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THE LONG JOURNEY OF SUDANESE WOMEN: From the margins of politics to influential roles

Women in Sudan have played a key part in historic uprisings, which have led to major developments in advancing their competence as agents for change. However, a lack of real political will and support have hindered women's effective leadership and inclusion. Women's meaningful participation is essential for sustainable peace and democracy in Sudan.

Women have been politically active and played key roles at critical turning points in Sudan's history. Yet, this has not been translated into official recognition in political processes or substantive representation in government. The latest example of this is women's active role in response to the crisis that has evolved in Sudan since 15 April 2023, when the country plunged into violence amidst a power struggle between the two main factions of the ruling military regime, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Women have established a range of coalitions and movements working towards ending the war through advocacy campaigns, such as Women Against the War, which comprises of 200 prominent female advocates and human rights activists who have been active in making statements on social media and documenting human rights violations against women. Women have also done substantive work in de-escalating the conflict at the local level and ceasefire-monitoring through initiatives such as the Ceasefire Initiative in Darfur and the Youth Citizen Observers Network. Moreover, women continue to support internally displaced people by providing basic services and catering to basic needs through initiatives such as the South Red Sea Organization Initiative.

Despite these significant activities and the fact that the conflict severely affects women, not least in the

form of exacerbated sexual violence, women, or civilians more broadly, have not been included or consulted in the recent ceasefire negotiations led by the US and Saudi Arabia. There is a valid concern that the role of women is once more being limited to that of civil society actors at the grassroots level, leading to them not receiving official recognition in the political process.

Similarly, Sudanese women were essential to the recent historic 2018-

2019 revolution, which led to the overthrowing of former president Omar al-Bashir. Women sustained the protests for months by leading and engaging in various forms of civic resistance through art, poetry and social media activism. Female demonstrators from across classes, generations, faiths, educational levels and ethnicities continued to occupy the streets while being exposed to arrest, harassment and gunfire by security agents. Female lawyers and media professionals offered their

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Women in Sudan have played a crucial role in historic uprisings in the country, including during the revolution in 2018-2019. They have now once more been part of leading the way in mobilising humanitarian support, de-escalation, and advocating for peace due to the recent escalation of armed conflict.
- The latest revolution had positive effects for women in Sudan, including the commitment of a 40 per cent representation in Sudan's national legislative assembly, the repeal of gender discriminatory laws and provisions, and a general shift in attitudes towards the role of women.
- Despite positive developments for women, their effective leadership and inclusion has been impeded by the lack of active political will and support.
- Moving forward, an inclusive political process must be created, which includes women and other key representatives of civil society, is legitimate, represents real constituencies in Sudan, and paves the way for a democratic transition.

professional expertise in support of creating a campaign for reforming the family law, which previously prevented women from obtaining travel documents for their children without the consent of the children's fathers.

However, it is worth noting the progress, although limited, that has been made in recent years towards a more equal inclusion of women in politics and society. Following the revolution, in 2020, Sudan's transitional government repealed the family law and banned female genital mutilation. Furthermore, women's participation in the revolution led to positive shifts in attitudes towards girls and women within society. Young women involved as vocal protesters on the streets and confronting security forces, even late at night, was now seen as more acceptable and even admirable.

As a result of the visible role of women during the demonstrations, commitments were made for the transitional period; securing a minimum of 40 per cent representation for women in Sudan's national legislative assembly and the repealing of gender discriminatory laws and provisions. Ultimately, women gained two out of 11 seats in the Sovereign Council and women were appointed to lead four out of 16 ministries. Thus, although small steps were taken towards women's inclusion, the set target of 40 per cent was not even close to being reached, as support and active political will for women's effective leadership continued to be absent. Similarly, during the negotiations of the Juba Peace Agreement in 2020, women had a representation of 10 per cent, the effect of which was largely symbolic, as women had little to no influence on the outcomes of the agreement.

Although Sudanese women have increased their preparedness to mobilise politically and to join political parties in recent years, many have continued to organise in parallel to the political structures rather than fully integrating themselves into established decision-making contexts.

Hence, political integration, or a synergy between political structures in Sudan, must be established to ensure that women's voices are included in political as well as broader peace processes. This also relates to the need for bridging informal and formal approaches and creating linkages between different levels of the peace process, both locally and nationally. Whereas women's participation is expansive at the grassroots level, their participation in official processes continues to be limited. Bringing women's voices forward to allow for a redesign of political processes is essential in addressing the realities on the ground and the consequences of the conflict.

In conclusion, women continue to play a critical role in Sudan's politics, as recent developments, the 2019 revolution, and the previous revolutions of 1964 and 1985 illustrate. While positive progress has been made, as outlined in this paper, women's ability to effectively engage as agents for change is impeded by political realities in Sudan. This has been further demonstrated by the outbreak of war on 15 April 2023. Nevertheless, women have once again played an

essential role in mobilising to assist civilians, in calling for an end to the conflict, and in monitoring human rights violations and the ceasefire. Moving forward, it is of paramount importance that the recently announced AU and IGAD initiatives, or any other international effort, creates an inclusive and legitimate process which ensures the representation of women, key civil society actors and real constituencies. This is a crucial step in avoiding the loss of positive progress made prior to the recent outbreak of war, but also in ensuring a sustainable peace and a thriving future democracy in Sudan.

This CMI Insight paper is based on research conducted by Alfhid University for Women (AUW) in 2022, supported by CMI, on the motives and objectives of the women who participated in the 2018-2019 revolution, their different ways of contributing and the challenges they faced. It is also based on the findings from a roundtable discussion held at AUW on 26 February 2023. It also serves as a case study to the dynamics outlined in CMI Insight on Recognizing Women's Political Agency – Beyond Advocacy to Inclusion <https://cmi.fi/2023/04/18/cmi-insight-recognising-womens-political-agency-beyond-advocacy-to-inclusion/>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Any international efforts to resume a political process must design an inclusive and legitimate process which ensures the representation of women, key civil society actors and real constituencies.
- In creating an inclusive and representative political process, it is essential to identify and include women's views on national issues in the outcomes of any agreement and to ensure that women's concerns are incorporated in a ceasefire agreement. A role for women must also be established in a ceasefire monitoring mechanism.
- The international community should continue supporting women's coalitions and alliance-building to allow for their mobilisation for peace and political participation and to strengthen their common voice, while taking into consideration the diversity of needs and perspectives among women.