

REVOLUTION IN SUDAN THE PRODUCTION OF "THE PEOPLE" AS AN EMANCIPATORY PRACTICE

Sara Abbas

As someone who studies social movements in Sudan and who has had her childhood dramatically upended by political changes there, the last eight months have been a roller-coaster of emotions. The country is in the throes of revolution. Protests began on December 13, 2018, in the town of Ad-Damazeen, the capital of Blue Nile State, a region that has suffered deeply from conflict. From there unrest spread elsewhere, including to Khartoum, Sudan's capital city. By January 2019, the whole of Sudan and its global diaspora was seemingly in revolt. On April 6, protestors occupied the area in front of the Military General Command in Khartoum and refused to move. Similar sit-ins, on a smaller scale, took place in other cities. A few days later, president Omar Hassan Al-Bashir, who had been in power for thirty years, was forced to step down. During this time, he was indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. His removal from power in April, however, changed little. Other army generals and a notorious militia leader took over and in May and June, were accused of ordering rape and massacres to disperse the sit-ins. They also ordered a shutdown of internet access to disrupt the ability of protestors to organize and mobilize. The protests continued however, and it now appears that the elites have reached a power-sharing deal between civilians and the military.

As I observe the revolution in Sudan and participate actively in it as part of Berlin's Sudanese diaspora, it strikes me that revolutions are a fertile terrain for thinking about "the people"-an idea that is central to populist discourses and performances. "The people" as a populist political symbol has emancipatory potential because it is an "empty signifier" that can integrate and articulate heterogeneous demands of different groups, as Ernesto Laclau (2005) argues in *The Populist Reason*. He asserts that one cannot easily dismiss "the imprecision and

emptiness" of this symbol because it can appeal to and unite plural demands and diverse groups towards a common cause and bring forth action.¹ In Sudan, it is "the people," constituted as they are by the populist discourse during the moment of crisis, who rise up against the unjust Inqaz regime of Omar Al-Bashir, and in the process of doing so, sketch a vision, or rather visions, of the society they want to build - a civilian, rights-based society where human rights violations are punished, and where government officials work not for their own enrichment but for "the people". As Ahmad Hosni has argued, "revolution is an ideology rather than an event. And like all ideologies it comes with its edifice of narratives, interpretive strategies indispensable to which are two premises: the totality of the people and the articulation of an incontro-

vertible antagonist [...] Yet, if the antagonist is always incontrovertibly articulated and identified [...] the 'people' is a much looser notion".²

Furthermore, in studying revolutions and their intersections with populism, it is useful to think of the latter through the lens of political practice, as R.S. Jansen advocates. He sees populism as a "sustained political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite nationalist rhetoric that valorizes 'ordinary people'".³ Every feature of this definition can be found in the current political mobilization that protestors in Sudan have named "revolution", central to which is the notion of "the people." While the revolution is largely fought on the streets by urban, working class youth, the notion of "the people" is more expansive - managing, as Laclau points out, to accommodate different groups with various demands - from justice for violations committed during war to economic redistribution. There is much to be said as well about how "the elite" is constructed, since there are various elites and not all are viewed with antagonism. In fact, the urban, educated professionals, as embodied in the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), are granted a leadership position. But this is a topic for another piece.

The biggest threat that the revolution poses to the political status quo in Sudan is that strong currents within the revolution seek to do what the post-colonial state in Sudan has been unwilling to do: to carve out an identity for the Sudanese "people" based on citizenship, rather than class, tribe, language, or religion. Citizenship of course is a complicated notion that carries a violence of its own. However, from where Sudan's protestors are currently standing, it is a dream that they are willing to die for.

As I observe the revolution in Sudan (...), it strikes me that revolutions are a fertile terrain for thinking about "the people"-an idea that is central to populist discourses and performances.

About the Author:

Sara Abbas is a PhD candidate in Political Science at Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies, Freie Universität Berlin. Her research focuses on the discourses and practices of women members of the Islamist Movement in Sudan and their relationship to the state's "Civilization(al) Project".



© Sara Abbas

1 LACLAU, E. (2005). *ON POPULIST REASON*. LONDON: VERSO.

2 HOSNI, A. (2013). "REVOLUTION AND THE LIMITS OF POPULISM". *OPENDEMOCRACY.NET*, ACCESSED ON JUNE 24, 2019.

3 JANSEN, R.S. (2011). "POPULIST MOBILIZATION: A NEW THEORETICAL APPROACH TO POPULISM". *SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY*, ISSUE 4, P. 77.