Sudanese women and the current uprising

Les femmes du Soudan et le récent soulèvement

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Abstract: In the history of Sudan, women had a prominent role in ruling and sharing in running the country. Women education started as early as 1900 when Italian Missionaries opened three schools for girls' education. Later on, a Women Teachers College and a Nursing College were started by the Colonial government. The number of women students increased with more schools and they were able to join the Gordon Memorial College which became the 1$^{st.}$ University of Khartoum after independence in 1956. Since 1970, many Sudanese migrated to the Gulf countries for better jobs. An increased number of women were employed in the civil and private services. New universities, both public and private, were opened by 1992 where women were in higher numbers than men. The country had three military governments and three democratic rules since 1956, it suffered from many economic problems and conflicts. A recent uprise in December 2018 culminated in ending the last military government of 30 years in April 2019. A new civil government is currently being established for a transitional period of 39 months to be followed by elections. Women had a prominent role in the uprise and will hopefully have a 40% representation in the new civil government and will positively participate in the sustainable development of the country.

Résumé : Dans l'histoire du Soudan, les femmes ont joué un rôle de premier plan dans l'administration et le partage de la direction du pays. L'éducation des femmes a commencé dès 1900 lorsque les missionnaires italiens ont ouvert trois écoles pour l'éducation des filles. Plus tard, le gouvernement colonial a mis sur pied un Women Teachers College et un Nursing College. Le nombre d'étudiantes a augmenté avec le nombre d'écoles et elles ont pu rejoindre le Gordon Memorial College qui est devenu la première université de Khartoum après l'indépendance en 1956. Depuis 1970, de nombreux Soudanais ont émigré vers les pays du Golfe à la recherche de meilleurs emplois. Les femmes sont de plus en plus nombreuses à travailler dans la fonction publique et dans le secteur privé. De nouvelles universités, tant publiques que privées, ont été ouvertes en 1992, où les femmes étaient plus nombreuses que les hommes. Le pays a eu trois gouvernements militaires et trois régimes démocratiques depuis 1956, il a souffert de nombreux problèmes économiques et de conflits. Un récent soulèvement en décembre 2018 a culminé avec la fin du dernier gouvernement militaire ayant duré 30 ans, en avril 2019. Un nouveau gouvernement civil est en cours d'établissement pour une période transitoire de 39 mois qui sera suivie d'élections. Les femmes ont joué un rôle de premier plan dans le soulèvement et, espérons-le, elles représenteront 40% du nouveau gouvernement civil et participeront positivement au développement durable du pays.

1 Sudanese women's role in the sustainable development of the country: Historical perspective

Sudan is a country with a very old culture going back more than 5000 years in history, fairly well documented in the Northern parts of the country and along the banks of the Nile.

Historically, women have had a role almost equivalent to that of men in the development of Sudanese life because they participated in wars and led armies, shared in the rule and running of the country. There were about 49 Nubian queens (Candace/Kandak) who participated mostly as wives of the kings, and only 11 of them were sole rulers and leaders of armies.

This rich history and culture of women's involvement continued through the Meroian era and the Christian kingdom till the establishment of the first Islamic and Arab Fung kingdom in the 16th century. Then the main role of women was limited to being wives, mothers and slaves. A few reached a ruling status in some parts of the Fung kingdom.

In the 19th century, during the Turks invasion of Sudan and the Mahdist revolt, many women were renowned for participating in the resistance and supporting men with bravery poetry. However, the status of women regressed to total domination and dependence on men. The spread of Islamic education transformed the social and cultural traditions to create a clear separation of the roles of men and women. This brought a clear distinction between the family members, mostly shown in the separation of the quarters for males and females inside the house. The teachers of religious Islamic education disseminated an Arab male domination on culture with a dwarfing of the role of women in the society. Formal education for girls was absent except in a few families who were keen to teach very limited numbers of their female members.

In 1900 -1902, three Italian Missionary schools were opened in Omdurman and Khartoum and about 80 girls were enrolled. The first national girls' education was started by Babiker Badri in Rufaa where he established a girl's school in 1907. He also established the Alahfad girls schools in Omdurman in 1917, which later developed into Alahfad College and then into the first university for women in 1966. This university is still the only women university in Sudan and conducts many courses related to women's community development and family planning in addition to medical sciences.

In 1921, the Women Teachers College was opened in Omdurman, a colonial government college to train women teachers for the girls' schools which were increasing in number. Similarly, in 1925, the first Nursing College was established. In 1945, the first girls' secondary school was opened in Omdurman, a colonial government school, and in the same year, girls having graduated from the missionary schools enrolled in the Gordon Memorial College followed by others from the Omdurman national school in 1949. The Gordon Memorial College became the University of Khartoum after the Sudan Independence in 1956.

By the year 1960, there were 52 female students (4.3%) and 1164 males (95.7%) at the University of Khartum. Interestingly, by the end of 2017, the number of girls had increased to 12,693 (62%) and the number of female teaching staff members was 703 (36%). This was also happening at many Sudanese academic institutions, both public and private, which increased in number to more than 112 institutions established in different parts of the country, mainly in the capital Khartoum and other big cities.

The fast increase in opportunities for education, mainly at secondary and university levels, provided women of Sudan with opportunities to participate in the public and political life even before the country received independence. In 1952, Sudanese women were given the right to vote, which was restricted to those who had completed secondary schooling and above. By 1964, Sudanese women were able to vote and be elected for Parliament. Ms Fatma Ahmed Ibrahim was the first woman to sit in Parliament in 1965, and Ms Nafesa Ahmed Alamin, who became Deputy Minister of Youth, and then Dr Fatma Abdel Mahmoud, who was the first Minister of Social Affairs and Sports in 1975.

During the years from 1970 till present, there were extensive changes in the Sudanese society and its ways of life due to several economic and political factors. The rate of migration was high among Sudanese men, mainly among scholars, moving to the Gulf States, Europe and the United States, for better jobs, while there was less migration of female scholars until the turn of the century when it increased.

The exodus of Sudanese men from different professions created a gap in the civil and private services which were filled in by women. With the large number of female university graduates during the past 20 years, the unemployment rate among females became higher than for males. Women of Sudan were heroic enough to occupy professions never considered to be feminine by their mothers and grand-mothers. Sudanese women are the majority in the education system and social services. Many community development organizations, including and led by women, were established and expanded their activities in the rural and urban areas in support of those who had missed out on education.

Literacy (defined as ability to read and write by the age of 15) among men of Sudan is almost 83% and 68% among women (2015 est.). The education system was affected by a change in school years and the use of Arabic at the primary and secondary levels as a rule, while English was started later at the secondary level. Some of the higher education colleges were taught mainly in Arabic. Consequently, the skill of speaking and writing English as a second language was greatly affected for many university graduates.

Children throughout Sudan faced several difficulties when it comes to receiving a formal education. As a result, more than 40% of children between the ages of 5 and 13 were not in school, and more than 1.5 million of them were girls. Of those in school, more than half a million were at risk of dropping out. Nomadic and displaced children and those in war-torn areas were at greater risk of exclusion, with girls often facing a higher risk of not completing their formal education.

The 2010 Sudan Household Health Survey shows that 53% of children in the poorest areas are not in school, compared to 4% in the richest areas. In some areas, these estimates are increased due to poor educational infrastructure, insufficient or non-existent classrooms, scarcity of learning materials such as textbooks, the lack of properly trained teachers and teaching materials, as well as school charges and fees that prevent the poors from sending their children to school.

In rural areas, mostly affected by conflicts, drought and weak economy (e.g. in Darfur), women have become the sole provider of food for their families and the lifeblood of their communities. The extension of water scarcity and poor vegetation has resulted in low agricultural productivity and subsequently, competition and struggle over the few available natural resources. In the rainy season, women in primarily farming areas cultivate crops to feed the family and to sell, while in winter, they focus on growing fruits and vegetables, and throughout the year they participate in animal husbandry, critical for the livelihoods and well-being of their community. All over the country, women's presence is also evident in local markets where they operate small businesses such as food-selling and tea stalls, especially among those who have migrated to the peripheries of big cities.

Sudanese women excel in fields like journalism, radio and television media, and form a majority in primary schools education and community services. The women participation in science and research-related desciplines (e.g. health and agricultural professions, technology and engineering) in Sudan makes up almost 40% of the workforce, a much higher percentage than in many other countries in the developing world.

2 Women and the current up-rising in Sudan

In 1989, the democratic rule of Sudan was taken over by a military Islamic group in a bloodless coup. During the past three decades, Sudanese women have lost most of the constitutional rights they had acquired since independence. The country was mostly run by what was assumed to be Islamic laws adapted to fit the traditional Arab/Sudanese customs. Women were very much affected by male domination and were victimized by many social practices, e.g. FGM (female genital mutilation), early marriage of girls, violence, harassments and their lack of employment rights. In 1991, the Social Order Law was imposed to restrict freedom of women, mainly relative to their attire and attitude in public, giving the right to the enforcer to decide and take them to court and a demeaning trial. Under this law, working females, university and school-girls were forced to wear long skirts and veils, an assumed Islamic dress. Many females were lashed in public for wearing jeans and not covering their hair.

Resistance against the ruling party had been accumulating over the past years, until a more organized up-rising broke out in December 2018. Mass popular protests denouncing the political and economic situation in Sudan started from some of the big cities and then intensified in the capital Khartoum. Peaceful demonstrations, mostly composed and organized by youth using the Internet and social media for communication, erupted from universities, schools, residential areas and markets. The mottos of the non-violent rallies were demanding freedom, peace and justice and a complete change of government.

The peaceful rallies have been met with unexpected and frequently deadly force by government authorities and anti-riot police. Participation of women and girls in the demonstrations was amazing, almost equal to that of males, in spite of the tear gas and brutal beatings. Females were equally detained and savagely beaten by the security police. Most of them were threatened with sexual harassment and rape if they continued participating in the rallies and cases of rape were reported and documented.

Photographs of the demonstrations and violations of human rights in detainment were taken using mobile phones. A network of females using social media, who called themselves "Minberchat" (literally it means Chat Forum.... but in Sudanese Arabic it means 'easy-going girls') provided detailed personal information about members of security police who assaulted the demonstrators and tortured the detainees. This group of females started as a social network of women and efficiently became an information support for shaming security members.

The demonstrations climaxed on 6 April, and protesters occupied the square in front of the military headquarters and sat-in chanting and demonstrating to demand that the army forces the Albashir President out. On April 11, the military announced that the President Albashir had been ousted and a council of military generals assumed power to stabilize the country. The seven-member Transitional Military Council (TMC) led by Lt-Gen Abdel Fattah Burhan claimed to ensure order and security and promised not to disseminate the protesters by force.

Occupation of the square continued and demonstrators demanded that a civil government should be established. Negotiations were started between the Freedom & Change Forces (F & CF), which were heading the demonstrations and formed of a coalition of several professional unions and groups, and the TMC. The negotiations process was extended due to the obscured connections of the TMC with the ousted regime members and the different security forces and militia who were responsible of assaulting the demonstrators in Khartoum and other major cities of the country.

On the dawn of June 3rd, the 29th day of the fasting month of Ramadan, an atrocious attack by forces in uniform (Rapid Support Militia Forces) equipped with heavy machinery and weapons challenged the pro-democracy demonstrators' camps in the sit-in and cleared them from the area. Tents were burned down, around 120 people were shot and much more were wounded and missing. Extensive thrashings and several cases of rape, of both men and women, were reported. The situation was similar to the notorious atrocities of the "Janjaweed" in the western region of Darfur. The responsibility of the massacre was on the TMC and claims of who planned it and gave the order to shoot were dubious.

Negotiations with the TMC were curtailed and demonstrations were aflame again in many cities, mainly in the three towns of the capital Khartoum. Internet connectivity was cut from June 3rd for about a month and the TMC announced that it is a threat to the country's security. Yet, demonstrations continued and the rebellious groups managed to organize people where public strikes were arranged. A one million person demonstration was organized in Khartoum and most of the other cities on the 30th June followed by a two-day public strike which shut down the country completely.

Demonstrators were able to video many incidents of the atrocities committed during the sit-in disperse which came out in the international media incriminating the TMC and Militia Forces.

The Sudanese in Diaspora in many parts of the world arranged many similar parades in support of their home country. Arbitration by the African Union and Ethiopian Prime Minister assisted in getting the Freedom & Change Forces and the Transitional Military Council back to resume negotiations and reach an acceptable plan for a transitional civil government with military representation. The agreement was initialed on the 4th of August and fully endorsed on the 17th of August, for the transitional civil government to lead the country.

It was agreed that the transitional government will be for 39 months extendable and to be followed by general elections. The transitional government will be composed of three councils:

- A Supreme Council of eleven members : 5 FCF + 5 TMC + 1 national figure. The SC will be headed by the TMC for 21 months and followed by the FCF for 18 months to supervise the government during the transitional period.
- A Ministerial Council of a Prime Minister selected by the FCF who will select 20 ministers from nominated figures for the different ministries. The selected Prime Minister, Dr. Abdalla Hamdok, is a prominent Sudanese economist who worked at the African Union.
- A Legislative Council (Parliament) of 300 people (200 selected by FCF and 100 by TMC).

3 Women in the new civil government

Participation of women during the uprise was equal to that of men. The Freedom & Change Forces constantly highlighted the role of women and announced that there will be a 40% representation of women in the selected parliament. However, only one woman (daughter of Alsaddig Almahdi of the Umma Party) participated in the negotiations with the Transitional Military Council, while many women participated in the supporting committees and did not show up in the media except for very few.

One woman, Dr Aisha Musa, was nominated by the Freedom & Change Forces as member of the Supreme Council, A Christian advocate, Ms Raja Nicola Eissa Abdel-Masih, was selected as the national figure to represent the Coptic minority of Sudan.

The Civil government members, 18 ministers, were announced on the 5th of September. There are 4 women ministers, as follows:

- Minister of Foreign Affairs: Ex- ambassador Ms Asma M. Abdalla,
- Minister of Higher Education and Research: Prof. Intisar Alzain, an archaeologist, University of Khartoum,

- Minister of Social Development: Ms Dina Elsheikh Mahgoub, Corporate Social Responsibility expert,
- Minister of Youth & Sports: Eng. Walaa Albushi, athlete and chemical engineer.

In conclusion, the Sudan recent uprising, mostly organized and composed of youth, both females and males, has given hope to many Sudanese that a new civil government will eventually succeed in leading the country. In spite of being a peaceful movement for democratic changes, and a motto of "Freedom, Peace and Justice", hundreds of martyrs lost their lives and thousands were wounded and mentally traumatized.

The Legislative Council (Parliament) of 300 people is not yet formed. The new Prime Minister announced on several occasions that women from the different states will represent 40% or more in the new government in recognition of their role in the uprising and that they will equally participate in rehabilitating the country and building the New Sudan.

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