by the chant of young females: “my grandmother was a kandaka” (Nubian queen perceived to have wielded authority). These salient slogans are visible on Khartoum’s urban landscape since they are painted on wall murals. One such mural places a cartoon of a young woman with her two fingers raised in the sign of victory at its centre, the illustration is framed from right to left following the logic of Arabic script: “this revolution is a revolution of girls” and on the other by the words “Hey girls be the unshakable foundation”. This depiction is placed against the backdrop of the old Sudanese flag (used prior to the 1969 military coup of Gaafar Nimeiry) with its green, yellow and blue tri-colour design evoking the physical landscape of Sudan: forest, desert and the Niles and with the words freedom peace and justice and the now famous hashtag Tasgut Bas (Fall that is all) etched onto it.

On another mural, one sees an Amazonian looking woman brandishing a sword and wearing a helmet that resembles one easily associated with Thor. In this instance the words are transcribed in English
“our history return back with Kandaka”. Yet another mural represents a painting of a woman next to the words “my grandmother is a Kandaka”: we need freedom. The fact that the Arabic text is written in the present obliterates the subjunctive in this declaration. This certainty creates an uninterrupted poignant thread of aspiration between the past and the present.

This strong symbolism connected to higher ideals of justice and the quest for a decent life embroiled women of all ages, ethnicities in joining the demonstrations all over Khartoum. It created a panoply of professional women, women at home, with even little girls at times permitted to join. Students would go out of the demonstrations, women working in the streets as tea sellers, women working in the local markets. Stay at home women would cook food and provide cold beverages for the revolutionaries (thuwwâr) whom they sometimes went as far as harbouring within their homes. This occurred in instances when demonstrators were being pursued by the security forces within the different neighbourhoods of Khartoum. Women would emerge from their homes and implore security agents to liberate their sons.

Women at home who were in their 60s joined the ranks of resistance by adopting a role akin to that of mythical “tricksters” playing tricks and disobeying the rules. Their generational positions might well have led to facile assumptions, that they would be conservative in their approach to resisting authority however that was not the case. A young lady described how she
and her friends were caught in the cross fire of bullets and tear gas in the area of Burri, Khartoum. She explained that while evading security agents they ran into the home of three women. Two were well in their 60s. The grandmother was in her 90s and unable to move, it was a small cramped house and she was lying on a wooden Sudanese bed (angaraib) in the courtyard her face was covered in Neem (Azadirachta indica) leaves to alleviate the effects of lacrimogenic gas. The women allowed the younger women in and gave them tobes (pl.) (sing. tobe: a swathe of cloth made up of four and a half metres of fabric and one hundred and twenty inches wide that is worn over dresses and loosely covers the head and the body) and slippers and told them to pretend they were members of the extended family and not guests when the security forces arrived. Such acts constituted everyday forms of resistance and expanded the breadth of the revolution.

The mother of the young doctor (Dr Babiker Abdel Hamid) assassinated in Burri while he was trying to save lives, enjoined the revolutionaries to win the battle on behalf of her fallen son, and her message was echoed by many other middle aged mothers. These sentiments were contained in the chant (thaur ahrar hankamil al mushwar: Free revolutionaries we continue on our path). Her message inspired one of the logos of the revolution: “Mother do not cry, I am going out” and was the theme of the march of 21st March 2019, the walk for justice: mothers of the fallen and those detained.

During the escalating stages of the revolution, women were a major component of the committees of resistance that had been set up within different neighbourhoods of the capital. At nightfall, they would let out ululations heralding the beginning of scheduled marches, distribute tracts within the area, set up barricades, care for people who were injured and prepare the recipe of yeast mixed with water- filling up bottles of it and distributing it- that relieved the noxious symptoms wrought by the lacrimogenic gas used by security forces. Declaring themselves kandakas (warrior queens), they would take the lead encouraging full participation by those residing within the neighbourhoods they belonged to.

Given that social media has played a big role in giving visibility to women during the revolution, do its portrayals convey the realities of their everyday engagements in this process?

In April 2019 the image of Alaa Salah a 22 year old architecture student at the University of Sudan captured the public imagination by going viral on social media. It is a site of ambivalence in relation to the messages it conveys about the position of women in the Sudanese revolution; for it is indeed an uplifting snapshot that carries within it an untold story. In reality, this shot was captured by another female, Lana Haroun, of the same generation and it succeeded in immortalising what could well have been an evanescent moment; instead it became the representation that spiralled a young woman into a stardom that she had neither asked for nor counted on. Through this single image she was framed as the Kandaka (queen) of the Sudanese revolu-
tion. The picture became widely publicised in multiple international media outlets but this unfortunately came at a price since Alaa became the victim of the contemporary phenomenon of trolling that constitutes one of the major pitfalls of the fast paced world of cyberspace.

The subjective and individual aspects of this story need to be integrated into wider issues surrounding representations of the participation of women in the current ongoing revolution. The image can be analysed productively to problematise the notion that there is a single profile of the Sudanese woman in the revolution. The representation works at two levels: the international and the local and conveys vastly different significations in these different contexts which do not converse with each other.

Reverberations Outside Sudan

Despite negative ramifications for the individual in question, outside Sudan the image is politically expedient to the goals of the revolution since it has highlighted the cause that had remained virtually unarticulated within the global media landscape since the revolt began on the 19th December 2018. Yet it is equally detrimental since it reifies the image of women who are distant in the global south and by extension portrays a static representation of a remote culture without sufficient expansion on catchy captions.

It succeeds in exotising Sudanese women through the prism of a single face while it erases the presence of many others. Furthermore, the image nurtures a culture of commodification that as well as reinforcing the edification of personality cults dangerously camouflages the complexity of the battle ahead in the realization of freedom, democratization and the weeding out of a system of mis-governance that persisted for nearly thirty years. The image contributes to the edification of a “Spectator Society” holding a depoliticised and romantic vision of emancipation (contained in portrayals of the Lady Libertys and the Mariannes of the world) that does not address the harsh realities of Realpolitik. It equally forms part of the processes that ensure that images and slogans from afar render harsh political realities within the Global North opaque. In this manner larger than life pictures conveniently - for some within the official corridors of political power - defer the processes that make it incumbent to confront and deal with political challenges or at the very least they attenuate them by subsuming them under the aura of iconography.

Such an iconic image equally distances the claims of the Sudanese people, from a global public, by placing them within the realm of a curated museum and framing them as objects fit to be observed but not tampered with. Clearly this creates a disjuncture related to how a global public engages with the problems of other nations. This works through attempts to obscure the fact that the political structures of various nation states are intrinsic to manoeuvrings where geo-political interests and stakes are prevalent and where the distance to be maintained between different political entities is gauged very carefully.
A Sudanese Queen Captures the Local Scene

Yet, Alaa’s sartorial choice resonates on the national level and gives Sudanese women a place which they once had within Sudanese society as pioneers. It goes back to the foundation of the women’s movement during the second condominium colonial era whereby we see images of young Sudanese women fighting for a place while donning their white tobes even before Sudan gained independence in 1956. It moves through the tides of time to evoke the establishment of the Sudanese women’s union in 1952, to echo the achievement of Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, the first female parliamentarian in Africa in 1965. It invokes the possibilities open to other women. It gives voice to the efforts of women who were in the forefront in the fight for independence, fought for the right to education, political participation while preserving an image of female decency by testifying that women could wear the tobe and still be, in dynamic fashion, active participants within the public sector which was hence not exclusively the monopoly of men.

Notwithstanding, such women continued to be the custodians of men’s honour by preserving the norms of decency expected by society. Interestingly, the image of the white tobe anchors the image of the decent Sudanese woman who is free born. Other women who preceded this type of archetypal woman on the arena (serving in bars, nurses, singers) were those who were not expected to cover their hair due to their servile origins. While they were disparaged in public discourse within the urban centres of Sudan.
they were, paradoxically, simultaneously afforded a level of freedom and contact with men and the public space that were refused to their other female counterparts.

Therefore the image contains a subtext of ethnic allegiances and ultimately represents the dominant image of the Northern Sudanese woman. It evokes the Mihara bint Abbouds (a female poet from the Shayquiya ethnic group of Northern Sudan who encouraged her male kin to fight against the Ottoman occupation of Sudan at a time when poetry and song were stigmatised in Sudanese culture - especially for females - and who became a symbol of Sudanese nationalism and pride); and Kandakas: Nubian queens. It underscores how they navigate the cultural worlds of ancient Nubia and the penetration of Arab culture into Sudan and how they perform their hybridity to create a distinct Northern Sudanese woman’s archetypal culture which remains dominant vis-à-vis women’s cultures within other regions of Sudan. For example, an alternative nomenclature originating in Darfur contained in the title Hakamat (pl. sing. Hakama) (women poets who influence social and political outcomes by inciting men into war or peace through using sung lyrics and invoking oral histories) could have been used to represent the archetype of the strong Sudanese woman. In Khartoum this was not to be the case and the honorific title of the Kandaka takes the day and becomes the metonym for the manifestations and multiple histories exhibiting the strength of Sudanese females.

This image of the Kandaka builds a bridge between an older generation and a young one. This sartorial garb comes to represent a Sudanese history and an authentic excavation of a past that young women did not have access to under the rule of the National Congress Party. This was due to its imposition of even stricter control of female bodies through the rule of law and not as mere social norms which could and would evolve over time. For some, this control was internalized to the point of becoming part of women’s habitus all over the country. This young generation venerated this image of their Sudanese grandmothers: able to walk the tightrope of maintaining the idealised traditional authentic in tandem with being modern and potentially part of the professional working classes. Nonetheless, it creates an image—albeit unintentionally—which is performative and vindicates a nostalgia for a past that is idealized since it serves as the antonym to a lived present whereby violations against women and encroachment on their autonomy are the order of the day.

Women of Alaa’s generation would typically not don this form of clothing in their quotidian lives—given that she is 22 and a student, and that this attire is officially reserved for more mature women within the civil service—but by doing so, in the instance of the unfolding revolution, she succeeds in harnessing dreams and imaginings that hark back to a time that precedes the era of the postcolonial when women were making headway in finding their place within the public arenas of Sudan, to moments that are ephemeral and dreamy whereby the majesty and strength of the Sudanese queens of yore (Kandakas) boosts the morale of the girls on the site of the present day sit-in.
We need to go back through the revolution’s time line to realize that the image could dangerously obscure its fluid and multifarious process where females of different ages but predominantly young women are out in the streets exposed to real bullets (security and shadow militias) throwing back tear gas canisters directed towards the crowds by the security forces in its multiple refractions (NISS, student security, economic security popular security). Many young women have fought against and resisted the reticence of their families to allow them to participate in risky demonstrations.

Some women express their disdain of being portrayed as queens: they reject this need to appear lofty and powerful since they embrace a more grass roots vision of their position within society which they wish to translate into those they desire to occupy within the revolution. Many would say that they were just normal women and that the persistence in framing them as queens would reproduce nefarious power dynamics and that it bears classist connotations that stand in sharp contradiction with the ethos of the revolution. Indeed, these elements could impede its ideal progression and the realization of its objectives of delivering freedom, peace and justice. This introduces the risk that the revolt might instead proceed in a manner that would lead to further fragmentation of Sudanese Society which the Islamist ideological programme had already consolidated quite thoroughly.

How did the Ultimate March of the 6th of April create a physical and symbolic space (the sit-in space) for the political will of a diverse Sudanese population? How was this space equally animated by the presence of women?

On the 6th of April- the anniversary of the 2nd revolution that brought short lived democratic rule to Sudan in 1985- the Sudanese professional association had set the objective of attaining the number of a million demonstrators to walk in the direction of the Armed Forces Headquarters. What arose was entirely unexpected, people showed up to heed this call in unprecedented numbers and when they finally arrived it seemed that even they were overtaken with surprise and euphoria.

These events contributed to creating a physical space when demonstrators refused to evacuate the perimeter of the Army headquarters: the space grew and became the terrain of waiting (midan al itisam) that continues to exist until the present.

This was a space that could be classified as a heterotopia juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible since it hosted different contradictory social manifestations: stands where orators delivered political speeches were located alongside ones where youth were dancing to hip-hop music (identified as nas al radim, people who bulldozer you through their dance moves). In equal measure the midan (sit-in space) also represented a carnivalesque space where there was order to seeming chaos. This was a place of waiting but waiting in motion
given that the process of negating the structure of the sovereign council had reached an impasse. In the midan, people were creating a life that would see them through this obstacle.

Thus the sit-in area was the site of political and social claims. These had progressed through the marches of the past four months and were crystallized on the site of the sit-in. Therein, people of all genders would hail (“either a civilian power structure or we implant ourselves here eternally”; ya sulta madaniya ya saba abadiya). Women were intrinsically part and parcel of both austere and playful transformative processes taking place within Sudanese society.

Some Political Components

On the 29th of April a march was organized starting from 4pm at the roundabout in proximity to the neighbourhood of Burri where youth of both genders had been extremely active in the demonstrations that led up to the events of 6th April. This march was aimed at demanding 50% representation for women in all the sectors of public life. It culminated in arrival on the big stage that had been mounted in the centre of the sit-in arena. Alongside presenting this claim women, in this instance, expressed their role in making the demonstrations successful and they presented the needs of vulnerable women within society i.e. individuals having special needs or with disabilities.

On one of the stands representing the Union of Women from the peripheries/margins the women on the panel expressed that due to the achievements of the revolution they were, at present, in a position to move out into the light and overcome their previous clandestine position where they were obligated to identify themselves as associations coming together to defend the rights of miserable women (kadihat). In the past they could not remotely utter the term marginal since the state considered it an accusation directly referring to the deliberate neglect of specific regions and population groups within Sudan. If these women, working in Khartoum had dared to use this term, in the recent past, they would have seen their efforts curtailed by the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) which was closely connected to the national intelligence services.

Novel Social Dynamics

This space provides the possibility of a new reading of gender relationships between young people. Such novelties are, for example, contained in the popular chant: hatasgut wa hanaris hanaris Kandaka (male chorus: it is going to fall, and we will get married we will marry a Kandaka), and the female chorus responding: hatasgut wa hanaris hanaris Shafata (it will fall and we will get married, we will marry Shafata: street wise cool young men. The anthem, at the instigation of young women, gradually changed to: hatasgut wa hanaris, hanaris Jayashi (army man) to which the young men would respond shalabona al jayasha (the army men have stolen our girls; In the Arabic, the first word is part of street slang signifying to break up a serious relationship by becoming the newer object of romantic interest).
In the past, a Sudanese musical genre known as girl’s songs (aghani banat) would be sung to the accompaniment of the drum (daluka: a leather bound drum made of baked mud heated over fire before each usage to create the specific soft thudding sound it produces). Such lyrics expressed the dreams and concerns of women in the traditional homes of Omdurman. These songs became part of Khartoum’s urban music culture used in weddings and during bridal dances. Formerly, the prince charming was usually embodied in the figures of professional men who could offer wives access to middle class statuses and offer them creature comforts. It was unbecoming to aspire to marry “rude boys” who were street wise and shrouded by a dangerous bad boy aura. In the space of the sit-in (midan) a veritable shift was taking place whereby young women were divested of the coy demeanour of the modest doe eyed female since they were loudly proclaiming their desires, and furthermore electing the profiles of men who would not have been serious contenders in the past. The revolution was shaping new understandings of the relationships one could aspire to construct.