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Sudan

Resistance committees, a revolution from below in Sudan

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Resistance committees, also known as neighbourhood committees, are central actors in the current mobilisations against the coup in Sudan. They are the main self-organising structure of the Sudanese revolution. What prospects for direct democracy do they offer for the country?

The resistance committees - also known as neighbourhood committees - emerged as a central actor in the Sudanese struggle against the previous Islamist regime. They were pivotal to the success of the December 2018 revolution, which uprooted the regime of dictator Omar al-Bashir. Many political actors are betting that the resistance committees will play a central role in the democratic transition process the country is engaged in. They also offer real prospects for direct, 'grassroots' democracy, thanks to their experience of self-management and their local presence.

Neighbourhood committees: a convergence between local solidarity and political resistance

Originally, resistance committees were simple groups of citizens who formed in neighbourhoods in different cities in Sudan, in order to establish by themselves basic services that were lacking in the neighbourhoods, such as electricity and water, and to improve conditions and services in schools and hospitals (by buying school or medical equipment, renovating buildings). For example, in September 2019, in the village of Zuhai (Gezira State), the resistance committees launched a campaign to rebuild the village well; in the Klakla neighbourhood of Khartoum, in January 2020, they organised a major collective clean-up of public spaces as rubbish accumulated in the street with indifference from the authorities. In the city of Al Obeid, in April 2021, they planted trees to support the production of gum arabic, which is the city's economic wealth. These local self-management movements bring together local residents from all different age and social classes, although young men and women are particularly active.

In September 2013, after the separation of South Sudan and the loss of its oil resources, a major economic crisis hit North Sudan, triggering a popular revolt. The resistance committees were at the forefront of this revolt, demanding the fall of the regime. From then on, the 'resistance committees' became an important political actor in the Sudanese political arena, on a par with political organisations and trade unions.

Their emergence prompted the former regime, led by Omar al-Bashir, to focus repression mainly on these resistance committees. The regime sought to dismantle them so that they would not extend their influence into the neighbourhoods where they were active, sometimes as political organisations and sometimes as social and humanitarian service associations. The important fieldwork carried out by the resistance committees earned them the trust of the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods.

The dream of the citizens and activists of the resistance committees was to rebuild the country from the bottom up, starting at the local neighbourhood level. Gradually, the trust and support they received from the inhabitants gave them the enthusiasm to extend this dream to the whole nation. They launched the hashtag 'Hanabniho', which means 'we will rebuild it', implying the country.

Constant political and social activity since the 2019 revolution

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After the fall of the regime in April 2019, the resistance committees remained constantly active, trying to protect the gains of the revolution. At the same time, they tried to rebuild what the previous regime had destroyed, disintegrating the social fabric and cultural life in the neighbourhoods (notably by closing cinemas and cultural centres, and putting their premises up for sale). The neighbourhood committees also organised many political events to support the interests of the revolution, with the aim of building a country for everyone, such as martyrdom commemoration ceremonies in each neighbourhood, and the celebration of the International Day of the Rights of Women and the Disabled. For example, on the occasion of International Women's Rights Day on 8 March 2020, the resistance committees in the Arkawit neighbourhood of Khartoum set up an open clinic where all women could come for free medical treatment and tests, as well as distributing sanitary towels and holding training workshops on breast cancer.

The resistance committees also organised conferences on the future of democracy in Sudan, as well as political self-training workshops. They have been involved in establishing women's and students' unions, taking advantage of the space for freedom granted by the revolution.

Over the past two years, as the country in transition was hit by destructive inflation, and plagued by wild fluctuations in the value of the currency (the Sudanese pound), Neighbourhood committees have taken up the fight against petty corruption at their level by forming teams of 'market watchers' to ensure that traders do not raise their prices by taking advantage of the scarcity of certain resources and thus profiting from the misery of the inhabitants. On social networks, for example, one can see from several cities pictures of young people camping in bakeries to check that bakers are not hogging stocks of flour in the hope of selling their bread for much higher prices on days of shortage. In the village of Al-Hilalia (Gezira State), in October 2019, resistance committees filed a complaint against a baker who was selling expired flour to the entire neighbourhood.

Under Omar al-Bashir's regime, local authorities were grouped into "people's committees" that pursued authoritarian and corrupt policies, seeking to destroy any form of local democracy. After the revolution, the resistance committees tried to prevent this system from being repeated by simply transferring power from one authority to another: some tried to destroy administrative papers necessary for the new authorities to take office to protest against this old system and demand new forms of local democracy.

In some cases, the resistance committees managed to recover common property taken away by the previous regime, such as public squares that had been sold to bosses and investors close to the government.

While the regime pursued a policy of division on racist grounds, the activists of the resistance committees work daily to create links between the inhabitants of the neighbourhood to rebuild a peaceful social climate.

Spearheading the current mobilisations

In recent weeks, during the mass mobilisations that erupted following the coup of 25 October 2021, the resistance committees have emerged as the main actors in the organisation and coordination of the various processions. They replaced the Sudanese Professional Association, which had played the same role during the 2018 mobilisation. Following the revolution, it was the Association of Professionals that played the role of civil society representative in the transitional government, formed by a coalition between civilians and the military. The very disappointing experience of the transitional government, which led to the current coup d'état, has largely contributed to the discrediting of the Association of Professionals in Sudanese public opinion. However, today, if the resistance committees have been able to take the place of the Association of Professionals, it is because they have been able to gain the trust of the revolutionaries, a trust that the Association of Professionals as well as the political parties had lost in recent years.

Thus, as soon as the coup was announced, the resistance committees launched a call for demonstrations to oppose it. They mobilised in the neighbourhoods and informed the inhabitants of the importance of participating in the

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demonstration, distributing leaflets in their neighbourhoods, drawing graffiti on the walls with slogans and timetables and demonstrations. They also used the loudspeakers in the mosques to broadcast political speeches. On the eve of demonstrations, they build barricades during the night with bricks and salvaged objects in order to obstruct the traffic of the forces of law and order and to protect the inhabitants of the neighbourhood from the attacks of the military and militias. This ingenious strategy has largely proven its effectiveness in protecting the demonstrators.

A future for democracy in Sudan?

In conclusion, although the resistance committees are composed of citizens who do not all have experience in the political world, they organise themselves with great professionalism, trying to implement democracy in the way they make decisions. They organise themselves without having recourse to leaders, only to delegates who then coordinate themselves at the level of the borough, and then again above, at the level of the city. It is this internal democracy that has kept them united and strong, and not divided as political parties are in Sudan. This is also what makes some observers hope that the resistance committees are a way to break the monopoly of traditional political party elites in the field of politics in Sudan.

Sudanese people now see that resistance committees can be an alternative to political parties that have failed to create a common climate of collective action to find solutions to Sudan's problems. Now, the resistance committees, thanks to their self-managed structure, are based on local action led by the inhabitants of neighbourhoods or villages, in which everyone participates regardless of their level of political experience: their method therefore initiates a real participatory democracy in Sudan in which everyone has the right to decide.

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