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Patriarchy, Politics and Women's Activism in Post-Revolution Sudan

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While Sudanese women were at the forefront of the popular uprising under the banner “freedom, peace and justice” that started in December 2018 and eventually led to the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, they were marginally represented in the negotiations that followed. In the process of consolidating a transitional government, women have been sidelined but continue to demand their rightful inclusion into political decision-making bodies.

Guests at the negotiating table

Although women have been largely excluded from the negotiation table, reform of discriminatory laws codified by the Islamist-military regime is a top priority in the August, 2019 Constitutional Declaration which was the negotiated result between the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC). The FFC is the coalition representing the protestors consisting of labor unions, civil society organizations (including women's organizations), political parties and neighbourhood committees. According to the Declaration, one of the aims for the three-year transitional period is to "Repeal laws and provisions that restrict freedoms or that discriminate between citizens on the basis of gender" para. 7(2)). The declaration also promises women 40% representation in Sudan's legislative assembly.

Two women were in the FFC negotiation team. One (Miriam Sadiq al-Mahdi) represented the Sudan Call Alliance in FFC, but she was replaced by a man during the first month of negotiations. The other young woman, Mervat Hamadaneel, represented civil society and struggled alone until end of the negotiations.

Female protesters and women's rights activists were disenchanted by what is widely perceived as an attempt to sideline women from an important historical moment and opportunity for change. As one young women's right activist say it in an interview with the authors (February, 2020); "(...) We fought the revolution, but they just took our agenda and put in in the drawer."

There were demonstrations outside the negotiation venue and several campaigns were launched on social media. Women protesters' posters featured slogans illustrating their disappointment at being mere guests at the negotiating table: "You thank us in demonstrations and forget about us in negotiations"; "I am a 100% protesting female, but am outside the power structures";

Women were excluded despite the fact that several women groups signed the Declaration of Freedom and Change, such as the Civil and Political Sudanese Coalition (MNSM) and the No to Oppression against Women Initiative, and are therefore recognized bodies within the FFC alliance.¹

If women's rights activists and groups had been given more than one seat at the table, the declaration surely would have included stronger wording and clearer direction. A crucial demand on the women's rights agenda is that Sudan should ratify the Convention against Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Constitutional Declaration merely aims to repeal discriminatory laws. Given the chance women's rights activists would have pushed for stronger protection against gender-based violence during the negotiations. This is currently sorely lacking in

Sudan's legal frameworks despite women's demands for accountability and justice for sexual violence and attacks against women before, during and after the revolution. Also, women's rights activists would have pushed for gender parity not only in the legislative assembly, but in all governing structures and policies in Sudan's transitional government. Since they were mere guests at the negotiating table, they were not able to push for these demands.

Patriarchal mentality

Although Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok is widely recognized as a supporter of women's rights, he relies on the FFC coalition for nominations to governing structures. The FFC Central Council which is responsible for these nominations consists of three women and 23 men. Decision-making within the FFC is described by women's rights activists as an organization exhibiting 'patriarchal mentality'.

Women have thus far been systematically excluded from the lists of nominations whether it is for peace negotiations or state governors. The list of nominees for state governors which was recently handed over to the Prime Minister, only includes men. When the Prime Minister sent the list back to FFC asking for female candidates as well, they did not oblige. As a result, women's groups have to continuously mobilize outside these power structures to demand inclusion. MNSM in collaboration with the No to Oppression against Women Initiative and the Sudanese Women's Union prepared a list of capable female candidates for governor post and handed it to the prime minister for his consideration.

A young women's right activist says in an interview with the authors (February, 2020);

"They are scared. If women achieve something, they will feel marginalized. It is a patriarchal mentality within the political parties and unions. It is as if they stopped developing their ideology and thinking when Bashir came to power in 1989. They act as if we are still in 1989. But we will continue the revolution as women. We will be shouting for our rights"

Another young, female university student activist and founder of the Noon Movement which is one of several newly established civil society groups in post-revolutionary Sudan, stated in an interview (August, 2019);

"The FFC are sexist. The few women who are publicly participating in the current scene are just there as a camouflage or appeasement to silence the international community."

MNSM Declaration

We, the women of Sudan, declare our solid unity in claiming our right to the enjoyment of our human right to political participation including through the temporary special measures, which for us can neither be negotiated nor compromised. We, thereof, demand the following:

- The representation of women in all governmental institutions, executive bodies, legislative and the judiciary including at decision making with a percentage of not less than 50% as a temporary measure while giving due consideration to female youth.
- The representation of women must be subject to merit and required standards of competency (with due consideration to ethnicity, culture regional geographical representation including conflict affected states, and disability,) and in a manner that significantly contributes to the formation of a strong, integral and inclusive Sudanese Nation.

The hurdles facing women with political ambitions are deeply embedded in the prevailing patriarchal mentality. By deconstructing the prejudice against women, the central arguments used to marginalize women are exposed:

- a) the *culture* argument, where Sudanese culture is positioned as conservative and not ready for female political leaders. This argument has been frequently used to justify the all-male list of nominees for governors; Sudanese society is simply not ready for female governors.
- b) the *capability* argument, where it is claimed there is a lack of capable women to partake in political decision-making. This argument has been used to counter demands for gender quota in Sudan's transitional power structures. If women cannot make inroads into politics on merit alone, then they should not participate in politics altogether.
- c) the *emotional* argument, where women are marginalized by the fact that they are unable to unite under one common agenda. We call this the emotional argument because women are described by men as 'emotional'. Following from this description the debates between different groups of women are described as 'quarrels' which is put in contrast to discussions among men which are seen as 'rational politics'.

Women's demand for 50/50

The efforts to curtail women's political voices are, however, fueling post-revolutionary women's activism embedding a diversity of claims to equal citizenship. Through MNSM, women are trying to come together across divides to agree on a common agenda. Despite a fractionalized history and political tensions, they have been able to come out with a clear demand for 50% representation of women in decision-making structures within the transitional government. These demands are also supported by women's organizations that have chosen to disengage from MNSM, like the Women's Union and No to Women's Oppression. In the words of women's rights activist Asha Al-Karib women stand united in the claim for political representation. She says in an interview with the authors (August, 2019)

"The current women's movement in Sudan is strongly demanding equal participation in the upcoming period. To this end, women are gathering beyond borders of age, ethnicity, and religion to build in solidarity their agenda during this critical juncture of our history. The process for change has already started, but it will be full of challenges, and the road for women will be particularly rocky and tough"

In an attempt to pre-empt the capability argument, a social media campaign was launched by young activists when Abdallah Hamdok was preparing to announce his cabinet. The campaign 50#qualified women# identified highly qualified Sudanese women living in the country or from the diaspora as nominees for political offices within the transitional government.



Four out of the 14 ministers nominated by the prime minister are women who are now holding the posts of Foreign Affairs, Labor and Social Development, Youth and Sports and Higher Education. In addition, Haider Ahmed Dafalla is appointed as the country's current chief justice. Women's representation in the current governance structure thus falls far below the demand of 50% parity. Yet, in a historical perspective it has more representation of women than any other. This is the first time that Sudan has a female minister of foreign affairs and a female chief justice.

Conclusion

Making sure that women are included in political processes in the new Sudan has turned out to be an uphill struggle, but women's rights activists are working tirelessly to challenge the patriarchal mentality. As preparation for the upcoming nomination of representatives to the national

legislative assembly women's organizations have, with the support of UNDP, compiled a list of qualified female candidates from all the 18 states in Sudan. Whether the FFC will take women's representation into account this time around remains to be seen. Past experiences do not bode well for the promise of 40 % representation of women in the legislative assembly to be fulfilled. What gives reason for optimism is that women will continue to demand inclusion in order to positively shape Sudan's future as a democratic state.

Endnote

- ¹ MNSM consists of 26 civil society organizations (including young women's organizations), 16 women's sectors of political parties, 17 civil groups including unions and forums and independent activists.