



Not just regime change: Women and protest movements in Sudan

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Background

The beauty of a revolution lies not in the fact that it happened in the most unfavourable of circumstances but that it is gender inclusive. Protesting men represents only half of the population and sometimes even less. It is the women and all the other genders, which most often remain discriminated, who adds substance to a protest. 2019 was an eventful year full of protests led by powerful women and other genders across the globe. Whether they are vouching for equal opportunities and rights or for the change of a regime or a corrupt government, all the other genders (apart from male of course) left no stone unturned. They showed the world that they are much more than what the latter perceives them to be. They are on the streets in countless numbers “braving tear gas, rubber pellets water cannons, sticks and harassment”¹ but still intact and consistent towards their respective causes.

But it must be understood that all the revolutions are heterogeneous not only in the issues they are raising but also in the location they belong to. The factor of the geographical location is very much important in order to proceed with a non-judgemental analysis. For example, the Himba tribe of Namibia are nomads. They live a very rustic lifestyle and roam around in groups of less than 50 people out of which majority are women. Though the women’s jobs are the same as the rest of the world, their clothing is scarce. Their upper torsos remain all bare. Now, these women will never understand the “no bra movements”² nor why the “girl in the blue bra”³ in Tahrir Square, Egypt became the symbol of women’s bodies being subjected to moral and social lenses.

On similar lines, a women’s protest in the Middle-east regarding “equal property rights and citizenship laws”⁴ cannot be understood in countries like India where these issues are absent. Where in India and the USA and in most other democratic countries, women can take a case to the law and not be judged, in most North African Islamic countries women are not even allowed to step outside their homes let alone go to the court to file a case.

In Sudan, the matter was two times worse than other countries with similar issues. First, the overall Sudanese population lived under the constant fear of then Dictator President Omar Al-Bashir’s regime. His regime was racist, brutal and was keen on building a nation with politics of fear. Non-Arab people, mostly indigenous Africans, are treated with

utmost severity. Laws and punishment kept constantly changing according to the will of the ruling government because of which no one could even stand up against them. Second, the plight of the women in Sudan is acutely downtrodden. The first blow comes to them in the form of the extreme male domination they are subjected to in their houses and in public. The second blow came in the form of the brutal regime their country had.

Revolutions in a country like Sudan are a complex power play. Mostly because half of its population which are women can be easily oppressed using the centuries old “forced” religious testimonies. If that is overcome by the women, still there stays one more full-proof strategy to stampede a revolt. The weapon of war⁵ that proves to be the most instrumental for regimes like these is ‘rape’ by the men in arms. If it is thought that rape is just for sex then the thinking is not profound enough to understand what these women have went through for ages. Rape is more about domination, harassment, humiliation and degradation of the gender. Most of the rape cases go unreported because of the stigma and fear of humiliation attached to it. That is where half the battles are lost. But, solidarity should reach those women who, in spite of all the obstacles and physical and mental torture, came out in the open and said “tasgut bas”⁶. The women in the forefront of the Sudanese revolution were adamant enough not to return back to the safety of the home until and unless their democracy was instilled. They were united for the very first time, drawing force and motivation from each other, to brave anything that comes between them and their freedom. Hence, the “fetishization of their protest”⁷ must not cloud their bravery; they must be supported and encouraged with much better way-outs than just mere applause.

The essay hypothesizes that: the attention and the immediate results the revolution brought did highlight the plight of Sudanese women to some extent. But the question that can be posed here is that whether this single strike revolution will bear any long-term effects for the women of Sudan. The sustenance of the spirit of the revolution is clearly what is required over the obsession of women participation in an Islam dominated African country. The women of Sudan must continue with a version of the protest to bring permanent remedial solutions to their long-standing social issues.

Causes, Concerns and Fallouts

So far, it has been clearly understood that the causes for the civil uprising in Sudan and the causes for the fierce women participation are almost similar. But in addition to that the women have their own separate narrative attached to it. For a country from the Middle-East or the African continent, long-standing issues pertaining to women’s under-development has raised many eyes across the world. A solution is, however, a distant dream or exercise as these nations are run in the lines of the highly orthodox and

poisoned patriarchal beliefs. Lack of women force in the employment sector is only holding these nations to prosper further.

Of course, it is the ardent urge to break free from the shackles of male domination which makes women protests from these regions so popular. But, the battles are tougher in the grounds than in minds. The protest movement in Sudan is not a typical protest movement from two points of view. First, it exhibited the most vehement women participation in its entire history of existence, especially in reference to its archaic yet strict religious teachings and cultural practices. Second, it was not “yet another” women’s protest demanding equality before law for the historical oppression the women were subjected to. While the first point is easily understood, the second point is the one that demands attention. It was not a women’s protest specifically. It was a normal civil protest where the women only “outnumbered” men in flooding the streets and holding up slogans against the dictatorship. Not only they were up for the fight but were aggressively consistent as well. But the smart move was when the “liberation of women”⁸ narrative was attached to the main narrative of toppling al-Bashir’s rule. So it was the main narrative working and then there was this sub-narrative placed perfectly under its umbrella to earn some symbiotic good.

Before gliding into the explanation of it, one must understand why exactly the people of Sudan started the protests. The answer to that is quite simple yet bizarre. When Omar Al-Bashir came into power after a military coup 30 years ago, he brought with him a rigid and obnoxious regime which literally stripped off basic rights from women. No men had any problem against it and even if they had, they did not object to it. Then he commented on giving a “decent lifestyle”⁹ to the people of Sudan which turned out to be no more than “survival. This was when the civil order started to collapse. The male-dominated society only became aware of their own plight when their freedom was curbed too because of economic restraints.

Sudan was already going through its second civil war when al-Bashir took power. Though he claimed that his government was all focused on uplifting Sudan’s poor economy, worse things happened and the graph only lowered over three decades. The major issues were economic in nature. Sudan has seen a string of protests in this decade due to the rising prices of cooking gas and fuels to start with in 2013. It was followed by a total standstill in the capital of Khartoum in 2016 where the people disobeyed the government by staying at home and abandoning their work and duties. It was in response to the inflating prices of fuel, electricity and medical amenities. The economy was not at all regenerating which was hampering the people to maintain a decent lifestyle.

The most recent protests took place as the economy completely gave away its potential to serve the nation. Inflation rate was at 70 per cent high as well as people denied

withdrawal of their own money from banks and ATMs. The latter are almost always without cash and banks let the people withdraw no more than 500 Sudanese pounds which is very less to sustain even one day. The price of a loaf of bread increased to three Sudanese pounds which eventually led the people to erupt into one of the largest protests in the nation's history. Another reason for it was that after the independence of South Sudan, most of the oil fields went under their territory. This resulted in a major downfall in the economy of Sudan which was mostly oil-based. The currency eventually devalued into all time low as there were scarcely any other restorative means to reconstruct the economy back. On top of that there were the economic sanctions imposed by the USA for 20 years which made foreign investment near to zero in Sudan. It has managed to cripple the nation in all the ways possible in order to curb terrorism and along with it strangled the development of the civil society.

All these led the people agitate against al-Bashir's government but then the protests suddenly became political. Reaction against a failing economy was simple and expected but it was bizarre because the political demands of toppling Bashir's rule was nowhere gender inclusive at first. The fall of Bashir was not expected to free the women from the absurd rule of law they are subjected to over centuries. This is where the women's revolution seeps its way in. As mentioned initially, the women's revolution has two reasons to cater to. First, the overall fall of the economy and the inflation because they are the home-makers who are in charge of the household expenses. Their life became hell when some could not even manage the daily bread for their families. Second, is the fact that they are born as women in one of the most gender discriminatory regions in the world. That makes them live hell twice as the Islamic law debilitate their rights and mobilization and make them house-bound in most of the cases. Al-Bashir's chaotic regime had preposterous laws against women's conduct, behaviour and dress code. Police could openly "flog"¹⁰ women who dare to wear trousers out in the open and trials for sexual misconduct and rapes were almost non-existent. The countries of Africa, especially the Islam dominated ones, are rampant in cases related to domestic violence, sexual assault, female genital mutilation¹¹ (FGM), child marriage and whole lot of other discriminatory activities against women. Sudan comes next to Egypt in the heinous act of conducting FGMs which impairs a girl child for life. Menstrual and maternity health are compromised which leads to wide miscarriages, infant mortality as well as maternal mortality.

In addition to that women are socially obstructed to undergo education and have a life out in the public. They are easily harassed and finger-pointed in case of any complaint of dissatisfaction they want to file before the law. In the 21st century when the rest of the world is more or less celebrating women and womanhood, these nations have not seen any women in the forefront. Of course it frustrates the women in bondage to see their counterparts across the world enjoying rights, accessing education and taking over the world in every sector. When the women took to streets in Sudan, it was out of both- the

historical suppression and the failing lives due to the poor state of their nation. They protested like there was no tomorrow and indeed there wasn't. It was a do or die situation for them which they utilized to the fullest not only to show the world that they are equally brave and capable citizens of their nation but also to bring justice to their gender by vouching their feminist agenda along with the main protest.

Major Trends

As discussed before, these protests were not the first ones. But they are the culmination of all the other protests that preceded before it. A failing economy and an autocratic rule were reasons enough for the dissatisfaction of the common people erupting a protest here and there. Especially in a country like Sudan which already has a low standard of living (average), economic recession is not greeted with joy in any manner by the public. Sudan started civil disobedience since 2013 as the inflation was soaring and people were suffering in excess. Hence, the first trend of this protest movement is its continuity. That it is not something which brewed overnight with a single economic spiralling and is a result of continuous civil unrest taking place in Sudan.

Second trend is the demand of civilian rule and democracy. With very less nations being under a totalitarian regime in the contemporary world, the people of Sudan may have seen positive hope in restoring the nation if it is turned into a democracy. The streets were filled with civilians all day and night for more than three months continuously, demanding al-Bashir to step down from power and hand the reigns to the people. The unrest was astonishingly consistent as the people were hell bound to end a disastrous dictatorship which has time and again denied the people their basic civil rights and disrupted normalcy with policies and laws.

Third trend is obviously the most important one. As the paper discusses about the women's contribution in the protest, it can also be perceived as a trend. It can be understood in the lines of the women's liberation movement across the world. Though the liberation movement is history for today's world and women have ever since become more and more independent worldwide, but for countries like Sudan the norms are still ancient. It was as if the Sudanese women were only waiting for a perfect moment to come out and raise their voices. They were, in that matter, successful. The moment can be called perfect because Sudan needed an overwhelming support from each and every citizen. Only the men couldn't have filled the roads and squares and strengthened the crowd. The participation of women which would have been otherwise questioned and harassed was accommodated with ease. Now, 'accommodation' is not same as acceptance. While the male dominated society did not accept the parity of women with themselves, they only compromised for the time-being because they needed all the possible voices and resistance against the regime. Women took this great opportunity to voice their gender

issues and make them heard to the rest of the world. Alaa Salah, became an icon overnight with herself clad in white, standing atop a vehicle and shouting out slogans of resistance. She became the symbol of the entire protest movement against Bashir's rule but most importantly, she became the symbol of the women uprising in Sudan which signified that winds of change have indeed arrived.

Fourth trend that this protest movement followed was that of age-inclusive participation. Students across the nation protested vehemently. The average age group of the protest was between 17 to 23 years. Student protests have indeed been quite a recurring phenomenon in the contemporary society. Especially in Africa, Latin America and South Asia, students are very active in recognising and acting against the anti-social elements. They are young and the pillars for the future of a country, hence, their protests are given interest by the governments and their issues catered to. Sudan saw many of its high school and college students agitating against the dictatorship which greatly signified that even education sector was under-developed and students dissatisfied with the quality of it.

Sudanese protests were successful to a large extent by incorporating many trends which gave them substantial momentum in bringing political and social changes. Economic changes are not mentioned because they take time to be visible. And especially for a country like Sudan, it will easily take a decade of good governance to uplift it from its current dilapidated position.

Evaluating the Responses: National, Regional and International

The response towards a particular protest movement is dependent upon many factors. It is true that protest movements do garner positive response for the nature of its cause which is always for the betterment of the people. Nonetheless, a movement has its share of institutional negativity which is mainly from the parties which has perks to lose because of it. The same happened to the Sudanese revolution as well. United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt which are some of the major powers in the Islamic world and in the region have backed the ruler of Sudan and supported his regime. While other nations were mostly in support of the protestors, but the influential forces backing up the dictator was a huge hurdle on the way. Those nations feared similar civil unrest erupting in their countries after the Sudanese pave the way.

The African Union suspended Sudan from its membership by calling out for constituting a civilian led transitional authority instead of the military council. It believed that if military still stays in power, the whole point of the revolution is meaningless. The United States of America did not voice any opinion over the issue at all.

Speaking about other national and international response was that in social media and digital platforms where hashtags were coined so that the whole world could follow every bit of the protest. Hashtags such as #tasgutbas #BlueForSudan #SudanUprising #KeepEyesOnSudan were used to share protest videos, slogans, poems, songs and updates. But along with that the symbolization of Alaa Salah was quite an *idée fixe*. Her choice of dress and jewellery for the moment was also dissected and analyzed which may be was just co-incident! She became a success story of marching thousands of women towards a new direction but it was all too overdone. The revolution was just the beginning of a long battle to rights and freedom in Sudan and the world was already obsessing over the might of the Sudanese women. This fetishization over support is a very negative sign of how women are treated across the world in general. What Alaa Salah and the thousands of other women want are far greater than mere applause. Though lauding them is necessary but it should not just stop there. It should continue as a growing support for the women to help them sustain themselves as heroes and not just being the hero for a day. A revolution like this may have toppled Al-Bashir but is not the whole battle won for the women. They have a long way to go. They are not in need of temporary praise for their 'breakthrough' revolution but all they want is equal participation in the democracy they fought for, equal participation in the household they tend to and equal participation in the crowd they constitute.

Military took over Sudan's reigns in April 2019 but a series of mishaps made it share its powers with the civil society. The suspension of Sudan from the African Union put immense pressure over the Transitional Military Council (TMC). It was also as a result of the 3 June, 2019 massacre by the military which killed many civilians. The TMC took responsibility for it and explained that they were just trying to rule out criminals with it.

With the suspension of the nation from AU and protestors staying put outside the administrative headquarters, the TMC arranged talks with the "Forces of Freedom and Change" and initiated an agreement. A formal agreement signing ceremony was organised on the 17th of August, 2019 where both the parties signed on a constitution which lead the way for a transitional government. The constitution described the powers and duties of the transitional government and the members and also the process of election. A period of 39 months is awarded for the government to bring back Sudan to a state of normalcy by the end of which elections would take place like any other democracy. The formation of a sovereign council, a legislature and a cabinet was announced. It was decided that a military general would head the council for the initial 21 months followed by a civilian for the remaining 18 months. The council will have 5 civilian members and 5 members from the military and a remaining one member would be nominated with consensus. A Prime Minister would be elected by the pro-democrats to head the cabinet. The other important ministries would also be headed by pro-democrats except for the ministry of defence and interior.

The transition period was chosen before the democratic elections as Bashir's rule was deeply entrenched in Sudan and would need time for disassembling. But women were still angry over the arrangement of the transition government. They asked for equal participation in the government but were only given with less than 40 per cent seats. Though the foreign, sports and youth, education and development and labour ministries are given to women leaders, dissatisfaction continues to linger. Only two seats were given to women in the sovereign council. The upcoming elections would give 40 per cent quota to the women but some activists say that it is not enough for the pain and fight they had to put up with. The only positive sign of the recent developments is that the oppressive public order law was abolished. That law, as mentioned before, allowed the police to flog any women in the public who wear trousers. Abolition of this law is bringing the much deserved public life to the women of Sudan. They would fear less of being slut-shamed or termed inappropriate for the society.

Forecasts in 2020

After an exotic revolution the results are always over-expected. While the Sudanese revolution did culminate Omar Al-Bashir's totalitarian rule and brought in an interim government which would pave way for the democracy, whether or not it will be able to provide its women the long sought liberation and equality is a question to ponder upon. The first and foremost expectation from the discussed protest movement is the sustenance of the momentum the women created. As mentioned before, the new transition government did include women in its core committee but it is not enough. 40 per cent seat reservation is not called 'equal'. Hence, more participation from the women is to be encouraged plus they should be included and consulted in any major decision concerning the re-building of the nation.

Here, one more clause arise which is very important to take into consideration. This point is about 'participation'. The psychology of participation¹² is often inductive in nature. This means that a person gets directly or indirectly induced to participate in something by another person or a group of them. This in turn means that, at times, participation depends upon the activeness of an event or the activeness of the majority of people to participate in it. In Sudan's context, the expectation is indeed a lot but it may get hampered due to the lack of a chaotic and active protest environment. While during the course of the protest, everyone was filled with vigour to accomplish a goal. The primary goal was accomplished as well. But the women's revolution is the associated narrative attached to it whose journey only started after the accomplishment of the primary goal. The situation in Sudan right now is relatively stable and not many women will be out in the open protesting for their rights. Half of them will consider the participation in the revolution enough for their lifetimes or enough to bag their rights. While the other half will be worried about the proceedings and whether they will eventually get their equality

before law or not, but they will be too reluctant to step out of their homes. They will fall prey to the gimmick of overall low participation subjecting them to harassment. This harassment may come from the government which is still largely male-dominated or from their society itself which is still patriarchal. The Sudanese revolution may seem like an equal space for both the genders to openly fight for their rights but in reality it is far distant from the dream. Men gave chance to the women of course because of selfish reasons explained earlier. This not at all means that patriarchy or its roots and branches are uprooted from its soil. One must not mistake on that. Hence, this very patriarchal mindset which is all the more present in the minds of the women and the now passive revolution may cut short many of the expectations one has from it.

Although the political future of women cannot be entirely predicted in a positive note, the social picture seems a bit blurry too. Whereas the public flogging and harassment may go down relatively more, the domestic violence and sexual assaults will still stay a problem for the nation. But, comparatively, it will be a bit easier for the women to go file a complaint for any such activities only if she can gather courage enough to cross the courtyard of her home in the first place. The main expectation from the interim government and the democracy to follow will be a ban on the female genital mutilation. Though it will be very difficult to trace and detect affected women in a country where Islamic law hangs on the heads like a sword. Still, hopes of confession will be alive.

Along with all this the girls must be educated and must be incorporated in the employment sector. The employment cannot be a compulsion but the education must be. Education will not only open them up to the world of possibilities but also make them understand, not question, which things should be followed and which should be discarded for their good. They must be able to decide for themselves and be able to stand alone in a crowd of a thousand men with a brave heart. The revolution has indeed initiated a starting point and with the right education they must be able to pave the path for the generations to come.

Also it is expected that more and more foreign investment should be brought to Sudan to save its economy. A democratic government would mean a relatively stable one- but most importantly a safe one. The government should devise its foreign relations in such a manner that foreign companies feel the ease of investing in a new economy. The African Union must intervene and help Sudan constitute an action group against peripheral instability¹³, especially in Darfur region. This would keep a check on the extremism and frequent warfare. This would also give out a picture of integrated and safe Sudan to the world and hence, can attract more investment to it.

Last but not the least is the expectation regarding maintaining the democracy Sudan is moving towards. The question is never about initiating something; it is about keeping it

stable and working. Whether it is the new democracy or the women's revolution for equality and freedom, all will only be well when they are nurtured and sustained with proper attention. Abandoning anything in between thinking that it would go on without any effort is the biggest mistake Sudan can commit at this critical point.

To discuss on the further evolution of the protest, one must take into view two contrary statements. First is the success of the revolution leading to a gender inclusive government and a free Sudan for the women. If this happens as expected the protests in all forms will automatically end and Sudan will be seen as a safe, sound and secured nation. There, a protest would only arise if the democratic government fails. One should keep in mind that democracy never fails; it is the manifestation of it in the respective states which does. It will be indeed very historic if it works, even by a quarter of a cent. But if it fails, the protest has all the intention to come back into action. This can be understood by the fact that women are still not very happy with the structure and composition of the government and some of them are ready to protest more to fulfil their demands.

So the second statement can be- failure of the revolution regarding bringing substantial long-term changes into the society. If this happens then new protests will surface again. This time, the people especially the women would be well versed with the protest mechanism. They would lead new protests- may be general or feministic in nature. The unequal democratic set-up will for sure pose a serious problem for the women and they would keep on protesting in whatever means possible. This leads us to understand about the nature of the future protests, if any. The protests may not become as violent as they were back in 2018-2019, but they would be consistent in their manner. The participation of women may not be very large as well but whoever participates will do it with conviction.

The second statement would also include the failure of sustaining the annulment of the penal code 157 which is abolishing public flogging on women. Moreover, if the domestic and public safety and security for women does not improve there might be another string of protests with respect to it. Also, if their contribution towards the success of the revolution is ignored or forgotten in any manner and oppressive patriarchy continues its holds on them, another truly feminist revolution might brew for rescue. Therefore, Sudan must move slowly and strategically forward while catering to all the basic demands which can otherwise end it before it even starts.

With the spread of the COVID-19 (Corona virus) pandemic across the world, Sudan now, is more worried about its survival as compared to its neighbours. Because of its poor infrastructure and inadequate health care facilities, the Government of Sudan is urging the United Nations to offer help and save them from the crisis. The capital city of Khartoum has been locked down for three weeks starting from 18 April, 2020 after the

cases arose to 66 with 10 deaths. All the flights and visas to eight highly affected countries are cancelled temporarily. Shortage of testing kits and protective gear for the health workers are reasons for their utmost worries. The interim government, so far, is handling the situation with the best of their capabilities. Out of the largest spread of the virus in the continent of Africa, they are sure that Sudan will be worst hit in the coming days because of its infrastructural defects. Mosques and public gatherings are banned and strict security forces including the military are guarding various check-posts across the city.

Sudan is going through a very delicate phase in its governance. If the interim government in Sudan right now takes utmost care in the fight against the pandemic, with of course respect to their economic stability, the people will be definite of a better Sudan in the future. If Sudan comes out of the pandemic with satisfactory results, protests may even stop for a while. In any case, even after the lock-down will be lifted, people will be in fear of large gatherings and public visits for a long time to come. This will in itself lower protest participation to a large extent. But, if the government fails to cater even to the very basic needs of the people during this pandemic, then there might be another round of protests on the way.

Conclusion

Time and again, protest movements around the world show us the solidarity of good beliefs. Whether they are success stories or failures, one thing special about them is the consistency they exhibit. The failed movements teach the world, all the more, about how to minimise mistakes the next time they strike again. Protests are the rawest form of resistance and dissent. A society needs its share of protests to keep the system in check. Because the people in administrative power will always tend to misuse their positions, hence, it is important for the power of the common people to bulge its head out to counter those. The women's revolution in Sudan is a perfect example of a raw protest. It can be called so because there was no turning back for them. It was free from planning and strategies and direction from the men. It was fierce and it was the beginning of something unique in Sudan.

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