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Contemporary youth movements and the role of social media in Sudan

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Abstract

Youth activism in the last decade has become increasingly associated with new media technologies. The “Arab Spring”, it can be argued, prompted much interest among academics, policymakers and others on the intersection between youth, activism and social media. Although oftentimes seen as threats to authoritarian states, youths have become agents of change in the eyes of international foreign policy developers who claim to be keen on progressive and inclusive governance. This paper reflects on the role of social media in the recent (2011–2013) activism of Sudanese youth, who have taken centre stage at demonstrations calling for regime change, and adopting mechanisms similar to their counterparts in the Middle East/North Africa. While political forms of activism may have been more prominent in the Arab Spring, this paper argues that social media plays a key role in both political and community engagements of contemporary urban Sudanese youth, perhaps pointing to future possibilities.

Résumé

L’activisme des jeunes au cours des dix dernières années en est venu à être de plus en plus associé aux nouvelles technologies médiatiques. On peut soutenir que le « Printemps arabe » a suscité un vif intérêt parmi les universitaires et les décideurs, entre autres, sur l’intersection entre les jeunes, l’activisme et les médias sociaux. Bien qu’ils soient souvent perçus comme une menace pour les États autoritaires, les jeunes sont devenus des agents de changement aux yeux des entités internationales chargées d’élaborer les politiques étrangères qui affirment être intéressées par la gouvernance progressiste et inclusive. Cet article traite du rôle des médias sociaux dans le récent activisme (2011–2013) des jeunes soudanais, qui ont occupé le devant de la scène lors des manifestations en faveur d’un changement de régime et qui adoptent des mécanismes similaires à ceux de leurs pairs au Moyen-Orient ou en Afrique du Nord. Si les formes politiques d’activisme ont été plus importantes lors du Printemps arabe, cet article soutient que les médias sociaux jouent néanmoins un rôle clé dans la mobilisation politique ainsi que communautaire des jeunes soudanais urbains d’aujourd’hui, ce qui laisse peut-être entrevoir des possibilités futures.

Keywords: Sudan; youth movements; social media; insurrections; Arab Spring

I. Introduction

In our process of rethinking Sudan Studies, especially since 2011 (Hale 2009), we have focused on two important areas of study that are emerging and intersecting with each other: youth movements (many of which are grassroots) and social media, including the gendered character of these. Although making historical reference to pre-secession Sudan (prior to 2011), we are concentrating on the Republic of Sudan and, specifically, on Greater Khartoum.
We have chosen to use a broad definition of “youth”, one in which “youth” is not necessarily determined by age (although it is, to some extent, generational), in order to reflect the diversity of actors in the so-called youth groups, but also as a kind of metaphor for the kinds of groups we are considering. Although these groups may be mainly composed of university students and fresh graduates, their membership and leadership also extend to young and older professionals in their thirties and forties. These “youths” may be members of political parties and/or work with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or other activist groups. What is surprising to us, discounting writings on earlier nationalist movements, the north–south war(s) and some materials on the labour movements and women’s movements, is how little has been written about contemporary youth and grassroots movements in Sudan.

As for social media, we are witnessing an explosion throughout the world. Even in areas such as Sudan, where the development of social media is slight, even in comparison to other less developed countries, the impact is growing. Regardless of the growing importance of social media, we can safely say that very little has yet been written about these technological phenomena in Sudan (Mourtada and Salem 2011). While there are inevitable generational gaps between today’s and earlier “revolutionaries”, social media has provided a platform for interaction and documentation among different age groups and eras, as well as a free flow of information that transcends traditional barriers such as reciprocity, geography, or censorship, but might require a new set of research methods for studying a fast-changing scene like Facebook. We have no doubt that the inevitable emergence of such literatures will change the nature of Sudan Studies.

We use mainly Greater Khartoum data to analyse where Sudan is located within the fluid frame of political change in the region, mainly gesturing toward the Arab World within the global phenomena of people taking to the streets armed with tools like digital cameras and tweeting live coverage from the protest. We are interested in observing how oppositional processes in Sudan may or may not follow the patterns of, say, Egypt, Tunisia, or Libya under the rubric “the Arab Spring”, which called for regime change, and how much and why Sudan exhibits different and creative phenomena (Hale 2013). As background to the discontent with the current military Islamist government (in power since 1989) we would argue that this discontent did not begin with the regime of the current president, Hasan Al-Bashir. Other provocative factors have shaped contemporary pre- and post-secession Sudan: the colonial legacy; the dominance of mainly two sectarian parties (based on the Ansar and Khatmiyya brotherhoods); the dominance of the military in a goodly portion of the years Sudan has been independent; the continuous conflict between north and south; the ongoing conflicts between the central riverain (“Arab”/Nubian) area and the margins of Darfur, eastern Sudan, and eventually Nubia itself; the rise of Islamism; the changing character of oppositional politics, including the failure of those parties, in general; actual or potential fragmentation of the country; the displacement of populations; the suppression of civil society, especially during the current Islamist regime; the exclusion of women and other marginalised groups from the political process; economic factors such as the struggle over control of oil reserves; environmental factors such as desertification, making land and land-use major issues; neocolonialism and neoliberalism in the form of structural adjustment and “development” projects which have only served to weaken indigenous economies; and the impending and then actuality of secession by South Sudan in 2011.

However, under Al-Bashir’s Islamist authoritarian military government with its many security arms, its puritanical zeal, its violence toward its own citizens, its attempts to inculcate the minds of the entire population with Islamist ideas and values at all levels of
life (through education, media, dress codes, morality codes, and the like), and its attempts
to control all aspects of its citizens’ lives, discontentment in many sectors of society
reached its zenith by 2013, when demonstrations erupted all over Sudan (Beny and Hale,

While Sudanese discontent with the regimes of Al-Bashir and other dictatorships like
Jaffar Nimeri’s (1969–1985) may have assumed different forms, e.g., armed insurgency,
freedom movements, and underground manoeuvrings, nonetheless, discontent in
Khartoum (and other major cities like Wad Medani) has been expressed primarily
through civilian protests similar to the contemporary political history and power struggles
in Egypt and other North African countries, and similar to various forms of coups d’état
(following trends on the African continent). We expect, therefore, the possibility that the
Sudanese will be influenced by the events in Egypt and other Arab Spring countries,
i.e., likewise rebelling against dictatorship, corruption, and inflation. One of the
differences between Sudan and Arab Spring countries, in addition to the fact that the
protests in Sudan during the same time period (2011) did not have the same impact on the
political system (i.e., regime change), is that the Arab Spring revolts eventually brought
Islamists to the forefront, while Sudan already has an Islamist government. We discuss this
briefly below.

The urban parts of Sudan, although, to a large extent immune to the types of armed
conflict we see in Darfur or the Nuba Mountains, were nonetheless affected by the
Islamists’ strategies of their version of “empowerment”, which not only excluded non-
Islamists from government jobs but also pursued a campaign of inculcating more all-
pervasive and radical “Islamist values” into the social fabric. Such a campaign interfered
with the educational system and personal, political, and press freedoms, but also generated
a conservatism that is exercised through public order police, religious curricula and
institutions, and various security apparatuses, not to mention the displacement of vast
populations from war-ridden parts of the country. These internally displaced person (IDPs)
live in poor neighbourhoods around Greater Khartoum and face greater challenges in
employment, health, and education than do older Khartoum dwellers.

The grievances of the urban elite against the Islamist state, on the other hand, though
not as harsh and direct as displacement, rape or death, are related to perceived government
economic or political failures, South Sudan’s secession and other unresolved conflicts, and
curbs on freedom of expression. Urban actors in Greater Khartoum now include
communities which had direct interaction with the war and face harsh economic
conditions, which brought new dimensions of racism and social injustice into the call for
regime change. These newer Greater Khartoum dwellers ask, for example, what the older
Khartoum dwellers are doing while people are killed in Darfur. In this paper, we examine
old and new dimensions of the urban political milieu in Greater Khartoum.

II. Situating urban, grassroots, and youth movements in Sudan

Sudan, even after the secession of South Sudan in 2011 (see Hale 2012), is still a large land
mass – close to two million square kilometres, with an overcrowded tripartite capital of
some five million people who are languishing under an authoritarian Islamist military
government. The remaining country is still highly ethnically heterogeneous, poor, and
predominantly Muslim (even more so with the departure of the partially Christian South).
With South Sudan gone, the population of Sudan is estimated at nearly 26 million. That
population is young (median age 18.7), fertile, but not very healthy. The unemployment
rate is very high, perhaps nearing 20%. Sudan is ranked by many agencies at
approximately 143 out of 180 in the world in terms of rich and poor countries. Sudan also lost three quarters of its oil revenues; the inflation rate increased markedly since 2011, reaching a high in 2013 and causing the government to remove oil subsidies, which led to the September 2013 protests (Copnall 2013).

The central riverain cultural area of Sudan where Greater Khartoum is located is where we see the greatest concentration of urban areas; where many colonial efforts were focused; where capital-intensive investments have been most common; where consumer culture predominates; where many labour and religious migration depots are; and where most of the critical movements before and since independence from the British (1956) – from nationalist movements to grassroots movements to military coups d’état – have taken place. In short, Greater Khartoum, in particular, is the centre for the arts, the media, telecommunications (including social media) and educational, religious, and national-political life.

However, having sung the praises of urban vibrancy, we would like to augment our study with data based on the influx of rural grassroots/youth organisations which have emerged from the festering wounds of low employment rates, government control over public spaces, war, and internal displacement to become a force to be reckoned with and an important focus for rethinking Sudan studies. This data, at this preliminary stage in our research, is mainly composed of the results of interviews and observations by both authors, interpretations based on our identities as academics and activists, and sometimes enhanced by our participation. We have also studied the trends, tools, and modes of political expression in Sudan, using events which are still unfolding, and making comparisons with relatively better documented, yet contemporary, global phenomena like the use of social media in revolts. We have also taken into account that women, within grassroots and youth movements – both urban and rural – are struggling for particles of independence and empowerment, and embracing what social media offer them in their struggles.

With further reference to the rural youth being a force with which to be reckoned, as mentioned above, one point is related to a change in the actors. The riverain ethnic groups (i.e., the “Arabs” and Nubians), with the exception of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), which emerged from marginalised parts of the country and influenced politics and history, had always been the more visible actors engaged in attempts at regime change. This scene has changed since the 1970s, with the emergence of new oppositional Southern groups and the Nuba Komolo, then the resistance movements of the 1990s – Darfuris, the Nuba, Angasana, and the Free Lions in the East. The tensions between youth from marginalised areas and urban youth, and the heightened awareness of race/racism and culture among Nuba youth, are examples of the diversity we now see among oppositional youth groups. In short, the marginalised and the displaced are taking centre stage and have generated new dimensions in the urban sphere once ruled only by riverain people. We argue more explicitly later in the paper that youth groups are new actors in the forces of change.

Sudan’s political structure is important to this study of political movements because the authoritarian nature of the state from the era of British colonialism (1898–1956) to contemporary Islamist military dictatorship (since 1989) has generated particular kinds of oppositional movements. Sudan’s civilian overthrow of two military regimes in the contemporary period (1964 and 1985) set a precedent for possibilities. Youth, women, labour and professional unions, the internally displaced, and marginalised ethnic groups have all instigated political movements, or at least insurrections that we might classify under different rubrics, but which have fed off each other. Not least, the Arab Spring has fostered and inspired thoughts of revolt among the incubated and disenfranchised, with
social media abuzz with conversations about the phenomena, and constant references to
the Arab Spring in various political meetings.⁹ Uprisings in Greater Khartoum have been
frequent enough – from students streaming out of their classes onto the streets to mass
movements that overthrew mobilised military power – in many cases, a partial reaction to
the militarisation of urban space. In the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis, more and
more people are actively fighting to restore what has been lost; the Sudanese are not an
exception. The military Islamist government that came to power in 1989 certainly was not
the answer to every Sudanese person’s dream, and through more than two decades the
disaffect have raised their voices in various ways.

All over the world, resentment of the oligarchic tendencies of centralised parties has
led, among other factors, to the rise of various youth and grassroots movements, often
classified by a dismissal of organised politics and a distrust of international monetary
organisations and other international organisations, such as: in the United States (US), the
1999 revolt in Seattle, Washington, against the International Monetary Fund and, in
general, the anarcho-environmental movements, as well as the more contemporary
Occupy and 1% movements; in Sudan, the Girifna (“We Are Fed Up”) movement
(discussed below); in Egypt, the Kefaya (“Enough”) movement and its anarchist
tendencies; and the Arab Spring, where we saw the processes of direct action and the rise
of youth and women. Furthermore, in the case of Sudan, like other areas, the failure of
political parties to affect democratic change has caused disillusionment and the weakening
of the established parties.

We argue that, for a range of reasons – many just named – political actors have moved
into different and creative modes of political expression. For example, while NGOs
suffered considerable funding cutbacks over the last two years, some are making use of
local resources to continue their activities. The “Khartoum Rising” event in February
2013, organised by the Salmmah Women’s Resource Centre (an NGO) in collaboration
with other civil society and youth groups, is an example of a low-cost yet far-reaching
event. The organisers staged a dance of freedom, enacted by hundreds of young (and older)
women at the Ahfad University for Women, filmed it, and just after the 2013 protest
events, sent it viral on YouTube. In the “Khartoum Rising” video (2013) narrators
associated the words “rising” and “spring”, perhaps a quiet announcement of Sudan’s
entry into the insurrections of contemporary times.

The causes of this abandonment of “politics-as-usual” and challenges to authoritarian
regimes – by youths and women, in particular – or the manifestations of less interest in
old ideologies or political groups may also be a result of: (1) the exclusion of women and
youth in the leadership of most parties; (2) the domination of affiliated women’s wings by
parties; (3) the influence from the diaspora where youth and women were freer to be active
and vocal about contentious topics; and (4) the consequent migration of many youth and
women into NGOs, resulting in the growth of civil society and its heavy reliance on youth
and female activists. More recently, perhaps as a consequence of the abandonment of any
welfare role of the government to provide social services to the poor (see Abu Sharaf
2009), especially during crises, youth have resurrected the Sudanese social tradition of the
nafeer (a word usually used to mean “cooperative labour”, which began to be referred to as
a “call to mobilise” by the participants), the tradition of volunteering during a crisis. The
most recent call for and use of the nafeer was a response to the 2013 flood crises that
resulted in the loss of lives and many homes (Kushkush 2013). Youths rebuilt houses,
delivered clothes and medicines, and took the sick and injured to doctors and hospitals.
It remains to be seen whether or not this coming together will materialise into a youth
movement as many of the volunteers suggested to us during our interviews, or if, as
suggested on the nafeer website, the immediate job was seen as done and a financial accounting presented (Nafeer Facebook page, 12 March 2014).

In our future research we will look more closely at the composition of youth groups and their permutations. From what we have observed, these gendered groups cross party lines and form alliances among youth affiliated with different political parties, which is what happened when the nafeer that formed during the flood crisis brought together communists and salafis (ultra-conservative Muslims, radical Sunnism), but mostly unaffiliated people who belong to the larger social activism milieu.

The demonstrations that took place in various towns in Sudan, especially in Greater Khartoum, in September 2013, were a response to the government’s announcement of economic measures and the lifting of subsidies for essential products like fuel. The seemingly ad hoc demonstrations in Khartoum neighbourhoods turned into the most powerful challenge of Al-Bashir’s regime. Demonstrations began as a revolt against the neoliberal austerity measures and began to move in the direction of demands for regime change. In a way, the youth led; and political parties followed. Youth in the Umma Party (one of the two largest sectarian political parties, composed of the Ansar brotherhood – followers of the Mahdi) challenged Sadig el-Mahdi, their leader, and his calls for modest reform, instead joining the street demonstrations (Al-Rakoba e-Newspaper, 3 October 2013). More groups emerged with names that followed the Egyptian “Kefaya” (“Enough”) trend, e.g., Abena (“We Will Not Comply”), Isena (“We Rebel”), and Margna (“We Came Out”), along with the slightly older youth groups like Girifna (“We Are Fed Up”), “Youth for Change”, and others. These groups formed a web of social media campaigns and alternative news channels, as well as bringing together progressives and members of the ruling National Party Congress (NPC).

Young women, who are prominent in these all-youth groups and who have a share in arrests and deaths, have also formed all-women groups to mobilise and strategise their engagements. Examples from Facebook include “Women for the Revolution” and “Women Peaceful [demonstrations] for Our Martyrs”.10

In addition, we are seeing new alliances forming among the IDPs (formerly rural, now urban) and creative uses of urban resources. These are activist roles now feared and combated, oftentimes violently, by the central authorities in Sudan, especially with the rise of Islamism and the recalcitrant, secretive military and National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS).

III. Sudan’s civil society and women’s NGOs

For many, “civil society” has meant adding a third option to the existing approaches of reform of state power from above, on the one hand, or revolution from below, on the other, i.e., the creation of free spaces for the formation of social and self-help associations and mutual solidarity (Chandhoke 2010). The ways in which these grassroots organisations and movements used public space are creative and dangerous in the face of the Islamist authorities (Kabalo 2012)11 and rising Salafism.12

Such seemingly safe and welcoming organisations characterise Sudanese women’s NGOs that were formed in large numbers after the initial and worst years of the Islamist takeover. Examples include Salmmah: Women’s Resource Centre, established in 1997, the Gender Centre, and the Asmaa Society for Women Development that works for displaced people living in Greater Khartoum, established in 2005. Shortly after the violent and oppressive 1989 coup d’état, female political actors in Greater Khartoum formed mutual solidarity and self-help organisations that seemed relatively safe from government
retaliation, while they went about their partially clandestine activist work on behalf of women. This relative safety (perhaps more like invisibility) ended in 2009 when the government expelled a number of international NGOs, and more recently in 2012 when it shut down four NGOs. The environment is no longer “safe” for women’s NGOs; nor are they any longer engaging in only safe politics.

Currently, these women-oriented NGOs, more than political parties and their affiliated women’s wings, are very active and make up the bulk of civil society. All NGOs are required to register with the Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC), but it is nearly impossible to obtain figures from HAC on the numbers of NGOs in Sudan or any area of Sudan. It is clear, just from our own knowledge and observation of NGOs in the capital, that there are dozens of women’s NGOs registered with the government. However, our interview with a leading activist in women’s NGOs, Adila Alzeibag, yielded the comment that there are thousands of NGOs in Sudan and hundreds in Greater Khartoum. These NGOs that serve women have taken up the role of women’s movements, not quite grassroots movements in the strict definition, but civil society on the move.

Analyses of NGOs are rife with contradictions. On the one hand, NGOs serve the government by tending to the underserved, i.e., they actually take on some of the burdens of the state. On the other hand, the government is highly suspicious of NGOs, sees them as a potential threat, and tries to keep them under tight control. For example, mandatory registration is not made easy and is not just a bureaucratic formality. With impunity, the government can either refuse a registration or drop an NGO from the rolls, and many NGOs are being constantly harassed. As mentioned above, in 2012, a number of NGOs were dropped from the rolls and the numbers in Greater Khartoum are declining. In March 2014, Salmmah, and other groups that were part of a coalition, were denied a permit to hold an event on International Women’s Day, the first time in some eight years – not a positive sign for women’s NGO activism.

These assaults on NGOs are partly a result of the fact that in 2012, HAC was moved under the Ministry of Interior, i.e., placed under more security apparatuses. Various aggressive acts on the part of the government toward NGOs have been met with resistance, however (see below). One outcome of the government attack in 2012 was the formation of the Civil Society Confederation which led the struggle at the time to preserve NGO independence, but grew to become an entity that joined the coalition with parties, trade unions, and youth groups and issued a statement (as well as creating a Facebook page) during the September 2013 uprisings. The coalition itself went nowhere, but the Confederation is a new entity that became very political.

Under mounting pressure and new restrictions by the government, additional constraints resulting from reduced international funding for post-secession Sudan is affecting programmes of previously very active NGOs (e.g., Salmmah and Asmaa) and, in extreme cases, they closed (e.g., the formerly very active and successful Sudanese Women’s Educational Project; SuWEP). Notwithstanding these relentless efforts to monitor and control public space for registered or informal civil society entities, a new surge of creative thinking and action is emerging. We are now witnessing the seeking out of safe spaces for programming, such as the Ahfad University for Women and the British Council, and organising through social media (Girifna, and more recently Abena). Therefore, while NGOs have suffered considerable funding cutbacks over the last two years, some are making creative use of local resources to continue their activities. Another example is the “Youth to Youth” Salmmah programme where the staff organised dialogues between NGO youth and the youth of some Sufi sects. Another creative activity has been the monitoring and documentation of the September/October 2013 fatalities,
a data-collecting and disseminating strategy which was used by international news channels to counter the official story (i.e., the story issued by state media) During the September 2013 demonstrations, the monitoring and documentation of fatalities was set up on a number of Facebook pages, which were used by international news channels to find the counter-story to that told via the state media. 17

IV. Grassroots organisations and popular mobilisations in Sudan

Within civil society we find more loosely organised “grassroots” groups and movements, including some NGOs (legally registered entities as opposed to informal communities of interest). While registration status matters in terms of permissions to conduct projects and obtain funding, the spirit of volunteerism blurs the line and defines them as mobilised people and entities who are doing the job of the government. In many cases, through the experience of participating in these grassroots groups, actors become politicised and engage in direct action and in popular mobilisations (see Kaplan 1997, 2004), although this may be impossible in the light of the totalitarian nature of the Islamist state. We would also include some militant groups such as the Girifna movement (discussed more fully below) that confront the state directly, but are not militarised. 18

Generally, with regard to definitions or descriptions of “grassroots groups”, scholars such as Brodkin (2007) and Castells (2012) point to their local nature, their non-hierarchical aspect, and the importance of networking. These traits seem very much in line with some of the most recent activism undertaken by Sudanese women and youth. In Sudan, where political parties and the government have defaulted on the majority of the people, especially the ethnically marginalised (see Abu Sharaf 2009), the militancy of grassroots groups can, perhaps, be expected, and especially given the government’s increasing brutality in the September 2013 protests, which saw dozens killed and hundreds arrested, as acknowledged by the government, whereas hundreds were killed and thousands arrested according to independent sources (See references in Note 23).

Our challenge to aspects of Brodkin’s (2007) definition of “grassroots” (local groups tending only to local issues and not seeking power) are partially based on Girifna, one of the most visible and politicised grassroots movements in Sudan in recent years. Girifna, now mainly in the diaspora, is composed primarily of disaffected youth. It was founded in 2009 to deal with impending national elections, and grew and expanded its goals, seemingly aiming during their brief period of activism – through non-violent means and in coalition with a number of other groups (e.g., Youth for Change) – to overthrow the central government. Originally, the goal of Girifna was to confront human rights abuses, but the movement grew into a major dissident movement (but not a party). It began as an open, non-hierarchical, street protest group (doing “flash” talks in the marketplaces) comprised of young men and women, but it has been so suppressed by the government that its openness has practically dissolved and it has become more secretive, now working primarily in exile against the government through the Internet. 19 The government began targeting opposition movements one by one, so it is no surprise that Girifna was one of the hardest hit. By infiltrating the organisation, as it has many others, the government broke down the essential circle of trust, creating a wedge between the leadership and others (Widgington 2012).

These groups and movements have been catapulted into urban space through the use of social media like Facebook. However, their visible members are relentlessly persecuted and forced out of the country. The outcome of the extensive persecutions and suppression has been a reduced presence in physical space of especially targeted groups like Girifna.
We consider, nonetheless, that their importance rests on the fact that their ideas inspired the continuous formation of new groups such as Abena, Isena, and creative organising (using text messaging, Facebook, and Twitter for mobilisation).

V. Social media in Sudan

Sudan, as in Arab Spring countries, has witnessed the growth of social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Their impact on civil society mobilisation was witnessed significantly during 2011, and then again in the autumn of 2013, in ways that cannot now be accurately calculated. For now we have observed that using social media enabled the calls for mobilisation to be more widespread, as well as making these mobilisations more visible to local Internet users and external observers. There has been an exponential growth in the number of Facebook groups, YouTube channels, and articles written in online forums. We would argue that social media not only facilitated civil society’s mobilisation and greater visibility, but they (the media) raised consciousness and drew in greater numbers. In talking with demonstrators (as one of the authors did throughout September 2013, and the other during 2014), we were able to find out how they knew about the demonstrations and what is being exchanged about them. In fact, through social media these discussions are continuing, drawing in more people to the conversations about regime change and change in general.

Sudan was ranked 23 out of 25 among new Facebook users and occupied last place in Twitter penetration, in the Arab region (which includes Israel and Turkey), at the end of the first quarter of 2011 (Mourtada and Salem 2011). This is consistent, however, given the low Internet penetration of its population of 9.3%, and indicates that even though Sudan Facebook users may be small compared to its population size, they are effective in drawing government and non-government attention. Besides, the sanctions do, in direct and indirect ways, affect the availability as well as the use of social media in countries like Sudan and Iran, the latter having occupied fourth place from the bottom on the Twitter ranking. Notwithstanding the direct impact on the cost of owning computers and the purchase of software, which is more prohibitive in countries under sanctions, social media outlets are also companies which may have to adhere to their base country regulations. For instance, in 2009 Facebook changed its policies to restrict its use in countries on the sanctions list, prompting campaigns from a number of prominent Sudanese bloggers protesting this decision, which was later overturned (Mubarak 2011).

The conviviality of social media tools (i.e., tools that allow for the exercise of personal freedoms; Ameripour, Nicholson, and Newman 2009), coupled with the rapid development in telecommunication infrastructure and availability of affordable basic mobiles and smartphones for a growing mobile-phone-user population in Global South countries in general explain the vibrant cyber society seen in recent years in these countries, which sometimes have higher rates of new users (e.g., Saudi Arabia) than countries like Norway, the United Kingdom (UK), and the US in global rankings. In addition, while English and French are commonly used in the Arab region, the support of popular websites like Facebook and Twitter in the Arabic language is noted by the Dubai Social Media Report (Mourtada and Salem 2011) as a factor in the increasing rates of uptake of social media in the Arab region. In addition, Arabic-language-based websites like Maktoob (purchased from Yahoo) and Wetwat (which mimics Twitter) encourage users who prefer to use only Arabic, which is just over half of Tunisia’s Facebook users, and three quarters of Egypt’s users (Mourtada and Salem 2011).
By and large, the growth in the social media user population in Arab countries can be attributed to improved access. However, we argue that adaptation to user needs is of particular significance in the Middle East, which, according to social media website statistics of April 2011, contributed the largest new user populations. In addition, Arabic-based websites like Maktoob and Wetwat encouraged users who prefer to use only Arabic. Higher rates of new Facebook users in Middle Eastern countries must partially relate to restrictions on social and political life and the scarcity of spaces for expression, at least where totalitarian regimes have reigned for decades. Sudanese social media users are now getting more opportunities to express their views on religion, politics, and culture, more than exists through the highly restricted and mostly state-owned conventional media outlets. With the exception of Internet-based media like Radio Dabanga, the state controls the National Radio and TV and most privately owned national channels. From our interviews it is apparent to us that many in the population believe that debating on taboo subjects like atheism or sexuality through public/state-controlled media can be a life-threatening act in Sudan and other places, but can now take place safely in cyberspace.

In the case of Sudan, Skype, Facebook, YouTube, and online forums like Sudanese Online have been significant in linking a now globally dispersed and dislocated population, and have also been noteworthy in organising and providing information on political campaigns. For example, several Arabic news channels set up Twitter accounts during the September 2013 protests and invited and used social media sources as references. On more than one occasion, access to these outlets (especially YouTube) has been restricted by the national telecommunications authority, and is used as well for government propaganda and countermeasures to monitor or derail opposition activities on the Internet. From both of our interviews and conversations with youth and professionals, the January 2011 street protests in Khartoum, which called for the overthrow of the regime, certainly signalled to us the discontent of a people who were witnessing the jubilant Egyptians in Tahrir Square. These demonstrations were largely organised using Facebook, prompting the Sudanese president to vow that the government would use Facebook to “crush opposition” (Ackerman 2011). In the months that followed, the government developed a coterie of technical specialists, referred to by critics as “cyber jihadists” (a term popularised by international media like the BBC) or garad (grasshoppers, to use a locally developed name for governments taking a proactive approach to online content). This is not, in itself, a new tactic (also known as “astroturfing”) as it is found in public relations and election campaigns (Schmidt and Cohen 2013). The Sudanese government sought to use these proactive approaches to find out about the schedules of protests and the names of active members of groups, and, on at least one occasion, called for a decoy protest which resulted in the arrest of those who responded to the call.

Notwithstanding these relentless efforts by the government to develop their Internet surveillance system, new groups and uses of social media are developing simultaneously (as witnessed in the September 2013 demonstrations) enhancing mobilisation, distribution of information, documentation, and the ability to counter the government’s reporting and unprecedented heavy-handedness not seen before in the history of Sudanese civil protests. 23

VI. Sudanese youth movements 24

The word “youth”, as romanticised in revolution (or war) and problematised in national policy, is also used interchangeably with terms such as teenager, adolescent, young adult,
and/or young person, and delimited by overlapping age groups. The United Nations (UNICEF 2012, 4) defines youth as the “time in a person’s life between childhood and adulthood . . . who are between the ages of 15 and 24”; “adolescents” as aged 10 to 19; and uses “young people” to include both, referring to those aged 10 to 24. Many countries deviate from this definition, with age ranges between 12 and 40 years. In Sudan, the 2007 National Strategy for Youth defined youth as persons between 15 and 34, and estimated youth (pre-secession) to be 34% of the total population, of which 50.3% were females and 40.7% were males [sic] (General Directorate of Youth and UNFPA 2011). Therefore, as we mentioned in an earlier section of this paper, the numerically prominent youths with which we are carrying out our study may not be “young” in the conventional sense in the West, but may, in fact, sometimes be seasoned political actors and young professionals, i.e., a more mature force than the term “youth” may connote in other settings. In part, we use this broad definition of youth in this study under the influence of how it is locally and culturally perceived (university student, young professionals) and reflective of the existing spectrum of “youth” actors.

Youth activism, although historically associated with a radical taking to the streets during national movements like civil rights, independence/nationalist and/or leftist movements, in the last decade has also become associated with new media technologies. The Arab Spring events can be argued as prompting much interest among academics, policymakers, and other practitioners on youth, activism, and social media intersections. The Arab Spring, although an evolving concept, was found in a recent survey to be accepted by a large proportion of the population in countries in the region, despite the fact that the series of uprisings involved “different grievances, often different types of participants, and quite distinct types of political aspirations” (Rangwada 2011). The year 2011 was proclaimed as the Youth Year by the United Nations (UN 2010), and witnessed a surge of countries ratifying the African Youth Charter (Kypriotou and Tijssen 2012) and the drafting of the Sudanese National Strategy for Youth (General Directorate of Youth and UNFPA 2011). However, this interest, which at least in part raised the self-confidence and status of youths, also made them seem a threat to totalitarian governments. At the same time, youths have been targeted as potential change agents by international foreign policy developers who claim to be keen on progressive and inclusive governance, which in turn further threatens totalitarian governments. In the latest Sudan protests, the government, through government media, began accusing activists of being subject to outside influence and reporting, i.e., “outside agitators”.

The last decade, in particular, especially with the growth of humanitarian aid and development, and cultural, political and technology-related missions, witnessed a surge in the number of youth groups and networks. Some groups, using religion, such as the Deel Ahly Network, follow the trend that was popularised by the Egyptian Muslim preacher Amr Khalid and his TV programme Sunaa Alhaya (or “Life Makers”), which led to the formation of charity- and religion-oriented youth groups in many countries at that time (2004/5), including Sudan. This trend is prevalent among Sudanese youth who have a preference for humanitarian and development projects. “Educators without Borders” is another example of a humanitarian-oriented group; working through Facebook the group is concerned with the rehabilitation of schools, and boasts a membership in the thousands. A more recent example is Nafeer, mentioned earlier, which formed during the floods in the Greater Khartoum area (August 2013) as a disaster response force, performing tasks that would normally be performed by government entities like the army. Nafeer members provided helplines, medical assistance, and aid distribution, and were supported by local NGOs, INGOs, and the diaspora (Kushkush 2013).

Culture and politics occupy a considerable engagement mode for Sudanese youth, sometimes with political change being the main agenda (e.g., Girifna members who aspire...
openly to regime change); *Sharara* (“Lightening”) and *Al-Tagier al-Aan* (“Change Now”) are among them. Others may not be quite so keen to take on the government, but issue social criticisms (e.g., *Shawaria* [“Street People”] whose street shows often include political poetry and plays) and exhibit a mission to expose societal and political problems (like gossip and corruption). Therefore, we see at least two distinct trends, the first related to global and regional youth movements like *Kefaya* in Egypt (and what we witnessed in the Arab Spring), and the second more locally linked – in part a result of government infrastructural developments in recent years where recreational spaces are being created for youth for singing, poetry and debate circles. Some of these less directly political groups may have gained from government resources made available to them (with the help of international NGOs) and may not, as a group statement, raise the issue of regime change. Whether or not simply having youth congregate to discuss social issues will develop into anything more political remains to be seen. Also, all youth are still vulnerable to public order police which always, if instigated by the state, has the potential for sparking revolt. Even if this creation of recreational space is yet another attempt to co-opt youth exuberance and stem revolt, such a strategy could backfire on the government. Besides, scholars such as Castells (2012) remind us that many of the new youth actions are “no-demand” attempts to build something new in which the “process is the message”.

We also considered the statistics from an analysis of the national situation which estimates that there is one youth centre for every 16,896 youth and one sports facility for every 10,820 (the latter is generally an exclusive male territory; Sudan, Federal Ministry of Youth and Sport 2007). The scarcity of resources and the control of public spaces, coupled with the abundance of grievances based on the unmet needs of the Sudanese population and waning belief (especially among youth) in traditional politics, are important factors in the surge of youth activism. The prominence of female youth in the make-up of these groups is allowing young women spaces that are otherwise curbed by an essentially conservative society.

Another trend among the youth, which Kadoda observed through teaching computer science at two universities in Greater Khartoum, is a high level of engagement in technological development which seems to be dominated by students from Khartoum and Sudan Universities (the two top institutions of higher education). These groups (such as the Khartoum Geeks) are concerned with political issues that affect them as technology enthusiasts, e.g., organising around getting the sanctions against Sudan removed, building capacities in software development, and promoting the entrepreneurial potentials of members. Again, only if we use a narrow definition of “political” would we exclude them from the potential for future organising of a broader nature, much like the Nafeer (Kushkush 2013).

A final trend that we have witnessed is that among youth from conflict-ridden regions in Sudan (e.g., Nuba Mountains and Darfur), there is much more concern and activist interest in the IDPs, the effects of war, and race and class issues. Youth groups that are based on ethnic or regional affiliation are not new, but have become more vocal and, as a consequence, are a target for brutal treatment by security forces. A number of high-profile cases of assassination of Darfuri students led to their funerals turning into street demonstrations. Notably, the participation of people from riverain ethnic groups was visibly low, leading to criticisms and resentment from activists of Darfuri descent (this tension was mentioned above). This exemplifies the mistrust of youth from marginalised areas versus more affluent youth, which generated, for example, debates over the “martyrdom” focus on Salah Sanhouri (one of the fatalities of the September 2013 uprising, a young man who came from an upper-middle-class neighbourhood) and, in contrast, the neglect of the many who
died in the demonstrations on the outskirts of Khartoum (nicknamed the “black belt” because it is mostly inhabited by displaced-by-conflict communities from Darfur and the Nuba Mountains and/or from 1983-famine-affected regions). Space outside university campuses for discussing contentious political issues and events in conflict regions is very limited, which lead these youth to use other forms of expression, such as the use of culture and music to foster self-pride and raise political awareness. For example, in an event celebrating World Day for Indigenous people, some 600 Nuba youth changed their names from Arabised ones to indigenous Nuba names.28

One of the significant phenomena which will change the face of Sudan studies is the fact that Sudanese youth activities are no longer confined within borders. In part, this is because of better access to the Internet, but also there is large diaspora now, and a tendency to internationalise events. For example, one of the indicators that the protests were being effective in some ways is the number of news channels and electronic websites which picked up on the stories. Kadoda read on Al-Rakoba (a Sudanese website published outside Sudan and internationally distributed) that a demonstration in the western area of Darfur, in Al-Genena (during September 2013) stopped after one day because there was no coverage! Another example of what we might call the internationalisation of local opposition through the Internet that we recently witnessed was the synchronisation of protests by the Sudanese diaspora in many parts of the world where youth groups like Girifna played an important role in organising the action. Even though most of these protests were staged in the US, Europe and “freer” environments, generally, Sudanese youth in places like the Gulf States have become very active in forming a union for Sudanese students at United Arab Emirates (UAE) universities (for the first time in 2011) and linking up with their counterparts at home to support and collaborate in development projects. The President of the Sudanese Association at the Emirates University noted recent legal changes in some Gulf States, allowing for more political freedoms, in addition to the Sudanese students’ desire to counter the negative world images of Sudan, as key instigators of their activism.29 Solidarity gestures across borders (especially with Egypt) are also taking place, such as female youth protesting in front of the Egyptian Embassy in Khartoum (in 2012) in solidarity with Egyptian groups who were protesting against the harassment of women, and the announcement by a number of Egyptian civil society organisations (notably the Egypt Centre for Political and Legal Assistance) to support the Tamarud (“Rebellion”) campaign in Sudan during the recent (September 2013) demonstrations (Egypt Centre for Political and Legal Assistance 2013).30

Some influences on contemporary Sudanese youth activism can be identified from the above narrative about the different groups – such as Amr Khalid or Kefaya models – that follow development and human rights discourses. Girifna was influenced by Kefaya; Sharara by the parent group in Egypt, and the like. The engagement of the Sudanese diaspora, in a context of global connectedness, and new trends of resistance seen in the developed and developing worlds, bring new ways and spaces for organising, and infinite knowledge sources for creative expressions. Other factors lie in the larger context of youth-dominant countries like Sudan, such as demography and the global shift (UN General Assembly 2001) in approach to youth policy development, and its specific economic and political situation.31 The effects of globalised social media on youth identity, where new media offer new possibilities for communication and social relationships, are regarded by the government (Sudan, Federal Ministry of Youth and Sport 2007) as a risk to youth behaviour and to the national social fabric, as well as being an indicator of the emergence of a new Sudanese society to be harnessed.

Notwithstanding the noted role of social media in youth community engagement, their use invokes visions from the Arab Spring and is challenging some active groups to obtain
official registration permission (e.g., Educators without Borders and Shawaria groups). Social media also lend themselves to new countering mechanisms such as the “cyber Jihadists” mentioned above, hired by the government, who are active on social media platforms to comment on behalf of, or inform the state of, activists, in order to curb their influence. This, by and large, creates a new dimension to the intersection of youth, activism, and social media in Sudan – that it is a cycle of innovation and counter-innovation largely fed by ideas and lessons learned from Arab Spring countries. Some examples of idea transfer are the influences of Egypt’s Kefaya or “We are all Khalid Saeed” or the strategies of the Girifna Movement or “We are all Salah Sanhouri” (from the call for the “martyrdom” of a youth killed in the September 2013 demonstrations, mentioned above) and other advocates-for-change youth groups. The use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and the naming style of groups and events, represent some of the lessons learned by the activists from the Egyptian and Tunisian models. Likewise, the Sudanese government learned a lesson about how damaging and ineffective shutting the mobile phone networks was in the Egyptian case. All of these youth activities provoked a quick response by the government to appropriate the Jihad concept and raised the stakes for the Sudanese state in the existing global cyber surveillance and wars. Not only is there concern that the state will mobilise its cyber resources and quell the resistance, but also that social media in Sudan may have its limitations because it is a phenomenon for affluent and educated youth. This has given cause for some organised groups like the Girifna movement to complement their urban-mobilisation campaigns, so stimulated by social media, with “on-the-ground” strategies that mirror those seen elsewhere, such as the wearing of orange T-shirts and organising flash demonstrations. In Hale’s interview with four Girifna members, which took place in Khartoum, February 21, 2014, the two men and two women revealed that members inside Sudan are searching for new on-the-ground strategies and for coalitions with other groups.

In a provocative article, De Waal (2013) compares the September 2013 protests with earlier Sudanese uprisings and notes that “[today’s] demonstrators may possess cellphones and Twitter feeds but they do not have a fraction of [the] organisational capability [of earlier Sudanese uprisings]”. He points to various other differences such as divisions among Islamists (observed less in Egypt and Tunisia where Islamists sided with the revolution) and the control of “Islamist-oriented officers” in the army (who are unlikely to side with the people as they did in 1985). We note here that the consistent policy of “empowerment” and co-optation that the Sudanese government pursued since the 1989 coup d’etat to control trade unions and professional associations, as well as government positions, has implications for the organisational capability of opposition groups. The Sudanese government’s cynical reaction to the Arab Spring (that saw Islamists coming to power) was to argue that Sudan is a pioneer with its 1989 “National Salvation revolution”, making the divisions among Islamists an advantage to the forces of change rather than a weak point. De Waal (2013) critiques the “external orientation” of some activists and their extensive borrowing from the Arab Spring narrative. He also notes that although “urbanites” may be wary of the intentions of the Sudanese Revolutionary Forces (who are fighting against government forces in the Blue Nile and South Kordofan states), they are also fearful of what might happen in terms of the potential for chaos if the government forces fail. He further argues that the government is playing on these fears in its counter-media campaign. We argue that these are entirely new formations with structures (or lack of structures) that may not immediately be stressing regime change, but are experimenting with new ways of coming together (see Hale 2014).

Notwithstanding the borrowing from the Arab Spring, innovative experiences like the Nafeer campaign that utilised Sudanese local knowledge (i.e., the nafeer tradition) to
organise thousands of Sudanese youth during the August 2013 floods (Kushkush 2013), and the later September protests that cut across socio-economic classes, may bring more ingenuity to the Sudanese context and render a revolution from below that is not necessarily led by traditional structures or guided completely by outside influence. The prominence of youth (in their various subgroups, e.g., urban, displaced, etc.) and female activists as new actors on the scene is, by and large, a major deviation from the 1964 and 1985 Sudanese major uprisings.

VII. Concluding comments

In our introduction we indicated that a central aim of the paper was to analyse where Sudan is located within the fluid frame of political change in the region and ask how such analyses will change Sudan Studies. We asked how processes in Sudan might follow the patterns of, say, Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya under the rubric “the Arab Spring”, but also how much and why Sudan exhibits different and creative phenomena. Our intention has been to use data from youth movements and social media to explore these questions.

We also underscored the role of social media in the activism of Sudanese youth – men and women – who took centre stage at demonstrations calling for regime change, and adopting mechanisms similar to their counterparts in the Middle East and North Africa. While political forms of activism may have been more prominent in the Arab Spring, we have argued that social media play a key role in the community engagement of contemporary urban Sudanese youth, as a wider phenomenon and potential extended Arab Spring. Similar to Arab Spring counterparts, social media have brought more women into the enterprise, allowing some of them from more conservative family backgrounds to participate from safer spaces, perhaps to take on personae that might not mark them as women, and to hone a skill that can be equally used by women and men. Social media have also provided channels for information flow and idea exchange across age groups, urban/rural, and other divides. Despite having less access than their Egyptian or Tunisian counterparts, Sudanese youth managed to get the attention of the government, having the effect of forcing the state to enter into the greater use of social media and to reshape security forces as more active infiltrators and players.

Is the “Sudanese Spring” delayed or has it been thwarted by the state/military which has become, or is threatening to become, a cyber-activist with its own on-the-ground capabilities? Or, can we say that the Sudanese uprising is coming in increments – not the sudden burst of the others, but a slow rise? The issue of why Sudan has not yet gone the way of the “Arab Spring” areas, including Syria, has given us some pause. There are many similarities between Sudan and some of these other disrupted areas, not the least of which is the fact that the state pioneered the use of media and is still controlling all telecommunications. This sets up a familiar dialectic: social media may offer a potential for total transformation, but the government has the same resources.

We had to take into consideration a number of factors that have shaped or characterised contemporary pre- and post-secession Sudan: the British colonial legacy; the dominance of sectarian Sufi parties; the dominance of the military post-independence; the continuous conflicts between north and south, and between the core culture and the margins of Darfur, eastern Sudan, and eventually Nubia itself; the rise of Islamism and now ultra-conservative Salafism; the failure of political parties, in general; the changing character of oppositional politics, including the militarisation of marginalised groups; the displacement of populations; the development and new directions of civil society and the strong role of women in NGOs that account for much of civil society; the growing
numbers of disaffected and often unemployed youth; the strong influence from the diaspora and its returnees; economic and climatic factors such as the discovery of oil and desertification; neocolonialism and neoliberalism in the form of structural adjustment and “development” projects; and the impending and then actuality of secession by South Sudan.

We can only point to this complex set of national and international sociopolitical and technological forces that have changed the ways that political actors do business, especially through their creative urban projects in Greater Khartoum (e.g., Educators without Borders who organise school rehabilitation projects using Facebook). We can point, especially, to the use of social media in Sudan which, although not well developed in terms of volume of usage is, nonetheless, highly important in political organising and in other social networking. Further, we argue that, although many of these political phenomena we have mentioned above may be unique to Sudan, nonetheless, many such as technological interventions have also coalesced with and/or are reactions to global phenomena. Schmidt and Cohen (2013) remind us that as connectivity grows we will see more revolutions; they are, however, easier to start with the new technologies but harder to finish. They further point out that these revolutions will be led by the young, not because of the “youth bulge” in those countries where there are rapid improvements in telecommunications, but “because the mix of activism and arrogance in young people is universal” (Schmidt and Cohen 2013, 122).

Recent political protests in Sudan (since 2011) and the groups that lead them exhibit most of the common characteristics of new social movements that have been identified by Castells (2012), i.e., groupings that exhibit the absence of hierarchy and the existence of various forms of programming, but are yet to become a movement by occupying the urban space. He reminds us that the meaning of a social movement can only be measured by the impact it has had on its participants. Castells, in observing contemporary insurrections in the Arab world, Iceland, Spain, and the US, proposes that “it is too early to evaluate the ultimate outcome of these movements … [but] that the belief in the triumphant global financial capitalism has been shaken … in the minds of most people” (Castells 2012, 244–245). Just as we might conjecture that participants in the Arab Spring movements have been changed forever, we can imagine the same possibilities for the raised consciousness of Sudanese grassroots and civil society political actors. We can also imagine this formidable force engaging Sudan studies scholars for some time to come.

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Notes

1. Some of the material for this paper was first presented at “Social Media, Urban Movements and Grass Roots Creativity in the Mediterranean during the Crisis”, Workshop for 14th Mediterranean Research Meeting, Mersin, Turkey, 20–23 March 2013.
2. For a discussion of the state of Sudan studies before 2009, see Hale (2009).
3. A note on methodology and some of the sources of our information. Although this segment of the research is new, in addition to the paper we mentioned in note 1 above, the project has a lineage from previous work that we presented together at a Knowledge Management Workshop, Khartoum, 3–7 January 2012, entitled “Managing Knowledge in Community Settings: NGOs and IDPs as Knowledge Producers”. Before and since then, with the exception...
of the written and Internet sources consulted, much of the data are based on interviews that Gada Kadoda has been conducting over a three-year period (2010–2013) in Greater Khartoum. Kadoda’s sources on youth and social media are also based on her role as a professor of computer science at two universities in Greater Khartoum. The data are also based on formal and informal interviews that Sondra Hale carried out over the same period, both in Greater Khartoum and among Sudanese political actors in diaspora. Hale has also been conducting research on social movements in Sudan and elsewhere for decades. Most of the people we interviewed preferred to remain anonymous because of the oppressive government and the sensitivity of the information.

4. For an early English language source on youth activism, see el–Tayeb (1971). Scattered sources on the Sudanese nationalist movement and other political phenomena usually referred to these movements as “student movements”, not “youth movements”; for material on pre-independence youths and education, see, for example, Sharkey (2003). Since 2011 we have seen a number of internet and journalistic articles on youth-generated protests; see Widgington (2012). At the time of writing this paper, new sources on youth movements and social media were emerging, notably from two recent conferences: the International Sudan Studies Conference, Bonn, Germany, 23–25 July 2012; and the Sudan Studies Association Conference, San Francisco, California, US, 23–25 May 2014.


6. It is problematic to use the term “Arab Spring” as an all-encompassing set of events against which to measure Sudanese political responses in the same years. However, Arab Spring has become a metaphor for contemporary insurrections in the region and sometimes beyond. Although some aspects of the recent Sudanese political uprisings have characteristics in common with insurrections outside of the region, we have chosen to refer mainly to the Arab Spring countries because of their proximity to Sudan and to Sudan’s history of being influenced by political events in Egypt, but also to the factor of calling for regime change. For a comparison of what all of these recent insurrectionary movements (Occupy, Indignatos, Taksim Square, etc.) exhibit in common, see Hale (2013). Hamid Dabashi has produced an insightful book about the Arab Spring that challenges many assumptions about the phenomena (Dabashi 2012).


8. This is not to deny political, economic, and cultural activity in other important regional and urban centres. Religious movements, labour movements, ethnic-revival politics and the like have taken place outside central riverain culture. Besides, centres of cultural and political power and energy have shifted spatially and temporally.

9. These conversations have been observed by both authors.

10. Used in local tradition (predominantly Muslim) that death in combat or for a worthy cause bestows martyrdom upon a person.

11. See, for example, Kabalo (2012). In this article she illustrates the harsh and violent methods Sudanese National Security Forces have used to suppress female human rights activists.

12. One definition from Princeton wordnet is: “a militant group of extremist Sunnis who believe themselves the only correct interpreters of the Quran and consider moderate Muslims to be infidels; seek to convert all Muslims and to insure that its own version of Islam will dominate the world”; see http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=salafism (accessed 3 December 2013).

13. Statement from a phone interview conducted by Sondra Hale with the director of a leading women’s NGO in Khartoum, 15 July 2012. Name withheld by request. The interviewee also stated that, during those worst years, before it was safe to form into any organisation, activist women held clandestine meetings in people’s homes (under the guise of social gatherings) to talk about women’s rights and other issues.

14. Adila Alzeibag, a member of the Board of Directors of a prominent women’s NGO, interviewed by Gada Kadoda, in Khartoum, 13 September 2012. Adila said that NGOs appear overnight and then disappear as quickly. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to know the numbers. In Kadoda’s phone interview with another NGO activist, which took place on 18 September 2012, she was told that the figure is 7000 NGOs in Sudan. Name withheld upon request.
In this paper we have only dealt with oppositional organisations. Therefore, we have not included the voluminous religious organisations and NGOs that either work with the Sudanese government or with international NGOs that work with the government. Among the most prominent liberal and progressive women’s and feminists’ organisations in Greater Khartoum are: Salmmah, Women’s Resource Centre; the Gender Centre; the Nuba Women’s Education and Development Association (NuWEDA); the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA); Mutawenat (women’s legal rights centre); the Asmaa Society for Development; and Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace (SuWEP), to name but a few.

This information was obtained by Gada Kadoda while attending a meeting of NGO activists in the European Union office in Khartoum, 12 September 2012. The sources are two university professors whose names have been withheld upon request.

See note 23 below for a comment on the discrepancies between government and activists’ reporting.

We have considered Girifna both as a grassroots and as a youth organisation.

It is difficult to find material on Girifna, especially now that the group is either underground or in diaspora, a response to being relentlessly targeted by the government. On 15 February 2013, Hale had a phone interview with one of the female organisers who was seeking asylum in the US. Name withheld upon request.

Works on the social media in the Arab Spring are too voluminous to list here, but two important theoretical works we have used are Castells (2012) and Kellner (2012). For works on youth and social media we have consulted Herrera (2012, forthcoming) and Schmidt and Cohen (2013).

For example, Tunisia and Egypt rank eleventh and sixteenth, respectively, on Twitter penetration which can be argued as consistent with their much higher Internet use statistics of 36.3% and 35.6% of their populations, respectively. It is worth noting that figures for Sudan on global databases like IWS, or those published by social media websites, are either outdated or non-existent. The latest IWS figures for Sudan predate the secession of the South and are missing from country statistics on these major social media while they are as recent as 2012 for Tunisia and Egypt (refer to website in Note 22).

Figures were extracted from the IWS which features international Internet usage statistics based on data from the International Telecommunication Union. http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm (accessed 31 January 2013).

Numbers on fatalities vary, but the government report of 70 dead conflicts appreciably with independent sources that estimate over 200 dead. Reuters is here quoting the government official figures for the fatalities: http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/10/04/uk-sudan-protests-idUKBRE99312V20131004; this following Amnesty International Press release suggests the actual figures for the fatalities, more in line with other international coverage: http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/sudan-escalates-mass-arrests-activists-amid-protest-crackdown-2013-10-02


Deel Ahly. “These are my people” is a network of 17 youth organisations (some of which are registered, others not) – see the introduction to group at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPYShmcBUY. The umbrella group funds some of their activities (which focus a great deal on orphanages, children’s hospitals, and humanitarian assistance, especially during religious seasons like Ramadan) through the Sadagat (“Charity”) group that focuses on fundraising and the collecting of in-kind donations (see the introductory video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRApy0W2-uA&feature=relmfu).

27. We considered the importance of Sudan registering for the Institute of Electric and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), which was pursued by students from these universities. It was the first time Sudan had registered. Other media organisations or Internet sites whose activities are relevant to our argument include: Technology Deep Team (TDT), http://www.youtube.com/user/TDTSUDAN; Sudanese Youth Forums, http://www.sudaneseyouth.net/forum/viewforum.php?f=4; Sudanese Bloggers, http://sdunlimitedbloggers.blogspot.com/; http://blogfromsudan.blogspot.com; Salmmah Social Media Workshop, http://www.violenceisnotourculture.org/node/1876.

28. This information was obtained from a dialogue between Gada Kadoda and a number of Nuba youth who attended the event, one of whom claimed he had changed his name from “Salih” to “Kal”, along with hundreds of others who abandoned their Arab/Arabic names, which took place on 21 September 2013, in Ombadda, Omdurman, Khartoum State. Names withheld upon request.

29. Gada Kadoda’s discussion with the President of the Sudanese Association at Emirates University, Khartoum, July 2012.

30. A statement by the Egypt Centre for Political and Legal Assistance that appeared in Egyptian and Sudanese e-newspapers, and on the Tamarud Sudan Facebook page declared its support of Tamarud Sudan; see http://www.alrakoba.net/news-action-show-id-119210.htm; https://www.facebook.com/HmltTmrdAlswdanyt. It is worth noting that the use of the term “Tamarud” started in June 2013 with the Egyptian campaign (http://tamarod.com/) that set out to collect signatures to oust Mohamed Mursi (and succeeded in both). Since then, the terminology travelled to Sudan, Gaza, and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, which is evidence of youth without borders organising across borders.

31. In 2001, the UN General Assembly called upon “all States, all United Nations bodies, the specialised agencies, the regional commissions and the intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations concerned to make every possible effort aiming at cross-sectoral youth policies by integrating a youth perspective into all planning and decision-making processes relevant to youth” (United Nations General Assembly 2001, 2). The various guidelines for youth policy development provided by the UN and other agencies suggest some key criteria that the development and content of national youth policies should encompass, such as consulting with youth in policy development stages, promoting participation and engagement in public decision-making, and targeting priority issues for youth in designed policies; see United Nations General Assembly (2001).

32. At the time of writing, demonstrations to protest new government economic policies erupted all over Sudan and have been met with enormous brutality by security forces. Nonetheless, the numbers of participants have grown, and more and more people have been brought into the raised consciousness of a people whose welfare has been abandoned by their government.

33. Sudan has seen some of the taking of public space in the September 2013 events when protesters occupied a square near the house of what they were calling “the Martyr” Salah Sanhouri, and then naming the square after him.

Notes on contributors

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**Bibliography**


