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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Women, Revolution, and Backlash: Igniting Feminist Mobilization in Sudan

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Women were at the forefront of the popular uprising that overthrew Sudan's dictator, Omar al-Bashir, in 2019 (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2021). In the aftermath of the uprising, different forms of feminist mobilization emerged. Based on interviews conducted in Sudan in early 2022, we argue that this feminist mobilization was sparked by the backlash facing women during and after what is popularly known as the "December revolution."[1]

Building on the conflict and gender scholarship, which notes that women in different contexts mobilize in response to conflict-related sexual violence (e.g., Kreft 2019), we suggest that backlash in Sudan following the December revolution ignited organized responses from women's groups, including feminist groups. This is significant because feminism was labeled as Western imperialism and against Sharia law by the al-Bashir regime, and because the women's movement in Sudan rejected using the term (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017).

To understand backlash in Sudan, we have to move beyond Faludi's (1991, 26) description of it as a "powerful counterassault on women's rights," or, as Zaremberg, Tabbush, and Friedman (2021, 529) describe, a countermovement "consisting of actors who seek to roll back women's progressive rights." The dominant literature situates backlash within religious and far-right populist movements and political parties as a response to women's successes in enacting change (e.g., Biroli and Caminotti 2020; Charrad and Zarrugh 2014; Morsy 2014).

In Sudan, however, backlash occurred *before* women had the opportunity to claim rights as a social group. As Zaremberg, Tabbush, and Friedman (2021, 529) assert, contexts in which "conservatives are taking the lead rather than merely reacting" are often overlooked. Sudan represents such a context in which the

al-Bashir regime (1989–2019) led campaigns of violent Islamization that disproportionately affected women. After the ouster of al-Bashir, backlash emerged not only within the conservative Islamist movement and its military allies, but also within the political and social forces proclaiming to represent the revolution. With this as a backdrop, we call for an approach that moves beyond a unilinear ideological lens. In the Sudanese context, this entails an understanding of backlash that moves beyond Islamism.

Backlash in Sudan

We understand backlash as acts of coercive power targeting female revolutionaries and their bodies through gendered violence and scripts aimed to push them back into the private sphere. *Matloogat* is a word used to describe female protesters. Translated into English, it refers to women who are not "put on a leash" (Nasreldin 2021), and it describes women who contradict social norms. For example, it is considered inappropriate for women to attend protests after sunset or without the company of a male guardian (Abbas 2020). Doing so can impact the reputation of the women and their families negatively, as they are seen as engaging in immoral and promiscuous behavior (Human Rights Watch 2016). Essentially, under the al-Bashir regime, women's participation in street protests threatened the ideological project of creating an Islamic state and society where women were envisioned as mothers and wives.

Using coercive power, the al-Bashir regime targeted women's bodies through gendered violence and discursively tried to relegate women to the private sphere, keeping them "where they belong," with security agents often calling women protesters "prostitutes" and accusing them of shaming their families (Abbas 2019). Backlash also manifested in physical violence. During the demonstrations and in detention, security and military officers tore off women's hijabs and cut their hair to threaten female protesters that other parts of their bodies were at risk. During the Khartoum Massacre in June 2019, the Rapid Support Forces violently dispersed a large sit-in in front of the military headquarters, and women (and some men) were subject to sexual abuse (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2019).

Driven by the same patriarchal logic, female protesters also faced sexual harassment from their male counterparts, and they were silenced for speaking about such incidents and accused of smearing the image of the revolution (Nasreldin 2022). The marginalization of women during the negotiations between the transitional military council and the revolutionary forces in August 2019 was a major tipping point in the conflict, demonstrating that other political parties operated under a similar patriarchal logic as the Islamists (see Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2021). Until the military coup in October 2021, those claiming to represent the revolution continued to sideline women's participation from formal politics. Non-Islamist political parties and unions justified this by referring to Sudan's conservative culture, as well as women's

lack of political experience and their emotional biological nature (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2020).

Responding to the Backlash: Sudanese Feminist Mobilization

Despite the backlash, Sudanese women are not absent from the public sphere. Although largely sidelined from formal politics, they found other spaces, online and offline, to organize away from established political elites in parties and social movements, including the older generation of women's rights activists. And while the aftermath of the December revolution has been described as a "disappointment" and a "betrayal" of women,[2] it demonstrated that youth politics outside of formal institutions could contribute to the toppling of a president (Nugdalla 2020). Younger women, many without previous experience of political activism, have since established their own women's groups and initiated campaigns, building on the confidence and solidarity created during the popular uprising. As one interlocutor said,

> The fact that the young generation is calling themselves feminist is directly related to the revolution and the awareness it created. ... There was a surge of confidence built during the revolution, but also growing awareness about the restrictions we face and that there are so many women who are victims of gender-based violence. So, from this growing awareness, solidarity between us emerged and also a willingness and excitement about challenging the status quo. I myself identify as feminist as a way of challenging the status quo.[3]

One example of increased feminist mobilization after the revolution is the establishment of groups such as the Noon movement. "Noon" is the first letter of the word "feminism" in Arabic نسوية (*niswi'iyya*).[4] Groups with feminist labels exist not only in Khartoum but also in different regions across the country. For example, the Feminist Gathering in Gedarif and the Feminist Forum in Kassala were born during the revolution. Both emerged from the east of the country, which is usually considered to be very conservative.

Another example of an organization established amid backlash is Maydanik, which can be translated as "feminist space." It was formed to provide a safe zone for women at the main protest site outside the military headquarters during the revolution. It offered support for victims and created awareness about sexual harassment, including the fact that "it happened within the revolution itself by the people protesting."[5]

While there is no monolithic definition of what feminism is in the Sudanese context, the groups that have emerged as a result of the backlash all aim to challenge the status quo. One interlocutor noted,

> Younger women see it as a form of resistance. We may not know fully feminist philosophy, but to us the term signifies a rejection of the system we live under.

> The feminist movement is now flourishing making invisible women visible. There is a hunger for knowledge. People want to define themselves as feminist.[6]

Changing Meanings and Patterns of Feminist Protests in Sudan

Although challenging the status quo means different things to different feminist organizations and individuals, this range of possibilities is seen as a strength by young feminists.[7] The new wave of feminist mobilization critiques the older mainstream women's movement like the Sudan Women's Union,[8] which was and continues to be composed of mainly Arab Muslim elites in Khartoum (Al-Nagar and Tønnessen 2017). In addition to catering to a very limited demographic, its approach did not challenge the status quo of preserving religion and culture, which younger feminists claim embed it within a patriarchal logic that strips the movement of its transformative potential.[9] Thus, the mainstream women's movement further mirrors the failings of the political elites, which privileged a very limited demographic, marginalizing others.

Consequently, many young feminists have advocated for an intersectional approach attentive to how violence intersects with race, ethnicity, class, religion, and sexuality. An intersectional approach entails that, in the words of one interviewee, "conservative notions are being challenged,"[10] including and especially related to bodily autonomy and sexuality. The Noon movement, for example, is the first feminist organization in Sudan that has openly supported LGBTQ+ rights (Tønnessen, Al-Nagar, and Khalaf Allah 2022). In their view, an intersectional approach represents an alternative and "nonelitist" vision for the women's movement in Sudan and political leadership generally.[11] Young feminists are also calling for the country's diversity to be reflected in the membership and leadership of feminist organizations with representation of women from marginalized groups and regions, which in the Sudanese context constitutes a radical transformation of politics.

The Sudanese case thus challenges the idea that backlash occurs as a response to feminist advances and is located solely in specific conservative political ideologies. In Sudan, the backlash occurred before localized expressions of feminist mobilization. As such, it is the backlash that mobilized young feminist to action. By paying attention to the emergence of new feminist mobilizations, Sudan also reveals the ways in which older women's movements too had been implicated in the patriarchal logics of governance.

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Notes

1. All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the interlocutors, and due care has been taken to ensure their anonymity against a backdrop of a volatile political situation following the military hijack of the democratic transition in October 2021.
2. Interview (in Arabic) with Feminist 5, Khartoum, February 2022.
3. Interview (in English), Feminist 1, Khartoum, May 2022.

4. See حركةنونالنسوية (noonmovement.org).
5. Interview (in English), Feminist 4, Khartoum, February 2022.
6. Interview (in English) Feminist 2, Khartoum, February 2022.
7. Interview (in Arabic) Feminist 3, Khartoum, May 2022.
8. Interview (in English) Feminist 2, Khartoum, May 2022.
9. Interview (in English) Feminist 6, Khartoum, February 2022.
10. Interview (in English), Feminist 1, Khartoum, May 2022.
11. Interview (in English), Feminist 6, Khartoum, May 2022.

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