Shifting Terrains of Political Participation in Sudan

Elements dating from the second colonial (1898–1956) period to the contemporary era

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In collaboration with:

INSIGHT STRATEGY PARTNERS

Contents

Abbreviations

AFC...Alliance for Freedom and Change
CEDAW.........Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
DDR...disarmament, demobilization and reintegration
DFC..Declaration of Freedom and Change
FFC..Forces of Freedom and Change
FGD..focus group discussion
FGM..female genital mutilation
GUSW...the Sudanese Women's General Union
ICC..International Criminal Court
NGO...non-governmental organization
JEM..Justice and Equality Movement
KII..key informant interview
MANSAM....................."Al-Mgmoa'at Al-Niswiya Al-Syasyia w Al-Madnia" Civil and political
                                                                    Sudanese Feminist Coalition
NCP..National Congress Party
NIF..National Islamic Front
NGOs...New Sudanese Indigenous Network
RSF..Rapid Support Forces
SCP..Sudanese Communist Party
SPA..Sudanese Professionals Association
SPLM/A ....Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/N.......................................Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Northern faction
SWU..Sudanese Women's Union
UNDP...United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF...United Nations Children's Emergency Fund

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

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This study offers a bird's eye view of the status of women's political participation in post-uprising Sudan. The report focuses on four states with the objective of looking at different forms of political participation outside of the central locus of political governance in Khartoum. The reason for this is to shed light on lesser explored sociopolitical contexts. The selected sites are:

Central Darfur: This is a conflict-affected state (2003 to date) where women faced harsh circumstances that led to their engagement in civil and political activities. The state also hosted diverse international non-governmental organizations and was the location that armed movements chose as a base. These elements diversified people's civil and political engagements and influenced their political affiliations. The authors of the study chose Central Darfur because it was the least studied of the states of Darfur. The state was recently established, in 2012, after the signing of the Doha Peace Agreement of 2011. Therefore, this exploration attempts to fill an information vacuum in relation to women's political situation within the state.

Blue Nile: This state presents another example of a war-affected area with a different demographic and ethnic composition from Central Darfur. It also presents a divergent politico-economic context in which women are present in the civil and political arenas of the state. The main focus of women's groups is the structural economic and security situations in the state, which have affected the overall sociopolitical transformations in the state. Therefore, peace, justice and development were among women's priorities.

Kassala: This is one of Eastern Sudan's most marginalized states. The local administration structures of governance are based on ethnic representation, which follows the patriarchal norms of the community (*Nizarat*). Therefore, ethnically based power relations among the political actors within the state are enhancing

the domination of men—compared with that of women—over political activities. Furthermore, the state has one of the lowest school enrolment rates in Sudan (UNICEF 2012),[1] with women being the most disadvantaged. This has created a gap in women's and men's ability to participate in politics.

River Nile: A stable northern state, where a woman was appointed as a state governor (*walia*)[2] for the first time in a patriarchal context.[3] Therefore, it is worth focusing on this event as a case study in order to explore social attitudes at the local level and also how it has affected the gender dynamics within the state.

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1   According to a report by UNICEF, primary school enrolment was estimated at 44 per cent, while secondary school enrolment was only 14.6 per cent in 2011.

2   Reference to gendered nouns in Arabic: walia is a woman governor and wali is a man governor.

3   The state is predominantly inhabited by Jaa'li northern Sudanese ethnic groups, which traditionally form patrilineal and patriarchal societies. Therefore, many elements are thought to deprive women of their legal and economic rights (e.g. inheritance and civic education). Furthermore, there is a large number of girls who get married at a young age.

Methodology

Methodology

The study is the result of qualitative-based research that targeted actors concerned with women's political participation at the grassroots and elite levels. The main data collection tools were interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Four focus groups (each with 7–10 participants) were conducted within each state (with the exception of River Nile state[4]) at different urban and rural sites. The groups were:

- a young-women's group: for young women who became more politically engaged during and after the 2018 revolution;
- an intergenerational group: to understand the age dynamics among different generations of women;
- a mixed-gender group: this group included working men and women, especially those working in civil service institutions that are responsible for or involved in implementing gender-sensitive policies; and
- a political stakeholder's group: such as policymakers, political activists and politicians.

Interviews were conducted using an intersectional approach that cuts across class, genders (questioning how gender norms and how gender identities are framed), ethnicity, religion and political affiliations.

This report uses the terms women/woman and men/man instead of the more habitual adjectives female/male used in classical writing. While this choice might appear controversial, it is justified academically by the fact that the former terms relate to gendered socially allocated identities, whereas the latter refer to biological attributions.

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4   Five focus group discussions were organized in River Nile state, as a group of participants with opposing points of view refused to meet in one group. The researchers had to mitigate the situation by organizing two separate group discussions for each party, as will be explained in the report.

The interviews were conducted in the following formats:

- Key informant interviews (KIIs): women ministers, women working in the security sector (including women working within armed opposition groups), key civil service staff (i.e. social welfare and health).
- In-depth interviews: women from different political parties, lawyers, civil society activists, women involved in media production (such as Hakamat: women singers and poets who influence whether men go to war or whether they make peace in Darfur) and young influencers (active outside the formal space of non-governmental organizations (NGOs)).

The data collection spanned 14 days of fieldwork within each state. The output data is shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Interview formats and locations within Central Darfur, River Nile, Kassala and Blue Nile states

State	FGDs	In-depth interviews	KIIs	Geographical areas
Central Darfur	4	14	6	Zalengei locality/IDP camp brought in from the suburbs (interview conducted in the city).
River Nile	5	14	6	Atbara/Damer/Umm Altiyoor/ Fadlab
Kassala	4	14	6	Aroma/Kassala
Blue Nile	4	14	6	Damazine/Er Roseires

Key points

Data collection was based on ethical research and the principle of do no harm. The report preserved the anonymity of the interlocutors, mentioning their institutions only when necessary to highlight their diverse positions within their local society.

The main findings can be summarized as follows:

- The researchers noticed that elitist attitudes were a key element that limited the political participation of some groups more than others. Some elite women were able to some extent to transcend gender norms and the hegemony of men. This was mediated by education and heightened awareness of their

rights. The data indicated a clear separation between social and civil activity on the one hand, and partisan politics on the other. The concept of political participation among many participants was linked to the latter, within which women were less engaged than men.

- The above-mentioned separation also challenged avenues for women's political participation. As a result, the participants' points of view were divergent in relation to whether women's social and civil roles among their local communities could be described as constituting political activity. It was clear that participants connected women's political participation with formal political avenues such as governmental executive posts, political parties and legislative councils. On the other hand, women's civil and activist roles within civil society organizations were considered social or charitable rather than political.

- There is a tendency, particularly among men participants, towards a tokenistic representation of women's participation in the 2018 uprising. This was articulated in diverse ways across the four states. This view deflects attention from the risks that women took in going to demonstrations and facing the authoritarian violence of the state by instead focusing on the domestic and socially symbolic roles—such as cooking for demonstrators and being responsible for the ululations that served to initiate the demonstrations— that some women engaged in to support men, thus reducing the magnitude of their real gendered presence-subject to comment in terms of gender norms that saw it as appropriate or inappropriate according to diverse scenarios-in the streets all over Sudan.

- Doubts about women's leadership capabilities were more marked in the discussions that took place in Kassala and River Nile in comparison with the other states studied. Ironically, while some women participants in River Nile explained their antagonistic views towards the woman state governor "*walia*" of River Nile, women participants from Blue Nile and Central Darfur used the "*walia*" as an example of successful women's leadership and empowerment.

- There were differing perceptions and deliberations about whether the 40 per cent quota allocated to women within the Transitional Legislative Council only revolved around numbers and figures and whether this percentage should be increased or reduced. More significantly, deeper concerns were expressed about whether enough qualified women were available, the ability of political parties and armed movements to support their women members, and the politics of representation among women themselves.

- There is a clear variation between central and peripheral settings. Rural women are removed from politics and political activities through structural limitations (e.g. underdevelopment, lack of security and economic stability, and dominant gender norms that hinder women's access to education);

however, these women are heavily engaged in socio-economic activities and bear a greater burden of their households' responsibilities.

- The challenging circumstances such as war, poverty and displacement that women encountered in Blue Nile and Darfur placed more responsibilities on them but also gave them more agency over their societal roles and opened the door for them to engage in politics. Conversely, the slight evolution in societal norms that allowed more women to gain an education and work in River Nile and urban Kassala did not substantially destabilize the dominant sociopolitical gender roles; paradoxically, these gains contributed to placing further burdens on women's shoulders.

- The study concluded that the four studied states represent varying peripheries of Sudan. In each of these peripheries, aspirations for equitable political participation are challenged by the historical grievances of previous conflicts, unfulfilled peace processes, unbalanced development and highly centralized hegemonic political practices.

- The elements cited in the preceding point illustrate that the distances between different populations and regions in Sudan were influenced by centre–periphery dynamics and that peripheries appear in concentric circles on the basis of distance from the centre, which was the location of power and the main catalyst in the distribution of wealth across the country as at the time of writing (2021).

Introduction

Introduction

This report explores diverse avenues of political participation in contemporary Sudan with a specific focus on women's political participation and understanding of this sphere of social activity. We deliberately left the word women out of the title of the report in order to provocatively convey that the analysis underscores and takes serious account of the historical hegemony of men within the sphere of Sudanese institutionalized politics, which implies that men have dominated in positions of authority or have engaged more robustly in the quest for power (within partisan politics, local institutions, etc.).

The first chapter offers a literature review and traces some elements related to the evolution of politics in Sudan and the position of women within a longitudinal historical sweep. The second chapter is based on empirical data collected from fieldwork conducted within the aforementioned states, and it therefore deals with a specific temporal juncture and locations. It describes the perspectives of diverse interlocutors and situates them within a broader understanding of the evolution of political activity within the larger Sudanese landscape. It is significant to note that the report introduces concepts that are drawn from long-standing events that have affected gendered political relationships, and it is important to highlight that the revolution of December 2018 introduced polemical and contested terrains within the debates that have informed the dynamics of Sudanese politics in the postcolonial era in a more vigorous manner since there has been a greater margin of freedom of expression (though not without limitations) in the past two and a half years.

1. Overview of Sudanese women's avenues for political participation

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1.1. Women's political bodies as early forms of political organization

The 1953 Anglo–Egyptian agreement on Sudanese self-government established a three-year transitional period of self-governance to be followed by a vote on self-determination. During this period the process of Sudanization commenced, where Sudanese men replaced British civil servants. Women were largely excluded from this process, but women's activism did gain some headway.

The Sudanese Women's Union (SWU: Al-Itihad Al-Nasa'i Al-Sudani) had already been established in 1952 (Brown 2017: 117). This was not the only body signalling women's presence, since it had been preceded in 1947 by the League of Cultured Girls (founded by two of Gordon College's earliest women graduates), which was eventually dissolved due to partisan politics. There were also the Republican Sisters. All these bodies spanned diverse political allegiances, but they were primarily concerned with advocating for women's rights and progress.

It was only after independence that the SWU could broach more political issues such as equity of pay, the introduction of maternity leave, the establishment of custody laws that would be more favourable towards women and the abolition of *bayt al ta'a* (the house of obedience), which allowed husbands to compel their wives to return to their marital homes (Brown 2017: 127).

According to the narrative of an early woman political activist within the limited political sphere of the late 1940s, the SWU was not a cultural centre or a political party. It maintained branches outside Khartoum, and it worked according to a specific agenda. Initially the union was elitist and reserved for educated women; however, the politicized landscape following the 1964 revolution and its espousing of its values, namely equality in representation and democratization, had opened up

political space and created a broader base, drawing from different and more diverse segments of Sudanese society. By the time Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim became the first Sudanese woman parliamentarian in 1965, representing the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), matters had evolved to the extent that she had managed to gain support even from conservative parties.

The SWU enjoyed the support of student groups, trade unions and the SCP (founded in 1946), which was the only political party which permitted women to be members (Brown 2017: 125). Many of the union's members were thus linked to the communist party, eventually undermining the union's political independence and cultivating a left-wing orientation that led to splintering within the union.[5] The women's movement would henceforth be increasingly susceptible to political wrangling and, following the trend of Sudan's other political bodies, the SWU began to fragment, which was not helped by frequent courting by a diverse, and competing, range of political actors. Subsequently, the SWU split into two wings in 1970, one led by the SCP faction and one arm maintaining a tactical and pragmatic approach towards the ruling regime (Al-Amin 2017), eventually dissolving in May of the following year. Moderate members of the SWU went on to form a second union a month later, under the patronage of Nimeiry, which then split over the introduction of an Islamic constitution within the union (Al-Qaddal 2016), accompanying Sudan's increasing lurch towards Islamist politics after 1977. The April 1985 uprising led to the dissolution of the second union, illustrating the degree to which the women's unions had intertwined their fates with the ruling regimes. In a departure from the 1964 protest movement, which had strengthened the then-independent women's movement, the more partisan iterations of the women's movements were predictably harmed by volatile political changes.

During the second democratic period in Sudan (1986–1989), with Sadiq Al-Mahdi as Prime Minister, there was an attempt to establish a new coalition of Sudanese women. The attempt failed, however, since Al-Mahdi's government accused the former members of the SWU of being partisan and communists (Al-Qaddal 2016).

1.2. Inclusion and the politics of representation within the women's movement

The evolution of political participation on the part of northern Sudanese women through different manifestations—both left-wing and conservative—has been critiqued (Hale 1996: 72) for some limitations framed through its exclusion of women who were not

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5   These developments forced the SWU to either choose an independent political stance or to support the agenda of the SCP. This was most palatable when the SCP detached from the regime of then-President Jaafar Nimeiry in the early 1970s and started opposing the Socialist Sudanese Union, a political vehicle that brought the SCP and Nimeiry into power in May 1969 and that was appropriated by Nimeiry after a failed coup by the SCP in 1971.

of northern Sudanese cultural backgrounds. The voices of southern women—who benefited from a small margin of more permissive gender relations— were minimized, and the dominant homogeneity of the northern women's movement denied it the opportunity to borrow from other gender frameworks and thereby push back against patriarchal norms of "Arab'[6] and Western patriarchal structures.[7] This trend has been reversed to some extent with the advent of conflicts, specifically the Second Civil War between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the central government of Sudan (1983–2005), that have pushed women to take a more active role within the political sphere. Through proximity (forced migration), southern Sudanese women attained a more visible presence within the landscape of Khartoum (historically the locus of political power in Sudan). Therefore, it is noteworthy that northern and southern women came together to form a coalition for peace[8] in the run-up to the negotiations for peace instigated by the Machakos Protocol of 2002. This coalition was inclusive and counted women from the peripheries (areas that suffered long-term neglect and underdevelopment and were subjected to the social and cultural hegemony of powerful political actors hailing from riverine Sudan) among its members.

However, as with other iterations of women's political organization, this coalition was not sustained. For even after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (2005) between the SPLM/A and the Islamist National Congress Party—despite the six -year interim period within which the mandate of the coalition could have evolved to encompass broader issues—this did not transpire. In reality, within the new peripheries of post-secession Sudan—Blue Nile and South Kordofan—women faced the same forms of invisibility as those experienced by southern Sudanese women in the past (Ahmed Abdel Aziz 2019a).

Throughout times of conflict and political turbulence, there has been a tendency to frame women's political participation within the framework of peace-building in light of the civil strife: first the Second Sudanese Civil War then the Darfur conflict of 2003. However, such conflicts engaged women in different ways. While many women have stayed within their local areas, some have been subjected to forced movement which has informed their political engagements. Their roles shifted from

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6   This refers to understandings of being Arab in the Sudanese context. It is part of a thorny debate that impinges on the identity of the nation as a site of strife. The discussion hinges around self-identification among diverse ethnic groups in Sudan with some claiming Arab descent and others professing a purity of African lineages.

7   This train of thought is consolidated in relation to later political engagements by women–see, for example, Beswick (2000: 93). An analysis of the political participation of Southern Sudanese women suggests that their presence was hidden due to the fact that writings about women's leadership tended to focus on northern Islamic women and less on non-Muslim southern women.

8   Personal communication with a woman political activist and member of the SWU and SCP (to be considered one of the rai'dat (pioneers)). For more on these pioneers as trailblazers regardless of their diverse political orientations see Brown (2017: 122).

being victims during wars to being active participants capable of influencing the contexts in which they live.

Generally, the role of women as political actors has been framed through their formation of coalitions. Examples include the establishment of the aforementioned democratic association for women (Al-Qaddal 2016), the New Sudanese Indigenous Network (NGOs) (Abusharaf 2009)[9] and more recently the coalition that signed the declaration of freedom and change, the Civil and Political Sudanese Feminist Coalition (Al-Magmoa'at Al-Niswiya Al-Siyasyia wa Al-Madnia: MANSAM) (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2020). Such coalitions were an appealing platform for spreading women's voices within the restricted political landscape under autocracy. With a clear unifying political enemy in an autocratic regime, the women's movement is thought to be better equipped than other political movements to unify opposition forces, despite its lingering partisan politics. The current transition period shows signs of the continuing susceptibility of women's movements to political shifts.

Tracing these avenues is useful, though they tend to give a false sense of women's political prowess and may, in fact, cement women as second string to the centre of male-dominated political decision-making. Reading women's participation uniquely through this prism does not account for the complex processes engaged through posing questions about political participation, informed by diverse dynamics that emerge within specific contexts and according to particular circumstances. The oft-discussed problem of "the invisibility of women' has to be viewed in conjunction with "the kind of visibility they have" (Beswick 2000: 93, quoting Shirley Ardener).

For instance, it has been documented that, during the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005), southern Sudanese women were increasingly active within the SPLM/A. This was to the extent that even marital choices were connected to their positions in the army (Beswick 2000: 106). Therefore, the political situation affected women in terms of the roles they adopted. Some of them worked as sex workers in order to extract information from the security services and to convey it the SPLM/A (Beswick 2000: 106).

Therefore, it is worth investigating how these levels of involvement develop into more active political participation. Internally displaced women in the shanty towns of Khartoum may evolve from being "only' peacemakers within communities ravaged by political conflict to being more assertive politically (Abusharaf 2009: 111). This process is twofold: within communities it may be informal, but it also exists on a more formal level: "as active agents in reconstructing their own lives and that of their nation, displaced women undertake feminist transformation. Both in and out of war zones, Sudanese women embrace feminism as a powerful language for challenging authority in all its layered complexities" (Abusharaf 2009: 112). This translates as a fight for

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9   Abusharaf (2009: 115–17) presents other avenues for participation on the part of southern Sudanese women.

independence and dignity exhibiting a more political character. Women making peace have transformed themselves into "active citizens" (Abusharaf 2009: 113).

More recently, there has been a trend in which grassroots women have been used as political figures (Lavrilleux 2019; Ahmed Abdel Aziz 2019b; Saif AbdelAziz 2015). This has equally emerged in the deployment of Hakamat women from Darfur in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes.[10] The danger with this is that they become embroiled in a space of NGOs and international organizations that has its own workings and lies outside the parameters of organic sociocultural signifiers. While "the Hakamat are associated with the war in Darfur, in particular the inter-ethnic conflict and violence" (Adam 2016: 159) they became the site of international interest and intervention through the efforts of peace-building projects. Peace-building projects engaged Hakamat—women singers and poets—to spread the message of peace between 2004 and 2012; the international involvement that encouraged this was influenced by two things: "the image of Hakamat among the riverine North Sudanese and the international peace building community as "troublemakers', and the fact that they contradict the image of women as passive victims of violent conflicts" (Adam 2016: 155).

These initiatives largely took place in Khartoum from 2006 onwards, and training for peace building was carried out by the UNDP (Adam 2016: 163). The trend precipitated the adoption by the Hakamat women of the language of international actors at the expense of cultivating more organic grassroots initiatives for peace, then advocating for them. Prior to this, the Sudanese central government had used Hakamat to garner support in Darfur during the 1990s, and it continued to deploy their services after the outbreak of the conflict in 2003 to counter opposition groups (Adam 2016: 159–60).[11]

1.3. Women's participation under authoritarian regimes

The conflicts over centre and periphery were instrumentalized by Islamist tendencies that emerged in Sudan in 1983 under the leadership of Jaafar Nimeiry, and again in 1989 with the advent of the Islamist regime (1989–2019). This latter regime instigated a civilizing mission (*mashru hadari*) based on its own interpretations of Islamic precepts and how they should be used to govern. It deployed these modalities in its quest to maintain power.

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10 Personal testimony by one of the researchers (Azza Ahmed Abdel Aziz), who attended one of the (DDR) workshops organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) at the Corinthia Hotel and Al Hosh restaurant in Khartoum and Omdurman, respectively, in 2015.

11 This position is reiterated by Musa (2018: 131), who argues that Hakamat were mobilized by the Islamist government to entice violence and confrontation in the instrumentalized use of race as a weapon of conflict. Arabs fighting for the government against perceived "Zurga' rebel groups (groups labelled as indigenous Africans not claiming Arab descent). For more on the, "Zurga' and "Arab' distinction and its political and social ramifications see Musa (2018 : 17) and Prunier (2005).

The rise of Islamist women's groups in Sudan was connected with the dominant Islamist-oriented political parties in Sudan (Al-Nagar 2006). This development highlights the constrained agency[12] of these militants, who benefit from patriarchal norms while concurrently negotiating them (Nur 2020: 7),[13] though arguably with limited success, as they must yet navigate a rigid framework.

The political role of women during the Al-Ingaz regime is of interest. Hassan Al -Turabi, the mastermind behind the National Islamic Front—dissolved in 1990 after the military coup of 1989—was a controversial figure who appeared to offer women avenues of political participation. Yet, as a key figure in the regime he did not strive to abolish the Public Order Law (established in 1996), which infringed most acutely on women's human rights and dignity (Al-Sir 2017). He seemed to support the emancipation of women and to have a liberal attitude towards arts and culture, and he wanted to expand the principle of *shura* (consultation) (Berridge 2017: 181 and 183).

The space for political participation given to Islamist women during the Ingaz regime obliged other women to deploy tactics to position themselves within this sphere— for pragmatic gains related to their livelihoods. Women from a low-income peri-urban neighbourhood in greater Khartoum set up associations, but since they did not possess the tools to continue independently, they sought administrative support from the regime-aligned General Union for Sudanese Women (GUSW: Al-Itihad Al-Aam li Al-Mara'a Al-Sudania), whose centre in Khartoum is tellingly abbreviated as MAMA (Revilla 2020). In areas with few services, women residents, in their attempt to establish law and order in the area, relied on the GUSW, which was, despite its affiliation with the then-ruling party, registered as an NGO. This reveals how various associations that were not necessarily part of the Islamic movement or the National Congress Party (NCP) mainstream pragmatically sought support and access to a political forum which made them part of NCP-affiliated organizations, such as the GUSW. Among the associations that sought the patronage of the regime, there were discrepancies in the level of support and access they had, often based on socio-economic status, education and level of buy-in into the regime's ideology.

The emergence of urban youth movements that counted a significant number of young women in their midst, worked against these Islamist political activities. Most noteworthy were Girifna (We Are Fed Up) and Sudan Change Now (with a solid base among left-leaning students and syndicate members). These movements were innovative in their engagements with traditional political parties—whose youth had been struggling to find space within aged structures—and in how they enacted novel intergenerational interactions within the Sudanese middle-class, urban (chiefly Khartoum-based)

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12 After the term coined by Saba Mahmood (2004).

13 Nur cites Liv Tønnessen, The Many Faces of Political Islam in Sudan: Muslim Women's Activism for and against the State, PhD dissertation, University of Bergen (2011).

political landscape. These interactions were primarily facilitated by familial and social connections with the aforementioned political parties (Dehayes 2018).

The eruption of these diverse women's movements was also accompanied by oppositional trends that claimed legislative amendments and policy modifications pertaining to issues that will be presented and discussed below.

Throughout the lifespan of political engagement on the part of modern Sudanese women, their movements have been highly prone to the influence of partisan politics and therefore vulnerable to political changes. Current iterations of women's movements have not been able to completely escape this trend but, over time, the deterioration and fragmentation that have accompanied political parties that had existed in the past— which have also been reflected in the women's movement—have created opportunities to cultivate broader alliances on the women's agenda. Such developments suggest that, politically, women are able to engage and to be engaged in political agendas that speak to women as a broader constituency rather than through narrower political ideologies. This represents a constraint in the engagement of women along political, rather than broader, lines, as would be expedient in the run-up to elections. However, engaging women alone for the sake of greater women's political engagement is not likely to be fruitful and will see women become relegated to lobby groups with men at the centre of politics.

Ultimately, Sudanese feminism is a broad church; from its narrower beginnings through to Al Turabi's engagement in Sudanese politics, it became even broader, as Islamist values were treated to modern interpretations of women's rights in the hope of attracting a large constituency—in the Islamists' (the National Islamic Front (NIF) at the time) ambitions for power. Sudanese politics throughout its broad spectrum can be situated mostly within the politics of the "right', as conservative social values have been maintained throughout the various political shifts that have taken place. This means that even left-wing political parties often espouse traditionally conservative views on women's roles (among other issues) within political and social life. The absence of manifestos, or well-articulated and documented positions, by political parties or movements—progressive or liberal—on key issues largely contributes to this. The presence of written manifestos could, for example, allow progressive party members or civil society or activists to engage with, lobby for or push against such positions and create the language necessary to drive the conversation within political parties, and ipso facto the political landscape, further towards a more progressive outlook on women's participation.

1.4. Legislative frameworks and policies

Looking at the basis of the legal system in Sudan, one can observe that it is based on legal plurality sourced from four paradigms: British common law, the French legal system (in a 1970s pan-Arab move to unify regional legal systems), Islamic sharia

law and customary laws. This plurality is reflected not just in the legal framework of Sudan's laws but, more importantly, in the ways in which laws are interpreted and implemented, and in how they conflict in reality.

The tendency of the British administration to separate the civil courts (based on British law) from the family courts (based on sharia laws) opened the door to contradictions within the Sudanese legal system. This is particularly noteworthy in its relationships with international conventions and protocols that Sudan has ratified since independence (1956).

This tendency has also impinged on the extent to which activists can criticize certain Islamic sharia laws or mobilize against them.[14] As Tønnessen and Kjøstvedt (2010: 4) state:

> Although the main focus of the women's union was women's rights within the public sphere related to work, education and political participation, they also worked on civil rights demands such as protection against compulsory marriage, marriage of minors and polygamy. But the women's union was very careful not to directly criticize Sharia (Islamic law) or the religious clergy (ulema) . . . [A]t the same time, they did raise issues and initiate debate on topics related to the status of women in Islamic law.

The introduction of the September 1983 Islamic legislation, when the Nimeiry regime declared Sudan an Islamic republic and sharia the main legal framework in the country, the NIF (the precursor to the NCP) took the conceptualization of sharia-based laws further by legislating the 1991 Personal Status of Muslim's Law (Al-Ahwal Al-Shakhsia Le'l-Muslimeen). This was the first law of its type to deal with family issues (marriage, divorce, custody and inheritance) from a legal and Islamic perspective.[15] The NIF adopted a less harsh perspective of Islamic sharia' law than that introduced by the initial 1983 Islamic laws (SIHA Network 2015: 3).

In a highly political move, the instrumentalization of Islam as a legal reference was taken to another level, expanded to move beyond Muslim family issues such as inheritance, marriage and divorce to broader issues such as citizenship (the 1994 Nationality Act), criminal law (the 1991 Sudanese Criminal Act) and public order (the 1996 Khartoum Public Order Act). These laws sidelined the cultural and religious diversity of the Sudanese population. They were particularly harsh towards

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14 See, for example, critiques—written by left-leaning activists—of Sudanese sharia law such as the one by Fatma Al-Qaddal (n.d.)—an SWU member and well established activist "Molahzat hol Qanon Al-Ahwal Al-Shakhsia Lel-Muslmin Al-Sudaneen Lea'm 1991". One can clearly observe a tendency towards arguing against clauses contained in the 1991 Islamic Family Law, such as age of marriage, male guardianship pertaining to women's marriage contracts, etc., by offering counter-arguments derived from the corpus of sharia itself.

15 Before 1991, there was no law specialized in dealing with family-related issues; such disputes were legally dealt with through the subjective interpretations of judges based on Islamic jurisprudence (ijtihad) and the general advisory (fatwa) of the Islamic Hanafi doctrine.

women and encroached on their social and political freedoms. This was achieved through the state's strict control of the dress code for women, their interaction within the public sphere, their ability to confer nationality to their children, their access to citizenship documents for their children with foreign fathers and their rights to mobility (Tønnessen and Kjøstvedt 2010; SIHA Network 2015).

Concerning gender-related human rights conventions, Sudan is one of two countries within the Middle East and North Africa region—together with Iran—that has not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Tønnessen 2020) as well as the optional protocol of 1999 (UNICEF Sudan 2017: 24).

Sudan has failed to ratify CEDAW despite the fact that article 15(2) of its Interim Constitution of 2005 (Government of Sudan 2005) clearly states that "The State shall protect . . . women from injustice, promote gender equality . . . and empower them in public life", while articles 31–32 guarantee equal political, social, economic and civil rights for all men and women regardless of race, sex, ethnicity, political affiliation, religion or language.

The constitution stated certain principles that did not translate into the legal framework of laws concerning women. For example, the 1991 Criminal Act of Sudan provided vague definitions of the distinction between rape and the Islamic criminalization of adultery and fornication (both termed *zina*).[16] Furthermore, the law provided contradictory definitions pertaining to the age of majority, defined as those under 18 years of age according to the Child Act of 2010 and within the Criminal Act, by the more nebulous "reaching puberty". For cases related to sexual misdemeanours, in the event that an individual was over 18, such misdemeanours would not be considered rape since the age was taken as a sign of consent and agency. In this way victims were at risk of being criminalized if they failed to provide evidence of rape; otherwise, they were accused of committing *zina*, which is punishable by law.

The 1991 Criminal Act similarly ignored other areas of gender-based violence such as domestic violence and marital rape. It was amended in 2010 and 2015 in the context of the legal reforms that followed the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2015: 10).[17] However, some scholars argue that the amendments did not change the core precepts of the law, merely modifying them

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16 If one party is married, the punishment for them is death by stoning (upon the production of four eye witnesses). If neither party is married, the punishment is lashes.

17 The reforms were also a response to pressure from women and legal activists who created campaigns against the article concerning rape (149) of the 1991 Criminal Act. However, Tønnessen and Al-Nagar have argued that legal reforms on rape laws were due to the issue appearing on the political level after the recognition of war crimes in Darfur by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2009, and the need of the NCP government to enhance its reputation for the 2010 elections.

slightly by offering a clearer definition of what constitutes rape and *zina* (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2015:7).[18]

The history of women's participation within the parliament reveals two facts. First, the proportion of women's parliamentary seats within dictatorial military regimes— that imposed the dominance of a single political party to the detriment of others—have brought a larger number of women to parliament. Secondly, there was less political participation on the part of women during democratic, multiparty eras in Sudan (Abbas 2010: 107).

The main reason for this is that, during the multiparty periods, women typically ran for parliamentary elections only through "graduate constituencies", which were formed without regard for geographical inclusivity and tended to favour urban, educated candidates who might not have an affiliation with a political party. Conversely, during the military-based systems, quotas were implemented to engage a broader group of women within predetermined allocations. Compared with previous dictatorships, the regime of former President Omer Hassan Ahmed Al-Bashir was the most active in terms of legislating parliamentary quotas. After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the women's quota reached 25 per cent during the 2010 national elections, a proportion that was described by many scholars (Tønnessen and Al-Nagar 2013) as the biggest step taken in the legislative sphere. Nonetheless, this progress was not followed by other efforts that pushed for gender-sensitive legislation, due to the political polarization of the Islamist-oriented women who formed the majority of women parliamentarians. This was compounded by the lack of political cooperation and ideological compromise regarding the issues of equality (musawah)(adopted by Sudanese liberal women activists) and equity (*insaf*)[19] (adopted by women Islamist parliamentarians).[20]

1.5. Constitutional and legislative frameworks governing women's political participation during the transitional period

Based on Sudan's 2005 Constitution and the international human rights conventions that the country has ratified—which do not include CEDAW—Sudan has adapted and developed several strategies and policies to enhance gender equality. Several sectoral policies were developed during the NCP regime, including the following:

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18 According to Tønnessen and Al-Nagar (2015: 18), the definition of rape involved not only penile penetration but also the use of any other devices or any other parts of the body. Moreover, the idea of "by force' no longer includes physical violence only but also "psychological intimidation'.

19 Rights given within a patriarchal system and not imposed by rights enshrined in the law (researchers' clarification). According to Tønnessen and Al-Nagar (2013: 9), gender equity, or insaf, within the Islamic framework emphasizes piety, unlike gender equality, or *musawah*, which is considered a Western, secular concept that is irrelevant to the predominantly Muslim communities that make up Sudanese society on the whole.

20 For more on the quota system affecting women, see El-Naggar (2013).

1. The National Women's Empowerment Policy (2007). This was declared by President Bashir under the technical supervision of the Ministry of Welfare and Social Development, as it was called at the time.[21] The policy consisted of six mainstays: education, health, human rights, political participation, peace and economic empowerment (UNICEF Sudan 2017: 26).
2. The Interim Basic Education Strategy (2012–16). Developed by the Ministry of Basic Education, this was a gender-sensitive policy related to enhancing girls' access to education, especially in rural areas (UNICEF Sudan 2017: 26).
3. The Code of Labour (1997). Introduced by the Ministry of Labour, the code confirmed the right to maternity leave and the importance of protecting women from harmful working conditions (UNICEF Sudan 2017: 27).
4. In addition to these, some federal ministries established specific units for enhancing gender equality, such as the Women and Child Protection Unit, under the Ministry of the Interior; the General Directorate for Women and Family Affairs, within the Ministry of Welfare and Social Development; gender focal points across sub-departments and institutional units; and the Advisory Council for Human Rights, part of the Ministry of Justice (UNICEF Sudan 2017: 27–8).

However, the above-mentioned policies are not yet unified under a macro policy on women's inclusion, as Sudan has not yet adopted a national strategy for gender equality. Instead, the state incorporated gender approaches within each national strategic plan, such as the 25-year national strategy that emphasized the right of "all Sudanese" (article 5 of Sudan's 2007 National Strategic Plan) (National Council for Strategic Planning 2007) to have access to a dignified life, fair political representation, respect for their human rights and socio-economic justice.

Post-revolution, the Constitutional Charter signed in August 2019 forms the baseline for women's political participation within the new political landscape of Sudan. The charter stipulated that one of the main mandates of the transitional period would be that state agencies should guarantee women's rights in all social, economic and political arenas, while also combating all forms of discrimination against women taking into consideration "provisional preferential measures" in both conflict and peace situations (Chapter 2, article 7.7) (Government of Sudan 2019).

The Rights and Freedoms Charter, part of the Constitutional Charter, also set clear rights of equality before the law, rights of protection through legal recourse regardless of gender, ethnicity, colour, religion, etc. (article 47), as well as equal rights

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21 At present at the Federal level this ministry is Labour and Social Development. As relevant to the states studied in this report it goes by the following: Central Darfur and Blue Nile, Health and Social Development. In Kassala it is called the Ministry of Social Affairs and in River Nile it is called the Unit of Social Development.

of entitlement to Sudanese citizenship and nationality on the part of any individual born to a Sudanese father or mother (article 44.2).

The Rights and Freedoms Charter also devotes a separate article to women's rights, which covers all political, civil, economic, social and cultural rights of women such as equal pay, free healthcare, positive discrimination and protection against harmful customs and traditions (article 48).

The main commitments of the Constitutional Charter are allowing 40 per cent of the members of the Transitional Legislative Council to be women (this is not a requirement) (article 23.2) and establishing independent commissions, such as a Women's and Gender Equality Commission, to be appointed by the cabinet (article 38.5.g). However, neither commitment has been fulfilled due to delays in establishing both the Transitional Legislative Council itself and the independent commissions.

There is a common misunderstanding among women's groups and organizations concerning the 40 per cent allowance for parliament, as many activists think that the percentage provided in the 2019 Constitutional Charter equally applies to all legislative and executive levels (Radio Dabanga 2020) especially since Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok expressed his commitment to equitable participation by women within his cabinet. In reality, the charter does not render the application of this percentage mandatory throughout all governance levels. Rather, it underscores a theoretical recognition of the importance of engaging women.

The role of women in making, building and guarding peace was also stressed by the 2019 Constitutional Charter and the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, especially through the application of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Republic of the Sudan 2020) and all other African Union resolutions (article 67.c), such as the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), which Sudan has ratified but not joined.

In response to the ratification of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 by the transitional government of Sudan (2019–time of writing), the Ministry of Labour and Social Development was charged with preparing Sudan's National Action Plan for the implementation of the Resolutio (2020–22), which was approved by the cabinet in March 2020. The plan's key points are to ensure the inclusion and involvement of women in all peacemaking processes; to increase the recognition of women's rights before, during and after conflicts; and to protect women against gender-based violence, especially in conflict-affected contexts. The mechanisms for achieving these milestones are training and raising the capacity of women to be politically engaged and economically independent, reviewing and reforming national laws and policies

that hinder the full participation of women and raising the awareness of political stakeholders and local communities about Resolution 1325.

However, the plan does not specify how such mechanisms are to be implemented in reality. Successive legal documents throughout Sudanese history, such as the 1956, 1973 and 2005 Constitutions, as well as the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the 2006 Doha Document for Peace in Darfur, among others, show rhetorical support for women's participation in political mechanisms and structures. Nevertheless, questions remain as to the practical aspects of implementation: What are the criteria for choosing and training women? How can fair representation among women themselves take place? What are the evaluation criteria (apart from the numbers of trained women) that ensure the effectiveness of the awareness programmes that are adopted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Development?

While such patterns of policies and strategies emphasize the importance of women's involvement, they do not explicitly illustrate how this involvement should take place. Furthermore, they frame women only as policy beneficiaries—the "add women and stir" approach (Noddings 2001)—instead of being part and parcel of the policymaking process itself. Social scientists use this concept to analyse how the male-dominated state is formed on a patriarchal basis that defers the full participation of women to a distant future, and even then it is to be introduced under patriarchal supervision.

This ultimately limits the parameters of such participation instead of offering new recipes directed at establishing legislation and national policies on the basis of equality within a contemporary civil state as advocated by both the members of the defunct NCP regime and the current transitional government.

1.6. Methodology

1.6.1. Scope of the research

The study aims to facilitate the work of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) in enabling diverse women to engage with the political arena and enhance their visibility in Sudan's institutional political landscape. The realization of these aims will be built on the observations of processes taking place during the transitional period (e.g. the current coalition between civilian, the military and Rapid Support Forces (RSF)), since these processes will influence the ability of the transition that strives to establish a strong civilian presence on the political landscape of Sudan. The research for this report focused on women outside Khartoum and on women who were not part of political institutions; the researchers

explored their conceptualization of political participation in Sudan, the available channels and the structural limitations facing women at large with consideration of the changing contexts of post-revolution Sudan.

1.6.2. Sampling

A guide on sampling criteria and a question list for KIIs and FGDs were provided to the researchers and data collectors (see Annex 2). Four types of focus group with 7–10 members per group were conducted within each state as follows:

- A group of young women who became more politically engaged during and after the 2018–19 revolution.
- An intergenerational group of women and girls; this group helped the researchers understand the age dynamics and how they influence involvement in political activity on the part of women and girls at the local level of women's movements.
- A mixed-gender group, which included active working men and women, especially those working in civil service institutions responsible for or part of implementing gender-sensitive policies (e.g. justice, social welfare, primary education, primary healthcare, etc.).
- A group for political stakeholders such as policymakers, activists, influencers, NGO practitioners and women politicians.

A training workshop and a briefing on in-depth interviews were provided for data collectors and included:

- guidance on the kind of information that needed to be collected;
- the context and directions on method directives to be observed by the data collectors:
    - Representation in interviews for each state was based on an intersectional approach that cut across class, ethnicity, religion, etc.
    - The data collectors had to be aware of the role of patriarchal structures and hegemonic gendered societal norms as a barrier to women's participation; and
- templates for observations (regarding the elements to be aware of in the field) and for the in-depth interviews.

The data collectors were expected to conduct 20 in-depth interviews per day in addition to organizing and conducting four focus groups over 20 days. The data collectors were in contact with the researchers in case of any difficulties and also to evaluate progress in the field and implementation of the methodology.

Targeted KIIs: women ministers, women working in the police and military (including women working within armed opposition groups) and key civil service staff (social welfare, justice).

In-depth interviews: women from different political parties, lawyers (especially women), either feminist-oriented civil society activists or women involved in media production related to political/electoral participation (such as Hakamat in Darfur, local-language radio presenters in Eastern Sudan) and young influencers (from outside the formal NGO space).

1.6.3. Research limitations and mitigating actions

- Access to certain field sites: either due to the impact of floods or for security reasons, some areas were restricted, such as the Nertiti area in Central Darfur and areas within Blue Nile state. Therefore, contacts with stakeholders were undertaken before fieldwork was conducted.
- COVID-19: due to COVID-19 risks, FGDs were meant to be limited to 10 members. Although this was not manageable in all cases and some FGDs exceeded this limit, the majority were committed to this standard. The discussions were preferably conducted outside, with attention paid to physical distancing.

1.6.4. Gendered positions

It is worth reiterating that this report uses the terms women/woman and men/man consistently, instead of the more habitual adjectives female/male used in classical writing. While this choice might appear controversial, it is justified academically by the fact that the former terms relate to gendered socially allocated identities, whereas the latter refer to biological attributions.

2. Shifting terrains of political participation in Sudan

2. Shifting terrains of political participation in Sudan

2.1. Introduction

Four states—Blue Nile, Central Darfur, Kassala and River Nile—were selected to serve as a microcosm for political participation across the breadth of Sudan. The choice to engage in conversations about political participation within these states was justified by the importance of moving beyond a pervasive focus on Khartoum. There exists a tendency to see the capital as the hub of political activity, which has fed the distinction between the centre and the peripheries. This difference between the centre (Khartoum state and the central state) and peripheries is based on a centralized state located in Khartoum that takes the lion's share of statecraftship (governance and policymaking) and unequal economic development and distribution of wealth.

Unequal development was inherited at independence in 1956 since during the Anglo-Egyptian era (with British domination) development had been concentrated in the central region and along the banks of the Nile, where cotton was exported. Later, during the rule of the now-defunct regime of the Islamist NCP (1999–2019),[22] the disparities in economic development across Sudan were crystallized in the conceptualization of the Hamdi triangle": a "Dongola–Sennar–Kordofan Axis, or the Northern Axis" (Young 2018: 33[23]), framed by Abdel Rahim Hamdi, the NCP's economic ideologue, as a homogenous locus of power bringing economics to the service of geopolitics and even going as far as articulating this space as a viable state without the South or even Darfur (Young: 2018: 3, 13 and 33).[24]

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22 The creation of the National Congress Party in 1999 was preceded by 10 years of Islamist rule masterminded by the leader of the National Islamic Front, Hassan Al-Turabi. He camouflaged the Islamist nature of the military coup organized by Brigadier Omer Hassan Ahmed Al-Bashir in June 1989. Eventually conflict between the two men heralded the creation of the NCP, led by Bashir, which effectively distanced Al-Turabi from power

23 Young cites Hamdi (2005).

24 Young provides details on the economic logic that contributed to shaping multiple political trajectories within Sudan and their manifestations in its different territories.

The aforementioned elements have made the contrast between Khartoum and the rest of Sudan particularly salient, and they contribute to the widely held belief that all locations within Sudan outside the geographical centre of power constitute an undifferentiated silent space where political engagements are limited to combating the centre through the efforts of armed movements. Examples of such conflicts representing the peripheries are, first, the civil war between the central government and the South—through two civil wars (1955–71 and 1983–2005) (Ylönen 2017) that eventually led to the South's separating to create the nation state of South Sudan in July 2011; second, the conflict in Darfur from 2003 (Hassan and Ray 2009); and a renewed upsurge in the conflict in Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains (South Kordofan) in 2011 (Komey 2013).[25]

An interlocutor from Central Darfur (FGD 1, Ministry of Health and Social Development) alluded to the consequences of these battles for political power: "more than one-third of the country died, and the country has been divided into different states". While in reality Sudan has only seen the creation of one state, his hyperbolic statement echoes the possibility of further fragmentation if the grievances of regions outside the centre are not taken seriously.

The revolution that brought down 30 years of Islamist authoritarian rule in Sudan started de facto within the "peripheries' in Damazine on 13 December 2018.[26] The revolution spread to Atbara (the seat of workers' syndicates and a hub of political and economic demands that occupied an important position in the Sudanese political imaginary) (Sikainga 2002) on 19 December and eventually erupted in demonstrations in Khartoum on the 25th that would continue until the fall of the regime on 11 April 2019. The spark from the peripheries did not, however, destabilize the position of Khartoum, since it was quickly engulfed by the political hegemony of this city that had always in the history of Sudan as a nation state been the locus of political and cultural power. This is aptly expressed in the following statement: "There is a distance between Khartoum and the outside. In Khartoum we fear that people are politically unaware, but these conversations have reassured us."

This view, expressed by one of the researchers after he finished conducting a focus group discussion in Central Darfur, elucidates the tenacity of attitudes that inflate the importance of political activity within Khartoum to the detriment of that of other parts of the country.[27] These attitudes significantly limit the engagements with

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25 This area had a representation in the SPLM/A before the creation of South Sudan; after the creation of South Sudan, this representation continued under the name of SPLM/A North and continued to be targeted by the central government.

26 A woman from Blue Nile state mentioned that the first spark of the revolution took place in Hay Al-Ghasam, a small neighbourhood in Damazine.

27 A similar sentiment was expressed by another researcher during a debriefing after his return to Khartoum from the field. He stated that he had not anticipated the level of interest in the subject of political participation or the

additional forms of political participation that do exist therein, and which are worthy of exploration.

Further biases could be seen in the fact that one of the researchers felt the need to reassure his interlocutors that they should feel free to be transparent since the team (even the two men on the team) supported women's issues (FGDs in Central Darfur). It also seemed that the political participation of women was deemed as more effective when they had achieved a certain level of education—in other words, it was suggested that their participation was most effective after the completion of university studies. This attitude also existed in Kassala and River Nile states and was a reflection of the ever-present element of social elitism as a determining factor of eligibility to enter the domain of politics (a persistent trend in the history of Sudanese political mobilization—see the literature review for information on this point).

Similar concerns with the elite nature of political participation emerged in the material collected in Kassala, where a group of participants, mostly undergraduate or postgraduate university students, political activists and politicians, defined political participation as a mechanism facilitating competition for and access to power. While many participants agreed that the Eastern region, including Kassala, had been historically excluded from enjoying its fair share of political participation by Khartoum governments, they also highlighted that not everyone in the community can be politically active. This meant that certain criteria were needed in order for a person to participate, such as a high degree of awareness, a strong personality, an upbringing in a politically active family and a "deep understanding" of politics (Kassala, FGD 1).

In order to redress such biases, research was conducted to allow space for a more expansive articulation of the scope and meaning of political participation that was held by diverse interlocutors: from four different states and of different genders, political and civil affiliations, ages and professional positions. Information was generated through methodologies favouring focus group discussions, semi-structured individual interviews and semi-structured interviews with key informants.

The gendered nature of such forms of political participation is all the more opaque and justifies the concerns outlined in this report. The expansion of understandings related to the scope and definition of political participation emerged from these discussions and was notably mediated by the question we were posing pertaining to the nature of women's political participation (elite and grassroots representatives) after the December 2018 revolution (during the transitional period from August 2019 to 2024) and projections for the future, with the upcoming elections being taken into consideration.

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range of associated activities that he had witnessed in the field.

2.2. Context and initial observations

The separation between public domains of political activity—formalized institutional or partisan politics—and the less ubiquitous women's domains of activity—associative work, civil society—needs to be investigated. As stated by Margaret Stacey, the question about "women and power cannot be addressed from the public domain alone; it is a question of the relationship of that domain and the private domain of the family between which for many years the men were the mediators" (El-Bakri and Kameir 1983: 608).

Contextual information related to each state is found below.

2.2.1. River Nile

The research team had to navigate the politically opposed localities of Damer (the administrative capital of the state) and Atbara. Officials from Damer locality were supportive of the state government and its appointed woman governor (*walia*). This suggests that they were in favour of the political party of which she was a member (the Democratic Unionist Party). On the other hand, officials from Atbara locality seemed to be more antagonistic to the government, because they were dissatisfied with services and policies that were being implemented in the area. They did not express any problem related to the gender of the governor.

The members of the research team arrived in Damer first, and when they arrived in Atbara they were accompanied by an official representative of the government. This resulted in their being rebuffed by several community members in this location. From this incident, we can deduce that the modes of political participation favoured in Atbara diverge from those being practised in Damer.

Historically, Atbara has been known for its strong working-class activism and syndicate activity (Atbara railway activism, the symbolism of Atbara's train in the 2018 revolution and how it was welcomed by revolutionaries after the fall of the perceived greedy and corrupt highly neo-liberal Islamist regime). However, this strong left-leaning political vantage point does not permeate rural areas of the state, which remain socially conservative. Therefore, the revolution seemed to be articulated as a response to the demand for bread and basic needs against an increasing cost of living rather than as an attempt to disrupt entrenched gender norms.

It was significant that, in River Nile state, the governor was a woman (*walia*). The team interviewed her, and it was evident that she was not inclined to use her position as a platform for women's political participation. On the contrary, it seemed that her official role constituted an opportunity for her to consolidate her own political party (the Democratic Unionist Party). The researchers (two women) felt that she

did not welcome their presence, and they sensed that she tried to frame them and interact with them according to her own engagements with gender norms designating women as either respectable or not. According to the researchers she highlighted this judgemental stance by saying: "I hope you are not the type of girls who wear trousers." Her comment suggests that in her view women who donned trousers were too liberated for her liking.

Furthermore, the gender dynamics of having a woman as a state governor (*walia*) had a significant influence on the perspectives of the informants in the state. Hence, the research team had to deal with disagreements among the interlocutors regarding their views of the state governor. The polarization in people's views could be seen when part of a focus group made up of women refused to sit with another group during a meeting due to their political disagreement, which included one lobby for the *walia* and one against her. The team had to hold two separate FGDs for these two groups.

2.2.2. Blue Nile

The researchers arrived in Damazine—after the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement (October 2020)—where there were many concerns about the sustainability of the peace process but simultaneously great support for the transitional government, which had established peace within the state. Therefore, the researchers were welcomed as representatives of the central government in Khartoum by different sociopolitical entities within the state. Thus, although the leading researcher was a man dealing predominantly with women, he faced no difficulties in terms of access or in communicating with them.

Although there was great relief that peace was on its way, some felt that it was still incomplete, since the factions of Abdel Aziz Al-Hillu (Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Northern faction) (SPLM/N) and Abdel Wahid Nur (Rebel Sudan Liberation Movement) had yet to sign the Juba Peace Agreement. This was a great source of anxiety; therefore, the cessation of war after the revolution of 2018 was articulated as a great relief that justified all the challenges of the transitional period. At this time, the second government of the transitional phase had not yet been established, so the criticism was directed towards the sluggish performance of the first government (August 2020–February 2021). Informants primarily referenced the dire economic situation that was affecting the area and the livelihood-generating activities within it such as agriculture and mining, which the government was not adequately supporting. There was some confusion about the status of the Public Order Law of 1996 (as a form of security control and intervention in the everyday lives of citizens that was especially detrimental to women) and therefore its abrogation elicited concern that the country was falling into a state of disarray and that criminals were roaming the streets all over Sudan on motorcycles, snatching people's possessions due to a lack of policing.

Conversely, youth in the area were still hopeful that the revolution had given women an opportunity and that this was the time to work actively in order to destabilize societal norms that consolidated patriarchal structures that frequently made for tense relationships between men and women. The peace was articulated as a good first step, but there was an awareness that Blue Nile could succumb to the forms of violence that had recently been affecting Darfur, Port Sudan, Gadaref and Kassala. These latter regional conflicts were framed as dangerous ethnic skirmishes that were caused by the joint failure of the state and civil society to sustain a genuine community peace in everyday interactions. The stress on community peace reduced the focus on official transitional peace modalities, and there was marked impatience around bringing the protagonists of the former ruling regime to justice. Many saw this as a futile exercise in revenge or retribution, and while they wrote it off, they prioritized the search for excellent modalities of governance that would give Sudanese citizens a decent life—and specifically people like those living in Blue Nile (the conflict in Darfur that erupted in 2003 was also mentioned in such exchanges), who were more severely traumatized by the travails of war and by the war with the state. The peace was considered partial, since some areas in Blue Nile were still outside state control. Generally, there was a consensus that peace accords mediated by elites concerned with political positions were not a panacea for Sudan's deeply entrenched political, economic and social challenges.

2.2.3. Kassala

The research team reached Kassala in a context of escalating demonstrations against the state government due to fuel shortages that negatively impacted farmers within the state. These demonstrations were blocking the roads to the city of Kassala. Members of the local community reassured the research team that, since they were both women, they would not be in danger and that it was safe for them to enter the city on foot.

The overlap between ethnicity and politics in Eastern Sudan had a major impact on political activity in Kassala. In addition, the research team noted the growing political tensions among the diverse ethnic configurations within the area. During interviews and FGDs, many of the interlocutors were unwilling to discuss ethnic divisions, and their ramifications on local state politics was a sensitive topic that many interlocutors were unwilling to engage in. Furthermore, the security situation within the state was unstable, especially after several violent clashes and street demonstrations took place. This situation was aggravated after the newly appointed state governor, Saleh Ammar, who was a member of the Beni-Amer ethnic group, was removed from his position. While some ethnic groups—e.g. Hadandawa (part of the multiple Beja ethnic groups—claimed responsibility for his dismissal, the decision angered his political supporters from different ethnic groups as well as members of his own ethnic group

who sometimes supported him on the basis of kinship rather than due to believing in his political ideologies. These patterns of behaviour indicate how sometimes political support and shared ethnicity converged in such instances to serve the interests of a politician). Although ethnic and political tensions did not develop into an officially recognized national conflict, some interviewees and FGD participants expressed their concerns about the security situation in Kassala. For example, one woman (59 years old and employed by the Ministry of Production and Economic Resources) mentioned that people were becoming highly volatile because of the pressures that they were subjected to and that they were even worried that disputes would erupt during pleasant social gatherings such as weddings. She also mentioned that ethnic differences were being increasingly exacerbated in the political arena of Kassala after the revolution. This was reflected in further clustering around ethnic affiliations among the existing ethnic groups: "This is the first time I know of that Ja'aliyin or the Shawayga have their own Nazir [chief]. We only know the nazir of Hadandawa and Beni-Amer, but we as Northerners don't have Nazirs" (Kassala, KII).

The data showed that the polarization of opinions regarding the dismissal of the state's governor was reflected in the divergent perspectives of politicians, civil society activists and women's groups—both feminist and non-feminist.

2.2.4. Central Darfur

The state is a conflict-affected area, and therefore the situation of women should be contextualized within the broader circumstances affecting the state. The political awareness of women was influenced by exposure to conflict and suffering. These women then developed an awareness of greater political engagement extending to the national level. During discussions, the researchers noted a clear link between political issues in Darfur and the overall political situation in the country. Moreover, the proliferation of NGOs and armed movements helped shape people's political views and their affiliations. The research team noted a diversity of civil society organizations and women's associations and a tendency among women to create new forums for representation.

2.3. Elements guiding women's political participation

2.3.1. The meanings of political participation

As already mentioned in section 2.2., certain interlocutors considered social activism and socially derived initiatives (e.g. civil society activities) as separate and clearly distinct from institutionalized party politics, with the latter appearing as a more genuine manifestation of political activity (particularly interviews and discussions in River Nile and Kassala states).

The researcher was intent on mitigating this tendency by explaining to participants that this divide was rendered moot by the dynamics of the December 2018 revolution. He explained that the revolt included people who were not members of political parties, calling them "floaters" (Central Darfur, FGD 1).

Nonetheless, this divide defining the parameters of political participation continued to be articulated as demonstrated through the focus group discussion with the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) in Central Darfur[28] (FGD 3). One of the women taking part in the focus group underscored the local nature of politics when she explained the motivations for political participation: "participation is based on principles; the JEM was working for the marginalized people and, as part of them, the movement became politicized to defend those who are dispossessed".

In light of this highly localized contextualization, it is worth noting that only one of the women involved in the discussion was intent on treating political activity as a national concern and stressing how the activities within the region were part of a larger political process. She alluded to the concepts of citizenship, state and nation (she was the only participant to stress these issues throughout a discussion that lasted just under two hours). She made references to the poverty shared by the capital Khartoum and all the states of Sudan. She was clear in her pronouncements that entry into politics should be conceived of as "humanitarian and nationalistic work and therefore different from other domains of social activity". In response to a query related to whether women should enter politics to redress difficult circumstances (economic constraints, war, etc.) she widened the scope for political participation:

> People should not enter politics for personal gain or to gain favours. This form of practice came about through the behaviour of the Ingaz regime over 30 years; they created a legacy; people joined the party for a car, a job, a house, etc. . . . [T]his is not good. People should enter politics on the basis of principles in order to serve the nation and citizens. I think if I come from a village in Jebel Marra (south-western Darfur), where they have no services—electricity, roads, schools, hospitals—I have to serve. This applies even for the cities. Politics is a principle first and foremost and not [a tool to be used] in order to augment individual interests.

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28 The JEM is widely understood to uphold an Islamist orientation inspired by Turabi's vision (not to be confused with the forms of Islamist practices adopted by the NCP between 1999 and 2018), although it does not generally clearly present itself as such. However, its ambitions to gain power became clearer with the establishment of the second transitional government in February 2021, whereby the leader of the JEM, Jibril Ibrahim (Minister of Finance), stated quite soon after taking his position that he was more concerned with elections and the establishment of the JEM as the winner of the elections in order to rule Sudan rather than governance modalities during the transitional period, which he said was temporary. He stressed that his focus was on funding the peace process and on organizing an electoral process that would bring his party as the governing party within the state. See the speech by Ibrahim after he became the federal Finance Minister, YouTube, 10 February 2021.

This member of the JEM shifted the conversation and foregrounded politics as a national affair; in doing so she engaged other women to state that political participation was indeed a means of serving the country and then, on a secondary level, of serving women's issues. Her views suggest that women's concerns and involvement in regional politics are gateways to broader political participation. Through these views, she stressed wider ambitions transcending the regional, but she equally noted that, by and large, Sudanese society diminishes the capacity of women, since it sees them as incapable, of as well as unqualified to, run the state, and this belief impedes their progress within the realm of political participation (at the institutional level).

The topic regarding who should be offered political engagement as a priority was the subject of an animated discussion in FGD 2. One of the women in the group contradicted the views outlined above of another woman, who took part in both FGDs and consistently claimed (FGD 2) that "politics is for public service: the nation and citizens come first". The woman who contradicted this perspective stated the following:

> In the centre [read the central government, predominantly controlled by Northern Sudanese], those in parliament give rights and services to those within their communities. I don't see this as wrong; everyone gives to those who are close to them— their family. Even the prophet started with those closest to him by offering *zakat*[29] or jobs. I would favour my own family if I had power. I would help women since they are the most vulnerable. I would not be corrupt in making use of public resources, but I cannot distribute generators for power supply in the direction of the east and south. When my people in Darfur are in the dark, I have to provide for them first. For instance, I would favour Zalingei; this is a right—it is not nepotism. Even if all people were to be in need, I would still prioritize my people, of course, and God will not punish me for that.

Another participant said she would discuss everything for all women in Sudan. She was supported in this view by the woman cited above who had a more unified vision of politics as serving the public good and who added that position and social prestige were secondary to this and that loyalty to the party should not cloud these priorities. A third woman accused politicians of lying: "They cheat; they say that they are at the service of the country, but they forget the poor. Everything becomes ideological. They need to be monitored by civil society." This discussion culminated in the researcher (a man) being asked where he thought the priorities lay.

In general, the dialogue that took place with JEM members was more detailed about the scope of political activity. As one of the men explained, the state had to be run

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29 *Zakat* is an Islamic tax applied to surplus income that remains after a calendar year has elapsed. 10 per cent is calculated on the basis of this saved amount, which is then further divided by four to produce the required sum.

through politics, and politics serves ideology, since politics solves the problems of nations. These problems are not managed socially; they are managed politically, and political decisions are sovereign: "As social groups, we need to manage people through politics. Different views and ideologies are held together through politics, which brings us together, running the state and running the society within it."

The scope of political participation was more narrowly defined in Kassala and River Nile, where it was perceived as an elitist practice performed by educated, relatively well-off actors in society who are capable of taking responsibility for their community and representing it in the wider political landscape. A woman who participated in an FGD in River Nile stated, "Men have political affiliations, but we don't; we have no time for politics" (FGD 2).

The previous examples from Central Darfur and River Nile, respectively, underscore an interesting element that indicated a separation between the political, on the one hand, and the cultural and social, on the other. This seemed to treat politics as a domain of activity that was removed from the social arena. The social was associated with hospitality, running homes, care giving—all domains that seemed best suited for women, as gleaned from the testimonies and attitudes of the research participants.

Yet in the context of Central Darfur and Blue Nile, it seemed that women, even when allowed to enter the realm of politics, were still expected to fulfil the aforementioned tasks. Paradoxically, they were given extensive tasks to perform, but this did not destabilize the hegemonic patriarchal norms that put women at the service of men.

This attitude was reflected in the biography of a woman who was part of the JEM; her title was Umm al Jaish (mother of the army). One of the women participating in the discussion framed her as a leader in the army. The way the former presented her fellow combatants as comrades indicated the nature of the movement as opposed to the political hegemony of the central state, and her title was a military one. Yet, paradoxically, her roles embodied a profile of feminization, since she provided services to the army, such as food provision, which are generically associated with essentialized gendered roles that associate women with nature (nurture) versus men with culture (the public sphere, including politics in a prominent manner) (Ortner 1972).[30] These positions reify the stature of women as mothers. From her very title one can infer that she is the mother of the army, and she later confirms this. The symbolism of the feminine and motherhood as synonymous is very strong in this context. One of the other women in the discussion, a mathematics teacher, stated that "motherhood is inevitable". Even this level of engagement in a highly masculinized territory (masculine-identified) in which claims are made on the spheres of governance, and

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30 A generalized gendered conceptualization of nature versus culture across diverse societies was highlighted in the social sciences in the 1970s.

access to power allocates specific gendered roles to women, who are nonetheless considered leaders by other women.

When she spoke about herself, Umm al Jaish proudly shared that she had paid for her husband's education for seven years and indicated that when he died, in 1998, she took on the responsibility of six children. She glorified her position as a widow of a martyr, but these lofty attainments were masculinized by one of the men in the discussion when he elected to transform her into an honorary father (attribution of honorary masculinity). He started by attempting to reduce the gap between women and men by stating that women completed men:[31] "If she [the woman] gets awareness, education and is removed from marginalization, she will not have any problem; the woman is the mother, wife, sister and she is even capable of becoming the father, as the story of comrade Um Salama [Umm al Jaish] illustrates."

This last statement clearly demonstrates that, while gender roles in this society might be interchangeable, they still speak to an essence. In this case, women who can act like men deserve praise, but they also cease to be typical women, and it is this element that elevates them in the public domain—which is mostly associated with men—where politics is located.

The above case shows some transformation in dominant gender roles in the context of Central Darfur that are somewhat distinct within this study. It was noted that, in this context, when women were speaking among themselves (FGD 2—uniquely a group of women only), they were more vocal about their claims, which went as far as claiming that a woman could/should lead the country. A woman stated that men in River Nile had contested the appointment (*dagu jaras*)[32] of a woman as governor because they knew that, when women played a political role, they were more mature than men: "This is even more valid when she is a leader and, in other sociocultural contexts explored, she indeed has this ability to lead, and she has the right to govern, but women are a threat to men socially and in terms of grabbing political seats from them. They don't want women as politicians." Another woman expounded on these views by expressing that women had a broader conceptualization of the scope of politics: ""the woman is concerned with women's issues—those of her sisters, but also those of her sons". The inclusion of both genders here suggests that women are more intent on seeking justice for all. In addition, the reference to sons evokes the notion of motherhood as the domain of women, and it is interesting in this instance.

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31 The interviewer modified the word' complet '—that was used by the interlocutor—by saying that men and women complement each other (avoiding the word complete) but the interlocutor reiterated his original terminology ("complete men"), and he did not seem to grasp the difference in signification introduced by the interviewer.

32 "They struck the bell chimes.' This is a Sudanese expression signifying the creation of a furore over a topic and railing against any specific event that transpires.

Instead of being a symbol that signifies limitations for women, as it frequently does (the distinction between public/private domains discussed above: in section 2.2., in this section in footnote 30 and in section 2.4., it is in this specific context inverted to widen the scope of women's activities: "The father only appears on the birth certificate, but the mother is the ultimate teacher: she raises and educates her children. Even those sons who learn politics learn it from their mothers; fathers don't teach children how to become politicians from the home in the least."

A third woman went further by stating that women's political participation was threatened by Sudanese society at large:

> This comes from customs and traditions [*adat wa taqalid*—read, societal norms]. These constrain people, and thus people don't accept women leaders. Here in Darfur, as women we established *sheikhat* [f. pl]—through a programme—the counterparts of sheikhs [m.] but it was difficult, but now, thank God, this has been achieved in Darfur. The *sheikhat* deal with women's affairs, but we want representation at the National Local Authority Level (Native Administration) at the top echelons of power: in the *Sharati, Omodia, Damangawiya*.[33] Like in the past, when within the traditional and popular [shabi] structure during the time of sultans we had this. The *mayram taji* was the war consultant for the sultan, and she occupied nursing positions within the medical corps. If this had continued, people could have worked in a positive sense, and women would more readily gain their rights. At some stage in the middle, people just focused on "men, men, men', and they adopted this system. They forgot anything called women, and there has only been a recovery for them due to the introduction of NGOs and due to the war in the region.

This last woman's allusion to "forgetting women' perhaps refers to the recent past and the era of Islamist governance and the practices of the now defunct Islamist regime that predominantly favoured the political participation of women who were members of the NCP.[34] The NCP equally used women as tokens to suggest that the regime was inclusive and progressive e.g. participating in the General Union for Sudanese Women; see the literature review and elaborations on NCP practices in section

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33 Forms of authority used in Darfur and part of the Native Administration and Customary Law structures used at the local level whereby the state is not involved in all modes of governance.

34 Even when there has been mention of the political participation of women within the Sudanese landscape, it has focused on that of Northern Riverine Sudan (see the literature review). This focus has persisted even after the revolution, where more attention is paid to the Sudanese woman through the figure of the Kandaka (Nubian queen) rather than that of the Mayram (Darfuri woman consultant to leaders in the local societies) introduced by our interlocutor in the text above. Hence, the cultural belonging and social signifiers of being anything besides the former are flattened, and the generic idealized Sudanese woman is represented by a hegemonic variant. For more on the focus on Northern Sudanese women and the symbol of the Kandaka to the detriment of the Mayram or Hakama see Ahmed Abdel Aziz (2019a and 2019b).

2.10. This perceived lapse on the part of the state could equally be a reference to the centralized nature of Sudanese politics during the Islamist era, with the regions outside Khartoum being grossly underrepresented in the political sphere and removed from the political manoeuvrings of the central state.

Another woman in Central Darfur who claimed that women's political participation took place through different avenues (civil society, feminist bodies, resistance committees, armed movements and political parties—interestingly she excluded the Legislative Council as a viable option, since she felt that it had in the past only served the interests of the NCP), alongside the ultimate goal of politics as serving the nation as a whole, stated: "Women are a threat to men when they know their full rights through participation. They get to know that domestic violence and rape are serious crimes. Women need administrative posts and more opportunities for child education and cultural activities that protect them from the threats of female genital mutilation and early marriage" (FGD 2).

She was nonetheless aware of the challenges on the path to attaining these rights and knew that civil society organizations had been hindered by the formation of commissions that refused to register them as official bodies able to conduct any work.

In contrast to Central Darfur, the gender roles of men and women in River Nile remain largely static and well defined both in reality and in discourse. During a debate between a women activist and a man activist in Atbara (River Nile, FGD 4), the man criticized the current feminist movement for being culturally dissonant (importing values and norms from other societies that do not meet with dominant societal expectations). The man argued that the pioneering Sudanese feminist movement represented by Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim (see the literature review) had succeeded in claiming rights for women such as education and voting. He stressed that the current feminist movement was based on Western epistemologies that supported issues such as the freedom of women's bodies instead of empowering women to be become economically autonomous. In response, the woman activist refuted this and argued that rights to education, at least in Northern Sudan, did not lead to any independence (*istiglal*) for women. On the contrary, she claimed, they led to the exploitation (*istiglal*) of working women by their husbands, who left the domestic responsibilities as well as half of the outside economic responsibilities to their wives.

2.4. Questioning women's leadership

Women's ability to be political leaders was doubted in both rural River Nile and rural Kassala due to three main factors. The first is the reproductive role that participants considered to concern only women. The second is what the participants termed the emotional "nature" (River Nile, FGD 1, FGD 2) of women, since many

women emphasized that decisions made by women could be highly influenced by their emotions, unlike men, who were perceived as efficient decision-makers and not blinded by their emotions. The third is the perception of men as being more experienced in the public domain, in contrast to the burden on women's shoulders in their private households. When asked about whether there is a difference in women's and men's capacities to maintain a job, a woman from River Nile responded: "Men are not like women; they can tolerate more pressure, and this was imposed on us by our instinct, our religion and society. If a job were offered to me or my brother, I would give the priority to my brother, not because he is more qualified than me, but because I have more responsibilities at home than him" (FGD 1).

A man participant from Kassala discussed the difficulty of finding "convincing" women leaders in the local society of Kassala state. He stated that, when thinking about women leaders, he could only conjure up Amanishakheto, a Nubian queen representing women's leadership in the old Nubian matriarchal system[35] of Northern Sudan. However, modern women leaders such as Indira Gandhi and Margaret Thatcher do not exist in the Sudanese context. According to the man, the main reason for the absence of role-model women leaders was the gradual Islamo-Arabization process in Sudan that historically altered the status of Sudanese women from leaders able to navigate the public sphere to individuals confined to the private domain of the home.

In Central Darfur, one of the men judged that the differences in leadership roles between the genders were based on "customs and traditions" (dominant societal norms), which were an impediment to women's progress. Men had more exposure and were therefore at the forefront, and since politics in Sudan was not well organized (formalized through democratic institutions) men had more opportunities to mix intergenerationally and acquire more skills. Regardless, he said he had seen some improvement in women's participation and that some parties did have women leaders but he added, "I think women do not respect each other". His comment seemed to suggest that, in the final analysis, women should be content with this slight improvement. In this particular instance, there was no radical reversal of the gendered norms that were prevalent in Sudan across different regions.

The discussions about women's leadership within River Nile were characterized by vigorous debates and divergent points of view. Many participant women expressed optimism after the appointment of Dr Amna Al-Makki, the first woman to be appointed as state governor (*walia*) in River Nile. However, they also described their frustration when realizing that women's priority issues were absent on her agenda. Some informants explained that a network called the River Nile Women's Democratic

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35 The interlocutor misunderstood the matriarchal system, as the matriarchy does not imply the leadership of women; rather, it facilitates the succession of men through the maternal line of kinship.

Union (Tagamo' Nisa' Nahr Al-Nil Aldemocrati) was formed with the main objective of propping her up. Some initiatives to support education and health in rural areas were founded by activist women and feminist bodies. A feminist association drafted a report about the status of women in the state and the areas of concern that needed local state intervention. They offered recommendations on how interventions should be executed. The lack of active response from the state governor's office and the refusal of their requests for a meeting with the governor created a negative impression of her.

Frustration resulted from the *walia's* hesitation to support women's issues and women's associative initiatives. This generated antagonistic views against the *walia* among women's groups, including those who participated in the interviews. Some of them bitterly explained that they had to advocate for the *walia* during their participation in public dialogues with her men detractors and to discuss their own reservations and concerns in their private circles as women. Other women objected to this attitude and explained that their own support of the *walia* should be based on her efficient performance and her ability to address the state's priorities, including women's issues. Therefore, support for the governor should not be based on her gender. A woman interlocutor from Atbara used the local proverb "sticking mud on the soles of your feet does not make them shoes" (*lisseeg teen fi al-koree'n ma bebga ne'len*) (River Nile, FGD 3). The proverb means that shoes offer protection and support and allow you to walk, while mud leaves you unprotected as if you were to walk barefoot. She explained that insistence on supporting the *walia* despite her shortcomings—especially concerning women's rights—and favouring a feminist agenda would be counterproductive in the long term and it would actually become a disadvantage in terms of women's equitable political participation.

The group discussions among the participant women in River Nile demonstrate that they stressed the symbolic manifestation of every woman and its embodiment by the *walia*. Therefore, criticizing or defending the *walia's* performance was, to some extent, a reflection on other women's participation. Some women informants explained their concerns about how any potential failure on the part of the *walia* in her management of the state would reflect on each and every other potential woman representative within any unit of public service within the state, and therefore women needed to defend her reputation in order to strengthen women's overall status in politics. Other women, however, argued that the *walia* need to save herself by maintaining society's patriarchal norms as a tactic to stabilize her position in the state first. A solid woman supporter of the *walia* mentioned that "she should go with the flow, instead of opposing the culture and the society; she should even encourage women to obey their husbands and provide training workshops for women on these matters" (River Nile, FGD 3).

This attitude explained the separation between political and social arenas (with women being required to compromise even when they are politically active in public office

in order not to disturb the social order). The gap between the social and political was further reflected in the way in which men and women participants identified the root causes of the 2018 uprising, and the ways in which women participated in demonstrations were articulated as symbolic support systems for men's efforts (Elamin and Ismail 2019) (see discussions on the role of Hakamat in Darfur in section 1.2.). A participant woman from rural River Nile explained that the 2018 revolution had lost its trajectory when activists misunderstood what freedom was and started advocating for greater freedom for women to take control of their own bodies (dressing as they liked, not donning the Islamic veil, wearing trousers, etc.) instead of focusing on improving the economic situation in the country and dealing with shortages of basic provisions. According to the woman, these shortages were the main causes of the fall of the old regime. Similar views were shared in Kassala, where a man interlocutor expressed that women were essential actors in the creation of political change in the country; the role of women was, he said, to be found in the ululations— zaghareed, which he saw as wonderful—that mobilized the street demonstrations and encouraged young men to raise their voices. His testimony is interesting, since it marginalizes the risks that women took by participating in demonstrations and facing the violent reaction of the state.

2.5. Structural limitations on political participation

Considering the structural limitations that affect women's political participation, the data showed varying degrees and forms of structural boundaries that affect women's political activity across the four states selected for this study. On the one hand, many women from Blue Nile focused on the infrastructural limitations and underdevelopment within the state, alongside massive displacement, severe poverty and the absence of security, as major burdens for women. On the other hand, participants from rural River Nile were more concerned with gender-based practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, lack of education, obstacles to working outside the parameters of their local areas and the real threat of forced marriage.

These issues were mentioned during discussions about structurally imposed social arrangements that women were living under. This indicates that there is a clear-cut set of cultural boundaries that women are conscious of and to which some are committed while others are unable to change. This consciousness about their structural positioning made women aware of the forms of violence they might encounter should they actively commit to resisting the dominant social structure. When asked about what women should do if their families rejected their participation in politics, some responded that they should try to convince them, and, if they failed, then they should respect the family's wishes and remain silent. One of the participants (FGD 2) mentioned a local proverb ("*Bint al-wilian maksora*") indicating that women from good families,

i.e.having man guardians, should compromise their personal aspirations for the greater good by not disturbing the dominant social norms. This was considered a laudable sacrifice that women should make despite the fact that it is painful.

Conversely, women living in urban areas who already had opportunities to overcome the aforementioned limitations and who had managed to engage in politics, usually in cities such as Damer, Atbara, Kassala and Damazine, were subjected to other challenges such as the stigmatization of women politicians. This was especially relevant to those who were arrested by security authorities. They were described as "*gililat adab*"—that is, having no manners, meaning they were either disreputable or potentially so. Furthermore, some women activists were shamed for the violence (beating, harassment, imprisonment and even rape) that they suffered at the hands of the security apparatus during the Ingaz era. They were perceived as deliberately putting themselves in such unfortunate positions due to their own choice to engage in political activity. A woman politician from Kassala mentioned that she had been politically active in the state since starting university. Since most of the politically active students were men, she found herself in the company of men most of the time. This resulted in her being bullied and called a "tomboy" (*wad al-hilla*), her men colleagues being branded as *kilab surra*—that is, men who are constantly in the company of women but are weak and not suitable to be life partners (i.e. husbands).

Furthermore, women in Central Darfur (FGD 2) seemed aware of the divergences within different parts of Sudan, but yet they stressed that all women in Sudan were subject to concrete limitations. One of the women was very clear in saying that a lack of education was an impediment for women in Darfur and that the shame of leaving home and taking a car in search of an education (i.e. moving beyond the confines of where one lived) was still met with disapprobation, but she seemed to stress that women in the "direction of the North" (i.e. Northern Sudan as a cultural space) were even more limited by male domination, since they could be deprived of their inheritance rights and not have land registered in their names. Another woman in Central Darfur stressed that different localities manifested different challenges:

> Men being the guardians of women is an obstacle. People think that mixing genders disrupts local norms; these are considered European or Israeli norms that don't belong to us and they are bad. For us the kind of mixing we need does not correspond to those, and it is not American; it is about gaining our rights. Obstacles exist in Zalingei but in specific spots, so the issue is not insurmountable, but Jebel Marra is more challenging. They do not allow women to mix with men in the least.

A man from Central Darfur (FGD 3) seemed to stress the structural issues that impeded women's political participation—rather than reifying their positions as

caregivers—which were charged with political roles that were deliberately feminized (confined to dealing with women's grievances such as FGM, domestic violence, early marriage, etc.). This view emerged after a discussion with three women in the group who expressed their dissatisfaction with entities such as political parties. One of them—the same one who had stressed national duty above (a member of JEM who had insisted on the importance of citizenship, state and nation in a more pronounced manner than others—initiated the conversation by clearly stating that she preferred specialized women's movements as a channel for women's inclusion in politics. According to her, political parties had failed to run the state and, she added, after the transitional period most parties would continue to fail since, in her experience, they all worked for their own personal gain: "They bring their own supporters for positions, so it is better to have bodies protecting women's issues. When organizations come to protect women, they should come through the mediation of these bodies and not through that of political parties." Another woman agreed, citing the Multaqa Nisa Darfur (The Crossroads for the Women of Darfur) as a viable avenue for women only.

2.6. Avenues for women's political participation

As previously mentioned, the separation between the social and political domains posed a challenge to attempts to find channels for women's political participation. According to a woman politician in Kassala, ethnopolitics was a dominant characteristic within Eastern Sudan's political landscape, affecting the workings of civil and political bodies and representation within them. This emerged, she said, from the patriarchal kinship patterns of leadership that favoured ethnic clusters and that removed women from existing political entities. For this reason, other women in this discussion group said that their motivation to participate in politics stemmed from their need to gain rights that were not protected within the patriarchal politics of their diverse ethnic groups.

In the context of Eastern Sudan, the observation by El Bakri and Kameir (1983: 606) is pertinent: that the Western conceptualization of political participation—which is measured by development indicators such as personal knowledge, voting in elections and engaging in political parties or pressure groups—might provide an incomplete picture in countries of the Global South where informal political networks are the dominant actor within the political sphere. Therefore, attempts to explore women's political participation by only looking at powerful institutionalized formal political bodies (state structures) would make alternative avenues of women's political participation invisible.

In Kassala, for example, the structure of ethnic representation has alienated women from the political arena. When a Nazir (KII, 75-year-old chief) of an ethnic group (identified as an Arab group) was asked about the participation of women and men in decision-making he responded by stating: "All women have very strong opinions.

Any man [from his ethnic group] consults his wife before taking decisions. If he did not consult his woman, she would not be satisfied." When he was asked by the researcher about consulting women in other matters such as state governance, he replied: "We did not reach the stage of building a cohesive state yet; we are still made up of units that manage to govern themselves, and falsely appear in the shape of a single entity. Women themselves are not educated to the extent that allows for them to be consulted in state decisions."

In River Nile, other avenues of women's political participation were discussed. A 49-year-old woman (River Nile, KII) mentioned that the internet was one of the recently available avenues that facilitated women's access to political participation even if women were physically remote from the political arena. This was also reflected in one of interviews from rural River Nile (outside the urbanized territories), where a young lady (River Nile, KII) explained that their physical participation in demonstrations was difficult but that they were more readily able to expose the evil deeds of the previous regime through social media: "We were able to reach as far as Atbara and express the slogans of the demonstrations taking place there through the Facebook pages of resistance committees."

For some women participants, the intensive use of social media during the revolution created a virtual street for women where they can gather, raise their voices, galvanize around their demands and manifest their presence within the realm of politics. The role of social media became more important after COVID-19 restrictions were applied nationwide in March 2020. Spaces for collective activism and organizational work were partially replaced with online avenues. Despite technical difficulties and the deteriorating internet service in Sudan, virtual communities have broadened avenues for women's political participation. Therefore, it is noteworthy that, in such a context, the positions of women regarding avenues for women's political participation are highly influenced by their historical experiences and contact with politics. Women who have personally been party members or whose family members have been party members tended to consider political parties as the only option for women to gain rights and engage in the political sphere. On the other hand, those who were not engaged in partisan politics (who represent the majority of the studied sample) considered that political parties did not and would not advance their welfare. In fact, those who were antagonistic to partisan politics referred to resistance committees as a new avenue for women's political participation that has been rapidly increasing recently (River Nile, KIIs: a 45-year-old woman from Al-Qarya Al-Matariya, a 45-year-old woman from Damer and a 39-year-old woman from Damer).

According to two FGDs (River Nile, FGD 2; Kassala, FGD 3), the roles that resistance committees should take are debatable. Some participants expressed widely shared views that considered resistance committees to be local providers of goods

and services such as bread, cooking gas, water, fuel, etc. They also said that blocking the streets with barricades (*mataris*) and burning tyres were forms of violence against society (Kassala, KII with a 59-year-old, Secretary-General of the Child Protection Council). Others considered the resistance committees to be the "guardians of the revolution", who were supposed to reform the path of the government rather than becoming immersed in highly localized logistical service activities.

When asked about the possibility of gaining rights to political participation through the Legislative Council, women in Central Darfur responded that theoretically this was viable but that in reality inclusion on the council required that one already be a decision-maker who was aware of their rights. This claim was based on views related to determining the possible channels for political participation: political parties, committees, armed movements, etc. There was some controversy that made it clear that some of these were considered more political than others. Some women preferred ideological political parties and deemed women's movements to be too limited in their scope of action. Others stated that women's movements were ideal avenues for participation during the peace process (the Juba Peace Agreement signed on 3 October 2020, during the transition) and that, since women were largely excluded from taking part in combat, the Multaqa could protect their participation rights. This was stated by Umm al Jaish, who claimed that women's movements protected women (Multaqa Nisa Darfur and MANSAM: Sudanese women's political social movements) and relayed their concerns to decision-makers. A man responded to this claim, saying that these women's movements were represented in parliament and that a woman from Darfur had participated at the national level through the *Hagana kamil* (our full rights) initiative and that the women present were well aware of this and that this allowed them to participate but that participation was hindered by political manipulations:

> Women can participate in women's movements, and we have seen successful ones, but unfortunately the ideology that exists in Sudan determines and proscribes the forms allowed for women. For instance, all the political parties try to dominate [women's] movements. Were these movements independent, they could resolve women's issues, but they are ambushed through the agendas of others speaking on behalf of women. Women were very visible in civil society but under pressure from the previous ruling party (NCP); domination and instrumentalization occurred where women were used as tokens and to advance the ambitions of men, and this does not constitute real participation. Women are limited by real laws and legislation in parliament. Even within political parties they do not participate in decision-making; they only work in the executive branch. They need to participate like in Europe, to convey ideas to the government; otherwise, this representation is merely tokenistic. The existence of legal frameworks is important, and women need to be involved in writing the laws that protect their rights.

In Central Darfur, a woman agreed that 40 per cent representation on the Legislative Council is assured and that now the Juba Agreement has allowed her and other women to reach 40 per cent representation within all fields of professional activity. Yet, the possibility of joining political parties was not an option that seemed to appeal to her. She still preferred participation within women's bodies as explained above. The women who took part in the discussion seemed to agree that men could not understand women's concerns. One woman stated that this participation should not be in an exclusively women's body but rather a body that belongs to civil society (not a party) and that it should include men.

The discussion clearly demarcated the gap between the political and the social and cultural spheres, as previously stated. This is succinctly expressed in one man's discourse separating political channels from women's initiatives (civil society organizations, cooperatives and associations):

> If these channels are political, I think women should be present with men within the same forums. If women are separated, they will face the enmity of men, and this will create unhealthy competition within society that will be detrimental to women. Husbands might in such instances stand against their spouses, and this can be countered by raising awareness. Women can remain separate in their activism and by establishing a "sisterhood" in order to get their voices heard on the social level, but if they desire political participation, they need to appear alongside men on the same podiums and not create enclaves for women's activities.

2.7. The presence of women in politics

One of the men in Central Darfur (FGD 1) stated that the 40 per cent quota for women's political representation is not real; it is merely documented constitutionally, he said. He feels that women's movements are a guarantee for their political participation, since the 40 per cent quota is tokenistic and, according to him, in terms of the alternative channel of political participation contained in party politics, women get nothing. He cited the ministerial changes accompanying the formation of the new government (8 February 2021), mentioning the appointment of "only" two women as ministers. The group corrected him, since the recent appointment included four women ministers[36] but they added that this was not really significant since even when women gain positions they are still undermined. The man said there should be no quotas and that political visibility should be based on ability. When asked about women's movements, he mentioned MANSAM (political and civil feminist groups) and Tagamu Nisa Darfur (The Coalition for the Women of Darfur)[37]

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36 These are Buthaina Dinar (Minister of Federal Governance), Intisar Sagayrun (Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research), Mariam Al-Sadig (Minister of Foreign Affairs) and Tayseer Al-Norani (Minister of Labour).

37 There is a significant lack of consistency regarding the name of the body representing Darfuri women: it is

In fact, he located MANSAM—a national coalition—within the confines of Darfur, confusing it with Tagamu Nisa Darfur, making them a single body. Furthermore, when the interviewer asked whether MANSAM was a feminist movement (*niswi*) or a women's movement (*nisai*), the man could not distinguish between the two terms.[38]

A woman in the group indicated that she was not familiar with MANSAM[39] but that she did know Multaqa Nisa Darfur, which the woman claimed was a *niswi* body (note another conflation of the terms for feminist and women's bodies): Multaqa Nisa Darfur deals with women's issues but she prefers *al majlis al niswi* (women's council— note another conflation as above). However, the woman pointed out its limitations, since the NCP did have women representatives within this body. Interestingly, the woman said she preferred to create an enclave for women's activities, and she defined *niswi* as that domain that serves women's interests, and she did not include men in this task. She seemed surprised when the interviewer reassured her that, as a man, he was interested in the political participation of women in Sudanese politics and that maybe they should consider including men in this domain of activity. Nevertheless, she did not modify her point of view, stating that things had been decided as such: "In case something happens to a woman, another one is best placed to serve her." This pronouncement possibly points to the circumstances that Darfuri women have faced in light of the protracted conflict in the region—war, displacement, rape, being widowed, running households—yet possible distrust on the part of men and resistance to their domination was left unarticulated in this instance.

Other focal points within the general discussion referred to the gendered norms within Central Darfur that curtail the political voices of women while making them work in arduous sectors of social life alongside men (contrast with the northern states—River Nile and Northern states—where women might be expected to stay at home). In this context, women could work outside the home but doing so did not spare them the duties associated with women's work: being married, taking care of their children, doing household chores (Central Darfur, FGD 1). The women in FGD 2 in Central Darfur confirmed these societal norms when they stated that rural women in Darfur were even more adversely affected, since they only worked for their husbands. This observation distinguished between elite Darfuri women who were educated and those who were not. Certain elite women expressed their duty to help their unfortunate sisters by gaining insight into the importance of political engagement and knowledge

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sometimes given as Tagamu (union) and other times as Multaqa (crossroads).

38 The man did not know the difference between *niswi* (feminist) and *nisaai* (women's body).

39 Note that not all of the women participants from Darfur were aware of the MANSAM coalition (see footnote 81) The variations in knowledge about its existence resonate with the articulation of the gap between national level and local-level participation in politics. Some interlocutors framed political participation widely through alluding to more detailed knowledge of the political concepts of 'nation' and 'citizenship' that spoke to a political participation that encompassed the whole country while others stayed concerned with the workings of their local communities.

of their right to 40 per cent representation according to constitutional decree.[40] A woman went as far as stating that, as Darfuri women, they had gained empowerment through the circumstances of war and that the presence of the United Nations–African Union Mission in Darfur within the region had allowed them to learn about setting up NGOs and their positive impact in improving lives in the area. All these achievements were seen as being crowned by the victory for women delivered by UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (initiated on 31 October 2000 and implemented in Sudan as an action plan in March 2020), guaranteeing women's protection across different social situations including during war.

Many of the discussion participants saw these achievements by women as posing a threat to men: "Men expect the positions such as commissioner, and when suddenly a woman gets the post, that really irks them." Another woman stated that the hegemony of men was reflected in the fact that they did not appreciate the appointment of a *walia* (woman state governor) in River Nile (Central Darfur, FGD 2).

According to one of the men (Central Darfur, FGD 1):

> A woman has a brain and earns her roles. Look at Atbara: the woman *walia* is better than all the men *walis* here; the fact that women are not accepted as political actors is imposed by a form of political Islam which oppressed them and saw them as less in reason and religion (*nagisat aql wa din*)[41] . . . . I think that in Sudan for a woman to become a *walia* is progress. Amna in River Nile is excellent because she stopped the *kizan* [Muslim brothers]; she resisted the ploys of those who rejected her. Her execution is good. I don't know about the other *walia* in Northern state.[42]

The obstacle to such appointments that placed women in positions of high authority was mentioned again (Central Darfur, FGD 3), and it was made clear that the subject of limited women's political participation did not just concern Darfur. A man interlocutor indicated that Sudanese gender norms made the exclusion of women easier: "The Walia in River Nile state had conflicts with the representatives of the Native Administration. They went as far as contacting Prime Minister Hamdok and

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40 The fact that this percentage was a minimum was not stressed in the interviews.

41 This is a widely quoted weak *hadith* (narration attributed to the prophet Mohammed. *Hadiths* are secondary sources of Islamic injunctions, following the text of the Koran, and Muslims are expected to apply them in guiding their worldly affairs) that suggests that women are more emotional than men (*aql* signifies reason or rationality) and have lesser religious duties (*din*) to perform (ritual prayers are not required during menstruation). These observations are taken in Sudanese society as indicators of women's fragility and a signal that they are most likely incapable of taking difficult decisions due to their essentially emotional natures.

42 He is referring to Professor Amal Mohammed Izzaldin, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Khartoum. It is noteworthy that the *walia* of River Nile state, Amna Al-Makki, generally elicited more attention than her counterpart in the Northern state.

Abdel Fatah Burhan [head of the military wing of the coalition established in August 2019] to try to make them fire her." His observation demonstrates that interest in politics started at the local level but that developments on the national level affected the political climate within the area and generated debate about how political engagement should evolve and comments about the elements that could halt its progression.

Regardless of the fact that such achievements are the subject of praise, the conversations in Central Darfur about the possibilities open to women reflected some ambiguity. In general, the men present did not see Darfuri women as weak, but most of the men seemed to think that would be of greater benefit to the community by avoiding public office. One of the women participating in the discussion confirmed that women were seen as incapable of running the state. In fact, most of the women participating in the discussion group seemed to be negotiating their place gradually rather than stating their right to participation as an inalienable right: they were in a space where they were revising gender norms for the whole of Sudanese society (women as half of men). Paradoxically, the men, while admitting that women suffered structural discrimination, did not argue that this was due to their being weaker than men. One of the men expressed this status of women in politics by explaining that, when women were required to collaborate, it was best for them to do so through civil society groups and to reach out both locally and globally in relation to general issues affecting women. According to him, if women were to become part of the formal political-party sector, they should not collaborate with other political parties:

> Women are more competitive than men. They are more combative and could actually destroy another political party. Men are more forgiving as per my experience. . . Sometimes in clashes women are more strident, and they have a greater capacity to hate, so sometimes they act as an obstacle. Instead of solving things smoothly, they refuse our pragmatism and will not accept friendship with other women from the fallen regime for instance. . . . Jealousy among women also plays a part.

This narrative encompasses individual points of view, but it might equally signal some structural components within Darfuri society at large. The image of the Hakamat (see the literature review) might be relevant for this image of a strong woman who seeks justice for her community and is fearless and ready to stand alongside her men kin to support them at all costs. This image might empower women, but it also limits the radius of their political participation. Some women in the group seemed to favour serving their direct communities and saw their strength as deriving from a close-knit sense of belonging. For such women, politics at the national level did not offer any temptation, and they were not interested in legal rights allowing women entry into institutionalized politics.

2.7.1. Beyond quotas

When the issue was raised of the appointment of two women as ministers (within the federal system and not at the state level)[43] and that of the two *walias*, in River Nile and Northern states, one of the women taking part in the discussion blatantly ignored the query about whether this was a positive development, and when prodded about whether women wanted the 40 per cent representation quota amended, she said that women would fulfil their roles regardless. When asked if women were mobilizing to attain the 50 per cent mark, she commented: "Women's roles are bigger and better than that and extend even beyond the positions of being a minister or a *walia*; a woman is the same as men in the internal structure: she is not less, and she has the same intellectual abilities as men" (FGD 1).

Representatives of the JEM (which is an armed movement) expressed diverse and interesting views about the quotas for women's political participation. One woman stated that the Juba Agreement had ensured 40 per cent representation and that women could increase that to 50 per cent after the transitional period. The man secretary of the movement admitted that the official representation of women in the movement was 30 per cent, but that in reality they performed on a 50–50 ratio of consultation and inclusion according to the principles of justice and equality espoused by the movement. The problem, he claimed, was related to customs within Darfuri society and the imposition of distance between men and women that could limit their interactions to certain times of the day and impede the flow of communication necessary for effective political deliberations. As secretary of the movement, he failed to underscore the structural nature of these constraints and laughingly declared that women were also responsible for "binding" themselves.

Women deployed the same sort of jests to move beyond quotas in claiming their right to political participation within government. One woman stated that it was not necessary to stick to 40 per cent since women were more numerous in demographic terms. By giving them 50 per cent, this would actually be 40 per cent, since men would be getting more than their share with their 50 per cent, which would translate in real demographic terms as 60 per cent. The women from Central Darfur were not confrontational in their demands, but they expressed their claims through satire—in some cases in the presence of men.

At the Ministry of Health in Zalingei, a man stated that he wanted society to get past the question of who, on the basis of gender, was more ideal for political participation.

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43 This related to the first government that was formed after the agreement between the civilian and the military component that were vying for power for four months after the fall of the regime. The completion for power was resolved and the first government was formed in August 2019. This government included two women as ministers: Lina Al-Shiekh (Minister of Labour and Social Development) and Wala Al-Bushi (Minister of Youth and Sport).

This was in response to a segment of conversation where some men seemed to think that men were more adapted for political life. One of them stated that, while men and women were both human, they were not equal: "Women are emotional and cannot have a complete role; they can only join in certain domains; therefore, men are more ideal."[44] In response to this statement, one of the women in the group felt obligated to offer a compromise in the face of dominant gendered societal norms—which placed men at the summit of societal activity, especially pertaining to the public sphere[45]— and to say that men had an edge but only if they showed adequate capacity. In this way, she attempted to negotiate some leverage for women so that the only men who could preside over them would at least be qualified men. Others pushed back more robustly, indicating that women could realize their goals and that their special circumstances—pregnancy and childbirth, which could potentially limit their time at work—should under no circumstances be used as a pretext to exclude them, since men are not exempt from falling sick either.

In light of these claims, the first man whose statement had ignited the discussion continued to state that the people who were best suited for political participation were those who possessed the capabilities for the role, and that this was not based on being a man or a woman or on biological differences. He stressed the gender dynamics of social interactions and how they impinged on the sphere of political engagement: "In the past participation in politics was a site of oppression for women; their physical mobility was curtailed by customs as well as the old regime, but now we have a margin of freedom" (FGD 1).

This statement evokes another made by one of the women who stated that the Islamist regime gave the limited opportunities that did exist for women to members of the NCP and that, therefore, as a woman she remained limited in public office as a civil servant in government. In order to counter such limitations, she had chosen alternative avenues within civil society to express her opposing political views before the fall of the regime (FGD 3). This opposition activity was centred around the Al Khatim Adlan Centre for Enlightenment and the offices of the NGO Justice Africa in Khartoum. She presented her findings about the lack of gender parity and equity among Sudanese citizens at a workshop in South Africa. This form of activity was impeded by the authorities, as she was intercepted at the airport upon her return from South Africa and accused of taking information out of Sudan. She argued her point,

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44 At this juncture, it is worth suggesting that these attitudes referenced the pragmatism of men (already mentioned by one of the men see section 2.7. in the Justice and Equality Movement in contrast to the emotional core of women, which was bound to sway their decision-making) (FGD 3). The "pragmatism" of men could well have been read as Machiavellian, but none of the women spoke about a nature inherent to men; rather, they focused on presenting their structural grievances (lack of education, confinement to specific jobs and social roles, etc.).

45 This tendency was discussed above through the gender debate on nature versus culture section 2.7., page 27 and footnote 30. Here, the debate correlates with the public (reserved to men) versus private (home as women's domain) distinction that prevails in many parts of the world.

saying that she had left legally through Khartoum international airport on a passport issued by the state and that her exit visa was in place, so she had nothing to hide from the government. It is significant that this woman was now based in Zalingei (Central Darfur), and this was a clear indication that the fields of political activity were shifting and were no longer contained within Khartoum.

Even though a man interlocutor stated that civil society women's movements were put under pressure by the old ruling party (NCP), the transitional period and the dialogue it generated could be used as an opportunity to use the slogans of the revolution to claim mediums of change through revolt: "*Huria salam wa adala wa al thawra khiyar al shaab*" ("freedom, peace and justice and the revolution is the choice of the people"); and later forms of governance once the regime had fallen and before the creation of the transitional government: "*Huria salam wa adala madaniya khiyar al shaab*" ("freedom, peace and justice and civilian rule is the choice of the people), making it potentially, in the words of the interviewer summarizing the sentiments of his interlocutors as ("*Huriya, salam wa adala wa al mara khiyar al shaab*" ("freedom, peace and justice and women are the choice of the people").

2.8. Variations in religious interpretations and their impact on political participation

Religious practices and understandings within diverse communities were presented as influencing women's access to the public political arena. Informants mentioned that religious families wanted their women to stay at home and at best attend *khalwas* (religious schools designed for learning the Koran by rote) briefly before reaching the age deemed suitable for marriage and staying at home to rear children. This was the general trend throughout Sudan.

Paradoxically, while expected to maintain the hegemony of men, women in Central Darfur stated that they were also expected to work outside as farmers (this also involved internally displaced women who gathered wood and made bricks to provide for their families), and even when they worked as professionals, they were expected to hand over their earnings to their spouses as a contribution to the running costs of the home. Therefore, whatever economic autonomy they actually gained was in reality short-circuited. The women speaking articulated these views by positioning themselves as educated women with access to information and a heightened awareness of their rights. They were attentive that, in this particular instance, they were spokespersons for others whom they saw as more vulnerable:

> We need a society that understands democracy. 10 per cent of women understand their rights, but 90 per cent do not. . . . This last figure represents rural women

here in Zalingei. Some women know their rights, but rural women only work for men—their fathers and husbands. . . . Men think they are on top. (FGD 2)

Furthermore, a participant in FGD 2 mentioned that women in Darfur were especially at risk as displaced women, since the camps they inhabited lacked adequate services. Given their precarious economic situations, they had to work in the brick kilns and collect wood and hence had to walk long distances that left them open to possible attack and rape. Domestic workers were subjected to harassment at times. The women in the group all agreed that in the face of such risks women's committees should be formed to support other women before they become victims.

As previously mentioned, a man in Central Darfur explained that the trend to distance women from public engagements such as politics was consolidated by the form of political Islam that had governed Sudan for the previous 30 years (section 2.7.; FGD 1). He was clear that this version of Islam framed women as *nagisat aql wa din*[46] and that this ultimately negatively impacted their ability to access the public domain of politics alongside men, who saw themselves as more qualified for decision-making (i.e. political activity), by being more rational and less emotional. There was a consensus within the group that only the formal education of women had served to counter such attitudes, but that this was still work in progress.

It was noteworthy that men tended to blame the Islamist regime for the diminished role of women in the public sphere. Within the JEM (FGD 3), a man went as far as stating that, although they officially allowed 30 per cent representation for women within the movement—and that this did not achieve the 40 per cent that had been agreed after the revolution—they did not in reality implement quotas, and women participated on an equal footing. While men predominantly seemed to stress the difficulties facing women through the analogy of mistakes existing within an organogram,[47] the women participating actually stressed the fact that they were more constrained by societal norms. Some women stated that, in situations where they were involved in a dispute, the local mechanisms of diffusing conflict, judiya (mediating negotiations), excluded women for the most part:

> Men discuss, and three-quarters of the issue is kept from us. We cannot speak; maybe a few educated women in the cities can speak up. . . . Social norms constitute a constraint for us. Maybe 30 to 40 years ago a woman would come back home after her husband beat her. Then her own family would beat her and force her to return to his house. Now things have changed for the better. You can file a complaint in court, and we have children's courts as well. (FGD 2)

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46 See section 2.7., footnote 41, for a previous allusion to this weak *hadith*.

47 Note the symbolism of things that are amenable to being easily reordered in terms of the relationships between parts of an organization.

Against such a backdrop of overlapping religion and social life in Sudan, claims for secular rule (as expressed in the citation above from a man in Central Darfur) were provocative. Such demands were generally not expressed with the same vehemence by all informants. For instance, a woman in Central Darfur (FGD 2) mentioned that religious precepts influenced the parameters of governance and the possibility of women occupying leadership roles. While her comment was fleeting it was nonetheless significant; She explained that Islamic countries limited positions such as those of the president or *wali* (governor) to men, since they involved travel and the execution of arduous tasks that were considered as unbefitting of women. According to her, such limitations were informed by Islamic precepts that had been favoured and applied within these societies. While she explained all this, she did not necessarily express a negative view: she felt that these obstacles should not affect the possibility that women might take on leadership positions; her comment was simply directed at explaining why women were lagging behind in terms of their political visibility. However, she did not elaborate on how these obstacles and religious principles, which were according to her more influential than societal norms in accounting for the limited presence of women within the political arena of Sudan, should be tackled. Her comment was taken up by another woman, who defended the Islamic religion by stating that women were consulted during the time of the prophet and that the primary example of this was the prophet's wife Aisha. She added that women were involved at the forefront of battles where they were actively nursing the wounded and quenching their thirst by offering them water.[48]

The issue surrounding the motivation for women to take part in the public sphere through political activity elicited animated debate. One woman felt that war and NGOs had made them aware of the importance of politics. The role of civil society and education was also highlighted as contributing to a recovery in women's positions despite the presence of major obstacles. She stated that women were perfectly capable of managing their time and could engage in public work without it interfering with their performance of household duties. Another woman was not satisfied with this response and stated that political participation could only ever enhance and enrich the experiences of women and that housework should be conducted in the form of a partnership between women and men: "Performing household chores is not our essential role. We need to show future generations that this is shared work and reverse this propensity to perpetuate these inherited understandings of women's roles."

Another woman stressed that awareness needed to be raised among men (since they were generally the instigators of violence or exclusion) rather than women, since awareness of women's rights was not initiated by NGOs and activists: "Awareness of women's rights existed in our religion 14 centuries ago." She offers a story that she cites

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48 Personal narrative perhaps based on the known fact that Aisha was favoured by the prophet and transmitted his sayings. She has *hadiths* attributed to her.

as derived from a *hadith* tradition. According to her narrative, a man once went to see the caliph Omar Ibn al Khattab to complain that his wife was neglectful of her duties of cleaning and cooking. Upon arrival, he saw Omar's wife perched on a pile of stones strangling the very tall Omar. Once the man saw this, he told the caliph that he had no reason to complain, since he had witnessed that the caliph himself had a problem controlling his own wife. To this, Omar responded that women were not obligated to clean or serve; they only had a duty to support their husbands psychologically and to perform marital duties.

The woman saw this as the ultimate proof that frames of reference for women's emancipation did not need to go beyond Islam: "Is there anything more glorious and natural than breastfeeding? Even this is not obligatory in Islam, so women are definitely not obligated to carry out housework. It is only that men will never accept this" (FGD 2). Her comment about men's reticence seems to be accurate, since the researcher facilitating the discussion[49] contradicted her by quoting a verse in the Koran that sets the weaning of infants at two years of age. However, the woman shut down his intervention when she explained that some Koranic verses are abrogated by others (*naskh*) and that it is optional for mothers to breastfeed their infants and that if men want their children to be breastfed, it is incumbent upon them to provide a wet nurse.

2.9. The constitution and the elections

There was limited commentary on the potential for elections and constitutional reform during the focus group discussions conducted in the four states. The following vignettes represent exceptions but are worthy of mention.

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49 See the earlier explanation that these discussions were spontaneous and unguided and therefore the researchers mediating the process are to be considered as individuals situated within their sociocultural contexts, which sometimes leads to the emergence of their own understandings and biases. They are sometimes—such as on this occasion—not entirely engaged in a process of objectivation of social signifiers (i.e. maintaining distance from them).

Diverse views extracted from Central Darfur (Zalingei locality):

> There is no consensus in Sudan about the modalities of governance that should be adopted. This failure is due to the fact that Sudan has experienced bitter circumstances, and many [Sudanese] have grievances. To date no census exists, and some areas do not even appear on the topological map, since they have existed for as little as 20 years. The constitution that we have is not permanent or even agreed upon. Even the elites have not agreed upon the constitution. This political strife has led to military coups. The December revolution has been hijacked and stolen. The constitution remains unclear, and there is no preparation, so the climate is not ripe for elections. (FGD 1, a man)

> Now is not a suitable time for elections; we have many things to do before being in a position to have elections. Early elections will sabotage the project of the revolution. The constitution has to be drafted and it has to resonate on the national level. Certain subjects such as the form of the state, the modalities of governance that have posed a challenge for politicians over time have to be resolved. The constitution should give pertinent responses. Anything less and early elections will undoubtedly bring the *kizan* [Muslim brothers] back to the reins of power. We cannot accept that Sudan be ruled once again by the Islamists. We have alternative visions, and we want secular rule. This constitution is pivotal; any mistaken wording could result in the drafting of an Islamic constitution that in the past caused death and division. We need to raise awareness regarding the importance of consolidating a secular constitution. (FGD 1 a man)

> We want a democratic constitution that should be established on the basis of elections. Right now, there is definitely no agreement. What are the arrangements by the current government? What is being done to gain the confidence of the people? This is not clear! (FGD 1, a woman)

2.9.1. Political parties

As already discussed, political parties were frequently cited as distinct from avenues of political participation accessible through civil society. It became clear that there was a tendency for women to be pigeonholed within the latter. As this report elaborates, this did not go unquestioned:

> Women are ensuring their rights now because in the past they were completely absent from politics. It was men's domain, but some women entered it due to certain oppressions that drove them to claim their rights that did exist within the law. People

used to think that women were just housewives, but they have now risen to do work and participate and have political roles. In order to develop this, women need to be active and know everything about the political field so that they are able to accompany men and guarantee their own rights. (Central Darfur, FGD 3, a woman)

Notwithstanding such views, the data indicates that the process of reducing the gap between partisan politics and social activities linked to civil society remains salient. There was a deeply anchored attitude among all genders within all four states that women could guide politics through their social activities. This could be read as a limitation for women and a form of exclusion, but it equally opens the door for a wider understanding of political participation. This was aptly expressed in the words of a man elucidating how Sudanese people called for the right to a good life as well as access to channels that could improve it. According to him, these were not merely attainable through the prism of political parties; they could also include Native Administration channels and associations: "People were not familiar with political parties, so armed movements became involved, and people participated through their feelings." He continued by succinctly stating that the objective of political engagement was to ensure that "Sudan should benefit from the modalities of good governance and democracy that other countries around the world enjoyed" (FGD 1).

Despite the importance of the words cited above, it was clear that formal political parties and their elites were in a stronger position to guide public opinion or even impose specific policies on the population more robustly than civil society channels. As one man shared:

> Political elites see themselves as above society through their class distinctions, and they create dissent. The ability to participate in politics should not be limited to such elitist attitudes. What is important is to be qualified and capable.

Formalized political activities were identified according to clear lines based on the constellations of partisan Sudanese politics in the postcolonial era. They manifested in bodies such as the Umma Party, the Communist Party and the Sudanese Congress Party. Little mention was made of the Republican Party (under the leadership of Ustaza Asma Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, daughter of the late founder of the party).[50]

2.10. The aftermath of the December 2018 revolution

The revolution of December 2018 afforded a chance for partisan avenues beyond the NCP to gain traction. As the revolution progressed, an alliance of political bodies

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50 Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, the founder of the Republican Party—which advocated for a reading and interpretation of Islamic texts that were considered as lying outside the mainstream—was executed by Nimeiry for heresy in 1985.

and syndicates stood in opposition to the rule of the National Congress Party. This coalition, in the form of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC),[51] issued the Declaration of Freedom and Change (DFC), which was signed by 29 political parties[52] and the Sudanese Professional Association (syndicates and professions, making a total of 40 bodies), calling on Omer Hassan Ahmed Al-Bashir (leader of the NCP) to step down.

It is interesting to note an exceptional case that arose in Central Darfur (FGD 2) when the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) was framed by a woman as a political party and hence a possible avenue for political participation.[53] This was not an accurate depiction of the SPA, which as a coalition of professionals had initially called for a march to the National Council and then the Republican Palace on 25 December 2018 to demand pay rises. However, this organizational unit (not yet declaring itself as the SPA) was aware of the discontent that was brewing within the Sudanese population at large, and it eventually capitalized on the movement in the streets (inspired by the first sparks of revolt) to become the organizer of the demonstrations—setting the times and locations for the street demonstrations.

The regime would eventually fall, and there was a period between 11 April and 3 June 2019 that could be described as exceptional. This was the period when a tug of war ensued between diverse members of the Forces of Freedom and Change and the military front (the army and the RSF). The FFC at various times enjoyed the unflinching support of the demonstrators and at times was supported but subject to criticism regarding perceived concessions it was making to the military front, which had supported the downfall of Bashir but was quickly attempting to mark its territory and carve out a significant position for itself to take over the reins of power. The sit-in that took place between 11 April and 3 June 2019 embodied the dispute over the nature of the Sudanese state (either fully civilian-run or to be taken over by the military). Eventually the military front acted through sheer violence to attempt to silence the call of the revolution for freedom, peace, and justice (*huria, salam wa adala*) followed by a call for civilian rule (*madaniya*).

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51 Also known as the Alliance for Freedom and Change (AFC), or the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change (DFC).

52 The 29 political parties were organized under three separate alliances—Sudan Call, Forces of National Alliance and the Alliance of Unionists in Opposition—and with the Sudanese Professional Association (SPA) formed four blocs. Other political parties were not part of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) and their position was ambiguous in relation to bringing about radical change in the structures of governance. Some preferred to await the 2020 elections—which would not prevent the participation of the NCP—to bring about change and were reticent about the value of revolutionary change.

53 This contrasts with the discussion with the JEM (Central Darfur, FGD 3), which expressed that their participation in the revolution was clarified through their adherence to the Forces of Freedom and Change. This precision indicates awareness that the FFC is a coalition of diverse political forces.

The massacre of 3 June 2019, on the last day of Ramadan, during the sit-in stunned the Sudanese population and the world at large. However, it also drew attention to Sudan in an unprecedented, extraordinary manner (#BlueforSudan). After a period of stupefaction and immediately after Eid, the Sudanese public heeded the call of the FFC to take part in civil disobedience. This ended after a week to allow some economic respite, but it was followed on 30 June (ironically the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Islamist Ingaz regime represented at the time by the NCP) by a million-person march (*millyonia*) that left no ambiguity about the will of the people to fight for civilian rule and their virulent rejection of military rule. Eventually, the military front and the civilian front were obliged to reach an entente, and a power-sharing deal mediated by Ethiopia was signed on 19 August 2019.

This date marked the start of a three-year period under the transitional government led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Some developments that occurred during the transitional period were noteworthy, and they reflect the fact that Sudanese politics is currently in unstable terrain. The government's performance was the subject of some comments during the interviews presented in this report. The first relates to an accusation by a man in Central Darfur (FGD 1) that the FFC had participated in the killing of civilians during the massacre. His words perhaps reference the fact that the Alliance of the Forces of Freedom and Change had been too lax in pushing back against the military contingent. These views resonate with broadly shared views within Sudan that the FFC was not a united front and was engaged in a soft landing: *hibut naim* (offering too many concessions in its quest for power and representation for its political parties, which did not actually represent the best interests of ordinary Sudanese citizens, who were only seeking a good and decent life).[54]

The second significant point refers to the call for secular rule, which is exemplified by the claim of a segment of the SPLM/A (North) under the leadership of Abdel Aziz Al-Hillu, which caused a stir by asking for the separation of state and religion.[55] The other segment of the SPLM/A (North under Malik Agar) was a signatory to the Juba Peace Agreement that was signed on 3 October 2020 and that brought in the second government of the transitional period.[56] The latter government was formed on

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54 Such views are well represented by the accusations directed towards the leader of the Umma Party: Sadiq Al-Mahdi – who died on 26 November 2020, a year and four months after the signing of the power-sharing deal between the military arm and the civilian one—regarding his political stances towards the revolution and how things were to be managed on the political level after the fall of the Islamist regime.

55 This conflict indicates that some ideological residuals of Islamist rule remained even after the fall of the NCP. These dilemmas are still to be resolved. See the declaration by Amar Amoun Daldoum, Secretary-General of the SPLM/N in Juba, on 23 November 2020, claiming secular rule. Notwithstanding this important example, the debate about secularism and how it should be defined is not limited to the SPLM/A and continues to animate political discussions to date during the transitional period.

56 The deal has yet to produce a healthy political climate based on more democratic practices, constitutional and legislative reforms working towards the realization of the objectives of the revolution (freedom, peace and justice) and ensuring that a multiplicity of warring ideologies and factions are appeased.

the basis of political allegiances and ties to specific political parties, whereas the first government of the transition was formed by technocrats. The divergent views about secularism within the SPLM/A movement indicate that it was fragmented on the basis of the debate around the separation of politics and religion within the workings of the state.

The dissatisfaction with how the transitional period was progressing raised serious queries about whether the revolution had now been aborted and whether it had been "stolen' (*itsaragat*). This was expressed through a re-evaluation of the values that the revolution had come to instil: freedom, peace and justice.

The first value in particular generated a robust debate. A woman in Central Darfur (FGD 4) had this to say:

> Freedom is now a double-edged sword. Some forms are good, such as productive criticism and freedom of expression and choice of religion, but now some things are not good. We have negative things now; we have a church, and in Central Darfur this did not exist in the past. This is a problem, because we are Muslim. People should have the freedom to practise among the four religions,[57] but how can we follow this person with a different religion and have them as a leader?. . .

> Being gay[58]. . . This is bad, it is not good at all (*ma tamam nihayi*), it is not part of our customs.[59]. . . Clothing is also a problem: some girls are copying the West; this is not good. With all due respect to you[60] it has to be within the parameters of your religion and customs. Personal choice is not to be confused with respect for the collective convictions of society, and the two domains should be kept separate when it comes to defining what freedom means.

Another highly reactive young woman, an activist from Blue Nile, stated that the values of the revolution should not be tarnished with corporeal freedoms and expressions of sexual activity outside marriage. She strongly asserted that she was very combative and committed to overturning the patriarchy, but her understanding of freedom meant that of the mind and not that of the body (FGD 2).

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57 This is an error on the part of the speaker in reference to the three major monotheistic religions.

58 In this quote the word 'gay' was used by the young woman as *misliyin*. In this instance it encompasses same-sex preference pertaining predominantly to men and perhaps women to a lesser extent. The term does not encompass the spectrum of LGBTQI+ gender orientations that are socially mediated identifications that are not soley based on sexual and biological categories or sexual orientation and practice.

59 The data collector did not contest this mainstream view possibly either because he shared it or because he did not want to interfere with the flow of the speaker's personal expression.

60 (This section in brackets) reflects the prevalence of gender norms; she uses this expression since she is speaking to the researcher who is a man and she feels that these topics are sensitive and could be taboo. In this instance she feels she is pushing boundaries by evoking understandings of decency and sexual preferences.

Yet another woman, aged 59, who was the Secretary-General for child protection in Kassala, stated that the community was not fully cognizant of the value of the revolution or the values that it is purported to have brought to life. She felt that social media were too quick to spread values that had a negative impact on the local society. She felt that youth were particularly vulnerable to these uncontrolled changes.

2.10.1. War, peace and healing

The three states of Central Darfur, Kassala and River Nile showed their particularities; however, we noted thematic overlaps, as illustrated in the text above. Damazine (Blue Nile state) was more removed in terms of the themes and concerns—presented above as aspirations and projections for a brighter future that the revolution had initiated— since it was until very recently an active conflict zone.[61] For this reason, the section below will focus on matters related to war and peace, poverty and underdevelopment and how they affect understandings, of women's political activities.

The women participating in the discussions stressed the levels of poverty that existed in the area and observed that, while the revolution had started in Damazine as a small spark in Hayy al Ghasam due to poverty and the increasing price of bread, the transitional period has not delivered on expectations in terms of addressing these everyday concerns, mainly pertaining to providing sources of livelihood for the citizens of the area: "Slogans and lofty values about freedom, peace and justice are important, but at the start, before the revolution took on life, we as women stood in the face of economic difficulties."

Although the women admitted that the revolution was one of change, they also said that it had been stolen, and that in their circumstances they had nowhere to sleep and no food to feed their children, and that the merchants were engaging in corrupt practices including stockpiling merchandise in order to sell it at higher prices. One of the women stated: "We are going to be like Gadaref and burn the markets. This citizens' revenge will also happen in Damazine." Another woman, a teacher, said that in Damazine there had never been a problem with food or fuel, contradicting the narrative of the first woman. For the second woman the conflict in Damazine was the result of the need for justice and equitable development:

"In Damazine there is no education; there is lots of unemployment; there is no infrastructure, and there are no schools. During the war the villages were cut off, and many youths entered school at the age of 14 and were integrated into the fourth grade. While some succeeded, many suffered from this lag." Yet another woman expressed a different point of view as a priority. She recounted the horrors of war and expressed

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61 The conflict in Darfur can now be best described as low-intensity with explosive moments, as witnessed by the recent escalations of violence in Geneina.

her extreme joy at the signing of the peace agreement. She said she had travelled from Khartoum to Juba, and she stated that peace was healing (organic peace from within the communities seems to heal more than the complicated legalistic modalities of transitional justice that were still under deliberation within the central government).

Despite the peace, she was worried that a conflict might erupt because of social interactions that were introduced in the area through the mobility patterns that had emerged during the long period of war. According to her, newcomers in the city of Damazine focused on differences between people on the basis of skin colour and ethnicity, whereas in the past the inhabitants of Blue Nile had coexisted peacefully: "The indigenous ethnic groups Ganza, Komo, Jumjum and Gumuz do not come to Damazine city; they live in the forest. When they come and see these 'Arabs'[62] they will go back to war. They prefer to die due to the stigmatization they face in the city. They might ask for separation (i.e. an independent state) despite this moment of hope that has pushed them to sign, but which might unfortunately be temporary if things do not change."

The women seemed to agree that measures related to transitional justice and punishment for the instigators of the 1989 military coup were irrelevant. They also commented on how social class was divisive in this context: "these bourgeois people coming from abroad who work in the transitional government need to be in touch with the needs of this area". While most of the women present seemed to be proud that the quota of women's participation had been raised from 25 per cent to 40 per cent and that the ministries included more women, they strongly questioned how these institutional gains had reduced inflation. One of the women even said that she knew a man who had committed suicide because of the economic strains that he was facing.

While there was a discussion about the percentages of women represented in government, this was not the crucial point for some women. The women in Damazine stressed that they were better than men in executing difficult managerial tasks and that working women were better equipped than their stay-at-home sisters to manage political engagements that were not limited to partisan politics and the quest for positions of power. There was a consensus that women could engage in politics within the civil society sector. They could equally engage in political activity that addressed the priorities of the area which were related to capacity-building for economic development, farming and looking after mobile people. However, in general the women seemed to hold the view that the political parties were not to be trusted since they could be closely associated with the corrupt practices of the old regime (NCP). They tended to favour voluntary work within cooperatives (mining and agriculture,

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62 This is most probably a reference to populations hailing from Northern and Central and perhaps Eastern Sudan. In this context, it does not refer to specific ethnic groups and is indexed by physical appearance (possibly lighter skin tones relative to those of the populations she states as indigenous to the area).

gum arabic) in order to enhance the prosperity of the area. They gave an example of an NGO called CORD, which aided in the cultivation of five *feddans*: instead of 10 sacks of produce, an increase to 120 sacks (shuwals) was witnessed.

Therefore, one can conclude that the avenues of political participation selected focused on maintaining peace at the local level and catching up with the rest of the state. Thus, Damazine can be seen as the most distant periphery that was faced with the challenge of catching up.

Conclusions

Conclusions

This report presents elements of the development of Sudanese women's political participation through time. It highlights multiple political trajectories from their early days until the contemporary era. Regarding the contemporary era, this report expands the definition of political participation to transcend practices linked with partisan politics and parliamentarian activities. Instead, it connects these manifestations of political activity to alternative modalities based on activities within civil society bodies and activist forms of political engagement. In this way, the analysis broadens the scope and definitions of political activity. The report also presents the legislative context that informs political processes that particularly impinge on the lives of women. Furthermore, it elaborates on gendered relationships and norms that prevail within the Sudanese social and political landscapes which influence the position of women vis à vis men and their gendered interactions during their engagements with multiple processes and discourses related to political engagements.

The study is significantly based on an analysis of secondary sources alongside one based on empirical data derived from four states within Sudan, namely: Blue Nile, Central Darfur, Kassala and River Nile. The themes that arise from the empirical data span some elements that affect the experiences of women within the domain of political activity. These include exploring the meanings of political participation, questioning women's leadership, identifying structural limitations that hinder the participation of women in politics, possible avenues for women's participation, the presence of women in politics, variations in religious interpretations and their impact on political participation, the status of the Sudanese constitution and the views of women and men on the extent to which women might advance in the next elections. The report equally addresses how the December revolution of 2018 might be a watershed moment for women since it clearly marks a break from the authoritarian practices of the defunct Islamist regime that had a severe impact on the freedoms of Sudanese women and their ability to engage in political activities of their own choosing.

The report pays special attention to how gendered relationships and social norms can be in flux or can alternatively sometimes remain quite static for protracted periods of time, depending on the actions of social agents and on how they analyse them—either criticizing or accepting them. The diversity of social actors represented in this study testifies to a diversity of Sudanese voices that shape the range of modalities of political action that can be undertaken at any given time within the context of political and historical determinants.

The content of the interviews and discussions indicates that components guiding international agreements aimed at ensuring equality for women with men were not highlighted within any of the four states. Notably, CEDAW[63] did not feature in the discussions, even though it was a subject of concern within the centres of power—whether or not to sign the treaty—and in civil society discussions and workshops in Khartoum.[64] In Khartoum there were also discussions within the Ministry of Justice on the revision of family law. The public order laws were suspended, but they were not yet abrogated, although the abrogation of these laws could possibly take place in the future. None of these examples were touched upon in depth. Conversely, brief allusions were made during the discussions to UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which guarantees women's protection in different social situations including during war. The informants did not address the polemic around secularization, even though it was the subject of a media frenzy in April and May 2021. Most of the coverage was aimed at inducing fear at the societal level by suggesting that the foundations of Sudanese social values were being threatened.[65]

The discussions alluded to the 40 per cent quota in the Constitutional Charter (even though this figure was frequently misunderstood as spanning all the executive bodies and all levels of governance rather than only the Transitional Legislative Council) more frequently than other elements supporting women's rights. The discussions also made more robust references to divorce, custody and child marriage.

It was clear that the issues that arose were wedded to the local concerns of the individuals who participated in the discussions and that these concerns were tied to their societies and the environments in which they lived. The impact of the

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63 CEDAW is an international treaty adopted in 1979 (signed on 18 December 1979) by the United Nations General Assembly. Described as an international bill of rights for women, it was instituted on 3 September 1981 and has been ratified by 189 states to date. For Sudan the ratification of CEDAW could be controversial, since its clauses are bound to elicit concern among conservative Islamic voices. Furthermore, CEDAW could be disruptive to well-cemented gender norms that predominantly elevate the positions of men to the detriment of women within large swathes of Sudanese society.

64 It was evoked, for example, during a lecture called "Women in Sudanese Laws' that took place on 28 April 2021 at the Khatim Adlan Centre in Khartoum.

65 See YouTube channel Sudanese drama, two episodes Fedail in Istanbul, against CEDAW: episode 20 posted on 2 May 2021 and against secularism episode 23 posted on 5 May 2021.

media and social media and their diffusion of internationalized concerns were not significant. Instead, both women and men tied their interest in politics to resolving daily concerns: halting conflict, seeking viable livelihood channels, receiving an education and raising awareness in order to improve the quality of life within their communities, and learning from the bitter lessons in Sudan how to live in harmony with others. In general, people seemed to realize that there was a highly specialized world of politics connected to power and wealth, but it was not a world that they seemed to praise; instead, they framed this world as self-serving and associated it with a hunger for power that created cleavages within society.

These expressions—alongside the fact that election to positions of power was not a priority for many participants—allow us to envisage the forms of participative politics that people tended to favour, and they facilitate access to the forms of political participation that might actually resonate with the needs and aspirations of interlocutors hailing from the peripheries. It was salient that the four states presented different refractions of peripherality. One could assert that all four states are peripheral since they are characterized by economic underdevelopment. However, River Nile is closer to the hegemony of Khartoum in terms of sociocultural values and some development (with the latter consolidated during the NCP's time in power, which saw preferential treatment on the basis of biological kinship). Kassala is more acutely disadvantaged in terms of economic development and is plagued with ethnic conflicts.

The two other states are farther removed from Khartoum by virtue of geographical distance, yet they present divergent profiles. The conflict in Darfur and the one in Blue Nile are not based on the same grievances, and the actors in these conflicts manifest different political ambitions. Before the eruption of the conflict in Darfur in 2003, certain dissenting elements were implicated in the Islamist modalities of governance. In time, alliances fractured, and the conflict exploded. At present, the conflict has abated, and the political discourse in Darfur has become more conducive to conversations related to party politics and representation within the larger national political trajectory. In contrast, Blue Nile is still caught up in processing the ravages of the onslaught of violence that the central state (federal government of Sudan) had piled onto it. The interviews were indicative of the raw experience of war trauma and underscored the importance of communal healing before people are able to engage in conversations about how to join the political manoeuvrings of the central state representing the federal government. In this context, the spectre of further fragmentation within Sudan is still evoked, and ties with South Sudan, which seceded, are relevant. The choice of Juba (South Sudan) as the site of the peace talks, which set the pace for the second phase of the transitional government and new constellations of power-sharing that include previously marginalized political factions, should not go unnoticed. It offers a message of hope for the possible future integrity of Sudan as a state, but at the same time it points to the possibility of further fragmentation if political actors do not proceed with caution.

Finally, on the basis of the data collected and the analytical contributions presented within this report, we highlight that the four regions studied all referenced Khartoum as the locus of development and stability in Sudan, even though they were aware that it was not immune to political manoeuvrings and upheavals. Nonetheless, it was clear that the inhabitants of the four states perceived that they were more disadvantaged than the capital due to the circumstances prevailing at the local level. For example, it was significant that participants in Blue Nile were aware of the problems in Darfur at large and that they mentioned the political and social events taking place in Kassala and River Nile. In turn, people in Central Darfur alluded to the appointment of a woman to a high position in River Nile, and yet they did not mention the plight of other conflict-affected areas. Participants from River Nile and Kassala did not mention the circumstances of any regions outside their physical boundaries. These indicators illustrate that the distances between different populations and regions in Sudan were influenced by centre–periphery dynamics, and that peripheries appear in concentric circles on the basis of distance from the centre, which is the location of power and the main catalyst in the distribution of wealth across the country as at the time of writing (2021).

About the authors

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Azza Ahmed Abdel Aziz holds a PhD in social anthropology, with a special focus on medical anthropology. Her research focuses on cultural understandings of health and well-being, which largely feature an exploration of the interface between such understandings and biomedical configurations of health. She has in-depth experience working on these issues among individuals and groups of people whose lives have been subject to experiences of movement/migration in their different forms. She equally focuses on how the sociopolitical impinges on constructions of identity and how these elements give life to diverse sociocultural manifestations in multiple domains of social life. After 2016 she has conducted longitudinal field research among diverse South Sudanese populations residing in Khartoum in light of their altered legal status after the creation of the state of South Sudan in July 2011. She is currently working on the role of women in the Sudanese revolution of December 2018, their avenues of political participation during the transitional period as well as how music and art are pathways in the quest for the construction of healthier modes of national identities.

Aroob Alfaki holds an MSc in the anthropology of culture and sustainable development. She is a lecturer at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Khartoum, Sudan. Her research focuses on how peace and democratic transitions are informed by sociocultural parameters. She explores how these processes are influenced by socio-economic inequalities that are reflected in gendered and ethnic relationships. Her research interests also highlight the relationships between development and cultural practices in the Sudanese context with special attention to grassroots action in the regions of Sennar and Gezira. Her most recent research focuses on the connection between social identity formations and their relationships to discourses that construct understandings of indigeneity (nativism) through oral culture (literary and historical) in Eastern Sudan.

Annexes

Annex 1

Guide to focus group discussions

Kassala: The discussions were conducted by two women from the Economic and Social Research Bureau (Higher Education) in collaboration with Insight Strategy Partners.

FGD reference/ type	Location	Number/ gender of participants	Age range	Occupations	Affiliations	Additional notes
FGD 1: young women	Unidentified location	6 young women	25–36	1 public health practitioner, 2 recent graduates, 1 university student, 1 primary school teacher	SUNA media agency, PlanNGO, Shar' Al-hawadith Initiative, a political party, Sudanese National Alliance	1 participant did not mention her affiliation.
FGD 2: political parties	Urban Kassala (unidentified location)	7 participants: 5 men and 2 women	23–51	3 university students, 1 NGO practitioner, 1 civil servant	Democratic Front, Unionists' Association, Independent Students Congress, National Democratic Alliance, the NGO Unionists' Feminist Association	One of the two women in the group preferred not to write their personal information on the FGD profile sheet nor to record their voice in the presence of other participants.
FGD 3: intergenerational	Centre for Women's Development in Aroma (rural Kassala)	11 women	25–55	4 homemakers, 2 primary school teachers, 1 agricultural engineer, 1 civil servant, 1 elder leader of the women's community	Local administration of Aroma, primary school, women's community association	Some participants preferred not to register their personal information on the FGD profile sheet.

FGD 4: mixed-gender	Al-Mirghaniya youth centre	13 participants: 7 men and 6 women	19–55	1 technical worker, 5 civil servants, 3 students, 1 teacher, 2 homemakers 1 media director, 1 airline pilot	Commission of Refugees of Kassala, activists	A middle-class group in a middle-class neighbourhood. The group meeting took place during a long queue for fuel. Some of the participants were passing bystanders who decided to join the discussion; others had already been invited to join the discussion. Some participants did not register their personal information on the FGD profile sheet.

Central Darfur: The discussions were conducted by two men from the Economic and Social Research Bureau (Higher Education) at the University of Khartoum in collaboration with Insight Strategy Partners and two women researchers from the Institute of Peace Studies at the University of Zalingei.

FGD 1: mixed-gender	Ministry of Health and Social Development	10 participants: 4 women and 6 men	26–41	Civil servants, social workers, a psychologist	Freelancers, Ministry of Health and Social Development, Office of Violence against Women and Children, NGOs, Gender-Based Violence Unit of the Department of Public Health	
FGD 2: intergenerational	University of Zalingei	8 participants: all women	36–38	1 teacher, 2 social workers, 1 researcher, 3 office cleaners 1 nurse	University of Zalingei, Liberty and Justice Party, local NGO Ministry of Health and Social Development, JEM, African Institute	

FGD 3: political stakeholders	Justice and Equality Movement headquarters	20 participants: 13 women and 7 men	25–50	Farmers, homemakers teachers, the Umm Al-Jaish, a trainer, a radio presenter, a radio programmer, a broadcaster	Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Education, JEM, Ministry of Youth and Sport, local NGO staff, traders	
FGD 4: young women	Centre for Jebel Marra Heritage	7 participants: all women	19–32	5 students, 1 doctor, 1 lab technician	Department of health at the Ministry of Health and Social Development, University of Zalingei	Five students stated that they were not active at all in party politics, civil society or even the revolution of December 2018. One woman revealed her involvement in civil society activities, and another said she was affiliated with *harakat jaish tahrir al Sudan* (the army movement for the liberation of Sudan), that she took part in civil society initiatives—among which she notably included MANSAM[66]—and that she was active during the revolution and present at the sit-in until it was dispersed.[67]

River Nile: The discussions were conducted by two women from the Economic and Social Research Bureau (Higher Education) in collaboration with Insight Strategy Partners. Further data is not available for participants' profile sheet.

Blue Nile: The discussions were conducted by two men, one from the Economic and Social Research Bureau (Higher Education) in collaboration with Insight Strategy Partners; the other one is a local journalist from Damazine. Further data is not available for participants' profile sheet.

66 The interlocutor was clear in stating that MANSAM existed in Zalingei but that it had only started mobilizing in the area during the previous year. Since it was not firmly established in Central Darfur, it did not have a headquarters in Zalingei.

67 The location of the sit-in remained confusing until quite late in the discussion, and it became apparent that the sit-in in Khartoum tended to have the greatest visibility. Eventually the researcher had to ask about the location, and it was confirmed that it was in the research location of Zalingei. More broadly, it is relevant to note that sit-ins took place in major cities in Sudan and were dispersed at approximately the same time as the one outside army headquarters in Khartoum on 3 June 2019.

Annex 2

Guide to conducting in-depth interviews and focus group discussions

You should be able to introduce yourself properly to your respondents and introduce International IDEA as a stakeholder. You should be able to act in an impartial manner and justify the importance of your research project, as this is the only possible way to build trust with your participants. You should also be fully capable of answering the expected questions you will face in the field, such as the following:

- What is your research project about (main goals, research methodology)? Why qualitative, targeted outcomes?
- Why is it important for the interviewees and group participants to be part of this research?
- What are the expected benefits for the participants in this research?

Verbal consent must be obtained before questions are posed. Preferably a letter or an overview about the research project can be submitted to relevant stakeholders in order to facilitate access.

Key informant and in-depth interviews

- Try to gain some basic information about the person you are interviewing before meeting them (such as their title, reputation, political and/or ideological affiliations).
- Answer all the questions and queries from the interviewee before starting the interview.
- Make the interviewee feel comfortable. If you realize that some questions might make the interviewee uncomfortable, leave them until the last section of the interview.

- Ask the interviewee for consent before recording the interview. If the circumstances of the interview change (place, people present, etc.), ask again for consent before turning the recorder on. Make it clear that the interviewee is free to stop the recorder at any point.
- If some questions are not clear to the interviewee, clarify by giving an example.
- Try to focus on the interviewee's answers rather than on the next question on your list. This way you can generate some follow-up questions from the answers provided.
- If you feel that some answers are not clear enough for you, do not second-guess them; ask the interviewee for clarification (make sure that what you understood from the answer is what the interviewee wanted to say).
- Be neutral and separate your political/ethnic affiliations and judgements from the person you are interviewing.

Focus group discussions

- In determining the group composition, make sure that the voice of each and every member of the group can be heard. If you feel that some voices would drown out the others due to certain power dynamics (such as education, experience, social elitism, ethnic concentration, age, gender, geographical concentration), you can reorganize the groups in a way that makes the participants comfortable about being equally engaged.
- Before the beginning of the discussion, let the participants agree on the rules of the discussion (e.g. to put their phones on silent, to avoid interrupting the group, to be respectful of each other's opinions, to ensure a fair distribution of time among the members, etc.).
- Ask for the consent of every member of the group to be part of the research. If the discussion is to be recorded, ask for consent.
- If possible, use a pen and a flip chart to write the participants' answers (especially if they do not agree on one answer, try to list all the answers and discuss them with the group). If needed, you can ask the participants to vote, and write the number of votes in front of each answer.
- If you ask a question that the participants seem unwilling to answer, move to the next question, and indicate the relevant question for further analysis by the researcher.

Question list

In-depth interviews: women from different political parties, lawyers (especially women), either feminist-oriented civil society activists or women involved in media production related to political/electoral participation (such as Hakamat in Darfur, local-language radio presenters in Eastern Sudan, etc.) and young influencers (beyond the formal NGO space).

Profile information: age, official job position, sector (theme) of involvement, affiliation (party, initiative, NGO, local committee, resistance committee[68]), area.

Number of interviews per state: 14

Political participation

1. What do you think about the political situation in Sudan?
2. Does this situation motivate you to get involved in politics?
3. Do you know anybody in your close social circle who is involved in politics?
4. Do you know or have any relations—now or in the past—with political leaders in your area?
5. Have they influenced you? In which ways?
6. Are you engaged in politics? In which ways? (to be asked discreetly)
7. Do you think there is strong political participation in Sudan, especially among women?
8. How did people participate politically in the past and how do they participate politically now?
9. What are the available forms of political participation in Sudan, especially since the revolution?
10. Which avenues of political participation do women generally prefer (e.g. parties, resistance committees, Legislative Council, public service, feminist movements and women's movements)?[69]
11. What is your personal preference (related to question 10)?

Concepts to be considered (questions 12–18): distance from traditional politics and work on women's issues outside the confines of feminist movements.

12. Do people still trust political parties—both historical parties and new ones? If not, where does this distrust come from?

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68 This could also be informal, so check.

69 Examples for interviewers to keep in mind.

13. Do you feel that you might be interested in joining a political party? If so, which one? Why did you choose this one?[70]
14. Which political parties were involved in the revolution?
15. Do you interact with any groups led by women? If so, what kind of interaction?
16. Do you think that women can only help each other if they have separate women's groups (apart from mixed institutions)?
17. Do you think men exclude women on a local and/or official level?
18. Do you think that "women are the enemies of women"?[71] If so, why? How?

Challenges facing women

19. What kind of challenges face women on a personal, family or societal level regarding their political participation?
20. Do women feel that they face challenges in the political arena compared to men? If so, what kind of challenges? How do they face these challenges?
21. What needs to be addressed in terms of legislation in relation to women's political participation?
    – Do all women face the same legal challenges? If not, who is facing what?
    – How do women mitigate the different kinds of legal obstacles they face?

Elections

22. Do you consider yourself a person who participates actively in politics rather than just supporting a political party or having a personal opinion?
23. Are you going to vote?
24. What are women's expectations for the upcoming elections?
25. What kind of capacities (organizational, campaigning, advocacy) do women have for running for the next elections in Sudan?
26. What preparations do women need to make for the next elections in Sudan? Who will support this process?
27. What are the challenges facing women in being elected and/or advocating for women candidates? What can be done to mitigate these challenges?

Key informant interviews: women ministers, women working in the police and military (including women working within armed groups), key civil service staff (social welfare, justice).

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70 If you feel that the interviewee does not want to answer this question, don't push it.

71 This is based on a Sudanese hard-felt belief (used frequently in everyday colloquial Arabic in many Sudanese communities).

Profile information: age, official job position, sector of involvement, affiliation (party, initiative, NGO, civil society, local committee, resistance committee[72]), area.

Try to take a brief biography from each interviewee (e.g. ask about who they are, how they ended up in their position, etc.).

Number of interviews per state: six.

Political participation

1. What do you think about the political situation in Sudan?
2. Does this situation motivate people in general to get involved in politics?
3. Do you think there is strong political participation in Sudan, especially among women?
4. How did women participate politically in the past, and how do they participate politically now?
5. What are the available forms of political participation in Sudan, especially since the revolution?
6. Which avenues of political participation do women generally prefer (e.g. parties, resistance committees, Legislative Council, public service, feminist movements, women's movements/groups, etc.)?[73]
7. Do people still trust political parties—both historical parties and new ones?
8. Do you think that women can only help each other if they have separate women's groups (apart from mixed institutions)?
9. In relation to your institution (army, movement, ministry, etc.), are there any policies, strategies or programmes to enhance women's political participation? If so, what are they? It not, why not?
10. Do you think men exclude women on a local and/or official level (within the institution of the interviewee, e.g. ministry, department, armed movement, etc.)?
11. Do you think that "women are the enemies of women'? If so, why? How?

Challenges facing women

12. What kind of challenges do women face on a personal, societal or institutional level regarding their political participation?
13. Do women feel that they face different challenges in the political arena compared to men? If so, what kind of challenges? How do they face these challenges?
14. What needs to be addressed in terms of legislation in relation to women's political participation?

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72 This could also be informal, so check.

73 Examples for interviewers to keep in mind.

15. Do all women who are politically active face the same legal challenges? If not, who is facing what? How do they mitigate the different kinds of legal obstacles they face?

Elections

16. Are you going to vote?
17. What are your expectations for the upcoming elections?
18. What kind of capacities (organizational, campaigning, advocacy) do women have for running the elections?
19. What preparations do women need to make for the next elections in Sudan? Who will support this process?
20. What are the challenges facing women in being elected and/or advocating for women candidates? What can be done to mitigate these challenges?
21. Do you think that women need to mobilize and fight for their participation in the upcoming elections? If so, what are your roles and responsibilities as a woman in order to support this?
22. What are the roles and responsibilities of your institution in the aforementioned process ?

Focus group discussions: mixed-gender group, young-women's group, political stakeholders group, inter-generational group.

Profile information: age, gender, geographical area, title, institution and political/ civil affiliation.

General questions for all groups

Political participation

1. What does political participation mean to you? How do you get involved and why?
2. Does women's participation in politics mean that women are challenging men?
   – If so, what do you think the nature of women's participation should be?
   – Does an interest in politics and/or political participation change their nature?
3. What is the most appropriate age at which women should engage in politics? (Also ask about the appropriate age for men in order to compare—in relation to changes in social norms.)
4. Should political participation take place through official pathways? If so, why?

- – Is it better for political participation to take place through other channels? If so, why?
- – What kinds of political participation are the most important? Why?

5. How do women prefer to be politically engaged (e.g. parties, resistance committees, Legislative Council, public service, feminist movements and women's movements)?

- Ask for details about all these possibilities (question 5), the differences between them, which are best and why, which are bad and why.

Participant groups and specific questions

a. Mixed-gender group

Please ensure that the group is diverse (different classes, ages, grassroots and elites).

1. During the discussion, focus on relationships between men and women within the political landscape.
2. Who is best suited to political participation?
3. Are there any differences in the way politics is practised nowadays, and in the past, by both men and women?
4. How do the above differences impact both women and men now? How did differences impact them in the past?
5. How do different people collaborate with one another (women with women, men with men, across genders and across different political ideologies and partisan affiliations) in the practice of politics?
6. What are the present challenges and opportunities that affect cooperation between men and women in the political arena?
7. Is there a consensus about the performance of the transitional government?
   - – Is there a consensus about the quota (40 per cent) accorded to women by the transitional government? Are women as a group satisfied with this percentage? If not, why not?
   - – Is there a consensus about the performance of female ministers and *walias* (the two *walias* of the Northern and River Nile states)?
     How do questions (6 and 7) show the differences in approaches across genders and also within them? (Keep in mind differences in education, class, elites, grassroots groups.)
8. Is there a consensus about how to prepare for the upcoming elections?

b. Young-women's group

Please ensure that the group is diverse (different classes, ages, grassroots and elites).

1. What were your general ideas about politics before the revolution?
2. Where did these ideas come from?
3. Did you participate in politics at school, at the local level, at university?
4. Did you do informal politics (associative work and charity work)? Do you consider associative work to be informal politics?
5. Are you part of any political group, activist group or movement (this includes coalitions and networks as well)? If so, how has this impacted your life (career, education, family, personality)? If it hasn't affected your life, why not?
6. To what degree were you involved in the demonstrations and then in politics after the fall of the regime and how?
7. Do you consider your involvement during and after the revolution to be political participation?
8. Did your ideas about politics change after the revolution? If so, in which ways?
9. Are there any advocacy or capacity-building programmes in your area (e.g. by NGOs) in relation to advocacy for women's rights?
10. If such programmes exist, how do you assess them? Are they inclusive? Are they effective?
11. Do NGOs working on women's rights include younger and older generations of women together? If so, how does this affect the relationship between younger and older women? If not, why not?
12. What are your expectations for the transitional period and after it?
13. How do you think the current government is managing? What faults can you name, and how do you think they can be corrected?
14. How do you want to be engaged or represented in the upcoming elections?
15. What are the challenges facing your political participation as young women?

c. Political stakeholders

1. Do you think that women are only involved in politics because of the difficult circumstances they find themselves in (e.g. a difficult economic situation, war)?
2. Are women involved in politics because they have to be? Or do they consider their participation in politics to be just another career?
3. What are women's roles within political parties and other political entities? (Try to understand if there are special roles, equal roles, exclusionary roles.)
4. What are the challenges facing female politicians (inside their own political parties, the general political space, the family and society)?
5. Do you believe that women should have a unified agenda regardless of their political affiliation?
6. Do women in political parties prefer to cooperate with women in other parties, or do they choose their political agenda in accordance with a party line regardless of gender?

7. How do women from outside politics perceive women politicians? How does this perception affect women politicians?
8. What mechanisms do political parties use to engage women?
9. Do you think that women can be active participants in politics without being a party member? If so, how? If not, why not?
10. Do you consider women working within NGOs (e.g. charity work, community work, women's rights activism, economic empowerment of women) to be active participants in politics? If so, how? If not, why not?
11. What are the opportunities and challenges for politicians, activists and NGO practitioners for networking, especially on women's rights?

d. Intergenerational group

Please ensure that the group is diverse (different classes, ages, grassroots and elites).

1. What were the main issues or concerns (e.g. education, FGM, pensioners' rights, divorce, marriage) regarding women's rights in the past, and what are they now (from the perspectives of both the older and younger women in the group)?
2. How did women organize themselves in the past to advocate for their issues? How has this changed now (from the perspective of both the older and younger women in the group)?
3. What are the main challenges that women faced in the past, and what are the main challenges facing women now, regarding their ability to mobilize and ensure that their voices are heard (from the perspective of both the older and younger women in the group)?
4. Do you think that women are only involved in politics because of the difficult circumstances they find themselves in (e.g. a difficult economic situation, war)?
5. Are women involved in politics because they have to be? Or do you consider the participation of women in politics to be like any other chosen career?
6. How did women deal with men's privileges (patriarchal norms) within their family, society and workplace in the past, and how do they deal with them now (from the perspective of both generations)?
7. How do both generations in the group look at past and present political practices?
8. Has women's presence in the public sphere, and especially the political space, developed in any way? If so, what are these developments (from the perspective of both generations)?
9. Are there any advocacy or capacity-building programmes in the area set up by NGOs in order to support women's political participation?
10. How do you assess these programmes? Are they inclusive? Are they effective?
11. Do NGOs working on women's rights and issues include both younger and older generations of women at the same time?

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About International IDEA

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This report entitled *Shifting Terrains of Political Participation in Sudan: Elements dating from the second colonial (1898–1956) period to the contemporary era* presents elements of the development of Sudanese women's political participation through time. It highlights multiple political trajectories from their early days until the contemporary era. The study is significantly based on an analysis of secondary sources alongside one based on empirical data derived from four states within Sudan, namely: Blue Nile, Central Darfur, Kassala and River Nile. The themes that arise from the empirical data span some elements that affect the experiences of women within the domain of political activity. These include exploring the meanings of political participation, questioning women's leadership, identifying structural limitations that hinder the participation of women in politics, possible avenues for women's participation, the presence of women in politics, variations in religious interpretations and their impact on political participation, the status of the Sudanese constitution and the views of women and men on the extent that women might advance in the next elections. The report equally addresses how the December revolution of 2018 might be a watershed moment for women since it clearly marks a break from the authoritarian practices of the defunct Islamist regime that had a severe impact on the freedoms of Sudanese women and their ability to engage in political activities of their own choosing. Political parties are considered gatekeepers for women's access to political positions of power, as they play an important role in institutionalizing women's inclusion in politics. Ensuring that political parties in Sudan play an active role in the advancement of gender equality and the enhancement of women's political participation is particularly important as Sudan prepares for its transition to democracy.