RELIGION, POLITICS, AND SOCIETY: THE ROLE OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN THE SUDANESE REVOLUTION OF DECEMBER 2018 AND ITS AFTERMATH

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Abstract: December 2018 marked a new direction in Sudan's political landscape as thousands of people revolted against President Omar al-Bashir and the Islamist regime that had ruled the country since 1989. Under authoritarian rule, Sudan suffered from genocide, war crimes, human rights violations and economic stagnation. As a result, Sudanese opposition groups organised demonstrations in 2018 to protest repression and demand change. This revolution galvanised unprecedented support from a wide variety of socio-cultural groups across the country. Protestors together with the army succeeded in ousting President al-Bashir from power in April 2019, setting in motion a process for political change in Sudan. This article analyses the practices performed by protestors in 2018 and 2019 and examines the social-cultural, political and religious dimensions of the Sudanese revolution. It also explores how the revolution's protagonists contested the role of political Islam and how its antagonists reaffirmed their Islamo-political ideology in counter-revolutionary activities. The discussion also includes a violent atmosphere of the current war, which erupted in April 2023.

Keywords: *revolution, Sudan, Islam, politics, identity, ideology*

Introduction

In 2018, Sudan faced a severe economic depression, marked by an unprecedented increase in the price of basic goods, as well as austerity measures, currency depreciations and cash shortages in the country's financial institutions. By the end of 2018, many people were forced to stand for hours or even days in long queues for bread, gasoline and cash.

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This political and economic discontent instigated the *intifâḍa shaʿbiyya* (Ar.), a popular uprising that demanded the fall of the Islamist regime and the restoration of democracy, which had been dismantled by the Islamists' coup d'état in 1989. This uprising gained momentum in the middle of December 2018, after massive demonstrations in the cities of Damazin in the South and Atbara in the North. Most importantly, Sudanese outrage was driven not only by a deterioration in economic and living conditions but also by atrocities the Islamist regime had committed during its three decades of governance. These atrocities include the genocide in Darfur, war crimes in the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile, and violent crackdowns of peaceful demonstrations between the years 2011 and 2013. The protests grew quickly and spread to other cities, namely: Port Sudan, Dongola, al-Gadarif, al-Nuhod, al-Fashir and the capital Khartoum, forming a strong nationwide uprising against Sudan's Islamist reign. The movement received unprecedented popular sympathy from a wide array of social groups, sectors and organisations in both urban and rural areas. In particular, youth and women, who suffered under the Islamist regime, played a crucial role in sustaining the spirit of *as-ṯhawra* (Ar.), the revolution, and ultimately ousting the regime from power. This revolution was inspired by two previous revolutions in October 1964 and April 1985 that succeeded in toppling dictatorships and led to democratic transitions in Sudan. The mass participation of youth in anti-regime protests was driven largely by unemployment, cronyism, nepotism and the clientelism of Islamist politics. Women, as Deshayes et al. states, participated in the protests because they "bore the brunt of the wrath of the state," enduring rape in war-torn areas and "punish[ment] for petty issues such as donning clothing deemed [religiously] unsuitable" in public (2019: 3). The repression of women rested on the Public Order Law, through which the Islamist police persecuted behaviour described by authorities as "immoral" or "indecent."

Anti-government organisers employed creative and innovative methods to mobilise support and to campaign for socio-political change. Their relative success invites the following questions: Who organised these protests? What were their methods for garnering support? Organising demonstrations under authoritarian rule is not an easy task. Opposition leaders who are known to the public remain vulnerable to violent retribution. Thus, between 2013 and 2018, the Sudanese opposition organised itself through professional associations whose programmes avoided direct political agendas. One of these associations was the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), a civil society organisation created in 2018 by urban middle-class professionals.

The group was composed of physicians, engineers, teachers, university lecturers, lawyers, journalists, pharmacists and other professionals, some of whom had backgrounds in Sudanese politics. Transcending socio-religious, political, cultural, urban-rural, and ethnic divides, it soon became an effective way to mobilise heterogeneous groups and expedite political transformation in the country. Before the fall of the Islamist regime in April 2019, for one year, SPA members worked clandestinely in order to avoid arrest by security forces. When the demonstrations intensified in January 2019 and the regime gradually began to loosen its grip on power, a coalition of political parties and associations joined the campaign. The most important body in this political process was the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change (FDFC), which is a coalition of political parties, associations and armed struggle movements that work together to effect political change.

The present article investigates the role of political Islam within the current Sudanese revolutionary movement, against the backdrop of three decades of faith-based politics and Islamisation. It asks: Why do proponents of the Sudanese revolution demand a secular state? Why do some Muslims reject Islam as a political force? This discussion about Islam and politics highlights the social-cultural, political and religious dimensions of the Sudanese revolution. It explores how the revolution's protagonists contested the role of political Islam and how its antagonists reaffirmed their Islamo-political ideology in counter-revolutionary activities. This debate about religion and power also includes recent counter-revolutionary efforts to retain elements of Islamism. The article clarifies how the imagined nation (whether secular or Islamic) is "performed" in revolutionary and counter-revolutionary practices.[1] Because the concept of Islam frequently appears in political discourses, whether for purposes of inclusion or of exclusion in politics, it is important to examine and unpack manifestations of the public role of religion in Sudan's burgeoning political system. In order to answer these questions, this article examines the voices of key protagonists and antagonists of the revolution, highlighting a wide spectrum of political representation and ideology.

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1   The imagined nation refers to the vision of a desired political community (Ismail 2011) that anti-regime protestors intend to achieve through different revolutionary activities. The protestors express this vision symbolically through resistance practices on the streets and in sit-in areas performing the kind of a nation they wish to live in. Thus, the playing out of the imagined nation through slogans and songs becomes a performative act in which protestors depict a desired political community, the representation of which is held to be inclusive and its quality is seen as different from the one entertained by the regime.

Methodological Note

This article reflects intensive ethnographic research on faith-based institutions of knowledge and Islamist epistemic policies in Sudan. In 2018, while I was in the field examining the connection between Islam and politics and the impact of these factors on institutions of higher education in Sudan, a revolution broke out. Sudanese revolutionaries were demanding a radical change in Islamist rule. Their discourse, which focused on the relations between religion, politics, and society, led me to expand the scope of my anthropological inquiry and include the role of political Islam in the Sudanese revolution of December 2018. I visited the sit-in in Khartoum during its formation and participated in anti-regime demonstrations to observe protestors' depictions of political Islam. Thus, this article builds on participant observations in anti-government protests and informal conversations with protestors conducted in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum in 2018 and 2019. My interlocutors include protagonists of the Sudanese revolution, who support secularism and contest the role of political Islam in the formation of Sudan's governance, and antagonists of the revolution, who maintain the idea that polity should remain based on Islamic principles. I closely followed conversations and arguments/counter-arguments about the Sudanese revolution on social media to consolidate my knowledge about burgeoning political changes in Sudan. While in the field, I attended forums and followed the news in which Sudanese politicians and religious scholars make statements and express their opinions about Sudan's popular uprising. I translated these statements from Arabic into English for inclusion in this article.

The Role of Political Islam within the Revolution

Under Islamist reign, Islamic principles have guided policymaking and legislation in Sudan, completely reshaping Sudanese government and society. Rüdiger Seesemann states that, through political activism, adherents of the regime desired a large public role for Islam including the goal of attaining political power and building an "Islamic state" (2018: 249). Hasan al-Turabi, the Sudanese Islamist leader, opines that the Islamic state is one of the dimensions of society's movement in its constant advancement towards the ideals of Islam (2010: 229). Utilising state power, the Islamists under his leadership launched a "comprehensive call to Islam" in which all aspects of the Sudanese lifeworld were subjected to a thorough Islamisation process. The motive behind this form of Islamism was to reconcile the principles

of Islamists' interpretation of Islam with changing socio-political realities in the country. In this sense, Islamism is a form of political Islam whose proponents advocate social and political transformation informed by select religious principles.

The SPA and FDFC, who claim to represent the protestors, call for the establishment of a civil state indifferent to religious and ethnic distinctions, with citizenship based on equal rights and civic obligations. In a televised interview, the SPA's spokesperson stated that "the main issue in Sudan is to build a state based on citizenship that will respond to the aspirations of the Sudanese people. Whoever wants to call it [a] secular state may do so, and whoever wants to call it [a] religious state may do so. The most important thing is for citizenship to be the basis for this state" (Yaqub 2019).[2] However, the main problem lies in the lack of a clear definition of citizenship and a lack of consensus on its role in nation building. Liberal political forces may characterise citizenship as civic nationality capable of embracing cultural diversity while Islamists may portray it as *ummah* (Ar.) (community of believers), underpinned by Islamic faith.

In an attempt to undo this enduring Islamist influence, the SPA has emphasised citizenship as a basis for Sudan's future state formation and governance. However, this new concept of citizenship propagated by opposition groups remains unclear. So far, the SPA has not identified specific criteria for citizenship in its governance program. As a result, organisation members use the concept of citizenship loosely to refer to membership in or belonging to the political community of a territorial state. Here, citizenship serves as a category through which politicians intend to overcome issues of socio-cultural and religious diversity. Rhetorically, opposition groups in Sudan use this concept to emphasise equality between all citizens, regardless of religion, gender, ethnicity or regional origin. However, membership in the political community of a territorial state does not preclude one's religious, ethnic, social, political, professional or cultural ties. The state may include these elements in its political system and institutional framework without eulogising or dyslogising them. However, in Sudan's multi-cultural society, it would be problematic for the government to promote one constituency or faith over another. For example, the Islamic regime prioritised the role of Arabic and Islamic identity in forming governmental policies and hiring employees in public institutions. The Sudanese revolution challenges this ideological stance, using the idea of citizenship as an equitable approach to

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2   Statement by Rashid Said Yaqub, the SPA's spokesperson, on France 24 News Channel, 10 April 2019 (statement in Arabic translated into English for the present article).

the socio-historical and contemporary diversity of Sudanese society. In his seminal book *Islam and the Secular State*, Abdullahi An-Naʻim characterises citizenship as a form of belonging that is capable of accommodating differences in society. Citizenship, in his words, is:

> An affirmative belonging to an inclusive, pluralistic political community that accepts and regulates the possibilities of various forms of difference among persons and communities to ensure equal rights for all, without distinction on such grounds as religion, sex, ethnicity, and political opinion. This term is intended to signify a shared cultural understanding of equal human dignity and effective political participation for all (2008: 33).

By making people from different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds shared stakeholders in public affairs, this new Sudanese interpretation of citizenship values the country's diverse constituency. Thus far, it appears that the SPA and FDFC both intend to construct this interpretation of citizenship upon the ruins of the Islamist regime, aiming to secure voluntary undivided allegiance to the state from all of Sudanese society. In doing so, they mobilise different communities to recognise and affirm the concept of citizenship as a categorical basis for rights and duties in the burgeoning political system. Building a political system on the basis of citizenship may imply a rejection of the role of religion in politics. Some members of the SPA deliberately avoid this implication so as to avert conflict with fundamentalist Islamic groups. However, other SPA members explicitly campaign for the exclusion of religion from government institutions, arguing that those mandated to represent the state should distance themselves from religious influence. For example, at a press conference in Omdurman, a prominent member of the SPA stated that:

> If we do not resolve the relationship between religions and the state, we will continue to have many problems. [The interconnection between religions and the state] creates despotism, guardianship, dictatorship and civil wars [...]. Religions must be liberated from the state. The state controls religions and manipulates them for its own purposes; and this creates problems. Religions are parts of our heritages and the believers of both Islam and Christianity are proud of their religions. To realise ourselves, we must liberate religions from distortion and hegemony of the state. Thus, religions must be separated from the state […] Religions are ours and we are free

to worship God the way we want to and believe in Him the way we think [is right]. We do not want a guardian who tells us to worship God this way or that way (al-Mustafa 2019).[3]

While this SPA member calls for the absolute separation of religion and state, not all opposition members agree. Regardless, the opposition seems eager to express a commitment to a new political order free of Islamist involvement (see Salomon 2019: 6). In this way, the state may serve as a mediator or adjudicator between competing social and political forces. This role will enable the state to maintain its religious neutrality. However, because the individual officials who work in governmental institutions hold religious convictions, their values will inevitably influence public policy and legislation. In this sense, the institutional separation of Islam and the state cannot totally exclude Islamic values from public policy, as demanded by some SPA members. Ultimately, a separation between religion and politics will not prevent Muslims from proposing policy and legislation that stem from their Islamic beliefs. Proponents of a secular state, however, press for what An-Naʿim calls "civic reasoning" (2008: 7), which opens a space for discourse and debate on issues of public interest management. Within a context of civic reasoning, citizens are able to assess and critique public policy and legislation. If citizens have the right to discuss, accept or reject legislation, *shariʿa* law can no longer be imposed on society. Of course, this worries Islamists and reassures secularists.

Civic Reasoning versus Political Islam

Sudanese politics has always existed at the intersection of identity, religiosity, citizenship and violence (see Beck 1998; Beck 2004; El-Affendi 1991; Gallab 2008; Gallab 2014; Gallab 2018; Idris 2012; Nur 2017; Nur 2020; O'Fahey 1996; Roy 1994; Seesemann 1999; Warburg 1990). Historically, these factors created the matrix within which the state formation took place and political parties developed. Currently, the manifestation of these intersections in politics is apparent as they play an important role in (re-)shaping competing visions of power in Sudan. The country lacks a national framework with policies for inclusive citizenship that would allow it to transcend existing ethnic and religious contention. The absence of an inclusive policy led some political scientists to characterise Sudan as a "turbulent state" (De Waal 2007; Prunier 2005) and other scholars to describe it as a "failed state" (Salomon

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3   Statement by Mohamed Yusuf Ahmed al-Mustafa, a member of the SPA, at a press conference in Omdurman, 13 February 2019 (statement in Arabic translated into English for the present

2016). However, the situation is far more complex; these rigid categorisations are unlikely to reveal the existing tangle of socio-cultural, religious and political realities. Liberal forces in Sudan emphasise civic reasoning as a discursive framework for state formation and stability. An-Naʿim explains that civic reasoning means "the rationale and the purpose of public policy or legislation must be based on the sort of reasoning that most citizens [have a possibility to accept or reject]. Citizens must be able to make counter-proposals through public debate without being open to charges about their religious piety" (2008: 7-8). In this sense, civic reasoning would allow citizens to debate religious ideas without being accused of apostasy, and it would also allow religious values to be included in or excluded from state law, discursively. This, in return, would create an environment conducive to discourse, debate, honest conviction and freedom of religious observance.

While secularists see the value in civic reasoning, Islamists regard any political system not founded on Islamic premises as an infidelity. According to one Islamist:

> The secular hypocrite says "no politics in religion and no religion in politics" but asks imams of mosques to lead the revolution against corrupt rulers. The secular hypocrite says that religion has nothing to do with governance but calls on imams and preachers to fight against bribery, corruption and tax evasion in state institutions. The secular hypocrite demands the removal of religion from the state but puts his [or her] hand on the Qur'an to swear in the name of God before assuming his [or her] high office (Yusif 2019).[4]

This Islamist aims to refute secularist claims of the value of a separation between Islam and politics by accusing secularists of hypocrisy. From the Islamist perspective, a secular state implies the total exclusion of Islam from public policy and the relegation of Islam to the purely private domain of individuals. This extreme conception of a secular state is unlikely to thrive in a society where most members hold strong religious convictions. Nonetheless, Islamists fear the prospect of a secular state, as it inherently threatens the group's political leverage.

To enrich our discussion about Islam and politics, I introduce a conceptual distinction between what is "Muslim" and what is "Islamic." The first term describes those who were born Muslim and do not necessarily share a uniform ideology; the second term describes those who commit deliberately to the

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4   Statement by Mohamed al-Hebir Yusif, a member of Islamist movement, September 2019 (statement in Arabic translated into English for the present article).

Islamist ideology and teachings. The term "Islamic" (*islâmî*, Ar.) is also associated with political Islam, jihadism, and the manipulation of Islam to achieve a political purpose. This conceptual difference is crucial in understanding how ordinary Muslims, who do not ascribe to a uniform ideology, view the government that has been ruling Sudan in the name of Islam for the last three decades.

For Islamists, Islam provides a polity's entire economic, legal, social, educational and institutional foundation (Nur 2020). Islam is also instrumental in justifying war, brutality, torture and oppression. For example, Sudan's Public Order Law authorises police to arrest women who do not comply with what Islamists view as an "Islamic dress code" or who accompany male friends in public. However, there is growing disenchantment with political Islam and its perpetration of serious human rights abuses. One objective of the current revolution, as the SPA and FDFC argue, is to disentangle Islam from politics and build a political system and institutional framework able to accommodate the socio-cultural diversity of Sudanese society. Thus, protestors under the leadership of the SPA and FDFC demonstrate to demand freedom, peace and justice and to call for the fall of the Islamist regime and a transition to democracy under the leadership of a civilian government. They engage in massive political campaigns on social media, where they announce schedules for and directions to demonstrations. One popular protest chant was *tasqut bas* (Ar.), it should just fall. As Casciarri and Manfredi explain, this "slogan makes no … particular socio-economic [or political] claim; it simply expresses popular exasperation towards the regime while demanding its fall" (2020: 15). Salomon adds that the slogan is the poetic and powerful expression of a desire for change regardless of what the future may bring (2019: 1). It transcends cultural, ethnic, political and religious divisions.

The regime took various preventive measures such as excessive violence, torture, detention and killings in order to quell the popular uprising. It also shut down Internet service to prevent protestors from communicating with each other and organising protests through social media, their main platform for communication and coordination. Furthermore, President al-Bashir declared a yearlong state of emergency, imposed nationwide curfews, dissolved the national and regional governments, and appointed military and intelligence service generals, who were trusted for their loyalty to the regime, as governors of the regional states. This structural reconfiguration was an attempt to restrain the popular uprising.

The protest organisers usually identify beforehand a particular theme for the marches. One theme was the "liberation of mosques" from Islamist scholars who are said to downplay the government's role in Sudan's economic and political deterioration. Islamist scholars maintain that Sudan's economic devastation is not the result of political mismanagement but rather God's punishment for moral decay and the deviation from Islam. The fallen regime recruited imams who agreed to deliver Friday sermons consistent with this fatalist Islamist ideology and even rewarded these orators by offering them executive posts in religious institutions. Protestors call these imams "*'ulamâ as-sulṭân*" (sultanic scholars) for their subjective complicity with insidious governmental politics. Here, the word "sultanic" removes these fatalist imams from spirituality, religious wisdom and scholarly admonition. It reduces them to mere servants of repressive authorities. Mohamed Ḥaj Ḥamad (2010) characterises these Islamic scholars as more dangerous than fundamentalists because they support the government's tyranny. However, the dynamism of the popular uprising lies in its questioning of Islamic ideological authority. These protestors understand their predicament as conditioned by the ruling elites and not determined by God, as the authorities want them to believe. When the liberation of mosques was proclaimed as a theme for protests, worshippers in various mosques scrutinised sermons to identify whether imams supported or opposed the revolution. Imams, who attempted to use their religious authority to legitimise the regime, were challenged and forced to change their sermons. Imams who did not take seriously the worshippers' admonitions were chased from their pulpits. Worshippers then nominated new imams from their congregations to assume leadership of the mosque and prayers.

In one mosque, for example, an imam tried to preach about the importance of *shari'a* in society and the state's role in safeguarding Islam. Worshippers immediately responded by chanting: "You are nasty *kôz*[5] (Ar.), you are hypocrite and liar; get out," followed by the main slogan of the revolution: "Freedom, peace and justice; and revolution is the choice of the people." Worshippers across the country cast out imams for supporting injustice or for turning a blind eye to the brutality of the Islamist regime. Overall, Sudanese society is eager to reclaim the integrity of religious institutions after thirty years of domination by a repressive Islamic regime.

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5   The literal meaning of the word *kîzân* (Ar.) (singular, *kôz*) is "drinking cup." Reportedly, this term came to represent members of the Islamist movement when Hasan al-Turabi, the late leader of the movement, stated that Islam is a sea and Islamists are its cups scooping from it. From there, members of the Islamist movement in Sudan were given the nickname *kîzân*.

Since the revolution, the regime has lost control over religious institutions, especially mosques, where worshipers increasingly scrutinise imams and their sermons. Thus, the revolution has transformed worshipers from passive recipients of dogma into subjects with agency. It restored the religious integrity of the rostrums by firing regime-appointed imams and nominating new ones. As worshippers began to take responsibility for their religious institutions, mosque administration moved away from state control towards collective leadership. This reshuffling of religious authority had the potential to both limit government manipulation of Islam and reinforce the freedom of religious practice and devotion. It also led to the emergence of alternative ideas around Islam that respects diversity and other religions and (re-) directs the role of religious institutions in society.

Some imams use sermons to communicate what they see as important messages. In this sense, the sermon serves as a tool with great potential for social mobilisation (Nur 2017). Imams may employ it to mitigate or escalate conflict, to mediate between social groups and to call for social change. Because these sermons are multi-faceted and address religious, socio-cultural, political and economic issues, anthropologists conceptualise preachers according to the realities they intend to reflect in their sermons. For example, Richard Antoun sees preachers as "culture brokers" who selectively transmit religious beliefs, ritual norms and ethics to their communities (1989: 3). Moreover, Abdulkader Tayob characterises the Islamic sermon as a "useful instrument in socio-political praxis" because it provides "audience, symbolic place and malleable message" (1999: 1). Preachers usually punctuate their sermons with appropriate verses from the Qur'an and *ḥadîth* to support certain ideas. Congregants are "not simply passive receivers of a dogma […but] they themselves interpret by sometimes rejecting outright certain interpretations in favour of others" (Antoun 1989: 6). This phenomenon is now occurring in Sudan, where worshippers are challenging imams to change the theme of their sermons or lose support. They expect sermons to support the revolution and its cause.

Rituals in Support of Revolution

The regime's ruthless responses to demonstrations indicated to protest organisers that civilians alone could not oust al-Bashir from power. Thus, the SPA and FDFC sought support from the military and exhorted its protection against police brutality. On 6 April 2019, the SPA led marches to the armed forces headquarters in Khartoum and in regional cities. Thousands of

protestors participated and decided to remain at these locations until the country's chronic political troubles were resolved. The armed forces protected protestors against the police, a decision that dramatically altered the power relationship between the opposition and the regime. The marches grew in size and culminated in the establishment of *mîdân al-I'tiṣâm* (Ar.), sit-in areas around the perimeter of the military headquarters. The sit-in in Khartoum was the largest and the most substantial as it hosted a variety of political activities. Activists and representatives of political parties, associations and civil society organisations regularly took the stage to deliver political speeches. Religious organisations, especially Sufi Brotherhoods, also joined the sit-in to support the movement. In their marches to the sit-in, the Sufi Brotherhood disciples chanted, "There is no God but Allah alone and the *kîzân* (Ar.) are the enemies of God." The term *kîzân* (Ar.) refers to members of the Islamist movement. According to this slogan, those who claim to be the saviours of Islam are instead the enemies of God. Thus, it deconstructs Islamist ideology and refutes its religious credibility in public discourse. Moreover, chanted by Sufi disciples, who are considered as custodians of local Islamic practice, the slogan carried significant revolutionary weight, reshaping the public debate about religion and politics in Sudan.

Islamists and Islamic groups who work closely with them accuse SPA and FDFC members of being secularists and infidels who aim to strip society of Islamic influence. However, this argument is losing potency in Sudan, where Islam has long been manipulated for political purposes. Protestors respond to this argument by demanding, "No more deception in the name of Islam," or claiming, "We are the generation that cannot be duped." Sudan's liberal forces believe that people will be better able to worship God if they are free to determine their own spirituality, without imposition from the state. Protestors also sought to refute the Islamists' accusations of their infidelity by organising and performing massive Friday Prayers in the sit-in space. One protestor commented on the sizeable attendance, saying, "This is not a Friday Prayer; this is a pilgrimage," referring to the majestic scene of collective prayer in the square. Unlike the fatalist preaching of the Islamists, the prayers at the sit-ins became sources of inspiration for revolutionary power. Thus, collective prayer served as a tool of resistance politics. Protest organisers maximised attendance, using different mediums such as social media and billboards. They mobilised worshipers from Khartoum, where the sit-in was located, and from faraway regional cities. These prayers seemed to carry a multi-dimensional message. Aside from their normative spiritual value, they served as a reaction to the Islamists' vilification of protestors as secular infidels. Protestors were able to proclaim a deep religiosity

and authenticity through their organisation of the Friday Prayer. Thus, instead of erasing the involvement of religion in politics, the opposition presented an alternative form of "public Islam" (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004) and the expression of faith. Not only did the organisation of such massive prayers and unprecedented solidarity among protestors render the Islamists' accusations impotent, it also appealed to non-Muslims who later converted to Islam during the sit-in. After one particular performance of communal prayer at the sit-in, an imam announced publicly the conversion of a Nigerian participant to Islam.

As a sign of interfaith solidarity and cooperation between protestors, organisers entrust Christian participants to guard, film and photograph the Friday Prayers at the sit-in. Similarly, the organisers assign Muslims to safeguard Christian prayers on Sundays. This display of religious tolerance and solidarity helped express their vision of religious diversity and interfaith dialogue. The protestors "perform the nation" (Ismail 2011) and re-imagine its religious diversity management through solidarity. They perform the nation in the sense that they create an inclusive, premier category of Sudanness for revolutionary practice, intended to convey the message that they would manage the country's religious diversity better than the Islamists did. This strategy also tacitly counters Islamist rule by re-imagining the nation through revolutionary practice and discourse. Thus, protestors demonstrate for a kind of governance comparatively different from that of the Islamists', which failed to accommodate religious minorities. Therefore, safeguarding one another has far-reaching implications: more than mere temporal security and proclamations of mutual respect, it symbolically initiates interfaith dialogue and religious co-existence in a diverse Sudanese society. It also builds a common ground to help accommodate diversity and draws people's attention to the socio-political issues that impact everyone across the religious spectrum.

Emerging debates about the role of Islam in public life created a discursive space where secularists, Islamists, religious scholars and ordinary people could discuss the nature of religion in society and politics. Scholars working on Islam and Muslim societies illustrate how the role of Islam in public life could be examined using "public Islam" and "Muslim publics" as analytical concepts for sociological investigation (see Salvatore and Eickelman 2004; Tayob 2012). According to these scholars, public Islam refers to the Muslim ideas and practices that specialists and non-specialists of religion, intellectuals and politicians contribute to civic debate and public life. The articulation of faith in public space, in turn, produces Muslim publics, which are discursive spaces in which Muslims (re-) negotiate the nature of Islam

in politics and society (Eickelman and Salvatore 2004). Thus, discussions and debates about whether Islam should be included in or excluded from politics constitute Muslim publics in a given society. In the Sudanese context, Muslim publics were prompted by the proliferation of political Islam under the auspices of the repressive Islamist regime. By using religious discourse in its counter-argument, protestors aim to distance themselves from the Islamist representation of religion and revitalise popular forms of Islam, specifically Sufism. Sufism's appeal to these protestors lies in the ability of Sufi leaders to accommodate multi-culturalism and diversity.

Many religious leaders stood at the forefront of Sudan's popular uprising from its outset, and even before. Most of them were associated with either Sufism or traditionalism and used their rostrums as platforms to admonish and criticise the Islamist government. Thus, these imams, renowned for their long-standing opposition to the Islamic regime, were invited to lead the prayers in the sit-in space in support of revolution. For instance, Sheikh Maṭar from Zalingie had been arrested repeatedly for his support of Darfur's armed struggle. To honour his efforts, protest organisers invited him to lead the Friday Prayer at the sit-in. Imams' support of political causes has been reported in other Muslim societies, too. For instance, Kai Kresse (2007) states that preachers in Kenya speak about the social and political situation in the country. During South African apartheid, according to Abdulkader Tayob, imams employed sermons to oppose the political system and to reflect the complex social situation of Muslims (1999: 1). Conceptually, Talal Asad refers to these forms of imams as *nâṣiḥ* (Ar.), advice givers, because they criticise unjust political situations and offer moral advice to the authorities (1993: 200-36). These imams and their messages indicate how religion can accommodate diverse communities and multiple ideologies and show the subjective nature of applying religious ideas to practical life. Jan Platvoet conceptualises this diverse faith-based experience as a multi-tiered notion of religious reality (1990: 184), whereby particular circumstances in a given society determine how some aspects of religiosity are projected and supported by imams.

Islamists' Counter-Revolution

As protests intensified and the sit-in expanded, the armed forces moved to oust President al-Bashir from the presidency on 11 April 2019 and subsequently formed a Transitional Military Council (TMC) to govern the country until the establishment of a civilian government. At that time, it was unclear whether the move was a coup or a show of military support to the protestors. The

protestors were sceptical of the TMC's political intentions, especially when the TMC began to mobilise and hold meetings with religious scholars and leaders of ethnic groups and political parties that participated in al-Bashir's government. The TMC used state-controlled media to distinguish itself from the fallen Islamist regime and promised to protect the popular uprising. However, the TMC's political statements and practices would soon prove to be unfounded. In this ambiguous political climate, some members of the TMC approached the protestors at the sit-in in Khartoum and started to negotiate a transition of power or a power-sharing arrangement.

As the TMC initiated negotiations with protestors and liberal political parties representatives, the Islamists quickly began to regroup under a new political umbrella called *Tayâr Noṣrat al-Shariʿa wa Dawlat al-Qânûn* (Ar.), the Advocacy of *Shariʿa* and the State of Law Movement. The movement was led by Abdul-Ḥay Yusuf and Muhammad al-Jazûlî, Islamic extremists whose radicalism is illustrated by their allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Political militant jihadism had proliferated in Sudan under Islamist rule (Ahmed 2015; Abdalla 2019). Yusuf and al-Jazûlî, adherents to this ideology, flourished during this time; even in the post-Islamist era, they continue to deliver fiery sermons in support of political Islam and jihadism. They argue, as Salomon states, that "Islam is a red line" and "that the new rulers and their opponents must not cross, no matter Sudan's political future" (2019: 6). This movement sharply criticises secularism and promotes faith-based governance in accordance with Muslim socio-religious and cultural values and traditions.

The movement therefore advocates for maintaining the *shariʿa* law that became official under the Islamist regime. Members of this organisation held a meeting with the TMC to ascertain the transitional government's commitment to *shariʿa* law during the interim period. This was a kind of counter-argument to the demands of anti-regime protestors, who wanted to replace *shariʿa* with civil rules. However, the version of *shariʿa* that this movement advocates does not have as solid a religious foundation as the group purports; rather it is a mere creation of the Islamist regime. In fact, Muslims have lived for centuries in Sudan without requiring *shariʿa* to organise their socio-religious and political life. Islamic law, in this sense, is socio-politically constructed and therefore subjective and devoid of divine quality. Thus, politicians look to incorporate it into Sudanese society not for the service of religion, as they claim, but rather to serve their own popularity. As a result, both Muslims and non-Muslims reject its enforcement by the state. Conventionally, *shariʿa* constitutes a set of

Islamic principles and obligations that Muslims voluntarily observe and practice as part of their religious conviction. These principles and obligations are traditionally driven from Islamic sources such as the Qur'an and *ḥadîth*. Furthermore, their interpretations vary across communities and generations. When the Sudanese state adapts *shari'a* principles, enacts them into official law and enforces their implementation in society, these principles lose their sanctity and become forms of state coercion. Thus, the movement's insistence on maintaining *shari'a* implies oppression and political instability.

Furthermore, advocates of *shari'a* called for a counter-demonstration to highlight the crucial role of religion in politics. Followers, who believe that the movement defends Islam and speaks truth to the rulers, responded to the call and joined the counter-protest. One of the polemic banners raised in this counter-demonstration stated: "We will never relinquish *shari'a*; Islam and democracy are adversaries cannot be brought together; faith and secularism are antonyms cannot meet; Islam and civil state are enemies to one another." This banner denounces the tenets of secularism, democracy and civil governance demanded by anti-regime protestors and alternatively announces the dominance of Islamic law and its teachings in society. With such anti-democracy, anti-secularism and anti-civil state slogans, the organisation could not mobilise a wider audience using religious discourse alone. After a few minutes, the counter-demonstration faded away and demonstrators dispersed. At these religious counter-demonstrations, men mainly wear garments and turbans while women wear *julbâb* (Ar.), long garment, and veils. This attire carries cultural and religious significance and symbolises the protestors' claims to religiosity, cultural authenticity, morality and piety. Thus, through banners, slogans and clothing, protestors perform an imaginative nation whose political philosophy is conceivably founded on the Islamists' interpretation of Islam. At anti-regime protests, however, protestors mainly wear trousers, shirts, skirts, T-shirts and pullovers, attire that symbolises modernity and indifference to religious affiliation.

Members of the pro-Islamic movement did not give up after the first unsuccessful counter-demonstration but campaigned for another march on 15 May 2019, this time meeting at Martyrs Square near the presidential palace in Khartoum. In coordination with the International University of Africa administration, counter-protest organisers invited the university's students, who are mostly foreigners and thus less familiar with Sudanese politics, to bolster the protest and transported them to Martyrs Square. Only later did the students realise that they had been hoodwinked into attending

an anti-revolution protest disparaged by many Sudanese; the student union ultimately issued a statement apologising to the Sudanese people for its unwitting participation. The union also clarified how the protest organisers had deceived them; students had thought they were responding to an invitation to an annual breakfast, organised by the university administration every Ramadan, and only later suddenly found themselves in the middle of a political protest. The pro-Islamist movement was willing to resort to deception to portray its support as robust. It used protest, in this sense, as a tool to negotiate popularity, exclusive Islamic identity and political dominance.

The Islamist movement continued to seek support and press for counter-protests. It aimed to mobilise popular support, gain legitimacy and restore political power. On 24 May 2019, the movement tried to organise a demonstration in Sennar, a town about 350 km south of Khartoum, in an attempt to demonstrate its support in regional cities and therefore its widespread acceptance. In Sennar, the demonstrators turned against the organisers, chanting slogans such as *abdulḥay al-kôz an-nay* (Ar.), Abdul-Ḥay Yusuf, the immature *kôz*, and chasing members of the group away from the mosque. Protestors shouted *niḥna kashafnah khoṭatu* (we deciphered his plan), implying that they recognise Abdul-Ḥay Yusuf's intention to exploit the congregation for political purposes. By expelling group members from the mosque, the worshipers aimed to establish themselves not as passive connivers but as subjects capable of determining and pursuing political interests. Here, the protestors seem to understand the socio-political backdrop against which they evaluate politicians' statements and actions. Espousing the idea that Islamists "manipulate religion" and that "religion is innocent of their actions," the protestors refer to those who downplay socio-economic problems and employ religion for political and personal benefits as immature, selfish, unethical and irresponsible. They see Abdul-Ḥay Yusuf in the same light, even more so because he presents himself as a religious scholar, not as a politician. After this counter-protest failed, the movement reduced its visibility and moved its activism into mosques run by movement members, using sermons to mobilise support, criticise opponents and praise allies.

When the Transitional Military Council suspended negotiations with opposition demonstrators and political parties on 4 June 2019, Abdul-Ḥay Yusuf praised the move, stating:

> They came from overseas, those who were in Canada, America, Britain and France. They came wishing themselves many things. They came believing that they had inherited the

country with its people and resources [...]. They promised to change laws and dismiss shariʻa. They want to make a crack in society and practice fascism without limit. God has chosen from His slaves who would cleanse their falsehood, prevent their evils and avert them from what they have desired. God helped those who are in charge of the country after they had signed an unjust and wrongful agreement. They are a few, but the agreement gave them almost everything. […] God helped those who are in charge of the country to dishonour that agreement and abolish its effect. This pleased the faithful and all Muslims. It returned rights to the people. This is what should be said in this situation (Yusuf 2019).[6]

Here, Abdul-Ḥay Yusuf praised the TMC, hoping to obtain fresh patronage from the new power holders and perhaps attempting to safeguard his religious authority against challenges from the new administration. Again, both Yusuf and members of the TMC had been working with Islamists for decades, so these established relationships have the potential for mutual trust and collaboration.

The TMC's Authoritarian Tendencies

Soon after their seizure of power on 11 April 2019, the self-appointed members of the Transitional Military Council sought to boost support by issuing statements defending the protestors and the popular uprising. However, a few weeks later, the TMC began to consolidate power, gradually transforming itself into yet another repressive authoritarian regime. The TMC limited political freedom by monitoring activists and political leaders whom it felt threatened its administration. Furthermore, the new regime demanded demonstrations of loyalty and attempted to quash protests, control media and Internet services and create patron-client relations. These moves towards "authoritarianism" (Cerutti 2017; Ezrow and Frantz 2011) stifled the momentum of revolutionary movement and deepened distrust between protestors and council members.[7] This mistrust took various manifestations,

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6   Statement by Abdul-Ḥay Yusuf, leader of the Advocacy of *Shariʻa* and the State of Law Movement, Khartoum, 4 June 2019 (statement in Arabic translated into English for the present article).

7   In this context, authoritarianism refers to the regime's advocacy of strict obedience and its rejection of political plurality and any thought for change other than its own. The regime used excessive power to oppress political oppositions and keep the status quo, in which the military maintained the role of a key player in the transitional political landscape.

such as arguments/counter-arguments on social media, harassments/physical attacks on streets and violent confrontations along the perimeter of the sit-in. Ultimately, the TMC resorted to brute military force to subdue the opposition.

On 3 June 2019, while protestors were preparing for the Eid feast at the end of Ramadan, the TMC sent Sudanese security forces to attack and disperse the demonstrators at the sit-in in Khartoum. The attack left approximately 130 civilians dead and hundreds more wounded or missing. Moreover, despite its claims to safeguard Islam and promote its values, the TMC chose to wage this attack rather than observe the holy day of Ramadan. This brutality was preceded by anti-secularist propaganda that sought to demonise protestors. Army leaders frequently labelled protestors as subversive for challenging the political order and demanding civilian rule. Furthermore, this leadership characterised the sit-in—the epitome of the revolution—as a crime scene and a place where Muslim society's code of conduct was not observed. Thus, army speeches frequently included falsehoods such as, "The sit-in has become the drug epicentre," and, "The sit-in square has become a place of obscenity, alcohol consumption, and abnormal behaviour." This smear campaign used a disingenuous discourse on morality and religion in order to divert attention away from the revolution and its cause. The regime sought to undermine the protestors' reputation, credibility and character as a way to publicly justify its violent attack. In the context of Sudan, labelling someone with obscenity, alcoholism and behavioural misconduct is an indirect way of questioning the person's Islamic faith. It is believed that, when someone loses his or her religious faith and social credibility, they lose the sympathy of the community of believers. Similarly, by portraying the protestors as wicked and corrupt, the TMC was seeking to isolate them from the rest of Muslim society.

This smear campaign painted protestors with a specific identity and character. For example, one TMC member stated, "These behaviours do not resemble Sudanese norms," referring to the activity of protestors in the sin-in space. This language attempts to deprive protestors of their Sudanese identity for what is seen as disloyalty to Sudanese military rule. The statement also implies that the protestors support foreign agendas that threaten the integrity of Sudanese society. As part of these accusations of treason, the TMC cited protestors' reception of donations from supporters in the diaspora. When these smear campaigns dominated state-controlled media, the TMC employed violence by attacking the sit-in. Protestors described this cataclysmic event as *majzara* (Ar.), a

massacre. A few hours after the massacre, the TMC proclaimed the suspension of negotiations with protestors and political parties and cancelled the terms upon which the parties had previously agreed. Before the massacre, the TMC was able to mask its true political intentions; after the massacre, the Sudanese people recognised it for what it really was—an extension of the Islamist regime. The TMC did not want to transfer power to civilians; it wanted to strengthen its own grip on it. The deputy head of the TMC, while addressing his soldiers after the massacre, stated, "Now we are moving into the right direction; the path we follow is the right one. [He paused to ask himself and answer] Why is it the right thing to do? It is right because we please God. We cannot be wrong when we are pleasing God. Our goal is to please God first and then Sudanese people" (Dagalo 2019).[8]

This statement, which disregards the public interest, mirrors statements made by Islamists that attribute Sudan's political and economic predicaments to religious and moral deviance. With its repressive, extremist behaviour, the Transitional Military Council aimed to revitalise Islamism and its ideological representations. Members of the TMC thought that dismantling the sit-in area would crush the protestors' revolutionary sprit and end the popular uprising, but, while the protestors may have been temporarily daunted by despair, their revolutionary spirit and determination has been growing ever since.

Bouncing Back to the Streets

This act of violent repression sparked anti-military demonstrations and further fuelled the desire for political transformation. On 30 June 2019, millions of protestors marched in the streets, demanding a civilian government and denouncing the army's political domination. The call for civilian government here challenges the idea of *ad-dawla al-ʿamîqa* (Ar.), a deep Islamist state, which was endemic to the Sudanese government and military. Protestors suspected that members of the TMC were Islamist agents and demanded the creation of a civilian government to ensure that the Islamist regime would not renew itself through its military wing. Demonstrators chanted, *tasqut tânî* (Ar.), it should just fall again, and "We do not want a military rule; we want a civilian government." In confrontations between the TMC and demonstrators, the Islamists sided with the former, seeking new patronage and support.

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8   A statement by lieutenant general Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, deputy head of the Transitional Military Council, Khartoum, 6 June 2019 (statement in Arabic translated into English for the present article).

The Islamists aligned with the military in a strategic attempt to restore Islamic governance and escape retribution. The military council also tried to benefit from this coalition by mobilising members of Islamist groups to organise counter-demonstrations in support of the TMC. However, this collaboration was short-lived as opposition demonstrations spread across the country with renewed vigour. Delegations from the African Union (AU) and the Ethiopian government were compelled to intervene in an attempt to contain the conflict. These delegations mediated between opposition groups and the TMC and hosted negotiations that aimed to secure a power-sharing arrangement and ensure political stability. This intervention helped stave off civil war between factions and achieved relative peace among them. Tensions eased and negotiations resumed, culminating in a political agreement.

On 17 August 2019, the Transitional Military Council (TMC), the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) and the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change (FDFC) reached a final agreement and signed the constitutional charter, the governing document for a transitional polity. This agreement paved the way for the establishment of an interim government to run the country for three years, with multi-party elections scheduled for the end of this period. According to this settlement, a Sovereign Council, composed of civilians and military personnel, represents the presidency. In creating this council, the new power holders considered regional and minority religious representations. As a result, the Sovereign Council includes a member of the Coptic Church, an appointment that marks the highest governmental representation for this minority religious group in Sudan. This appointment was a gesture of tolerance towards Sudan's Christian minority. Islamists, who marginalised Christians during their governance, were despondent. One Islamist opined, "The secular hypocrites demand a position for Copts at the top of the state pyramid but say secularism is neutral toward religions. [They claim that secularism does] neither offer nor deny to someone a position because of his [or her] religion affiliation" (Yusif 2019).[9] However, the interim government's Minister of Religious Affairs, Nasr al-Din Mufreh, reaffirmed Sudan's religious tolerance. He stated:

> Islam entered Sudan through peaceful means and not through war. Hence, the issue of religious tolerance and open-mindedness between different religious schools of thought is an important issue on which we should work. The issue of

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9 Statement by Mohamed al-Hebir Yusif, a member of Islamist group, September 2019 (statement in Arabic translated into English for the present article).

> religious tolerance is one of the issues that the Holy Qur'an puts a great value on. [Quoting a Qur'anic verse which reads] "To you is your religion, and to me is my religion" (Mufreh 2019).[10]

Mufreh transformed his words into action by appointing his deputy from a Christian minority group. When a journalist asked for his opinion about the country's socio-cultural and religious diversity, he responded, "Sudan is pluralistic in its views, its values and its cultures. It is pluralistic in its ideologies, in its Islamic schools of thought and it is pluralistic even in its religions. We have Islam, Christianity and traditional religions in which many people believe. There were also Jewish minorities that left the country" (Mufreh 2019).[11]

This inclusive approach is an attempt to foster peace, coexistence and mutual respect between different socio-cultural and religious groups in the country. Unlike Sudan's Islamist government, which emphasised Arabo-Islamic culture, the new interim government strives for socio-political consensus to ensure national unity and social cohesion. Under oath, the new Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok declared, "I will be a prime minister for the whole Sudan. Let us work together for a country and a pluralistic democracy in which we respect our differences." While Hamdok's statement indicates his determination for political transformation, it will be impotent unless his words become reality.

To demonstrate a commitment to protestors' demands for legislative reform, the Minister of Justice abolished a number of articles in the Criminal Act of 1991 that protestors considered a violation of human dignity and religious freedom. For example, article 126 (1&2) stated:

> There shall be deemed to commit the offense of apostasy, every Muslim, who propagates for renunciation of the creed of Islam or publicly declares his/her renouncement thereof, by an express statement, or conclusive act. Whoever commits apostasy, shall be given a chance to repent, during a period to be determined by the court; where he/she insists upon apostasy, and not being a recent convert to Islam, he/she shall be punished with death (Ministry of Justice 1991: 37).

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10   Statement by Nasr al-Din Mufreh, Sudan's Minister of Religious Affairs, Al-Arabiya News Channel, 7 September 2019 (statement in Arabic translated into English for the present article).
11   Statement by Nasr al-Din Mufreh, Sudan's Minister of Religious Affairs, on Al-Arabiya News Channel, 7 September 2019 (statement in Arabic translated into English for the present article).

The interim government abolished this article and replaced it with another denouncing accusations of apostasy and heresy and promoting religious freedom. Liberal political forces endorsed the change while Islam-oriented political groups denounced it. The substitute article reads:

> Whoever declares the apostasy of a person, sect, or group of people from their religion, or beliefs, or declares that person or that sect or group apostate in public, endangering their life, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not exceeding ten years or with a fine or with both punishments (Ministry of Justice 2020: 9).

Furthermore, the joint agreement between the Transitional Government of Sudan, led by Hamdok, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM/N), led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu, signed on 3 September 2020 reaffirms the issue of religious freedom. The agreement states:

> Sudan is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural society. Full recognition and accommodation of these diversities must be affirmed. […] For Sudan to become a democratic country where the rights of all citizens are enshrined, the constitution should be based on the principle of "separation of religion and state" in the absence of which the right to self-determination must be respected. Freedom of belief and worship and religious practice shall be guaranteed in full to all Sudanese citizens. The state shall not establish an official religion. No citizen shall be discriminated against based on their religion (SPLA/N & Council of Ministers 2020: 1).

Liberal forces organised rallies to endorse the agreement while Islamist groups demonstrated to denounce it. The agreement contributed to the tense political atmosphere of today and to an already heated debate about secularism and the role of Islam in Sudan's political arena. In this context, various groups in Sudan, depending on their ideological orientations and political philosophies, view secularism differently. Islamic groups believe that secularism leads to moral decay, obscenity, and alcoholism. Some may perceive it as freedom without limit, the antonym of Islam. However, liberal forces see secularism as a separation of religion from political affairs.

From Political Transition to Coup

Since 2019, the diverse components of Sudan's transitional government have been unable to chart a clear roadmap through the country's economic crisis, political unrest and democratic transition. The FDFC and its representatives in the government worked vehemently to reduce the military's influence on decision-making and broaden the civilian basis of governance in preparation for democratic transformation. They also restructured state institutions, uprooted Islamists and confiscated their properties, and set new regulations to prevent the return of the former regime and its sympathisers. Throughout this process, the military tried to expand its political role in the interim government, negotiating with opposition groups, becoming involved in foreign conflicts and setting unilateral diplomatic relations with other nations. At the same time, civilian partners demanded that the army's financial institutions be restructured and called for the institution to be held accountable for personnel who had committed atrocities. As a result of these conflicting visions, this transitional political moment in Sudan was plagued by vilifying rhetoric and attempts at recrimination, which led to further division and fragmentation.

As the conflict between civilians and the military escalated, those who sympathised with the former Islamist regime sided with the army and endorsed its consolidation of and grip on power. They formed a sit-in at the perimeter of the presidential palace, demanding that the military seize power and dissolve the transitional government. In support of these activists, the military provided food, shelter, and protection. The military then capitalised on this show of support to carry out a coup on 25 October 2021, dissolving the power-sharing agreement between military and civilian forces. Moreover, leadership of the Sovereignty Council was acutely contested. According to the Minister of Justice of the dissolved interim government, "One of the main factors that drove the military leaders to stage the coup was the scheduled handover of the Sovereignty Council chairmanship to civilian leadership" (Abdulbari 2022: 1). Before establishing the transitional government, military and civilian leaders had agreed on a handover timeline as part of an interim constitutional charter. The charter divided the transitional period into two equal, two-year terms, assigning the first to military leaders and the second to civilian leaders. When the end of the military's term approached, the army staged the coup, preempting the handover. The coup leader, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the Sudanese Sovereignty Council, arrested Prime Minister Hamdok, announced the dissolution of the transitional government and declared a state of emergency. This move

earned stiff opposition at home as well as from the international community. It also ignited and revitalised massive demonstrations to protest the coup and the dissolution of the interim government.

The charter upon which the transitional government was established is now partially suspended, especially the articles that deal with civilian partnership in governance. However, the Juba Peace Agreement, which was signed in October 2020 during the interim government, is still honoured, and those who joined the government through its framework retain their ministerial and executive posts. With this move, the coup created what Agamben calls a "state of exception" (2005) as a paradigm for a political transition and military domination. Sudan's exceptionality rests on the ability of coup leaders to employ oppressive force against the opposition. While the military staged an unconstitutional coup for power, it retained elements of the transitional political charter, thereby creating an imagined legitimacy. This contradiction is exceptional in that it situates the coup leaders into a liminal space between lawness and lawlessness. "This is not a coup but a rectification of the revolutionary path," the coup leaders often say in reaction to protestors. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan stated, "The Armed Forces will continue completing the democratic transition until the handover of the country's leadership to an elected civilian government" (al-Burhan 2021).[12] From the military's perspective, the new regime is acting as a caretaker government until elections can be held in two years.

Before waging the 2021 coup, the military staged its backdrop through state-controlled media, warning that the country was in danger of a civil war due to political division between partners of the transitional government. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan proclaimed, "The partnership turned into conflict causing divisions in various components of our society. The conflict portends an imminent threat to the security of the country, its unity and the safety of its land and people" (al-Burhan 2021). Thus, Sudan's exceptionality is rooted in the idea that the army has deemed itself responsible for protecting Sudan from allegedly nefarious elements as a way to justify its power. This responsibility is not based on a critical understanding of the existing political situation but the subjective determination of these decision-makers. To undo the work of the dissolved interim government, the coup leaders revoked commissions that sought to disempower Islamists and confiscate properties acquired illicitly under the Islamist regime. They also abrogated a commission set up by the interim government to investigate the dissolution of the sit-in in Khartoum and any crimes committed during this

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12   Statement by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan upon the coup announcement on 25 October 2021.

incident. These measures pleased Islamists, who were the main target of those commissions, and laid a foundation for collaboration between the coup leaders and sympathisers of the former regime. As a result, Islamist security officials who had been dismissed from state institutions during the transitional government have since been reinstalled into their previous positions and imprisoned Islamist leaders have been released. This collaboration between the military and the Islamists may lead to the re-establishment of the Islamist regime under a new name with different political slogans.

From Coup to War

In April 2023, war broke out in cities across Sudan as tensions between rival factions of the government erupted into violence. Just one and a half years earlier, Sudan's military leadership had staged a coup, dissolving the power-sharing agreement between military and civilian forces. However, as power negotiations faltered, the two main parties clashed, unleashing a brutal war on the country. The current war is being waged by two key figures: General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of Sudan's Armed Forces (SAF) and chair of the Transitional Sovereignty Council (TSC) on one side, and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, head of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitary group and deputy head of the TSC, on the other. These two generals have been Sudan's de facto rulers since 2019 and were military and political allies until January 2023. Together, they fought against the revolutionary armed struggle in the Darfur Region for two decades, collaborated on ousting President Omar al-Bashir from power in April 2019, and subsequently created the TSC, which leads the country's interim government and implements its political transition to civilian rule. In October 2021, al-Burhan and Dagalo waged a coup to oust their civilian partners from the TSC, consolidating their shared power.

Until March 2023, the two commanders engaged in peace negotiations in South Sudan's capital Juba, aiming to expand participation in their interim government. They were looking to incorporate into the TSC activists of opposition parties, the December 2018 revolution, and various armed movements. As part of an effort to form a unified national force under one military command, participants in these negotiations proposed the integration of all paramilitary forces in the country, including the RSF, under the umbrella of the SAF. As part of this arrangement, SAF leadership would have a monopoly on weapons and pursue one unified national security strategy. As neither al-Burhan nor Dagalo were willing to relinquish their

power to the other, tensions came to a head in early April 2023. Faced with the prospect of military concession, each general mobilised his respective forces against the other, resulting in a brutal war. For more details on this war and its background, see Nur (2023).

The warring parties have thus far employed heavy weapons and tanks, and the SAF even resorted to deploying its air force in cities; the ensuing violence has decimated service infrastructures such as water supply, electricity, food, and hospitals, with catastrophic humanitarian results. According to the latest estimate of the Sudanese Medical Doctors Association, at least five thousand people have died and more than ten thousand were injured in the fighting or in crossfire. More than one million have fled the country in search of refuge.

The violence plaguing Western Sudan's Darfur region, which has been undergoing a catastrophic civil war since 2003, is even more tragic due to existing grievances between the RSF and the local community. The paramilitary's brutality has further exacerbated the situation. For instance, in El Geneina, near the border with Chad, RSF fighters burned down most of the town including Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps, destroyed water and electricity infrastructures, and demolished the main hospital. They teared down residential houses using artillery and other heavy weaponry. Approximately one thousand civilians lost their lives, and an additional seven thousand fled across the border to Chad in these barbaric attacks.

The RSF, which fights against the army, are the immediate successors of the Janjaweed militias who were mobilised in the 2000s to suppress the revolutionary armed struggle in the Darfur Region. This region had long suffered from underdevelopment, political and economic marginalisation, insecurity, robbery of livestock, and recurrent attacks on villages by Arab militias. The two main armed movements that fought for the cause of Darfur were the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). They started their revolt against the Islamist regime of Omar al-Bashir in 2003 and pursued military operations to bring about political transformation, justice, and a proper representation for marginalised groups in both regional and national politics. The regime responded by waging a counter-insurgency, using historical grievances within the region's ethnic groups to weaken the socio-political support of the Darfuri movements. With this tactic of divide and rule, the Islamist regime created the Janjaweed militias from the self-identified Arab nomadic groups to assist the army in its attempt to defeat the SLA and the JEM. The composition of these militias also bears

a regional element, as their leaders recruited fighters from self-identified Arab nomadic groups in neighbouring countries such as Chad and the Central African Republic. As for the development of RSF throughout the years, see Nur (2023).

Conclusion

The ongoing war is a manifestation of the crisis of governance in Sudan and the failure of post-independence regimes to construct a sound Sudanese commonality that would embrace the country's socio-cultural, religious, linguistic, ethnic, and regional diversity; a commonality whose edifice rests on the historical and contemporary diversity of Sudanese society; a commonality that creates a political environment conducive to equal representation and effective participation. The current lack of a reliable mechanism for a peaceful transfer of power poses an existential threat to the country's national security and political stability.

The Sudanese polity is marked by authoritarianism, despotism, corruption, illegitimacy, injustice, inequality, discrimination, and violence. It suffers from the absence of accountability, inconsistent development, misappropriation of public funding, ineffectiveness of the rule of law, and a lack of transparency, among other shortfalls. This dearth of effective political leadership has led to Sudan's current crisis of governance and constitutes the root cause of conflict and war in Sudan. A country's crisis of governance can assume different forms depending on its socio-political milieu. In Sudan, it appears in the forms of civil war and revolution: civil wars in South Sudan before its separation in 2011, in Darfur beginning in 2003, in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile beginning in 1986, and now in cities across the country, as well as in revolutions in October 1964, April 1985 and December 2018. Sudan's crisis of governance stands at the root of the wars and revolutions that have plagued the country since its independence in 1956.

The cause of this crisis of governance is clear. In Sudan, a small group of elites hold a monopoly on power. This privileged minority, comprised of urban-based leaders of political parties, members of sectarian groups, army officers, and the like, has controlled the country's political landscape since independence. This elite political minority excludes the under-privileged majority from effective political participation, manipulating and exploiting it through deceptive political measures and divide-and-

rule tactics. Ultimately, these political elites undertake these measures in order to increase their own economic prosperity and perpetuate their own power within Sudan's political structure.

Marginalised groups in Sudan have never been afforded the opportunity to participate in governance as stakeholders with equal citizenship rights and duties. Excluded from decision-making processes, their representation in various regimes has always been symbolic and minimal. Those in power determine who gets to participate. This parochial approach is designed to create an impression of inclusivity, which further perpetuates its system of injustice and, in turn, provokes political discontent and resistance, instigates wars, opens vast rifts in the landscape of society, and tears apart the fabric of the country.

Throughout Sudan's history, even during the era of British colonialism, Islam has played a vital role in Sudanese politics and governance. Most political organisations in the country, regardless of ideology, employ religious symbols and references in order to exist in a society with deep Islamic roots. In the postcolonial period, some regimes sought legitimacy from Islamic organisations while others founded their entire systems of governance on Islamic principles, aiming to transform the national culture and individual behaviour in accordance with their specific interpretations of Islam. A thirty-year process of Islamisation, which touched every aspect of the public sphere, instigated current discourses about political Islam and the role of Islam in politics. Because of this long, arduous experience with political manipulation, Sudanese society may want to minimise the public role of Islam in politics. However, the country will not be able to uproot Islam's influence immediately. This process will undoubtedly take years of discourse and counter-discourse between not only secularists and Islamists but also among elements across the political spectrum. In the Sudanese political discourse, there is no agreement on secularism and its implication for politics, religion, and society. Therefore, the demand for a secular state is not an objective in itself but a mechanism for rejecting Islam-inspired politics and governance as unfolded in the Islamist regime.

Furthermore, the demand for a secular state is not necessarily a call to exclude religion from the state apparatus but rather a rejection of the imposition of religion by power holders. It (re-)imagines citizenship as a relationship that transcends current narrow religious, ethnic, and political identifications, to one marked by a sense of equal rights and obligations. According to those who advocate a secular government, the state must permit the free practice

of religion. This means that the state should remain neutral on the issue of religion and allow individuals to make these decisions for themselves. This interpretation may lead to the establishment of citizenship-based governance, which would embrace the country's socio-cultural and religious diversity and grant equal rights for all. In this way, Sudan can ensure a more tolerant society for future generations.

Acknowledgments

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