

The Sudanese Resistance Committees 2013 to 2018: From Revolution to Governance in Time of Crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines the Sudanese Resistance Committees, the period leading up to the 2018–2019 revolution, and their rise as a potential new system of governance within an African context. The Resistance Committees – as the name implies – emerged during the 2013 uprising, which was brutally suppressed by the security apparatus. Five years later, following a surge in the prices of essentials such as fuel and bread, the Resistance Committees returned to the streets; after a two-month sit-in, they succeeded in toppling dictator Omar al-Bashir – who had held power for thirty years – aided by a shift in the security forces' loyalties. That glorious sit-in, which lives on in the participants' idealized memories, represented a successful experiment in self-governance: a realized utopia, the Plato's Republic. Does the Resistance Committee possess the ambition, agency, and legitimacy to transform itself from a revolutionary force into a governing actor? To answer this question, the paper examines the Sudanese people's decade-long experience of popular resistance, focusing in particular on the period between 2013 and 2018. Various *mubadarat* (مبادرات), (initiatives) emerged at the local level; lacking central leadership and coordination, they arose from the population's need to respond to the regime's progressive abandonment of its responsibilities regarding service provision. Although these initiatives initially had a social dimension – consisting largely of forms of self-organization and mutual aid – they also took on political significance, as they exposed the weakness of the central state and its predatory nature: the wealth generated in the country was not redistributed but rather carved up among the economic, political, and military elite. The spirit of solidarity, commonly known as *nafeer* (نفاير), has permeated the social action of these "communities of resistance." Solidarity and resistance emerge as two defining traits of Sudanese social identity, fueling the resilience of a people who – after enduring thirty years of brutal rule – managed to overthrow the regime through one of the most extraordinary popular movements. With the outbreak of the conflict in April 2023 (which is still ongoing), the Resistance Committees have transformed into crucial and indispensable humanitarian actors: the "Emergency Response Rooms" (ERRs). Thanks to their extensive grassroots presence and the legitimacy they enjoy within their communities, they have become the most reliable and efficient partners for the international humanitarian community in Sudan, managing to reach areas that international actors cannot or will not access. Through their governance system, the Localization Coordination Council (LCC), the ERRs challenge the neocolonial relationship between donors and aid recipients, at least in crisis situations. The ERRs and their LCC demonstrate that a different form of governance is possible: one that is authentically democratic, based on a bottom-up approach, and is accountable, flexible, and anti-colonial.