

EVAP Episode 25_ Muzna Alhaj

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SPEAKERS

Muzna Alhaj, Speaker, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall

S Speaker 00:00

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:12

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. This podcast features one on one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Today I'm joined by Muzna AlHaj, a Sudanese activist and a member of Khartoum Resistance Committees. Thank you for joining us today Muzna.

M Muzna Alhaj 00:56

Thank you for having me.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:58

Muzna you're a formidable Sudanese activist, advocating for the inclusion of the voices of women and youth in Sudan. I'm just wondering, how did you first become involved in political activism?

M Muzna Alhaj 01:12

I come from a political family. My father and both grandparents were parliamentarian. So I

I come from a political family. My father and both grandparents were parliamentarians. So I started off very early with all the readings and knowledge of Sudan history, and current political issues. But it really started when my family moved back to Sudan, because I wasn't initially born there. And then I would say, since 2004, we moved back and this was coinciding with a CPA, which is the comprehensive peace agreement between South Sudan and the Sudanese government. And then of course, beginning from 2011, 2012, 2013 and until arriving at 2018, when the December Revolution happened, I was engaged in different political activism activities, including protests, and other types of activities. Basically, I would say that the secession or independence of South Sudan was a historical moment for the Sudanese politics, because Sudan basically lost a big part of its people and its land. And this actually immediately influenced the economic situation in Sudan. Basically, it led to decisions like lifting the subsidies on very important commodities like fuel and bread. And these activities actually led to ignition of protests among the Sudanese people. This actually started in 2011, remarkably, but then I would say that the political activism history in Sudan is a very rich history. Especially during the past 30 years, beginning from 1989 when people first realized that the **call of** the regime is something that's worth fighting against and resisting.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 03:27

It's really such a rich history, as you mentioned, and for so long, those civil society voices and political dissent, and resistance efforts to the leadership of President Bashir were suppressed in Sudan. And now since he was removed from power, there's formidable pressure via resistance committees. Can you share how and why they were formed and maybe give a little info on how you personally got involved with them.

M Muzna Alhaj 03:58

Resistance committees definitely dates back to earlier than late 2018 and 2019. Some historians actually talked about the fact that resistance committees were formed as early as 2013. Because 2013 was such a remarkable year in the history of Sudanese resistance, because yet again, Bashir government decided to lift subsidy subsidies on bread and fuel, and it was met with great resistance, but unfortunately, it was also repressed so fiercely and violently, leading to the killing of almost 300 people in the course of four to five days. So back then there was resistance committees formed, but at that moment, there were more of bodies that are related to political entities, specifically political parties. But what happened in late 2018 and early 2019 in the December revolution is that the Sudanese Professionals Association, which was back then actually the leading entity for the Sudanese December revolution. They called on Sudanese people, especially Sudanese youth, being the largest percentage of population but also participating in the protests that took place in December 2018 and moving forward. They called upon them to start forming these resistance committees within their neighborhoods, because this was actually a form of organization where people could organize themselves within their neighborhoods to take place in the revolution, leading to the event of **April 6** sit-in that caused the toppling of Al Bashir, five days later in April 11 2019. So the people by default responded to this call from the Sudanese Professional Association, and they started forming the resistance committees within their neighborhoods. And what started with Khartoum and bigger cities in Sudan, quickly escalated to hundreds of resistance committees, and different towns and even small villages, all over Sudan. So it was indeed, a

remarkable response to this call. But it was also fascinating to be part of this experience, and see how Sudanese people actually possess the power to organize themselves within their local communities, to be able to prioritize their needs and prioritize their actions of resistance.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 06:44

I want to pick up on something, that you said just now, about how they called on youth to form resistance committees in their neighborhoods. You know, I think that youth played a huge role in the protest movement and the resistance committees. And I remember from that period of time, there were these very moving photos being spread throughout the world of women standing up to power during protests. And I'm curious if after the government changed were civilians and women and youth who had such a sort of prominent image within the protests, given enough space at negotiations during political talks?

M Muzna Alhaj 07:34

I would say this was not the case. Youth in general, and women particularly, were on the forefront of the revolution in Sudan, and also in the acts of organization and the acts of resistance. But then, of course, very quickly, the political elite managed to also organize itself, and secretaries and in wide alliances like the Freedom and Change Forces Alliance that decided to take up the political leadership, and said to everyone: "Okay, thank you, we'll take it from here." And then this basically was the case they were involved in the negotiation with very minor women representation. I remember that, during the negotiation between the Civilians Alliance and the transitional Military Council, which is the Military Council that basically succeeded Al Bashir, there was only one woman in the negotiation team. And then, of course, also, fast forward when that transitional government, Civilian Transitional Government, was appointed in August 2019. I believe that the woman representation within the cabinet was only 18%. So you could see very quickly that youth and women were sidelined. I would say that when it comes to women, all the different women group and feminist groups, they have managed to push their agenda, they managed to actually resist this, they managed to secure some sort of representation, even if it's a flawed representation, even if it's very little in its percentage. But when it comes to youth, it's even more complicated. Because for the resistance committees, for example, many of them decided that this deal was not a fair deal and that the Sudanese people actually worked for a full civilian rule, not for a rule to be shared with the Transitional Military Council. So by default, they were not even pleased with this deal that led to forming the civilian government and therefore they were not **represented. They boycotted** this but they were not represented. And later actually, they also had a very cautious relationship with their Civilian Transitional Government, where they actually decided to lobby and advocate for issues like justice and transitional justice issues. But without being completely or fully represented within the different structures of the government.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 10:26

That's really powerful how, through persistence, these groups are still able to, as you said, get their their demands and their needs hurt, even if the system is an imperfect one.



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Muzna Alhaj 10:40

Yes indeed, it's a struggle and it remains to be one.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 10:44

Since you mentioned the struggle within the Transitional Council. And, obviously subsequently, there was a coup in 2021, and now renewed violence throughout Sudan. So I wanted to turn to that a little bit. Since it's probably on the forefront of many people's minds. The outbreak of violence in April 2023, has dramatically changed the situation within Khartoum, as well as wider areas of Sudan. Can you provide our listeners with an overview of recent events that brought Sudan into this deadly conflict?

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Muzna Alhaj 11:27

I think it was very obvious that the partnership between the civilians and the military is not a long lasting relationship. And basically, the coup was just an announcement of a divorce of a very fragile partnership. I would say also, this was the time when civilian and pro-democracy groups like resistance committees actually announced separation with their political civilian political elite, because a coup was just too much to handle at that point, because people have worked very hard during the revolution. And they worked very hard to pave the way for a sustainable and strong civilian rule. And here we are faced with this coup. And I would say that the political elite, despite the fact that many of them were detained, but then of course, in November, in 2021, former Prime [Minister Abdalla Hamdok](#) decided to actually sign an agreement with the coup leader to basically sustain the civilian rule. And I think at this point, resistance committees were running out of patience and tolerance for any more partnerships. And they just decided that they're going to resist this coup with the last breath in their lungs, and I think that is what happened. So the resistance started from the first moment that the Sudanese people were aware that there was a coup. Many of these young people and even older people, members of resistance committees, decided to take the streets and say no to the coup. The resistance of the coup resulted in the killing of hundreds of members of resistance committees, but also Sudanese citizens, who are just resisting this coup. And of course, we were resisting the coup until April 2023. I think this war basically was just the cherry on top for everything that happened since 2021, until now arriving to a war. And I think, actually for us, it's just a natural event to take place after this coup. Because this war also, as much as it appears as a power struggle between the two generals, I think it's also a very timely opportunity for both warring parties to get rid of actually any hope of having a civilian rule imposed on them. Because let's be honest, both warring parties want the power for themselves. But they also were tired of the continued resistance of the Sudanese people. And what a better opportunity to chase away democracy and civilian rule by saying that the country is in a insecure situation and that the military needs to take over. And I think this is exactly what's happening now. Because despite the fact that there is a war, a serious one, both parties still find the time to detain, kidnap and to torture members of the resistance committees and other Sudanese activists. So this speaks volume to their real intentions towards the Sudanese revolution and to the resistance of Sudan, and how they are just very immune to any democratic change taking place in Sudan.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 15:21

Joelyn S. ... 15:11

It's really fascinating that you're saying that to you, from the inside, it felt like this was sort of an inevitable conclusion that this conflict would happen. And yet, from the outside, I feel like many observers, many people within the international community who were facilitating negotiations between the warring parties even did not anticipate this. What do you think they were missing?

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Muzna Alhaj 15:52

I would simply say it's just maybe the audacity, how the international community members in Sudan think that they have this power vested in them, to change the course of events, even the events that could be seen very wide and clear. I think, after signing the so called framework agreement in December, and then all the events leading to the war in April, the international community actors really thought that they could persuade the parties into signing this political agreement and restoring the so-called transition to democracy in Sudan. But they could see clearly that at least one of the warring parties, which I would say here, [General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan](#) was very resistant to any type of agreement. And even this agreement, the framework agreement is not the type of agreement that would have been a successful agreement or satisfactory to the demands of the Sudanese people and to the demands of the resistance generally, and to the pro democracy groups, because it was basically just a notion of reinstating the partnership. The failed partnership between the civilian elite and the military elite. And when one of the parties didn't actually wanted to go through with the framework agreement due to pressure [because Abdel Fattah al-Burhan](#) is just very associated with that National Congress Party and the Islamists which is Al Bashirs party. So he was under pressure to not sign this framework agreement. On the other side, of course, there was the political elite and the leader of the Rapid Support Forces, who claimed that he was backing this framework agreement and fully behind it. And now actually using this very same claim, he got into war against the Sudanese Armed Forces claiming that he is bringing democracy to Sudanese people, while [his military or](#) while his militia is causing all these atrocities. Killing the Sudanese people, detaining them, torturing them, looting their houses and raping Sudanese women and girls. So I would say that the nature of alliances between the Sudanese political elite, and these military generals was never a model that anyone else would settle for, especially the resistance. Because we could see clearly from the beginning that our welfare and our demand as a movement of resistance, does not align with the demands and does not align with the priorities of the Sudanese political elite, and therefore does not align with what the international community sees and wants for Sudan. We want different things, and they thought that they could actually create democracy in Sudan, through meetings behind closed doors and through fragile political alliances and through fragile political agreements. But we saw clearly that unless we get rid of military rule in Sudan through resistance, that things will not work out. I hate to say that eventually turned out that at least our vision was more white and correct and what it has solved because eventually, everyone anticipated that this war will happen. Because these generals were actually running out of flexibility and running out of giving promises to the international community that they will sort things out. But at the same time, these generals were not about to give up power. And they really wanted to create the circumstances to take power completely. But the international community was not giving up. And at the same time, also the Sudanese political elite. But I guess especially for the Sudanese political elite, it was just very naive to believe that after a coup that these generals will again share power with them.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 20:30

Indeed. You've touched a little on the abuses that the warring parties have committed against members of resistance committees, as well as the wider population. I wonder if you want to elaborate a little on what atrocity risks civilians are currently facing in Sudan.

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Muzna Alhaj 20:50

I would say if we take both parties, whether Sudan Armed Forces or Rapid Support Forces, they're both committing crimes against humanity against the wider population of the Sudanese people. If we started with the Rapid Support Forces actually being, I would say, the most violent party in this war. You can go through all types of crimes from killing the Sudanese citizens in their houses, when they resist looting or when they actually resist these orders of evacuation. They also kidnap, torture, detain and sometimes also kill in detention members of resistance committees, Sudanese citizens and also Sudanese activists. There are of course, recorded and documented tons of cases of rape and sexual violence against Sudanese women and girls in different areas, whether in Khartoum, but also in the different states of Darfur. Of course, this is just the crimes where they don't use and don't shell the houses and use heavy artillery or any types war acts that are not supposed to be taken in densely populated cities like Khartoum, or cities in that for like Nyala, Al Fashir, Al Junaynah and so on. On the other hand the Sudanese Armed Forces they are having full fledged war inside densely populated cities. So this is also by default, a violation for the rights of life, where people are just being shelled in their houses, being shelled in mosques, in markets and in the streets. But also their military intelligence repetitively kidnap and detain members of resistance committees and activists. And also some of the forces that are affiliated with the Sudanese Armed Forces are also looting and raping and causing terror to citizens in the outskirts of Khartoum city. So I would say both parties are committing all these unspeakable crimes, and they are not shying away from doing this. Of course the Sudanese Armed Forces decided that they're going to start a mechanism to document all the crimes of RSF. To bring them to justice, because they are committing crimes against humanity. I wouldn't say that both parties are equal, I would say RSF is definitely doing worse crimes than the Sudanese Armed Forces. But yet again, they're both killing Sudanese people and terrorizing them, and actually find the time to crack down on resistance committees member and activists while fighting a war, which, again, brings us back to the point that I mentioned that they are also beside the war, they have a bigger goal, which is basically just ending the resistance.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 24:20

The resistance committees are a really inspiring example of civilian mobilization. Just in general your ability to organize themselves to offer an alternative for a government that has continued to fail them, both in terms of the current abuses, as well as the sort of logistical gaps left by the lack of good governance under the military regime. So from providing alternative political and democratic future, providing command atherian assistance and basic services over the past few years. And now, in the current context, you're clearly under physical threat constantly. And yet they continue to try and operate and try and provide assistance and hope of some sort to the people of Sudan. So I'm wondering if you can tell us a little more about the role of resistance committees in the current situation, as the conflict progresses.

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Muzna Alhaj 25:29

I think the impressive aspect to resistance committees, being a member, but also sometimes just taking the time to contemplate away and try to look at this model very closely, is that they always managed to recover faster than the situation allows them to, and they always take the initiative, even if their life is on risk. So I think they crack down the, the killing, the detention and the torturing is not new to the resistance committees. These are always the circumstances in which the resistance committees managed to grow, develop and flourish, and also continue to act. So what the resistance committees are doing since after the first two weeks, of the eruption of this war, that they very quickly took all the roles that the government should have taken, but never did. And that they filled this governance gap, where they started to actually rescue people within the neighborhoods, provide emergency health services, evacuate the people from very risky areas and neighborhoods to safer places. Sometimes they even confiscated passports and important papers to the citizens. So they can facilitate their departure from one area to another or departure outside the country. They have provided and run shelters, to the internally displaced people, they have opened public kitchens, where they provided free meals, for those who cannot provide for themselves because this is also a large segment of the population are dying or at the risk of dying of hunger. And they also provided medications and created these very sophisticated channels of communication and coordination between health service providers, donors, and also the citizens or the people who actually needed these services the most. It is just an enormous effort and countless amount of services that the resistance committees managed to provide to their local communities during these dire circumstances, and being under continuous threat. I think that this is very important for resistance committees to take this role at this time. Not only because this role is expected from them, because since 2019, resistance committees have always successfully managed to serve their communities by providing important commodities that were running short. And by actually regulating the use of commodities like fuel, during shortages of fuel and so on. But I think it's important for them to actually practice what they have preached. Because the resistance committees for the past year, they have been drafting their political vision and shape of political charters, that in detail spoke about local governance, and federal governments, and how local communities should be in charge of themselves and in charge of their actual natural resources. And because they know exactly their needs, their development needs and, and their governance needs. So now, resistance committees were actually able, under these circumstances, to practice this. To basically govern their communities, provide services to their people, and actually show those who were doubtful that local governance models can actually succeed and flourish in the worst of situations. And I think this actually also sends a very strong message to all the actors in the international community and all the local actors who were always skeptical, not only of their abilities of the resistance committees, but were always skeptical of grassroots governance, and models of communities self empowering themselves, because let's face it, this model of governance was always criticized or questioned by the political elite who thought that everything, it's always an up-bottom approach. It's always a central government telling everyone on the peripheries what to do, and so on. So now the acts and efforts of the resistance committees sends a very strong message to everyone who was skeptical of this.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 30:45

In that context, do you think that resistance committees can play a role in forging a democratic future for the country, which is currently controlled by the military?

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Muzna Alhaj 30:56

I would say absolutely. Resistance committees through their effort could be a cornerstone, actually, in emphasizing this model of local governance. I would say that they have already laid out the theoretical part, and started practicing a bigger part of the practical part. But I would say in better situations, and more peaceful situation, resistance committees could definitely be part of genuine peace agreements and peace processes, where stakeholders are the local communities that were impacted by war and conflict. At the same time, resistance committees could play a key role in elections for neighborhoods community, but also local communities that could pave the way for elections for regional council, and elections leading up to legislative council, which basically is the parliament. So I think the resistance committees could basically play a key role in better circumstances. And even if the circumstances are not better, I think if this work continued in the pace by which it's going now, and if we actually eventually yet again, arrived at some sort of a negotiation between the political elite and between the military leaders, I would say we would find ourselves, yet again in resistance mode, because definitely after a war, this is not what the Sudanese people are looking for. And I think the resistance committees will always, if they are there, be able to pick up the pieces and continue to resist these models, but also provide a good alternative of empowering local communities and enabling them to perform these important governance roles, that they were long deprived from in a country like Sudan. And it only makes sense for local communities to govern themselves in Sudan, because the rural areas in Sudan were always the main provider of wealth to the central government of Sudan. Because they are the producers, they are the farmers, they are the herders. And actually, most of the fortune and the wealth of Sudan, is provided by the periphery. So why not as well rule themselves and manage to better distribute their wealth to benefit their development schemes.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 33:59

Absolutely. And since you mentioned how the actions of resistance committees in local communities can be a signal to the military as well as to the international community. Is there anything that you feel the international community could be doing better right now to support resistance committees, grassroots community based organizations and civilians in pursuing these goals?

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Muzna Alhaj 34:29

I think in the political aspect, the international community knows what they are supposed to do, but they are still somehow failing the Sudanese people by trying to continue in this model of behind closed door negotiations that are very exclusive and non inclusive of the important stakeholders. So they might as well start to listen to the hundreds of advisors that they were given of convening more inclusive peace negotiations and political processes. And instead of just having the usual suspects with the military and the political elite, because I think everyone now tried partnerships between the military and political elite twice or three times, and haven't been very successful, and it led the country to war. So I think it's about time to change this model. But what the international community could really do to the Sudanese population and the Sudanese people. Nowadays, it's just tried to further enable the resistance committees and Sudanese [civil society to actually be able](#) to engage in a better way and humanitarian aid work. The Sudanese activists and the resistance committees and the entire civil society are

already doing what they can, with very limited resources available to them. But then when the bigger donors, whether countries or international organizations or UN agencies, yet hand the different resources and donations to the de facto authority, and then expect them to do all the work. This is basically just unfair for the Sudanese people, because we know for sure that the de facto authority being formed of all of these War Lords. And I would say, NCP members, they have no interest in saving the lives of the Sudanese people, they have no interest in the well being of the Sudanese people. And therefore, simply all these resources and all these funds are being mismanaged. If not being looted, or if not even targeting the Sudanese people. So it would be good if their international community try to pose some pressure on the de facto authority, that it actually includes the Sudanese civil society, and humanitarian aid work and these processes because this community actually is the community that has been leading all the processes to save the lives of the Sudanese people. So they might as well also be in control of some of the resources, because they know better how to use these resources. The international community, but also the wider audience who are watching this war from away, and not necessarily know the details of the Sudanese politics and its complexity, I just don't want them to be fooled by the fact that this war is just, purely a conflict between two generals who want to rule Sudan. But this war is just a bigger scheme of crackdown on any hopes for democracy, in a country as Sudan, and I would just want to call on all the civil societies all over the world who are taking interest in the Sudanese cause to continue to support Sudan, and to continue to support the Sudanese people to continue to remember them, and to mention them, and to mention their right in having a democracy. Because I think when countries slip in to wars the international community will always allow their narrative of this is just another failed African state, they don't necessarily understand democracy, and therefore they don't necessarily deserve it. And then we will find ourselves arriving at a scenario where they think that a military leadership or a military rule regime will just have more security. And it's important to prioritize security over democracy. And this is what this country or those people deserve for allowing their country to slip into war, although that this war was never the fault of the Sudanese people. Also, I think in the light of all the very intense geopolitical interventions in countries like Sudan, but in the region of the Horn of Africa and Africa in general. It's very easy for this to become a proxy war, where the international community actors like the US or the EU, would just want to minimize, for example, Russia's power in Sudan and actually forgetting what the Sudanese people want and need in the narrative. So actually the last thing that we want to see is that eventually, this becomes a full fledge proxy war for different geopolitical powers, where they're just don't care about the Sudanese people and don't care about the Sudanese land, and just decide to use this as a battlefield.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 40:29

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