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Sudan's torch of peace

Dozens of Sudanese pro-democratic youth groups have morphed into humanitarian ones, battling the apocalyptic situation in the country

In recent years, Sudan has witnessed a massive wave of pro-democratic youth activism, resulting in new political power centres. This activism was driven by the hopes of a predominantly young population for democratic governance, freedom and the recovery of a wrecked economy after decades of autocratic, corrupt rule in one of the poorest countries in the world. But after having persevered through a revolution, coup and military crackdown, can Sudan's revolutionary pro-democratic youth also stay on course in exile or under war circumstances?

In 2018 and 2019, millions of mostly young Sudanese women and men took to the streets, finally toppling long-term dictator Omar al-Bashir. During the subsequent joint military-civilian transitional government, which was supposed to lead up to the first democratic elections, the youth cells that had significantly contributed to bringing about the change were sidelined. Yet, they managed to continue to slowly professionalise, for example in the shape of so-called resistance committees. This development was accelerated when the military and its then-partner Rapid Support Forces (RSF) ended the democratic experiment by staging a coup in October 2021. Through mass demonstrations and smaller gatherings, tens of thousands of young people yet again protested the coup, as well as the military crackdown, braving tear gas, arrests, rubber bullets and real bullets.

With joint 'political charters', Sudan's youth tried to unite the fragmented movement and decide on the best organisational framework (horizontal or vertical) and the approach to change (gradual reform or drastic transformation). With the military unable to form a functioning government, many members of the movement started grassroots committees, bringing social services to a population abandoned by its 'government'.

Months of war

However, on 15 April, a war between the military and the RSF broke out in the country's capital Khartoum, and with it came one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. In only six months, around six million people were displaced internally and across borders. The fighting also expanded into the five Darfur states in the west of the country, where, like in the early 2000s, RSF and some allied Arab militias are pursuing an agenda of ethnic cleansing by attacking certain tribes' communities. Reports of horrid cruelty and human rights violations are surfacing.

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Among those affected and displaced from Khartoum and Darfur are many of those young Sudanese who had been the backbone of the democratisation attempts. Many youth-led political initiatives broke apart. Representing an enormous setback in the fight for change, these developments have disillusioned many, further weakening the already fragmented civil society.

Power and water provision are down in many areas of the capital, as are internet services and mobile phone networks, turning one of the biggest cities in Africa into a black box. RSF has moved into residential areas, using civilians as human shields. Plundering and looting are happening on an industrial scale. There are reports of rape and sexual violence — from Khartoum and even more so from Darfur. The majority of clinics in the conflict areas are either out of supplies, destroyed, or occupied by militia fighters, leaving many citizens without access to health care and medication.

From a political to a humanitarian movement

The Sudanese youth movement has certainly suffered a brain drain, with many activists being forced to flee to other Sudanese states or abroad. Despite this, dozens of youth groups are still working for the greater good. The former pro-democratic political movement has now morphed into a humanitarian one, battling the apocalyptic situation.

The war is taking away even more of the space for young democratic action in

So-called emergency rooms were formed for many neighbourhoods in Khartoum and also online. Young women and men are distributing food and water and are helping citizens to exit

Sudan.

dangerous areas. In the absence of state provision of services (or rather in the face of state abuse and destruction of infrastructure), young teams on the ground find medication for the sick or elderly, organise psychological support for women and girls that have experienced sexual violence, bury the dead, or act as ambulance drivers. Similar initiatives – if fewer – exist in some of the conflict-ridden Sudanese states. They are often supported by peers abroad, who assist online in finding funds, sending money through the few remaining channels, or amplifying calls for needed supplies on social media.

Youth activists are also monitoring human rights violations against civilians in Khartoum and in other cities in Sudan. The *Youth Network for Civilian Observation,* for example, brings together various organisations, youth entities and resistance committees to record cases of forced displacement, direct targeting of medical facilities and anti-war initiatives, civilian casualties, thefts, looting and murders. It also advocates for peace and democracy. Youth initiatives are contributing to the journalistic project *Sudan War Monitor*, and the *Youth Network for Stopping the War and Establishing a Democratic Civilian Transformation,* which is promoting peace and civilian unity for better governance.

Dispersed and separated months ago, youth groups now also are uniting again in the diaspora, mainly in Kampala and Nairobi, as well as in Addis Ababa and Cairo. With very little means – mostly some pocket money for a cup of coffee – they are re-starting meetings and discussions about how to end the war and how to return to a transition period towards democracy. Some youth representatives from resistance committees in Khartoum are part of a broad civilian front to stop the war in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. This includes actors such as the former Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and high-ranking party politicians. The so-called Civil Front Conference is supposed to be held in November to discuss political, organisational and economic visions to stop the war and restore a transitional government towards democratic elections.

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All in all, though, opportunities for Sudan's youth remain limited, and there is yet again no guarantee that youth representatives will be involved more strongly in this 'official' initiative. Young Sudanese have been

complaining about the ‘old political club’ since the failed military-civilian transitional government. They speak of a crisis of confidence between them and the political parties, which youth groups accuse of needing structural reforms and hogging all political power.

Meanwhile, the war is taking away even more of the space for young democratic action in Sudan. The military and RSF both continue to arrest activists they perceive as critical. Regularly, young actors vanish — either for good or to surface again after weeks of illegal detainment. At the same time, both warring sides seek to rally the support of communities in areas under their control, encouraging youth enlistments into their ranks or simply forcibly recruiting them. Thus, today, the Sudanese youth is fighting on both sides of the conflict. But rather than being the fuel of war, Sudan’s youth needs to be able to return to holding the torch of peace. For this, the remaining youth groups and initiatives need support, chiefly from the international community — support for their humanitarian and social work, support for their own survival, capacity-building support and backing for their involvement in high-ranking peace talks, civilian political initiatives and delegations abroad.



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