STUDY

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

YOUTH IN SUDAN

FES MENA Youth Study: Results Analysis

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December 2022

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Moving beyond the notion of youth activism as a passive reaction to repression or abstract political anticipation, this study documents youth agency and experience with the aim of understanding youth's political imagination regarding the framing of their own personal future and their commitment to social transformation.

Disillusioned and almost having lost faith in the existing political class, youth groups have a lot to do to transform the country.

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

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Youth are recognised as having been the principal drivers of the political protests against al-Bashir's military rule in as early as 1989. Hence, it is no coincidence that youth groups, in the form of resistance committees (RCs), played a significant role in the December revolution of 2018 that brought down the al-Bashir regime in April 2019. Our survey was conducted from September to November 2021. This coincided with the coup led by General al-Burhan, which was staged on 25 October 2021 and resulted in the overthrowing of the civilian-led transitional government and the end of the power-sharing arrangement with the political parties led by the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC). Ignoring the state of emergency, angry youth groups and opposition parties immediately took to the streets to hold anti-government demonstrations calling for a return to civilian rule.

Young people are showing signs of fatigue when it comes to the repressive measures by the authorities, reminiscent of the al-Bashir era. The response to this has been ongoing revolutionary efforts by the RCs to draft »political charters« to unite youth groups all over the country. While a protracted political deadlock dominates the political scene in Sudan, this survey shows that the youth movement is now emerging as a new political actor, one that cannot be ignored by other political actors, be they national, regional or international.

This study is concerned with the involvement of young people in social and political struggles as they have sought to achieve their life goals and develop their identities. Rather than static political ideals, their visions of the future were constantly reshaped by activist practices alongside the unfolding crises. Moving beyond the notion of youth activism as a passive reaction to repression or abstract political anticipation, this study documents youth agency and everyday experience with the aim of understanding youth's political imagination regarding the framing of their own personal future, and their commitment to social transformation in the areas of provision of social services to their local communities, as well as to their nation at large.

Further information on the topic can be found here:
https://mena.fes.de/topics/youth-study
https://sudan.fes.de/

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Content

1

INTRODUCTION

Sudan is highly diverse society. This diversity manifests itself in the country's ethnic make-up, religions, cultures and languages spoken. Different sections of the population profess their affiliation to Islam, Christianity and »other religions«. Religious heterogeneity is further sustained by sectarian cleavages within Islam, the religion of the majority. Different parts of the population also subscribe to different value systems, support different local political structures, and pursue different economic activities and occupations.

From 1956 to 1989, Sudan had been ruled by a civilian and military government that maintained the unity of the country despite ongoing conflicts. However, with a radical Islamist military group taking power in June 1989, Sudan moved into an entirely different period. South Sudan seceded in 2011 leaving the rest of the country embroiled in protracted conflicts, military dictatorships, economic decline and state failure.

In 2008, young people aged between 15 and 24 accounted for 19.8 per cent of Sudan's total population of 39.1 million, and those between 15 and 39 made up as much as 27.7 per cent. Young adults in the 20-45-year age bracket represent about 45 per cent of the total population. Despite their large number, they are largely excluded from political processes in Sudan and are unable to contribute to political debates and policymaking.

Policies of economic liberalisation, privatisation of state-owned corporations and misuse of oil money have all contributed to a distorted labour market and aggravated unemployment among Sudan's younger generations. Currently, the majority of youth were either born or educated during the Islamic Inqaz regime of 1989-2019.

A number of studies have identified youth as a potential change agent, particularly in countries that had to endure autocratic rule. In severalMENA countries, youth have taken the lead in street protests and politics against autocratic regimes. Sudan is among the countries where young people have fuelled speculation about the reasons why the current political dynamics are so heavily influenced by the youth agenda and leadership. In addressing this issue, this study places the engagement of the youth movement within the country's broader socio-political context.

This study focuses on youth groups as potential and actual agents of change in Sudan. It explores young people's economic situation and viewpoints on employment and well-being, and will also shed light on their opinions on current political problems and their motivation for engaging in political activities.

2

METHODOLOGY

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) views young women and men as instrumental for democratic development in the region and is keen to strengthen their potential to initiate change in the world of politics and across society. Based on the results of a long-term survey, launched in 2016, the FES seeks to provide insight into young people's situation in the MENA region. In 2021, FES launched its second large-scale representative survey in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as in Tunisia and Yemen. With the 1,000 in-depth interviews conducted for each country, the FES MENA Youth Study generates a large database of answers to around 200 questions concerning the personal background of the interviewees and their views on a variety of topics.[1]

2.1 SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

For reasons of feasibility, a nationwide quota sampling method was chosen, with the aim of conducting 1,000 interviews per country. This sample size is considered adequately representative of the target group as well as of socio-demographic and regional subgroups (e.g., age, gender, level of education). In Sudan, the local institute responsible for fieldwork and sampling was the Sudanese Statistical Society. The institute has an established set of methods for selecting sampling points and identifying eligible households to survey, with the aim of randomising the selection process as much as possible. The aim was to ensure a geographic spread of respondents that was as close as possible to the distribution of the survey universe in the respective country. For each geographic area, the institute provided a list of sampling points.

The fieldwork phase was conducted between September and November 2021. The survey ultimately reached 1,007 Sudanese aged between 16 and 30 years. All interviews were carried out in the local Arabic dialect. Interviews were held at respondents' homes or in public places such as cafés, community centres and the like. It was of major importance that the respondents felt comfortable and the interview locations were chosen accordingly. The data was collected in face-to-face interviews conducted using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) technology. The data collected was transferred to and stored in a central CAPI database. During fieldwork, Kantar Public, a specialist research, evidence and advisory business, carried out data validation with sets of interim data via Excel and SPSS (statistical software program) syntaxes. In parallel, Kantar Public and the University of Leipzig conducted the final comprehensive data check. To ensure that the final structure of the sampling reflected the structure of the survey universe, differences were reduced with factorial weighting. The survey data was weighted for all target groups with respect to the structural variables of age, gender and region, based on available statistics.

2.2 SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Of the surveyed population, 46 per cent resided in large cities (more than 500,000 people), 33 per cent resided in medium-sized cities (100,001-500,000 people) and in small cities (20,001-100,000 people), 21 per cent resided in rural/central cities (1,001-20,000 people), in villages (50-1,000 people) and in refugee camps. Of the total number surveyed, 95 per cent identified as »youth«, and 5 per cent identified as »adults«. Moreover, 84 per cent of the total sample indicated that they were single at the time of the survey (higher among males, at 91 per cent, than females, at 77 per cent), 89 per cent said they were engaged (94 per cent among males and 84 per cent for females) and 9 per cent stated that they were married. The vast majority of the sample, 92 per cent, stated they did not have children, with the highest percentage (99 per cent) among respondents in the 16-20 age bracket. Looking at the numbers through a gendered lens, 12 per cent of female respondents reported having children, while 4 per cent of males stated they had children. The average household size across respondents is 7 persons per household with 5.4 persons aged between 16 and 65 years.

1 For more information on the FES MENA Youth Study: https://mena.fes.de/topics/youth-study

When asked about their living situation, 83 per cent of respondents stated that they lived with their parents within the same household, only 7 per cent lived with their own family (with their partner/without their parents). Less than 5 per cent stated they either lived alone or with friends. When it comes to who heads the household, 69 per cent stated that the head of the household was their father, 17 per cent stated that their mother headed the household, 14 per cent stated they themselves were the head of the household, 12 per cent stated that »someone else« was the head of the household and less than 5 per cent responded that their husband/wife was the head of the household (multiple responses were possible). In line with more traditional family dynamics/views, a large percentage of female respondents (67 per cent) stated that their fathers were heads of the household, while just 22 per cent said their mothers were the head of the household. When asked to provide a broad assessment of their family's situation at the time of the survey, the overwhelming majority of respondents shared that their family situation was very good (17 per cent) or rather good (55 per cent). The situation five years earlier was perceived as even better in retrospect, with 37 per cent saying it was very good and another 39 per cent stating it was rather good in 2016.

The majority of respondents (61 per cent) stated that they were students/in school, with a majority of those (70 per cent) being university students.

The study broadly delves into aspects around: (1) the general context of the country, its diversity and governance structures; (2) the economic situation of youth in Sudan, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities young people face; and (3) political dynamics and forms of youth civic engagement.

3

COUNTRY CONTEXT

To reiterate, following the December revolution of 2018 that removed the head of the state, President al-Bashir, from power, Sudan's young people faced a context shaped by the negative cumulative legacy of the 30-year rule of the Islamic Inqaz regime from 1989 to 2019.

Young people's life chances are limited. They are required to participate in the jihad war, forcibly conscripted and sent to war zones.[2] Expansion of higher education meant that thousands of graduates were able to graduate, but amid aggressive economic liberalisation policies and privatisation, they were ultimately left without jobs.[3]

Youth resistance to the autocratic Inqaz regime never waned, culminating in the December revolution of 2018, which in many ways showed the strong opposition of young people to religious indoctrination and authoritarian rule.

The Sudanese youth movement is attributed a decisive role in the 2018 December revolution and the removal of al-Bashir from power. While the transitional government, led by Abdalla Hamdok, made some progress with regards to the economy, the coup of October 2021 reversed gains made in 2019-2021 and took the country back to the days of al-Bashir's Islamic autocracy.

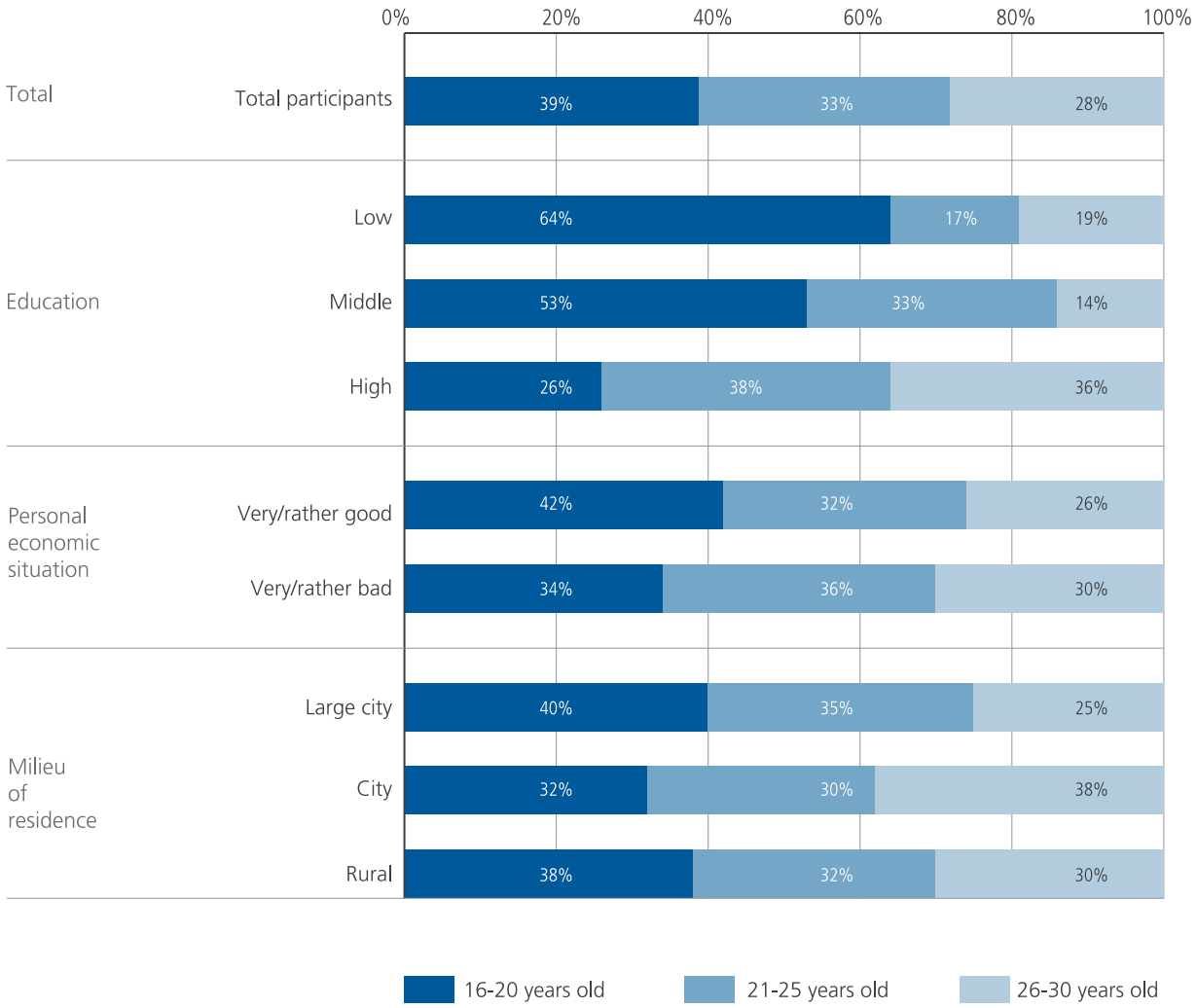
The fieldwork period during which the Sudan survey was conducted was September-November 2021. This coincided with the coup led by General al-Burhan, which was staged on 25 October 2021 and ended the partnership between the civilian arm of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) group and the military, and destroyed the constitutional document (CD). The coup was followed by the announcement of a de facto government, comprising representatives of armed movements (signatories of the Juba Peace Agreement) and members of the military.

The bulk of the survey (94 per cent) was conducted before the coup. Many of those who were part of the sample must have played an active role in demonstrations led by the resistance committees (RCs).

2 Young people aged between 18 and 35 were enlisted to do their Al-Khidma al-Wataniyya (national service), and many found themselves drafted to join jihad forces (holy war) fighting against the rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

3 A widespread hashtag recently showed medical doctors and engineers setting up a café with a sign board displaying the name »khasarat giraity« (the loss of my education).

Figure 1
Age of participants surveyed



It is clear from the above figure that the survey sample is generally representative of Sudan's youth. Young people in the 16-20 age bracket account for 39 per cent, while those aged 21-25 make up 33 per cent and those aged 26-30 represent 28 per cent of total sample. This corresponds to the available demographic information at the national level.

4

LEGACY OF ECONOMIC EXTRACTIVE POLICIES AND DECLINE

To compensate for the loss of oil revenue, the Khartoum government turned to gold mining and the extraction of other minerals. Further economic measures taken in the post-secession period after 2011 have reinforced the rentier character of the economy and the clientelistic nature of the political regime. Rather than addressing the structural and root causes of economic stagnation, al-Bashir's autocracy was more concerned with short-term interests, securing the necessary finance to maintain rent-based patronage networks.

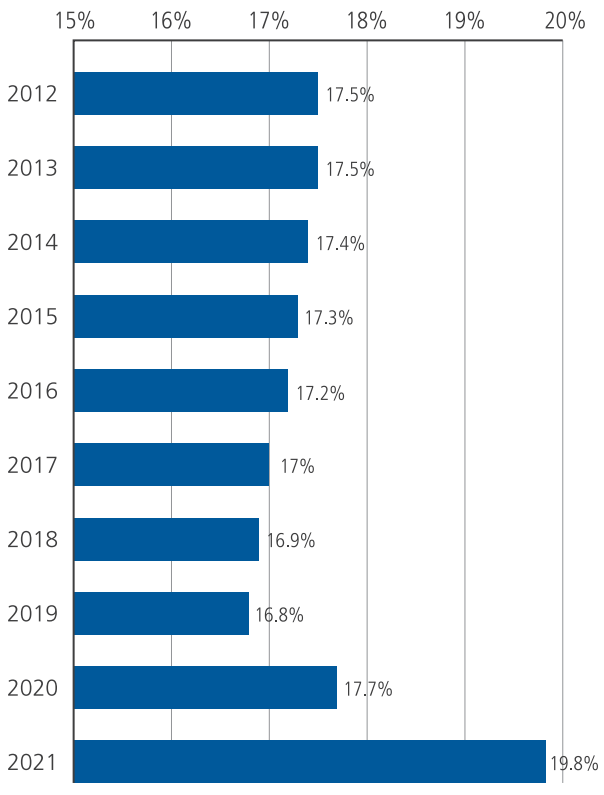
These policies and efforts were not meant to structurally reform the economy but to ensure that finance was available to pay for an elaborate military security apparatus, so as to secure the support of clientelistic networks and to buy off splinter opposition parties and rebel groups. This co-optation strategy demonstrated that the rents at the disposal of the regime could be an effective instrument for impeding or even preventing a democratic transition.

Dwindling resource rents saw the regime facing difficult choices and it turned to removing subsidies on fuel and bread, a move that sparked widespread protests, ultimately leading to its downfall in April 2019. Nonetheless, even after the removal of al-Bashir from power, the economic situation did not improve and young people in particular faced difficult circumstances.

4.1 SUDAN'S YOUTH: FINANCIAL CIRCUMSTANCES AND LIVELIHOOD INSECURITY

With resources channelled into a financing war and into keeping the regime in power, certain sectors of social services and employment were adversely affected. Ironically this situation did not even change after the December revolution ousted al-Bashir from power. One reason for this is that economic reforms introduced by the civilian-led transitional government in 2019-2021 take time to bear fruit. It is therefore no coincidence that, as shown below, unemployment shot up to a higher level during the transition.[4]

Figure 2
Unemployment rate, 2012-2021



4 Since the regime could not distribute the profits from rents to everybody, in particular after the secession of South Sudan in 2011, it had to limit distribution to a subgroup of its constituency and suppress the others, including promoting a military agenda for resolving political conflicts, etc. Again, recourse to political repression and conflict—which was found to be quite useful in impeding democracy—becomes a »rational« strategy for such a regime. For more details, see El-Battahani, 2017.

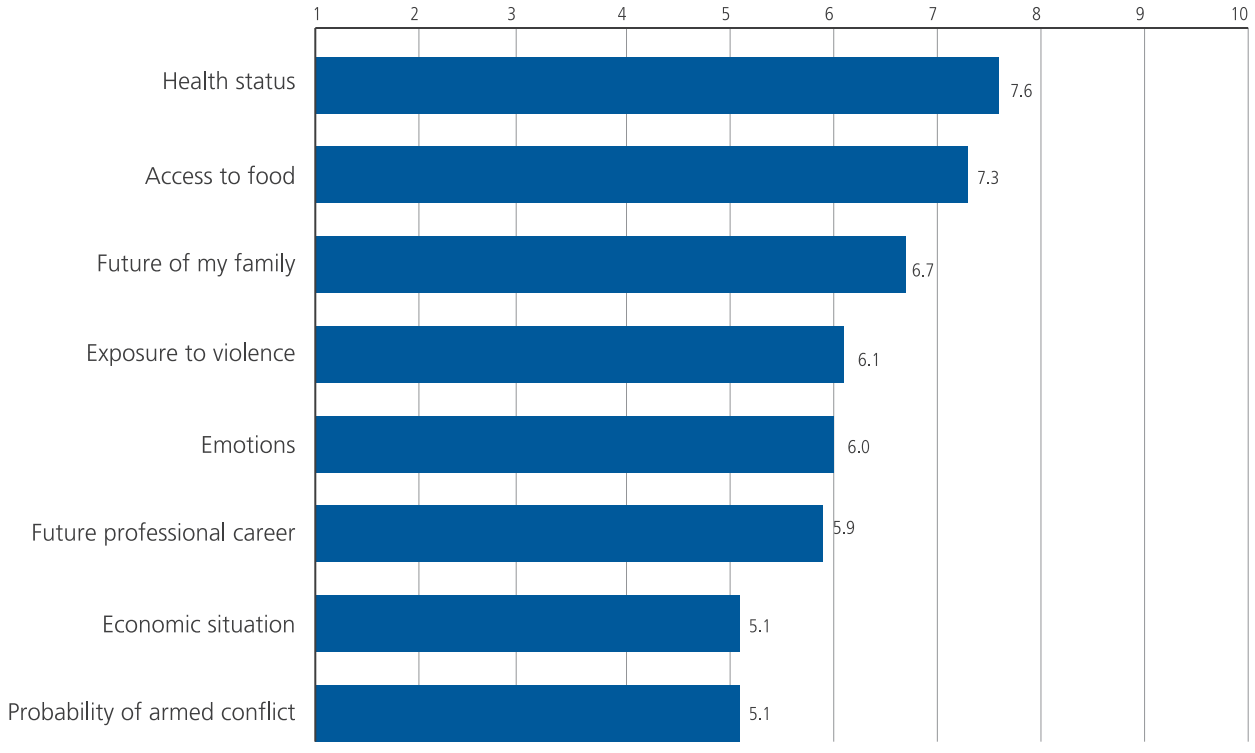
Youth employment is highly dependent on the overall state of the economy. Over two decades of conflict from 1983 to 2005 had a significantly negative impact on the growth and development of the economy until oil exports increased in 1999 and the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005. Sudan's economic growth averaged at roughly 7 per cent per annum between 2000 and 2006, and at an estimated 10 per cent in 2007 making it among the highest on the African continent (World Bank 2008). Findings show that across northern Sudan, the main employment opportunities continue to be in the agricultural/livestock sector and more recently in the construction and services sector. Labour absorption capacity is highest in crop farming and horticulture (27 per cent) followed by the wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and the construction sectors (CBS 2009). Well-balanced decisions regarding employment-intensive investment in agriculture and rural non-farming activities can create immediate short-term employment opportunities, which can be accessed more easily by young people. This, combined with appropriate local economic development strategies, can generate an increase both in the types of jobs available and in employment sustainability. A UNDP study also revealed a serious mismatch between the skills produced by the country's existing training/educational institutions and the skills required by the labour market. This undoubtedly makes a significant contribution to the growing youth unemployment rate (UNDP 2011).

Lack of employment opportunities for youth, deteriorating services in marginalised regions and political deadlock created fertile ground for conflict. It is no coincidence that wide-scale eruption of violent conflicts in Darfur coincided with the oil boom and a peace deal being signed with the southern rebel movement in 2005.

According to a report by Sudan's minister of labour and human resources to parliament, the rate of employment of university graduates did not exceed 2.6 per cent and for secondary school graduates it was 1.9 per cent, leaving 100,000 graduates unemployed. Noting the increased numbers of foreign workers, the labour minister was critical of the preference for foreign over Sudanese workers, in particular among young people (Elaph 2013). The release of this information coincided with a report by the World Bank stating that Sudan had registered the highest rate of inflation in the world (Elaph 2013). According to the last population census in 2009, more than 19.5 per cent of of Sudan's population were aged between 15 and 24 years, corresponding to almost 5.6 million people (CBS 2009). As the overall population of Sudan continues to grow and experience a demographic transition, the country will undoubtedly face increased pressure with regard to job creation, in particular among young people. This has clearly been captured by the study, as shown in the graph below.

Figure 3
Areas of insecurity

Do you feel rather secure or rather insecure?



Scale : 1= not at all secure to 10 = totally secure

It is clear that young people are more concerned about issues pertaining to health, access to food and the future of their families. Recent reports from the World Food Programme (WFP) paint a grim picture when it comes to Sudan's food security. In 2019, it was estimated that around 6.2 million people in Sudan faced food insecurity. This figure rose to about 9.8 million in 2021, and the projection for 2022 is 40 per cent of the population, i.e., 18 million people (WFP 2022). The WFP gave several reasons for this, referring to the negative impact of Covid-19, ongoing violent conflicts, poor harvest and the war on Ukraine pushing food prices up. While the WFP alludes to the current state of affairs in Sudan, we contend that food insecurity goes deeper and seek to expose a long-running political and economic crisis.

Like young people in other MENA countries, what it is hard for some of Sudan's youth to accept is that their situation has not improved despite the change in government and the role they played in bringing about that change. In assessing the economic situation of their families today versus five years ago, 28 per cent of respondents saw their situation as very/rather bad today compared to 24 per cent for five years ago. This is an undeniably depressing situation for the young people surveyed.

WHAT ECONOMIC STEPS DO THEY FEEL COULD BE TAKEN TO TACKLE THE SITUATION?

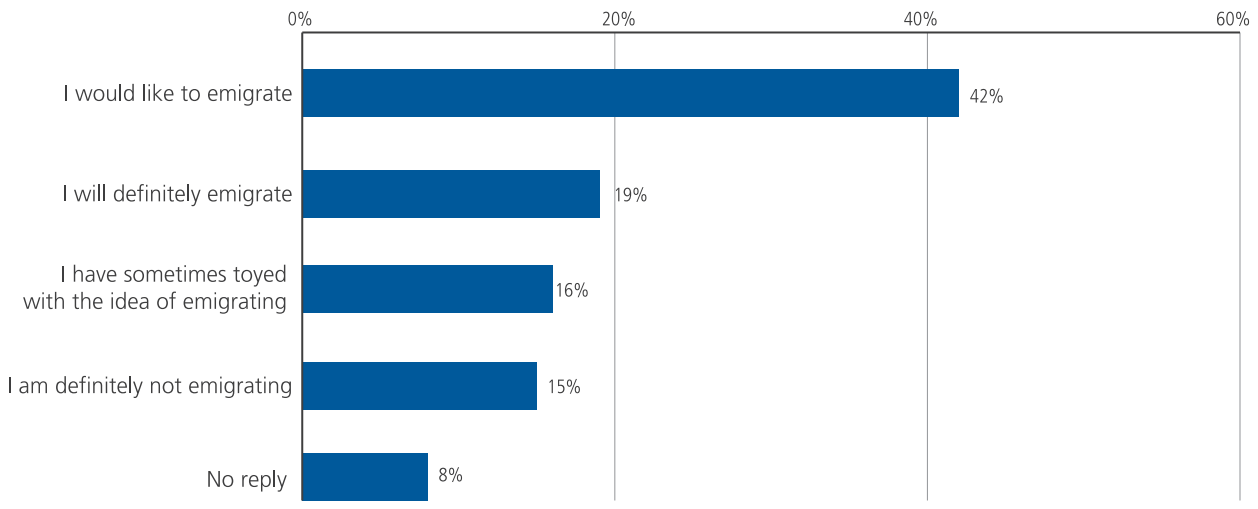
Much like studies conducted in other countries in the region, most respondents identified themselves and their families similarly in class terms. For example, 54 per cent considered themselves to be members of the working class, 32 per cent did not and 14 per cent did not know. When positioning their families in terms of the class hierarchy, the results of the survey show that 1 per cent saw their families as wealthy, 32 per cent saw them as part of the upper middle class, 48 per cent said lower middle class, 16 per cent saw their families as poor, 2 per cent as destitute and 1 per cent did not know.

4.2 TACKLING POOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE CHANCES

In the December revolution of 2018, youth groups were instrumental in campaigning, mobilising and organising street protests against Islamist rule. A considerable number of young people, almost the majority, were part of the RCs, a development that, among other factors, in the course of sustained street protests helped elevate youth as influential players in politics.

The questionnaire asks about emigration to another country. Regarding internal (rural-urban) migration, on the other hand, a recent study shows that migration from rural areas and villages to cities and towns is most common among young people (34 per cent). The rural to urban population ratio is 9:6 for young men compared to 11:6 for young women. This reaffirms a male bias in labour migration. The gender gap for youth labour participation (15-24 years) is extremely wide; 44 per cent participation among the male population and a mere 17 per cent among the female population (UNDP 2011).

Figure 4
Personal emigration plans
What would best describe your situation?



Many were discouraged by the ruthlessness of the security apparatus and poor performance of the transitional government led by the FFC. It is therefore understandable that some favoured emigration, while others were adamant about remaining in Sudan. The slogan »al-hissa wattan« (our duty is our homeland) and »hanabneho« (we shall build it) have contributed to this determination to remain in Sudan and shun those who wish to emigrate. These campaign slogans also have an impact on youth beyond Sudan's borders.

In general, Sudanese youth favour staying at home, determined to bring change. Nonetheless, realistically, the more the military consolidate their power and reinstate the notorious Islamist security apparatus, and the more economic opportunities are blocked for young people, the higher the likelihood of large-scale emigration from the country. This will deal a devastating blow to the transition forces working to pave the way for democratic rule.

Two of the principles attributed to the December revolution in Sudan is what young people refer to as »al-hissa wattan« (our duty is our homeland) and »hanabneho« (we shall build it). As indicated in other sections of this study, these calls by Sudanese youth also have implications for youth movements in other countries, in particular in the Global South. The sharp rise in the number of young people indicating that they »would like to emigrate« is probably due to the after-effects of the October 2021 coup that resulted in the suspension of a series of economic reforms and assistance from outside to get the economy back on its feet.

5

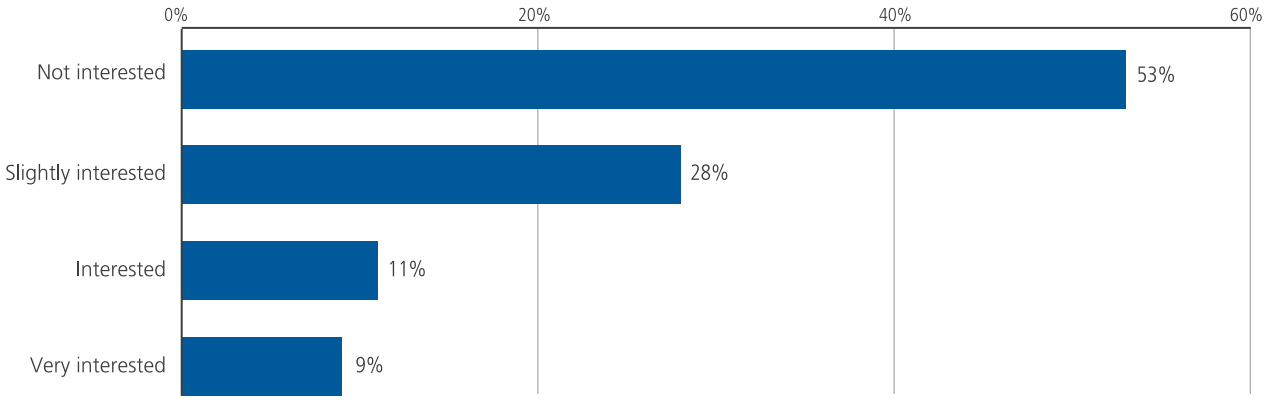
POLITICAL DYNAMICS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

5.1 YOUTH INTEREST IN AND ASSOCIATIONS WITH POLITICS

During the period of the al-Bashir regime, from 1989 to 2019, a one-party state was in total control: politics was an exclusive domain for Islamist elites. As a result of the December revolution, this monopoly of power was broken in April 2019 but the revolution failed to make the government accountable to the people. A power-sharing agreement between the FFC and the military paved the way for a transitional, civilian-led government. This is a transition in which the theory and practice of politics show conflicting trends, though as we shall see later, the overwhelming tendency among the younger generations is to chart a new path of politics.

Of all the young people surveyed, only 9 per cent reported being very interested in politics, 11 per cent were interested, 28 per cent not particularly interested and 53 per cent were not interested. Overall, 47 per cent of all those surveyed reported being involved in politics. This is remarkable given the high cost of taking an interest in politics in an oppressive regime known for its abhorrent and aggressive treatment of youth leaders.[5] When it comes to young women, the percentage is almost half that of young men, with only 6 per cent saying they were very interested in politics. However, this contradicts the visible presence of young women at demonstrations and sit-in camps. Though about 58 per cent of females said they were not interested in politics, we find that the Kandaka tradition and mythology inspires many women to take the risk and join political activities. Perhaps one of the factors discouraging women from adopting a more visible position in politics is the risk of sexual harassment and even rape they face. In terms of political participation, the age factor appears insignificant. However, those with higher education showed more of a propensity to engage in politics.

Figure 5
Interest in politics
Are you interested in politics?



5 Apart from various lethal forms of torture, other tactics are used to dissuade young people from participating in politics. One of these is deliberately encouraging the sale and use of drugs among university and high school students.

Examining the correlation between interest in politics and milieu of residence produces an interesting finding. In rural and urban areas, large cities or small ones, the interest in politics is similarly strong among respondents. It could be argued that this is related in one way or another to how »interest in politics« is defined.

ASSOCIATIONS WITH POLITICS

The association of the word »politics« (siyasa) with party politics is correlated positively with age. Those in the 21-30-year age bracket link politics with political parties, while those in the 16-20-year age range show less of an inclination to see politics in terms of political parties.

Association with government is understandable in a context where access to public office amounts to a rent-seeking source. Neo-patrimonial politics dominated during the al-Bashir era and are still strongly present even after the political change brought about by the December revolution. Reports by the military accusing the civilian-led transitional government (2019-2021) of excluding key partners and promoting a partisan agenda were used to justify the October 2021 coup, putting an end to power sharing between the military and civilian leaders.

The highly educated are most likely to be associated with politics, in particular with government. However, this is not always the case since a sense of resentment can be detected among youth who do not see the elite in a favourable light, especially politicians who young people see as an »old political club«.

Respondents' personal economic situation impacts their associations with politics. According to the responses of those with a rather/very good economic situation, politics is associated with government (66 per cent of respondents), while a smaller number in this group associated politics with political parties (38 per cent). A conventional view still looms large, according to which politics is associated with large cities where the seat of power is located and connections can be made with influential people. Generally people have lost trust in government and officials who wield official authority.

5.2 YOUTH AND THE DIGITAL AGE

Like young people in other countries in the MENA region, Sudanese youth have shown a remarkable ability to connect to and use modern information technologies. New social media refers to digital, computerised or networked information and communication technologies (ICT) starting in the later part of the 20th century. New social media are seen as a powerful social network that links people of different social, religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. They involve the telecommunication networks, the internet, texting and online multiplayer gaming to name but a few. Some examples are the internet (databases, websites such as blogs, social networking websites, etc.), mobile telephony (SMS, MMS, etc.).

The government is paving the way for the private sector to play an increasing role in the national economy. Telecommunication services were the first to be privatised in 1993. In this case Sudan was a pioneer in Africa and the MENA region. The country has a number of telecommunications companies operating landline telephones, with Sudatel being established in 1993, followed by Zain, Canar and others. In the 1990s, during the privatisation era, the government set the public-to-private equity ratio at 67 per cent to 33 per cent with a view to gradually diminishing government shares to zero. Later, however, government policies changed and the army and security forces took control of landline telecommunication companies, particularly after April 2019.

The available data shows rapid diffusion of information and communication technology in Sudan. Such development can be expected to have very positive social and economic impacts. These might include more family and social connections, interaction and networking regardless of time and location, stimulating economic activity, increasing the speed of money circulation and reducing transaction costs, which would particularly benefit small and medium-sized enterprises.

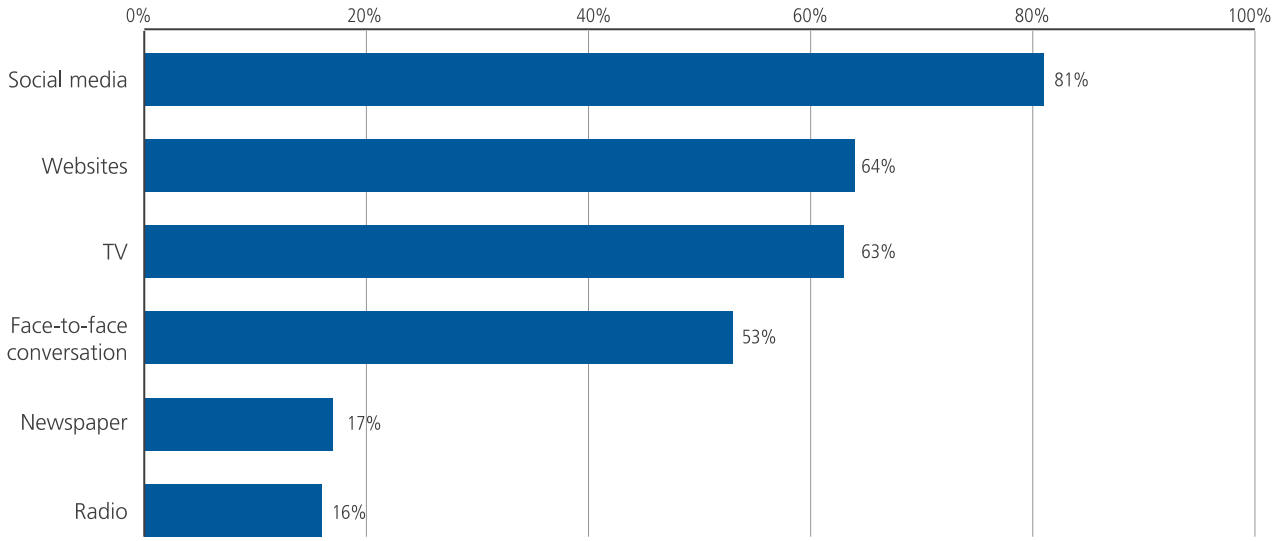
Young people complain about the poor quality of online and internet facilities in Sudan, in addition to its high cost compared with other countries. Nonetheless we cannot deny the impact of social media and the internet in informing and stimulating youth activism. As argued by Philip Howard, to a considerable extent, democratic change in Islamic countries depends on the use of communication technologies. Howard refutes claims that the low connectivity rates in these countries preclude communication technologies from reaching enough of a mass audience and thus curb their transformative role. He explains that internet use is rapidly increasing, whether that usage is from the home, school, work or cybercafés. Rather than via mass communications, content is being distributed, he contends, between networks of family and friends. However, in the case of Sudan, communication networks owned and run by members of a defunct regime have the upper hand vis-à-vis independent youth movements.

It is clear that social media play an instrumental role as a source of information about politics for the majority of participants. For example, social media are a source of information for 81 per cent of those participants who actively keep themselves informed, while internet websites are used by 64 per cent, television by 63 per cent, face-to-face conversations by 53 per cent, newspapers by 17 per cent and radio 16 per cent.

The networks are an area of contestation between those in support of the Islamists and their opponents, in other words

Figure 6
Sources and means of information

What sources and means of information are you using?



those calling for change. It is important to emphasise that the government controls the telecommunication industry, and the transitional government after April 2019 failed to take control of these corporations from the military and security apparatus. Youth activists are put under surveillance by the authorities, and they find it hard to prevent encroachment on their privacy and ensure security of their movements, not to mention cases of character assassination and defamation.

Sudanese youth rely on social media and internet websites more than newspapers to keep themselves informed about politics. The television channels used are probably foreign channels as Sudanese television is rarely relied on given that it is controlled by the government. Face-to-face conversations are common among young people in small groups where they meet in janbat (semi-private cafes) or gather around tea and coffee sellers in the public space.[6]

It should be noted here that the emerging strength of youth is articulated in the development of communication technologies in these countries and the creation of content. Like young people elsewhere, Sudanese youth have been involved in online activism and online participation for many years now, challenging all practices of censorship. For example, in the recent torrential rain and flooding in Sudan, »nafeer« (collective voluntary work) was quickly organised to provide relief assistance to disaster-affected communities to the extent of embarrassing the government. This indicates that there is a great potential for voluntary efforts, provided a conducive and supportive environment is in place.

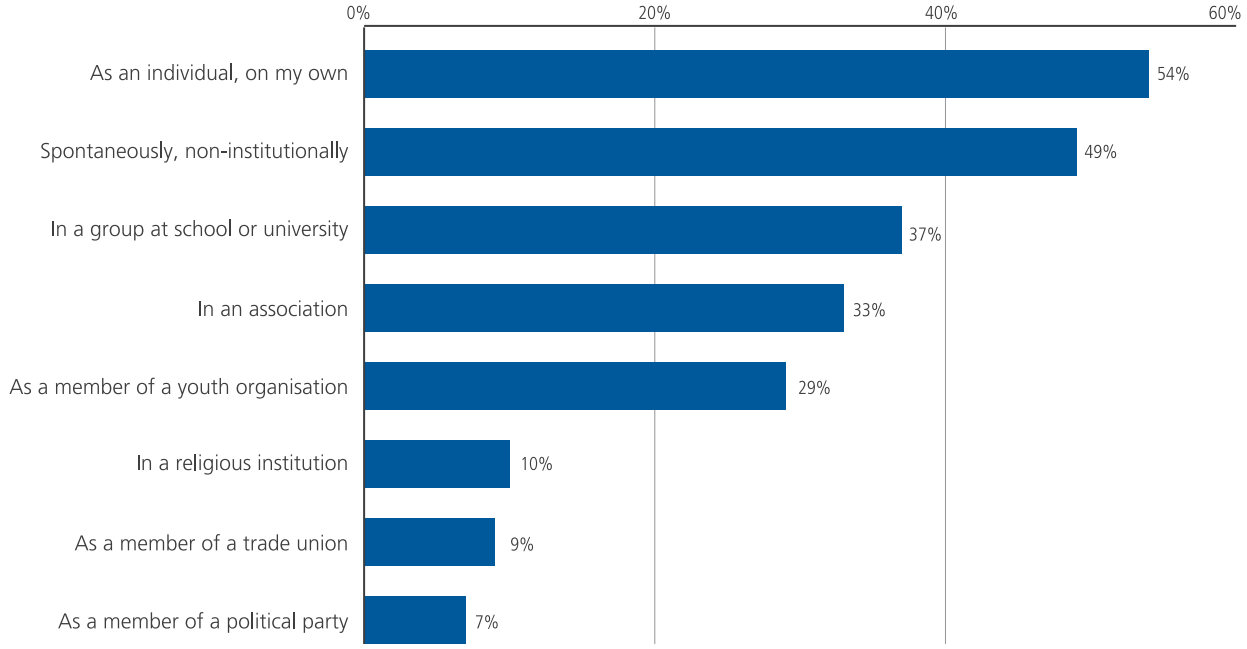
5.3 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Over the last few years, having lost faith in the existing political class, Sudanese youth began experimenting with various means of political engagement. In addition to building on social capital and social connections, new forms of association are being tried out. Respondents were asked what political activities they would probably or certainly consider becoming involved in. Before looking at the responses to this, it is important to note that those surveyed are from the younger generation, born during last decade of the 20th century in the 1990s or in the first decade of the 2000s who represent the prime target for indoctrination with Islamist values in accordance with the so-called »civilising project«. The political activities considered by participants cannot be analysed without referring to the political landscape of the 30 years of rule by radical Islamist elites determined to force this »civilising project« onto society using state power. Both Islamist elites, who ruled for 30 years, as well as the opposition parties lost the faith of the younger generations. Sudan's political class has come under fire from younger generations for its lack of internal democracy and for not opening up leadership positions to young people, to name just a few examples.[7]

6 The idea for one important project implemented by youth activists was conceived during one of these gatherings around a tea and coffee seller in Omdurman and led to the renovation of one of the city's hospitals. See Elaph Newspaper, 15 May 2015.

7 Most leaders of political parties are in their 70s and 80s.

Figure 7
Place/institution of civic engagement
Where and how are you becoming involved in civic activities?



It is clear from the above graph that youth have a negative attitude towards the institutions of the political establishment, with just 7 per cent indicating that they participate in political parties, 10 per cent in religious organisations and 9 per cent in trade unions. With 37 per cent, schools and universities seem to provide opportunities and platforms for youth engagement. What is referred to as non-institutional or spontaneous participation (49 per cent) probably comprises RCs. Later, efforts were made to institutionalise these committees to some extent. The high 54 per cent of young people who reported being involved in »individual civic engagement« is questionable. Here the responses reflect wishful thinking rather than the real situation. In fact, the culture of civic engagement is weak or even non-existent. On the contrary, the dominant attitude is: »Why care for others?«

Another interesting finding is the apparent total rejection of the practices of the existing political class, dubbed the »old political club«. A similar phenomenon can also be found in in Lebanon and Iraq, among others.

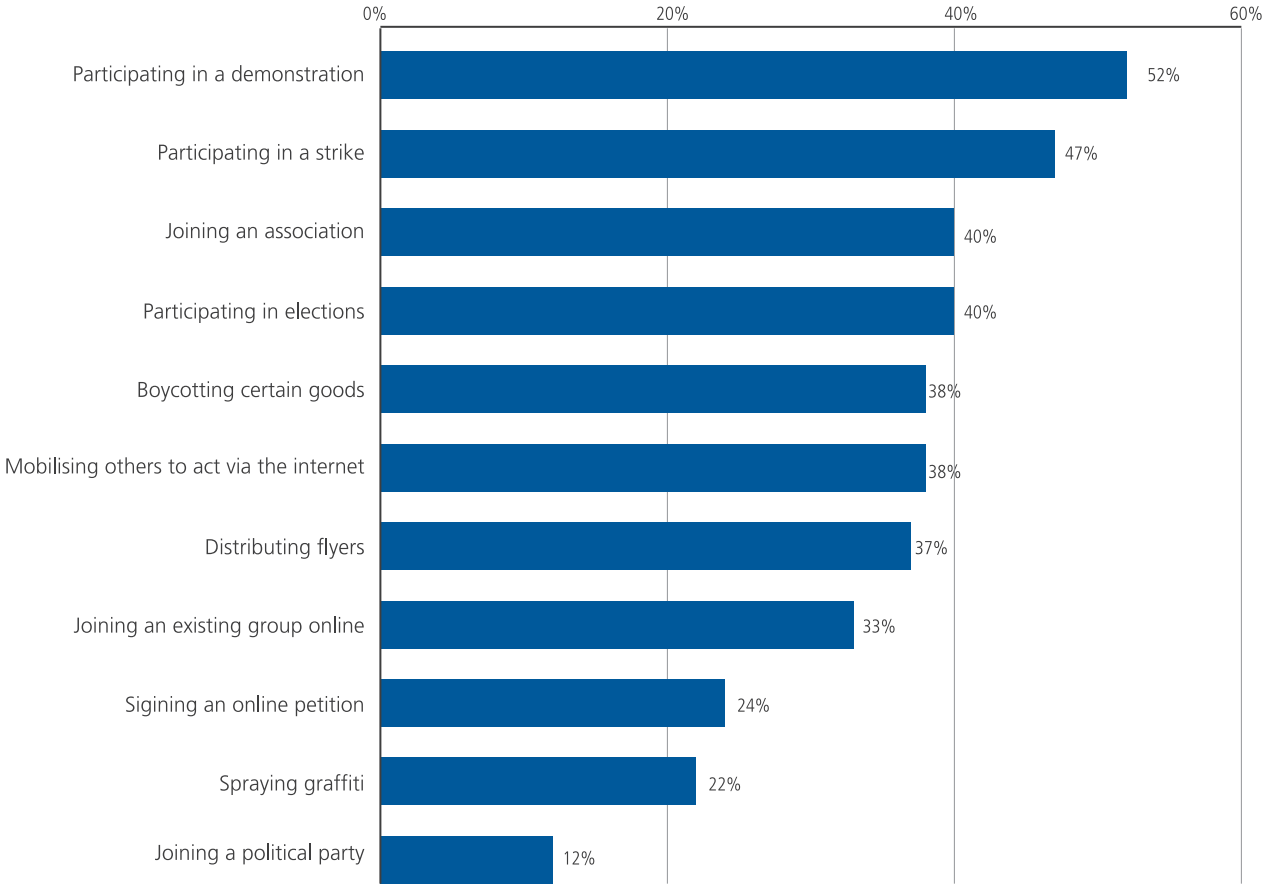
To reiterate, survey participants' political activities cannot by analysed without reference to the cumulative negative impact of the three decades of the Inqaz regime under which youth in particular were the main target of brutal government policies.

5.4 TOWARDS A NEW POLITICAL PARADIGM

When Islamists took power in 1989, Hassan al-Turabi, the leader of the National Islamic Front (NIF), was developing a strategy to turn Sudan into a springboard for other Islamic movements, a kind of an Islamist Internationale. Controlling and indoctrinating the younger generation was a key pillar of the Islamist policies and strategies. Educational curricula and extra-curricular activities (national service) in schools and universities were designed to serve this objective. Young people who were not at school or university were targeted for compulsory conscription to fight a jihad war in the 1990s and beyond. Yet, all these measures and acts failed to quell youth resistance to Islamic authoritarian rule.

In 2005, the government led by the National Congress Party (NCP) signed a peace agreement with southern rebels from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and formed a power-sharing government in which the northern opposition were only given minor posts. While the peace agreement ensured a margin of freedom for civil society organisations, youth groups felt that this did not meet their expectations of meaningful change.

Figure 8
Political activities considered
To achieve political impact, which of the following would you consider?



Aided by new means of information technology and witnessing how youth movements in Tunisia and Egypt were at the forefront of the Arab Spring, Sudanese youth began organising in non-partisan groups and adopting non-violent tactics as early as 2010. A tacit agreement was reached by the NCP and SPLM to preserve the security architecture and pave the way for the secession of South Sudan. With South Sudan seceding in 2011, as mentioned above, the government in Khartoum faced mounting economic challenges, fuelling youth resistance which culminated in September 2013 when the security forces gunned down more than 200 young people aged between 16 and 30 in Shambat, Khartoum North.

Inspired by the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, a number of youth groups both inside and outside the country[8] began experimenting with limited strikes and acts of civil disobedience from 2015 onwards. In 2018, as popular protests gathered momentum, the political class seems to have lost the confidence of the youth movement. What is unique in the case of Sudan is that youth groups, in the form of RCs, have begun to articulate visions for political change in »political charters«. These charters are open to debate and discussion, first among young people, then with other political and social actors being invited to discuss and add to the charters in a way that they deem to be in keeping the principles of the December revolution. Participation in demonstrations and strikes were the most prominent direct political actions respondents reported considering. This is part of the legacy of the December revolution, which emboldened the people to overcome their fear of the security forces.[9] The December revolution, with its peaceful protests, continued for more than four months and ended with al-Bashir being toppled from power. The revolution was celebrated and admired by many around the world, in particular the role played by women who bore the brunt of the brutal

8 These groups included »The Flame« (Al-Sharara), »Fed-Up« (Girifina) and »Change Now« (al-Tagier al-Alaan).

9 On 19 December, a three-fold increase in bread prices ignited public anger in Ad-Damazin in the Blue Nile region and in the city of Atbara. This was immediately followed by a series of protests in Khartoum and other towns. The protest movement was spearheaded and orchestrated by the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA), with active support from medical doctors, university staff, teachers, engineers and other groupings. The slogan around which all the protesters united was »Tasgut bas« (just fall, that's all) along with the demands listed in the »Freedom and Change« document that call for a transition period to agree on new constitutional and political dispensations.

discriminatory measures of the Islamic regime. The December revolution in Sudan can be seen as a second wave of the Arab Spring, an idea that has sparked intellectual and political debates in many Muslim majority countries, in particular Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt and Morocco. This is because, more than in any other country in the region, what took place in Sudan signalled an end to political Islam. In Sudan, there is a yearning for an alternative political perspective, a post-political Islam one. In answer to the question regarding the preferred political system, about 28 per cent chose democracy as their favoured political system. Now the onus is on the leadership of the youth movements to work out how to articulate the ethos and mechanisms of a democratic system that transcends the failures and pitfalls of the »old political club«.

Social media blogs are used by youth leaders to propagate their own version of programmes or manifestos for political change. WhatsApp groups have provided an accessible arena for a plethora of youth groups to engage in debates on political setbacks after the coup of October 2021 and on what is needed to protect the December revolution and get the country moving forward. Perhaps this explains the aforementioned 54 per cent of respondents who stated that they were involved in civic activities »as individuals«. From my own reading of these blogs and interactions, it became clear that a social democratic perspective dominates the thinking of young activists. Here, the work undertaken by the FES in organising a series of workshops on civic education and two »Social Democracy School« retreats in 2020 and 2021 are worth mentioning.

In a way, Sudanese youth are charting a new post-Islamist path for change. This builds on the work of Asef Bayat with the Sudanese added value here being advocacy for what we could tentatively call the »social left« to distinguish it from the »ideological left« which is reserved for the Communist Party of Sudan.

6

CONCLUSION

Sudanese youth are a lively and dynamic force in society, not only in numerical terms, but in terms of their potential energy and proficiency in using the tools of the digital age. Young people are more attuned to IT, ICT, social media and the like than the older generations. Nonetheless, they suffer from not being recognised or acknowledged, or being included in social and political life. In almost all educational, social, economic and political fields, the older generations are refusing to make way for young men and women to take over. This is why the resistance committees call for Sudan to do away with the »old political club«.

Perhaps more than just playing a role in politics, the younger generation of men and women want to live their own life, not the life prescribed to them by the older, conservative generations. The Inqaz regime attempted to impose social conservative values in the public space, restricting the activities of women in the 1996 Public Order Law for instance. Young women suffered immensely during the 1989-2019 period, and it is no coincidence that Sudanese women emerged as an icon of the December revolution. In this regard, and despite the different contexts, what Sudanese women, and young women in particular, achieved and how they achieved it offers women around the world an array of insights and lessons about how to accomplish positive change, in particular women in the Muslim world.

Young people have been able to transcend tribal, ethnic, regional and class differences, creating an image of national unity in a country divided and devastated by inter-tribal, inter-ethnic, inter-religious divisions and conflicts.

One of the most important findings of this study of Sudanese youth is their views on issues pertaining to emigration. Although there are some who wish to emigrate, one of the achievements attributed to the December revolution is youth's call to »al-hissa wattan« (our duty is our homeland) and »hanabneho« (we shall build it). As indicated in other sections of this study, these calls by Sudanese youth have implications for other youth movements in other countries, in particular in the Global South. It has also showed regional and international actors that economic reforms and assistance from outside to get the economy back on its feet help stem the tide of emigration to the Global North more than aiding and assisting security cartels.

Sudan has now moved into the early phases of the post-Islamist era. Political Islam has divided the country, ruined its productive economy, deepened social conflicts and fragmented the political class. Sudanese youth emerged at the forefront of the post-Islamist era. However, the coup of October 2021 and the reinstatement of former al-Bashir aids to power change the dynamics of post-Islamism. Disillusioned and with almost no faith in the existing political class, youth groups have a lot to do to transform the country.

The same happened in September 2013, which (i) led to the regime's lack of tolerance shown by the brutal crack-down on the demonstrations, (ii) confirmed the wide gulf between young people and the established political parties, (iii) resulted in weak organisational leadership on the ground.

As shown above, one thing that youth groups certainly do have on their side is faith in themselves and their potential dynamism, stemming from a number of factors including demography, economy, politics and the information age. Nonetheless, this potentially vital role as an agent of change has to be translated into genuine and effective change agency, and this can only be achieved through effective organisation. Youth groups are now working on »political charters« amid debates and, at times, dissension over the vision and priorities for the future.

It is not clear whether the youth movement would continue using peaceful, non-violent means or whether at some point they may turn to violence.

Youth groups such as »Al-Sharara«, »Girifina« and »al-Tagier «al-Alaan began as non-violent resistance after the failure of what was called »al-Intifada al-Mahmiyya« (the protected uprising).

Now there are signs that some youth groups such as »Gadiboun« (very angry) »Milouk al-Ishtibak« (kings of confrontation), particularly among the 12-19 age group, are not afraid of confronting the security forces by throwing stones and using tear gas, not to mention roadblocks. When it comes to the most active age group in the demonstrations and roadblocks, those between the age of 12 and 16 years (not captured in the questionnaire) are probably the more active, persistent and stubborn in clashes with the police

and security forces. It is the members of this younger age group who are the foot soldiers of street politics.

Youth may contribute to triggering a process of change, but it is no guarantee that they will lead this process, much less reap its fruits. Moreover, Sudanese youth groups have to find their own way of translating their potential into reality. In their efforts to move away from »old party politics«, a number of RCs put forward proposals for »political charters«, seen as one way for youth groups to articulate their vision for change. These charters have created a new dynamism among the RCs, shedding light on issues such as the preferred organisational structure (horizontal or vertical) and the mode and modality of change (incremental reform or radical change).

When it comes to women rights, there is a lot of controversy, in particular regarding young women. While the December Revolution was in favour of women rights, some groups of young women oppose any restrictions on their personal rights and development—some very small circles call for women to be granted all rights (including sexual rights), a terrifying demand for those who support gender equality but are fearful of a backlash from the country's conservative clergy among the Islamist ulama.[10]

While the majority support the December motto »hurriya, salam wa adala« (freedom, peace and justice) and are in favour of a more participatory democratic model, they have serious reservations about the relevance of what they call the »old political club«, i.e, the existing political parties. Not only do they see the existing political framework as flawed, but they also call for a paradigm shift away from the rent-seeking perspective of the political sphere to a new perspective where politicians are servants of the people not the other way round.

10 Plans by the Hamdok transitional government to reform the primary school curriculum were vehemently opposed by the ulama and conservative political parties. Curriculum reforms were depicted as impinging on the Islamic identity of the nation.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CD	Constitutional document
FFC	Forces of Freedom and Change
ICT	Information and communication technologies
NCP	National Congress Party
NIF	National Islamic Front
RC	Resistance committee
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Program

LIST OF FIGURES

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Atta El-Battahani is a political scientist at the University of Khartoum. From 2003 to 2006, he was Head of the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Economics, University of Khartoum and from 2006 to 2009 he was the Country Manager of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). For ten years, he served as Chief Editor of the Sudan Journal of Economic and Social Studies, published by University of Khartoum (2010-2020).

ABOUT THE FES MENA YOUTH STUDY

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) views young women and men as instrumental for democratic development in the region and is keen to strengthen their potential to initiate change in the world of politics and across society. Based on the results of a long-term survey, launched in 2016, the FES seeks to provide insight into young people's situation in the MENA region.

In 2021, the FES launched its second large-scale representative survey in 12 MENA countries: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as Tunisia and Yemen. With its 1,000 in-depth interviews conducted for each country, the FES MENA Youth Study generates a large database of responses to more than 200 questions concerning the personal background of the interviewees and their views on a variety of topics.

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