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Interview

On the fight of the Sudanese Professionals Association: "We Want to Take Sudan From This Dark Corner to a Bright Future"

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Description:

On August 4, 2019, the Sudanese military council signed an agreement with Freedom and Change, a body representing the country's mass protest movement. The agreement establishes the structures and powers of a transitional government that will lead the country out of almost three decades of authoritarian rule, with the expectation of elections in three years. It has been hailed as a major victory by protest leaders, who secured their terms on three key sticking points in several tense months of negotiations: limiting the participation of the military council in transitional structures, stripping military leaders of absolute immunity from prosecution, and subordinating the infamous Janjaweed militia to the general command of the armed forces.

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The agreement follows more than eight months of protests, sit-ins, and political mass strikes across the country. At the forefront of the uprising has been the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an umbrella coalition of seventeen white-collar trade unions that had been officially banned in the country since its founding.

SPA activist and geophysics professor Nuha Zein represented the group at the 2019 convention of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). DSA delegates Ella Wind and Niall Reddy conducted this interview with her on the day the constitutional agreement was announced.

Ella Wind (EW):During the uprisings that swept the Arab world almost a decade ago, Sudan experienced a string of popular protests, but nothing that matched the scale of neighboring countries. What set the masses in motion now? Was there a particular trigger?

Nuha Zein (NZ): It was kind of an accumulation of reasons because, if you think about it, from the beginning, when the regime of al-Bashir came to power on June 30, 1989, it overthrew an elected government. So, this is one.

The second thing is that Sudanese people, in their behavior, are very peaceful. So they were very patient about the mistreatment and brutality that the government was meting out during the initial years.

And then came this kind of Islamic terrorism and the embargo of the US administration in 1993 for Sudan, and life was terrible for Sudanese people. And then there was the discovery of oil. Life was getting a little bit better, but at the same time you see your money is leaving the country.

At the same time, people were just trying and trying to say no and to raise their voices. The brutal regime used to either detain or kill them; all kinds of brutal responses.

We also have a problem in the south. South Sudan, separated from Sudan in 2011, is also an issue.

So for thirty years, a host of accumulated issues stifled the protest movement. We tried to have a revolution in 2013. They killed many people. Maybe the Sudanese people were not very ready for that. In 2016, we went on disobedience for three days. That was successful, but it was also not enough to go on a revolution.

The last point is about political parties in Sudan. They have a long history, but they didn't practice democracy enough for the last thirty years to sit down at one table and discuss how to oppose this regime.

The al-Bashir regime used to reserve 70 percent of the state budget for security. So he managed to allocate full security for himself, and 1 percent of the budget for health care, and 0.8 percent for education. When people went out on [the streets] in December, even if they didn't go out to bring him down, they went out because the price of bread was very high for them. They were just going out protesting that we need better life. The demands were not that high. But when the response [from the regime] was very violent, people escalated their demands.

My association was formed officially in June 2018, and the revolution started in December 2018. So they stood by each other on the street and planned, organized leading, and then [the revolution] went [forward].

Niall Reddy (NR): So the revolution started really over bread-and-butter issues literally but it ended up completely changing the political regime in the country. Can you tell us in a little more detail what actual demands people were fighting for, and how they changed over time?

NZ: When people were suffering, there was no freedom to voice our struggles. There is no dignity for people in Sudan. The security forces have the right to strike and humiliate anyone. At the same time, the regime managed to somehow to persuade the Sudanese people that, if you take to the streets, Sudan will end up like Libya, like Syria, like Yemen. We will have civil war. And Sudanese people were scared of that.

They also tried to persuade people that, even if the regime is terrible, al-Bashir is the best man for now. People believed that, among the political forces, there was no one else qualified to be our president. So people took to the streets for very simple demands, and then when the response [from the regime] was very violent, the demands were escalated. We had this declaration of Freedom and Change, which had three main points: the first, to bring down al-Bashir and his totalitarian regime, the second, to form a civilian government that would exude democracy, justice, and freedom; and the third, to present these perpetrators for a trial according to the International Charter.

For the second one, the formation of a civilian authority, we had a lot of work to do. Because the regime has been there for thirty years; it's not easy for them to be replaced. So the easiest thing that they did four months after the beginning of the revolution, al-Bashir down stepped down and they brought in another general. But we didn't want to replace a dictator with another dictator. So people continued. And there were three things that kept us alive: we were peaceful, we were organized, we were united around the slogan "Freedom and Change."

So no matter how they try to provoke us to use violence, people wouldn't. How many times they try to kill and rape girls and put us in prison. People have lot of anger, disappointment, a lot of sadness, but we kept ourselves peaceful. It wasn't easy, but that's how it was.

EW:What were the key turning points in the process of the uprising?

NZ:The revolution started December 13, 2018.

And it wasn't in Khartoum. It was in a very far, small region in southeastern Sudan, in a place called Ad-Damazin. And then from there, it went to another city in the north. The regime killed people in the first place, and the next place. The revolution went to another city in Sudan near the Red Sea. And then, after, it came to Khartoum. So the revolution didn't start like any other revolution, from the capital city.

NR:It all started from the periphery.

NZ:Yes. People just go from school demanding lower bread prices. It was a protest with simple demands.

Exactly seven days after that, my association was already aligned with the revolution. And we started organizing meetings according to a schedule. It would go on Facebook every Sunday in the morning, to show people what to do from Sunday to next Saturday. So every day we would have a procession for something. We have a procession to clean the neighborhood, we have a procession to go to the palace. We have another procession to visit the mothers of killed protesters in their houses. Thousands of people would go to visit a mother and support her because she lost her son. It was amazing how many peaceful mechanisms we found.

NR: Wow. So there was a constant stream of this kind of activity and protest and solidarity?

NZ: Yes.

NR: And then on April 6 there was an important event?

NZ: Yes. And why April 6? Because it is the anniversary of our last revolution in 1985. Just four years after that, al-Bashir came to power. So it was our last peaceful revolution in which we got an elected government. The SPA organized what we called "the million procession." People went to the headquarters of the Sudanese Armed Forces in Khartoum. People were, to be honest, afraid to do a sit-in in front of the Sudanese Armed Forces building. But it succeeded. This sit-in continued for two months. Many diplomatic people went and visited the protestors over there. It was very peaceful.

NR: How many people were involved?

NZ: Six million. The brutal regime, in its deep state counterrevolution, always tried to find excuses to oppose us. So sometimes they call us communists. Sometimes they say we are anti-Islam. Sometimes they call us drug dealers. Every day there was a new accusation. One Friday, the sit-in was the biggest Friday prayer in Sudan for the last thirty years.

Christians were helping cover praying people from the sun because it was very hot. They were just stretching very big sheets out over them. So it was really peaceful between all kind of religions. So this revolution has nothing to do with religion, has nothing to do with race or tribes or anywhere. It was just for Sudan.

The sit-in went amazingly well. You didn't have to worry about what to eat or what to drink, because everything came to you. We had lots of tents in the sit-in. We had a tent for medical care, for emergencies all for free. We had many tents for free food. We had lots of tents people just set up at the wall around the headquarters of the Sudanese Armed Forces.

It was just this amazing picture until May 3. Then the Janjaweed [a militia group active in the Sudan and Chad] came. This Janjaweed are quite malicious. When Bashir couldn't control them, he negotiated a deal with the Janjaweed [six years ago]. So they undertook mass killings of foreigners in Sudan in collaboration with al-Bashir. And then he promoted [the Janjaweed] and brought them to Khartoum to be an official armed force.

So, on May 3, they tried to kill many of the peaceful protestors. They shot some of them. People were very angry, but we continued our sit-in. The military council realized that they will never manage to dismantle or to stop this sit-in.

The government went to Egypt to get some advice from the intelligence security service there, because in Egypt, they did it. They had killed two thousand at the Rabaa Massacre [in 2013].

So they went to learn from the experience of Egypt. And one week later, they did it. It was the last day of Ramadan, people were fasting. They came at 5 a.m., when everyone was asleep, and they killed 180 in two hours. And threw tens of them alive in the River Nile. People found the bodies with cement blocks tied on their feet so they couldn't float. They raped girls, they raped doctors, females. Even they raped males. When the males tried to protect girls, they raped boys. This is the Janjaweed. This is what happened.

This is the turning point in the revolution. They burnt the tents and everything. For one week, there was a lot of anger, a lot of sadness. But with my association and other forces they recovered again, and we started our procession again. Then we decide, this is the time for disobedience. We carried people to do it. And it was very easy because people were full of anger. It was very successful, disobedience in the whole of Sudan.

EW: What kind of disobedience?

NZ: Nobody left their home. People just stayed at home. That needed preparation, so for the week beforehand we had committees for resistance in all the neighborhoods taking care of poor people. They prepared them for the three days by bringing them all kinds of food and money and everything. So they don't need to go out. It was amazing support. And it was very successful for three days.

And then the military council asked supporters of Freedom and Change to come back for a negotiation. People were divided about whether to negotiate because they were very angry after the massacre. But we were adopting two lines. We have the line of public pressure, but we also have the line of negotiation. They happen at the same time. Very peaceful public pressure, and at the same time, expert people in the negotiations.

NR: So when was al-Bashir forced out?

NZ: On April 10. Just four days after the sit-in started.

The military forces and the brutal regime immediately removed Bashir and brought in another guy, General [Ahmed Awad Ibn] Auf. He stayed for thirty hours. People rejected him because we know he belongs to this regime. So after thirty hours, they also had him resign and brought us another general, [Abdel Fattah al-]Burhan, who is still there now. Starting at that time, they asked us to start negotiations. They recognized that we are the representatives of the people, so they wanted to sit down with us. And we have our conditions. We want civilian government. No more from the brutal regime party. No more. None of them will participate in the coming transition of government. They can participate in the election after three years, but not now. And to put on trial not just the perpetrators who killed our protesters in May and June, but the crimes since al-Bashir came to power in 1989.

And they accepted it. But the deep state tried many times to make our negotiations fail. So it was like up and down, up and down sometimes in the negotiation until [July]. They signed the political agreement. It says that the Freedom and Change forces are a representative. The military council and us agreed to sit down. This is last week. This morning they signed the initial letters, the constitutional announcement, which is seventeen pages. It is about everything. About equality, about justice. About the three councils of the transitioning government. The sovereign, the legislative, and the executive council. The rights of women, the rights of youth. How to bring justice, everything. The majority of this sovereign council is civilian. We have representatives from the military council, but the majority is civilian.

So finally we got our civilian government.

EW: So the main group that has been leading the revolution has been the SPA, the Sudanese Professionals Association. Can you tell us more about the origins of this group? Who does it represent, and what was it doing in the years before the uprising?

NZ: We have a long historical legacy, since 1947, when the labor unions were struggling for their rights under British colonization. After that, things were improving until 1989, when al-Bashir came. At that time, al-Bashir froze any activities of these unions and impeded any attempts to form any trade unions. Instead, the regime had their own unions who serve their policies but not the interests of the people. So we tried to refound ourselves again in 2012. It failed because they detained and put our leaders in prison. Then, in 2014, it failed again.

From 2016 until mid-2018, just six months before the revolution started, they managed to build the SPA. And the three main unions that composed the SPA were the schoolteachers' union, the medical doctors' union, and the Democratic Lawyers Association. They signed a charter. Then new bodies came in, in like my body, the Professors Association, then the journalists. As of now, twenty-five bodies have signed the charter to be under the umbrella of the SPA.

So, after the revolution started, SPA aligned with the people. On January 1, 2019, they made a declaration, which is called the Declaration of Freedom and Change. We asked the political forces and opposition forces to sit and discuss what we have to do to fight this brutal regime. And for the first time in Sudan, those forces sat on one table beside armed movements, beside committees from neighborhoods and the resistance, beside civil society forces. More than seventy bodies under the umbrella of the Forces of Freedom and Change.

But they gave their mandate to the SPA to lead and organize the processions. They did that for three reasons. The first reason is because our body is the first one who aligned with the people. Second, because our leaders, our members are on the street with them. The third reason is that we don't have any ambition for future executive leadership in the new government. We are just a union. So that's why people trust us a lot for any plan to achieve this revolution. People just execute it and do it together.

NR: Could you give us a sense of other key players, the key members of the coalition? Were there other trade unions, industrial workers, etcetera, involved? Other social movements? You mentioned that there were neighborhood councils.

NZ: Yes. The most effective body for the last few months was the committee of neighborhood resistance. They are not only in Khartoum, we have these committees in all cities in Sudan. They respond and contact each other when there is a procession for justice.

These neighborhood committees will not stop. They will continue as civil forces because they have to watch the representatives in the legislative council. From these committees and from these neighborhoods, there will be members in the legislative council. So their job is not finished. They will continue within the transitional capacity, but not us.

EW: Can you give us a sense of whether there were other demographics or social groups in Sudan that are very well represented in the protest movement, like youth, or any parts of the country where it's been especially strong.

NR: It seems, for example, like women have been at the forefront of things.

NZ: From all sectors and from all areas, citizens, students, and women were amazing in this revolution. No matter if they were from the village or from a town. Whether they're educated or not. The mothers were especially amazing. They would go outside and encourage the protestors, "We lost our son, but we see our sons in your eyes, so their blood is not dry yet, so you have to go and complete this revolution." People were so encouraged by women.

Sometimes revolutions go up and down. Sometimes people feel very frustrated that we are not gaining anything. The military council doesn't respond. So usually women at the procession encourage men to continue. If we women are outside, what are you doing inside? So they just go outside.

Sometimes there was teargas. We had many of these strong women throw it back and burn their hands. They would send it back to the military forces. This encouraged us and the men that we have to continue.

NR: You've already spoken about it quite a bit, but could you elaborate again on some of the key tactics at different moments in the revolution?

NZ: When the revolution started, many people were on the internet, because it was the only way to contact each other. They were saying, "Why don't we go on civil obedience? Why don't we go like this?" We said, we are not ready. And, really, we were not ready at that time. December and January, before the sit-in, we had a partial political strike. We did it a couple of times.

We had instructions for how people could do it. These helped to inform people and made them aware that striking is their right.

And then the sit-in came, and we did a full strike also. After the sit-in and the massacre, people were really ready to undertake disobedience. They were ready because they had lot of anger, for the blood of the two hundred young people that had been spilled at that time. So the disobedience was very successful.

But sometimes we got in a lot of arguments. About this is not the time, it's not good timing to do this. People had different opinions. But each time, the SPA managed to do something good, so they trusted us more.

Regardless of the main methodologies or tactics, day by day, it depends on the response of the people. It depends on what the military council is doing at that time. We make our plan according to the situation.

EW: In the teacher strikes we've seen in the United States, teachers really benefited from having organic social ties with the community around them. I'm wondering if you all, as professors and teachers, also interact with the community that way.

NZ: I can give you one example. Young and old people were killed in this revolution. But one of the worst killings happened to a schoolteacher. The whole of Sudan got very angry about what happened. Because he was raped by a big metal object until his intestine was bleeding, and he died. He was a schoolteacher who used to oppose the regime for many years. And he was against the fake teacher unions that were aligned with the government, because they were not acting in the interests of the people, but in the interests of the brutal regime. So he used to oppose them a lot, until they killed him while they tortured him in prison.

You can't imagine how many people went to the streets for him. His students made songs for him. He was something very special. So, yes, I agree, the schoolteachers have more interactions with more people. They know the problems, how they feel. It's not like they are bosses, or far away from normal people.

NR: Something that seems to be quite important about Sudan, that it shares in common with Tunisia, the other country that was most successful in toppling its regime, is that both revolutions seemed to be led centrally by a labor movement or a labor coalition. Do you think that is significant?

NZ: Over the last ten years in the Middle East, if you see Libya, if you see Yemen and Syria and Tunisia, and then Egypt and then Sudan, you'll see different ways of conducting the revolution. For us from Sudan, we see the Tunisian experiment as the best.

The mechanisms and tactics that they used in the revolution were very close to ours. It's not like the other countries. At the same time, we both stuck to being peaceful. Because of the labor thinking. As I told you, when leaders come from inside the people, they know how to handle them. But when leaders come from outside, they will not understand how to organize them, how to lead them. So we were very close to the Tunisian revolution in the way the labor movement was involved.

EW: The Sudanese victory has come at a time when, in the rest of the Arab world, people have really lost hope. You said even the regime in Sudan was using these as examples to discourage you from trying to undertake an uprising. So how do you see the Sudanese revolution in the context of these uprisings more broadly?

NZ: Before starting the revolution, there was fear that it would be like what's happening in Libya and Syria and Yemen. The regime also managed to persuade people that the US embargo on Sudan was the main reason why we have a bad economic situation. People believed it to some extent. But this embargo was released in 2017; by the time 2019 arrived, the economy was only getting worse and worse. Then people realized that [our economic problems] have nothing to do with the US embargo. It has something to do with the way that the leaders in Sudan deal with government.

We didn't want to go the same course as the Arab revolutions that failed or resulted in civil war. Besides, we have two peaceful revolutions in our history, so we have more experience with that. Another thing is that a Sudanese citizen is totally different from an Arabic citizen. We are an Arabic country, and we're part of the Middle East because we speak Arabic, but not because we are Arabic. It's different, we belong to Africa more. But at the same time that we are a part of Africa and the African Union, we are also a part of the Middle East. We are mixed. So stability in Sudan will affect the stability of the whole region, especially in Africa.

Besides that, we were lucky to have the SPA and other good leaders. They increased the awareness of the youth of how to have a peaceful revolution. We are very proud about what is going on in Sudan. And we felt that our neighbor countries encouraged us. Especially in Africa, in many countries, like Algeria, which also has a revolution right now. We support each other during that.

We all look to each other and try to do it the best way and keep it peaceful, even if the regimes provoked us. I wouldn't say it was easy. It wasn't easy, because some days seeing the videos or being there, you just cry. Because you have nothing to do. You are just going outside very peacefully and they kill us. But people were very determined.

NR: What do you think happens next in Sudan? It seems there have been incredible victories and you have secured key concessions from the regime, but how do you see the process unfolding from here? What is there still to fight for?

NZ: Yes, because when the regime delegations signed the constitutional announcement, that doesn't mean we succeeded. We still have two challenges. The first challenge is dealing with the deep state or the counterrevolution.

They are still there in all institutions. And they will not kept silent, they will try to keep us down. We know that. So this is our first challenge.

The second challenge is to build Sudan. We want to take Sudan from this dark corner to a bright future. We don't have any kind of infrastructure in Sudan. Everything is collapsed. The economic situation is very bad. So is the health situation and the education situation. Our international relations are also misdirected. In each aspect, Sudan needs to be rebuilt. So this is our second challenge. It's to defeat this deep state and to build our new one. So we have not succeeded yet, we are just in our infancy. It's a long way

[Jacobin](#)

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