

Mobilization and Resistance in Sudan's Uprising

From neighbourhood committees to zanig queens

BY MAGDI EL GIZOULI



Young men play video games in the Khartoum suburb of Kalakla.

When confronted with the question of succession, Sudan's former president Omar al-Bashir would often quote the transcendent Quranic pronouncement on sovereignty:

O Allah! Owner of Sovereignty!

Thou givest sovereignty unto whom Thou wilt, and Thou withdrawest sovereignty from whom Thou wilt.

Thou exaltest whom Thou wilt and Thou abasest whom Thou wilt.

In Thy hand is the good! Thou art Able to do all things.

On 11 April 2019, leaders of the military, security and militia formations he relied upon to maintain his rule overthrew him in a palace coup after months of mass protests and civil unrest across the country. Witness to his abasement were thousands of people who amassed around the army headquarters in Khartoum to demand his ouster. Sudan's season of revolt had claimed its highest prize.

Organizing revolution

The men and women who played the central role in the relocation of Bashir from his palaces on the banks of the Blue Nile, to Kobar prison in Khartoum North, were brought together through a number of different organizational forms. Some, like the now famed Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) and the umbrella Forces of Freedom of Change (FFC), were a reworking of a longstanding tradition of associations, political alliances and civil society initiatives that stubbornly survived thirty years of suppression under Bashir's rule.

Of all these formations, the Resistance or Neighbourhood Committee, which gained major significance in Khartoum during the popular protests of 2018-19, is arguably the most novel and distinctive of these structures. It combines the emancipatory potential of a popular movement with a radically democratic structure rare in a political field dominated by ad hoc bodies with limited representative credentials.

Neighbourhood committees were born out of the necessity for protestors to organize in their daily confrontations with the security apparatus during the peak of the protest movement in early 2019. From this basis, they evolved into a novel form of political authority challenging and often displacing the micro-organs of state power. The latter included the Bashir-era Popular Committees—the basic level of government in Sudan, which combined retired army officers, merchants, land brokers, the mosque imam and the in-service security eye.

The Popular Committees and their petty patriarchs penetrated the everyday life of citizens. They issued residence, death and poverty certificates, monitored moral and political conduct. Their judgements even determined which women were deemed sexually promiscuous and socially outcaste, and which were deserving single mothers eligible for welfare benefits. The Committees also had the authority to dispense common resources—the neighbourhood square or football field, or the local clinic or dispensary unit—to investors, which often involved cycles of kickbacks and speculation. Politically, they functioned as the long arm of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and were responsible for electoral mobilization and the micromanagement of patronage networks.

The generational and social confrontation between the Bashir-era Popular Committees of petty patriarchs and the Resistance Committee of angry rebellious youth epitomises one of the central divisions that has emerged during Sudan's season of revolt.

Rehearsing resistance

The first Resistance Committees were founded more than six years ago, during the September 2013 protests in Khartoum. These were originally just organizational cells dedicated to mobilization for protest. They were dominated by students or young graduate political party cadres from the Communist and the opposition Congress Party, which were attempting to fill the political void resulting from the shipwreck of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

The September 2013 protests were a popular response to the government's decision to reduce wheat and fuel subsidies—a consequence of Sudan's post-secession financial crisis.

A young crop of political operators who had come of age under Bashir, but whose evolution was stunted in sclerotic political parties where leadership was confined to their elders, escaped to alternative networks such as ChangeNow and *Girifna* (We Are Fed Up) inspired by the 2011 Egyptian revolution.

Their organizational activities in September 2013 landed many of these activists in detention, often for months on end, inadvertently tying them to a career of political struggle. However, participation in the 2013 committees was limited and mostly restricted to university students and their acquaintances, who had a shared experience of campus politics. Communication was poor and the committees lacked cohesion or internal structure.

By 2018 secure WhatsApp groups provided political operators, activists and engaged citizens with a technology, and space, of resistance that could not be cordoned off, or otherwise regulated, by the security apparatus.¹ The miniature notes of the Sudanese underground—scribbled on tightly folded cigarette papers ready to be swallowed swiftly on the author's apprehension—became museum items.

The September 2013 protests had been, in many respects, a rehearsal for the December 2018 showdown. Sudan's post-oil financial crisis had spawned a rather haphazard policy of rabid austerity. The banking system fell into a state of near collapse, with queues at Khartoum's ATMs and restrictions on the amount of cash those with bank accounts (and savings to put in them) could withdraw. Monetary policy failed to address the precipitous depreciation of the Sudanese pound and consequentially foreign currencies became

a commodity in themselves. A parallel foreign exchange market ballooned to surpass the formal banking system in volume and turnover.

President Bashir himself preferred to avoid the cash-stripped banking system. When asked in court to explain why he did not deliver the millions of dollars found in his residence to the Bank of Sudan, he replied that the bank's procedures were simply too cumbersome and would oblige him to disclose the source of the money. He said he received 25 million US dollars as a gift from Saudi Arabia's crown prince Mohamed bin Salman (MBS) outside the state budget. Instead of involving the bank, Bashir—as most Sudanese citizens would do—was intelligent enough not to part with money at a loss and opted for the black-market exchange rate rather than the meagre official one. 'I called on Tariq', he said. The surprised judge asked and who is Tariq? The president behind bars answered: 'Tariq... he is married to a relative of mine'.² The man in question is Tariq Sir al-Khatim, manager of Seen Wheat Mills, a company with alleged ties to the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS). It has a major share in Sudan's highly profitable wheat import market and Tarik would have had sufficient sums of cash at his disposal to exchange the presidential dollars.

In these straightened economic times, local governments had no other option but to squeeze the population for financial resource wherever it could be found. This involved rule by sheer force in an economy where the dominant proportion of exchange took place beyond the reach of the formal financial system and beyond the ability of the state to tax its citizens. In this context, the government's attempt to reduce bread and fuel subsidies ignited a broad wave of protests, this time right across Sudan's urban landscape.

As protesters faced the wrath of the security apparatus in their own neighbourhoods, better organization became a necessity. This forced the reinvention of the Resistance Committee, which had evolved in to a neighbourhood manoeuvre and logistics unit responsible for planning, execution and supplies of protests but with a radically different composition and remit than its 2013 version.

The Republic of Kalakla

Kalakla is a sprawling sequence of densely populated neighbourhoods in the south of Khartoum, populated by lower-middle and working class people. It is a place abuzz with hustlers—not unlike Bashir and his in-law Tariq, but in Kalakla's case the sums involved are rather smaller. In Kalakla, the drama of Sudan's urban malaise is played out in the daily confrontations between the state and its citizens.

The official youth (15 to 24) unemployment rate in Sudan is estimated by the World Bank to be 27 per cent.³ Kalakla has its share of the young unemployed, with an overrepresentation of university graduates, chronic students and school dropouts. Many are engaged in the so-called informal economy as peddlers, hustlers, petty traders, brokers (of sorts), fixers and handymen. All are enmeshed in social and economic networks that are built on trust and the exchange of services and benefits.

In order to appropriate a share of the income generated in this sector, the state resorted to violence, unleashing the police in regular cycles of expropriation, through the infamous *kasha* or surprise police raid. The *kasha* was the local authorities' method of taxing the informal sector. The police carried out summary arrests of market peddlers and labourers with the objective of extracting bribes and fines in exchange for freedom for another day.

The Public Order Police, originally mandated to guard public morality, were deployed with the incentive of acquiring a portion of the fines it collected outside and inside court. Their favoured legal alibi was failure to produce a commercial permit and the ubiquitous accusation of trespassing moral and behavioural borders. A memorable court case in Kalakla immortalised in urban mythology involved a romantic pair who were arrested posing for a selfie. The judge, sweat-drenched in the busy court, obviously annoyed asked: 'Aha, and these two? What did they do?' The policeman, with no credible case at hand responded: 'he had a hard-on your honour!'

Kalakla is also a place where criminality is in part a coping mechanism. In response to police violence, petty criminals coalesced into neighbourhood gangs. These rogue elements are vilified in the parlance

of Khartoum's middle and upper classes with the title 'niggers'. While this could be interpreted as a transplantation of the American term, once it is employed in the Sudanese context it seems to echo the colonial epithet 'detribalised negroes' used to refer to emancipated slaves, targets of the 1905 Vagabonds Act. This Act, ancestor of Bashir's 1998 Public Order Law, assumed that freed slaves would either be criminals or prostitutes. It accordingly made provisions for punishments that included arrests and lashing, or even returning slaves to their ex-masters if they would take them back.

In contemporary parlance the handle 'niggers' invokes an undisguised racialisation of social outcasts—excrements of the social system to be disposed of at will. These were the occupants of Columbia—the name given to an area of the protestors' sit-in outside the military headquarters—excommunicated by the SPA and the FFC and dumped in the Nile tied to stones by the security forces and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) after the camp was violently broken up in the early hours of 3 June 2019.

Kalakla's 'niggers' operate in a moral economy predicated on a measure of redistribution and solidarity, and hence their coordinated efforts to shield their class compatriots from police violence. In one instance, a band of youth shuttered their favourite *a'rāgi* (date liquor) manufacturer—colloquially known as 'the gas-station'—in their watching club for weeks to protect her from police raids. They attached a sign to the door that said: *Closed for repairs*.

The watching club is the major entertainment hub for the Kalakla underclass. Generally, it consists of a walled courtyard where young men and some women assemble at the end of the working day to watch Bollywood movies, smoke shisha, chat and drink through the night. It is a routine target of the Public Order Police. It is also a place for the romance of the poor and a site where an urban sub-culture that includes particular styles of dress, music and dance flourishes and evolves.

Echoing their favourite Bollywood stars, Kalakla's heroes have nicknames like Shahrukh (Khan) and Amitabh (Batchchan) and are celebrated *zanig* dancers. This bootleg musical genre, pioneered by the King Ayman al-Rubo, is a fusion of West African beats and Egyptian *mahrajanat* style, with frequent accelerations and deceleration and techno-style repetition. *Zanig* queens sing about 'antibaby pills' and the agency of 'MILFs' and introduce themselves with maxims like: 'If you follow the sugar mummies you'll end up driving six cars, and if you follow the little buds you'll waste your money in restaurants'.

Kalakla's neighbourhood committee was born out of the solidarity that developed between these disparate elements in their confrontation with the state apparatus. Unlike the situation in 2013, communication was instantaneous and efficient thanks to WhatsApp (particularly the ability to form groups). While no leadership structure as such emerged, unemployed graduates with some experience in campus politics, but now pushed down the social ladder, provided the elemental political voices and acted as trusted guardians to a younger crowd. Social outcasts were often rehabilitated as local heroes who stood their ground against the police, encouraging a spirit of hyper-masculine sacrifice.

Revolutionary discontent

The neighbourhood committee proved a wildly successful organizational form and was soon reproduced across the country. Even Riyadh, an upscale neighbourhood of Khartoum, prides itself on having a resistance committee. Yet the Riyadh dynamic is quite different from the Kalakla committee. While Kalakla is hungry for work, Riyadh's agitators are motivated by the depreciation of their middle-class purchasing power.

The Riyadh committee is solid SPA-material. It was formed through a twitter outreach effort and includes many cosmopolitan upper-class university graduates, Chevening alumni with degrees from places like SOAS and LSE. It is in some sense already a proto-NGO with offices for communication and funding, and boasts a minister or two in the transitional government.

The events after the deposition of Bashir in April 2019 forced the committees into new terrain beyond mobilization and demonstrations. They began to develop a political platform of their own, independent of the SPA and the FFC and often critical of their positions. Two trends emerged: First, maximalists who

remained faithful to the letter of the SPA's original January 2019 declaration, demanding the surrender of power to a wholly civilian transitional government with no role for the army and the security apparatus. Second, compromisers willing to embrace a tactical arrangement with Bashir's security committee, rebranded the Transitional Military Council (TMC).

The younger and disenfranchised from places like Kalakla were overrepresented in the maximalist block. The compromisers were more likely to be found in Riyadh's upmarket coffee shops and restaurants. Stakes were high. The maximalists of Columbia paid the ultimate price for their steadfastness and ended washed up on the Nile bank north of Khartoum—nameless numbers whose sole purpose was to feed the argument over power-sharing between the FFC and TMC.

Following the bloody 3 June dispersal of the *qiada*—the protestors sit-in encampment around the army headquarters—representatives of the SPA and FFC were hard pressed to explain their choices to angry young women and men around the capital in political rallies organized by the neighbourhood committees. The Burri Lions, champions of Khartoum's epicentre of protest, were hard to convince and shouted down one speaker after another. Only the SPA star, Mohamed Naji al-Assam, an able communicator, could manage their disappointment with the compromise that the SPA and its allies were about to make with the establishment. Nobody showed up to soothe the anger of Kalakla.

Post-revolutionary entitlement

The eventual compromise between the FFC and the TMC was crystallized in two documents—a political declaration and a constitutional document—signed with great fanfare in Khartoum on 17 August 2019. This was celebrated as a historical landmark, a momentous breakthrough and a new beginning. Once the aim of toppling Bashir was achieved, the unity of purpose that united the independent committees as a generic whole was lost.

Underlying social conflict within and between the committees played out in different ways depending on the particular conditions of each neighbourhood. In middle class neighbourhoods like *Burri* and *Beit al-Mal*—places with solid house rents and a multigenerational record of salaried occupation with nodes extending across the globe as expatriate breadwinners—activists of the resistance committees had sufficient social capital to make a bid for local authority and win it. Resistance committee activists in these places occupied the premises of the Bashir-era popular committee and announced themselves the new micro-authority.

The emerging discourse of neighbourhood insiders and outsiders became a measure by which the unwanted petty patriarchs of yesterday and also the 'niggers' and outcasts—often accused of complicity with the security services, or random criminality—could be excluded. The current status of the neighbourhood committees is captured by a Khartoum joke placed in the mouth of a Kalakla youth. Chronically unemployed and defiantly cynical, the hero of the revolution complains: 'I neither had the connections to work in Bashir's government nor do I have the qualifications to make it into Hamdok's administration'.

Central to the FFC's claim of legitimacy is a notion of merit. Prime Minister Hamdok's cabinet was assembled based on alleged meritocratic credentials. It includes a number of prominent Sudanese expatriates, including the prime minister and his foreign affairs and finance ministers, who have spent the past 30 years working for major international organisations, mostly outside of Sudan. Perhaps due to its internationalist composition, the transitional government appears to draw its energies from its negotiations with international financial institutions and western diplomats over reengagement and debt relief. These interactions are conducted in the jargon of state-making and reconstruction. Meanwhile, the concerns of the Kalakla heroes have almost become a nuisance to the newly ensconced political class.

Co-option of committees

As the structures of the transitional period started to fall in to place, the neighbourhood committees proved a source of irritation for the established operators of Khartoum's political arena. Still committees and alliances of committees claiming to represent wider urban geographies made public announcements

declaring their independence from the politicking of the FFC and its members. They also resisted Mohamed Hamdan Daglo ‘Himeidti’ and military-militia bloc around the Rapid Support Forces attempts to appropriate their revolutionary credentials.

The litmus test that the committees, or their representatives, continue to apply to their many suitors is the integrity of the government-managed investigation into the 3 June massacre. A credible and transparent investigation would be the undoing of the compromise that constitutes the very foundation of the transitional authority. The RSF, SAF, NISS and the police all stand accused of involvement in the bloody debacle and certain elements of the FFC have also engaged in silent complicity.

In the new era of free speech, FFC leaders have been subjected to the unforgiving scrutiny of the committees and their revolutionary ideals. Many a hero of yesterday has been announced a villain. The committees have also taken to naming and shaming individuals accused of attempting to infiltrate their ranks or steer their course. These accusations have become a staple of media reporting on the committees, especially as imitator structures cropped up under the alleged patronage of powerful actors.

These imitators include the association ‘We Are All Himeidti’—a Facebook group that announced itself as an off- and on-line lobbying engine in a Khartoum press conference hosted by the Sudan News Agency on 12 November. Representatives of the group explained that their motivation was to clear Himeidti’s name of the slander thrown at him and offered themselves as loyalists ready to wage a social media campaign in his favour. The declaration came after a widely publicized meeting a few days before between Himeidti and representatives of the neighborhood committees ended in fiasco. The committee members who found themselves in the company of Himeidti and intelligence chief Abu Bakr Mustafa Dambalab claimed they were lured into the encounter on the assumption that they were scheduled to meet the prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok.

Representatives of the resistance committees have told the press that the RSF, security services, Bashir-era NCP cadres and FFC parties are all seeking to gain a foothold in the committees with an eye on the coming elections. But the greater temptation facing the committees is arguably structural incorporation into the state machinery as pawns of authority in their local spheres. Leaders of the FFC certainly prefer this option to the vocal and seemingly unrestrained agency of the committees. The transitional Minister of Federal Governance issued a policy directive in early November that would dissolve the Bashir-era Popular Committees and transferring their mandate and assets to Change and Services Committees—a formalised version of the neighbourhood committees.

The invention of a standardized formula for the composition and operation of the new structures strikes a bureaucratic blow against the organic character of the original committees. The new committees shall be composed of 10 to 12 members each, who will be nominated in consultation between the FFC and the residents of a particular neighbourhood or village, or the workers in a particular market or industrial area. Nominations will be approved by the administrators of each locality on the condition of commitment to the Constitutional Declaration. Members of the Popular Committees, as well as supporters and associates of the former regime, are barred from joining the new structures.

The ministerial decree seeks to impose a hierarchy of state penetration on a horizontal open-access organizational form that challenges established patterns of micro-authority.

It attempts to tighten the definition of the political character of the committees around endorsement of the Constitutional Declaration and documented effort to further its implementation. In that regard, the decree provides for a political commissariat of sorts to oversee the operation of the committees involving coordinators at the level of administrative units and a coordinator-general at the level of each locality. These commissars shall be appointed through consultation between the FFC and the executive director of each locality.

In essence, the decree seeks to transform the committees into propaganda units. A committee member, states the decree, shall agitate amongst neighbourhood residents to consolidate the December revolution,

promote civic spirit and initiative, raise awareness regarding constitutional and legal matters and strengthen societal security. It seeks to channel the neighbourhood committee into the mould of the Bashir-era popular committee. What is obscured in this procedure is the praxis of the neighbourhood committees that has indeed shifted the coordinates of micro-authority and exposed it to popular interrogation.

The neighbourhood committees savoured their role as guardians of the revolution. Unlike the FFC—consumed by the daily drudgery of government and its compromises—they have also been able to credibly maintain fidelity to the revolution’s goals. For the FFC, the euphoria of the revolt against dictatorship has been displaced by the reality of life after it.

In November 2019, the heroes of Kalakla were on the streets again, tyres ablaze, calling for the ouster of their locality chief and the immediate involvement of their neighbourhood committees in the reconstitution of local government. Slowly nesting into government posts, the FFC’s politicians prefer to orient the axis of confrontation as between the defeated Islamists—searching for a route to return—and their (currently) victorious secular opponents.

The *Zanig* queens of the ‘watching clubs’, at least for now freed from the shackles of the Public Order Police and the faux morality of the Sudanese bourgeoisie, invoked an abstruse *zar*⁴ ballad and reworked its lyrics to sing the praise of the neighbourhood cadre.⁵

This is the one

The Lord of Tuesday

He departs before dawn

Slaughters by the moonlight

His blade a glaring red

This is the one

Who takes our side

And strikes at our foes

He

Resolved the case

He

Acts on what I have to say

He is

The hero of the downtrodden woman

He

Defeated the policemen

Defeated the lawyers

Defeated the interior [ministry]

He

Trounced the officer corps

And

Brought us civilian rule

Notes

1 WhatsApp had been made freely available in June 2013, with an annual US dollar fee after the first year, and had introduced voice messaging in August. It did not yet allow for voice calls (February 2015) or document sharing (March 2016). The App became available completely free of charge in January 2016 and introduced end-to-end encryption in April 2016.

2 President Bashir faces charges of corruption and illicit trade in foreign currency.

3 'Unemployment, youth total (% of total labor force ages 15-24) (modeled ILO estimate) – Sudan', The World Bank. Accessed 17 November 2019, (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=SD>).

4 *zar*: beliefs and practices associated with spirit possession and exorcism. The notion refers to a type of spirit, and the illnesses such spirits can cause by possessing humans, mainly women, and the rituals necessary for their pacification. The cult is found throughout northern Sudan. Possession is perceived as matter of fact that penetrates all facets of human experience.

5 Mawada al-Haneena performing at a *zanig* gig in Khartoum, YouTube, August 2019. Accessed 16 November 2019, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2i7nr89WsE>).



Credits

This briefing was written by Magdi el Gizouli, an independent researcher and Fellow of the Rift Valley Institute. Cover image © Waleed Alaa.

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