Youth Transforming Narratives

Research Study | November 2026

Re-Envisioning Democratic Participation: A Case Study of the Sudanese Resistance Committees and Emergency Response Rooms

Research Team of Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN)



Youth Transforming Narratives
Research & Knowledge-Production Team

Navigating Change: Youth Perspectives on Development and Geopolitical Shifts in the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES)

Research Team of the Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN)
November 2026

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Acknowledgement

This research would not have been possible without the individuals who agreed to be interviewed for this study. We are deeply grateful to each of them for their trust, their time and their willingness to share (often difficult) insights into their lived experience in Sudan. In a context marked by ongoing conflict, displacement and real personal risk, the decision to speak openly with us was neither small nor guaranteed. This report exists because they chose to make space for it, and any value it holds belongs first to them.

We also wish to thank the research officers and volunteers at Youth Transforming Narratives who supported this research with their time, passion and the networks and connections they generously opened up to make this work possible. Their commitment, often carried out alongside other responsibilities and without material recognition, reflects the spirit this organisation was built on.

Finally, we thank Youth Transforming Narratives itself, for bringing us all together around a shared conviction that young people's perspectives belong at the centre of research on the issues that shape their futures, not at its margins. It is that common purpose that made this collaborative research possible in the first place.

Executive Summary

Since the outbreak of the war between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in 2023, Sudan has plunged into a severe humanitarian crisis characterized by mass civilian casualties, large-scale displacement, the disruption of essential services and very limited humanitarian assistance. As the conflict approaches its fourth year, several international organizations are warning about a high risk of famine in the country, affecting millions of Sudanese. Despite these circumstances, Sudanese communities have developed and sustained locally rooted forms of collective action that challenge the assumption that crisis-affected populations are primarily dependent on external and foreign humanitarian intervention.

Emerging prominently during the 2018-2019 Sudanese Revolution, Sudan's Resistance Committees (RCs) and Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) are two interconnected forms of grassroots, community-led structures that have played a critical role in providing assistance and sustaining local communities throughout the ongoing war period. In a context marked by the systematic absence and failure of state institutions, these initiatives have assumed functions conventionally associated with the state and formal humanitarian actors. Through their horizontal and non-hierarchical structures, decentralized organization, and reliance on community participation, RC's and ERRs constitute important examples of alternative forms of governance and collective care.

Building on scholarship as well as qualitative interviews conducted with Sudanese youth and civil society leaders, this research situates the RC's and ERR's within broader debates on decolonial governance and humanitarian action. It tries to understand these initiatives as forms of grassroots governance that became alternatives to state-centric understandings of organization and humanitarian action. This research aims to move beyond the normative framework of viewing Sudanese as people with a constant need for international aid and interventions, and rather highlights the role played by local and youth-led initiatives, whose participation demonstrates the capacity of local actors to organize, make collective decisions, distribute resources, and respond to community needs under conditions of extreme political and humanitarian uncertainty.

Overall, the main finding of this research is that democratic participation and governance can be practiced outside formal state institutions. By situating the RC and ERR's role and importance within the overall context of Sudan, the research reaches the conclusion that these structures represent a continuation of Sudan's political and collective action. Additionally, by diving deep into the RC and ERR's internal structure, the research explains that their horizontal and non- hierarchical structure reflects a sort of rejection of successive authoritarian regimes, allowing communities to organize outside conventional state hierarchies.

Furthermore, the research stresses the vital role of both Sudanese youth and women, showing that they're not passive victims of conflict. In fact, it has been observed that the main drivers of both the RC and ERR's have been the youth, essentially through community organizing and emergency response. Similarly, women played a significant role through participation in sustaining humanitarian response, though the gendered gap between participation and leadership remained present. Lastly and most importantly, the research finds that locally rooted humanitarian structures can provide effective forms of collective care, even in conditions of state absence or severe institutional weakness. Overall, this research underscores the effectiveness and importance of non-state initiatives, such as the RC and ERR, and contributes to a broader re-envisioning of democratic participation beyond formal state institutions, especially in a context largely characterized by the absence of a centralized government and state. The research concludes with a set of recommendations for new research aimed at consolidating and strengthening the role of the ERR's in supporting the people of Sudan as an alternative structure beyond the formal state.

Glossary

Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs): Locally coordinated networks that grew out of RCs once war broke out in April 2023, as members shifted their focus from political organizing to mutual survival. They deliver food, medical evacuations, communal kitchens, and safe spaces for women in places the state and international aid agencies don't reach.

Resistance Committees (RCs): Neighborhood-based groups that formally emerged around 2013 and rose to national prominence during the 2018/2019 uprising against former president Al-Bashir. They are organized horizontally, meaning each neighborhood runs its own committee based on local needs, with no central authority dictating their agenda. At the core of each RC was a central demand of mandaniya (full civilian rule) organized around the principle of silmiyya (non-violence). After the 2021 coup and the outbreak of war in 2023, many RC's evolved into ERRs to meet the collapse of state services.

Madaniya: Sudanese Arabic for "full civilian rule" – the central political demand of the RCs and the broader Sudanese revolutionary movement. It is less of a specific policy and operates, rather, as the underlying goal behind every phase of resistance in Sudan, which envisions a system where civilians actually hold governing power.

Nafeer: A traditional Sudanese practice of communal solidarity and collective self-reliance.

Silmiyya: The RCs central organizing principle of non-violence.

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Introduction

Since the outbreak of the civil war[1] in April 2023, Sudan has faced a devastating humanitarian crisis, marked by massive population displacement, acute food insecurity, and severe constraints on the delivery of humanitarian assistance (United Nations, 2025). Yet amidst the devastation, Sudanese communities have continued to organize, mobilize and provide life-saving support through locally-led initiatives that have received comparatively little international attention. Among the most prominent of these initiatives are the Resistance Committees (RCs), neighborhood-based grassroots groups that emerged during the Sudanese revolution and have continued to organize collectively throughout the conflict; and the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), locally coordinated networks delivering emergency assistance, mutual aid and community services where formal institutions and international actors have struggled to respond. Together, they represent more than emergency coping mechanisms. They offer an alternative vision of political organization, democratic participation and solidarity rooted in local agency.

This research, conducted by the global youth movement Youth Transforming Narratives (YTN), seeks to challenge dominant narratives surrounding governance, humanitarian action and youth political participation by centering the experiences of those directly involved. This focus is particularly significant in Sudan, where approximately 60% of the population is under the age of 25, which highlights the centrality of young people to the country's present and future political and social trajectories (UNFPA, 2016). Rather than viewing Sudanese youth solely as victims of conflict, this study examines how they are actively reshaping ideas of political legitimacy, sovereignty, and collective care through horizontal, community-led structures. In doing so, it asks whether the Resistance Committees and Emergency Response Rooms offer lessons for reimagining democratic governance and humanitarian response.

This research arrives at a critical juncture. Almost four years into the civil war, with famine already confirmed in parts of the country (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, 2025) and peace negotiations repeatedly stalling (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026), the international response to Sudan continues to be shaped mainly by external actors, state-centric frameworks and short-term humanitarian metrics, with limited attention paid to the political and social structures Sudanese themselves have built to survive (Olson et al., 2024). Sudanese youth are both

[1] Note on terminology: This report refers interchangeably to the ongoing "war", "armed conflict" and "violence" in Sudan since April 2023. We recognise that the language used to describe violence is not neutral. Terms such as conflict, war, civil war or political violence carry different analytical and political implications, including for how responsibility, legitimacy and civilian experiences are understood. While "armed conflict" is widely used in humanitarian and policy frameworks, this report seeks to remain attentive to the diverse ways Sudanese people themselves describe and experience the violence affecting their lives. Following Krause (2016), we acknowledge that categories such as "war" or "armed conflict" may not fully capture the broader forms of insecurity, coercion and rights violations experienced by civilians.

disproportionately affected by the collapse of the economy and essential services (Mercy Corps, 2025), as well as instrumental to the local response that holds communities together. Nonetheless, their political agency remains largely absent from policy debates conducted at a distance from the realities they navigate daily (Olson et al., 2024). By making space, in this research, for young Sudanese people and civil society actors to speak in their own words about what they have built, sustained and learned through the RC and ERRs, this research seeks not only to document a moment in Sudan's history, but to insist that any future conversation about peace, governance and humanitarian work in the country must include young people.

This report is organized in three parts. Part I traces the history of the Resistance Committees (RCs) and the emergence of the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), and explains the philosophy and praxis of *silmiyya* (peacefulness). Part II examines horizontality and local coordination and provides the background on the formalization and structure of the RCs and ERRs. Part III focuses on the meaningful participation of community members, women and youth, and reviews the activities of the RCs and ERRs as well as the challenges they encounter.

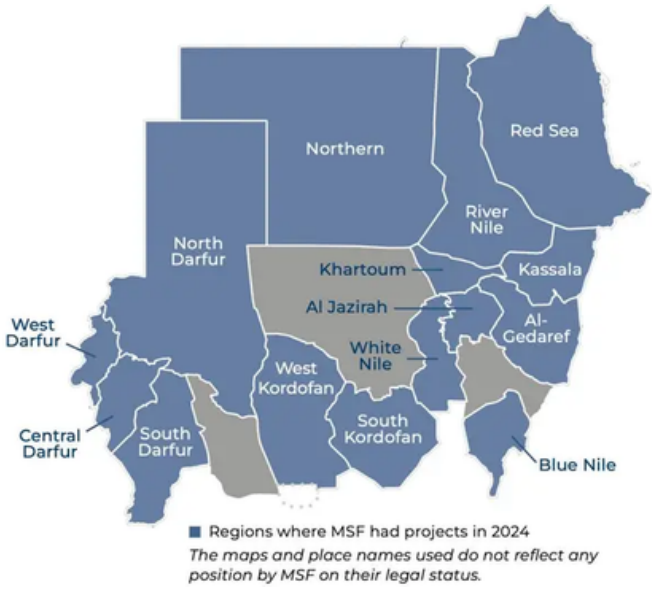


Figure 1. Sudan – General Reference Map, by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), 3 July 2024, URL.

Methodology

This research follows a qualitative approach. It is built on a review of the existing literature alongside five semi-structured interviews conducted online with Sudanese civil society leaders and young people, including three current or former members of the Resistance Committees. While the limited number of participants does not allow for generalisable conclusions, the research deliberately prioritizes depth over breadth, providing space for voices that are often absent from international discussions on Sudan.

The five participants were identified through a combination of approaches. A LinkedIn post published by Youth Transforming Narratives

circulated widely and generated a snowballing effect, with respondents recommending or putting us in touch with other relevant individuals. In parallel, we contacted members of civil society organizations (CSOs) identified through online research. Prior to each interview, participants received an information sheet and a consent form describing the aims of the research, as well as their rights to anonymity and to withdraw from the study at any time. Verbal consent was also confirmed at the start of every interview. Interviews were conducted in English by one or more members of the research team and recorded with participants' consent.

Recordings were transcribed by YTN officers and subsequently deleted. Although we sought to achieve diversity within the sample, this was constrained in practice. Two of the five participants were women and all participants appeared to be located outside Sudan at the time of their interview. The findings should therefore be read as reflecting a small, predominantly male and diaspora-based group of perspectives, rather than the full range of experiences of Resistance Committee members, particularly those inside the country and women, whose experiences may differ significantly.

Following data collection, thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze and report patterns and themes emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed the key stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), beginning with familiarisation with the data, followed by the systematic coding of relevant features. These stages were carried out collaboratively by the research team, following an online workshop on thematic analysis. Each team member first coded the transcripts assigned to them. The codes were then brought together on Miro, where the team collectively organised them into potential themes and identified patterns across the dataset. These themes provided the outline and structure of the report and the writing of each section was then divided among team members.

The research team does not include any Sudanese members, and YTN currently has no Sudanese volunteers, so we approached this research as outsiders to the context. The study did not stem from a pre-existing relationship with Sudan but from a wish to amplify the perspectives of those involved in the Resistance Committees. Participation was voluntary. After the research was explained through our LinkedIn post and in conversations with Sudanese contacts, several people expressed interest to take part. We have sought to foreground participants' own words and analysis rather than speak on their behalf, yet we recognize that our outsider position shapes how the findings are framed. Lastly, in line with our ethical research approach, all participants have been anonymized to protect their identities and ensure they could share their experiences freely[2].

By documenting these perspectives, this report aims to contribute to a broader conversation on decolonizing governance and humanitarian action, while highlighting the transformative political imagination emerging from Sudan's youth-led movements.

Part I - A History of the Resistance Committees: Between *Silmiyya*, War, and Coups

The Bedrock of Sudan's Third Revolution

Although formally emerging in 2013 through a series of anti-government protests, it was throughout 2018 and 2019 that Sudan's Lijan al-Muqawama (hereafter: Resistance Committees, or RCs) rose to national prominence. It was during this time that their grassroots movement served, both, as the precursor and hallmark of the third Sudanese revolution. The spirit, and actions alike, of the RCs cannot be overstated. Their fidelity to Sudanism (a unifying national consciousness) was echoed, profoundly, throughout Sudan's diverse neighborhoods, and was imbued in every chant that *"we are all Sudanese"* (Mustafa, 2024). The RCs, immersed within Sudan's heterogeneous sociopolitical fabric, wielded community and collectivism to transcend the *"colonial cartographies of class, ethnicity, religion, and region"* that were historically barriers to revolution (Awad, 2022). In doing so, they hoped to advance their central aspiration, that which is representative of the broader, immensely plural, Sudanese population: to achieve madaniya, and subsequently radically reformulate the ontological foundation of democratic participation in Sudan. This aspiration was, largely, born out of deep-seated remonstrances against the oppressive neoliberal policies and systemic marginalization enacted by Omar Al-Bashir and his Inqaz

[2] Respondent codes that span this report follow this structure: transcript type (I = Interview; S = Survey), gender (W = Woman, M = Man), country (B = Burkina Faso, M = Mali; N= Niger) affiliation (CSO = civil society organization worker), and transcript number (1–10). For example, "IWNCSO6" refers to an interview with a woman from Niger who is a CSO worker.

[3] One year following his coup in 1989, Bashir introduced a nationwide restructuring of the syllabus in universities and schools. Arabic, despite teaching staff lacking the relevant training, was made the official language of instruction and textbooks were rewritten to promote extremist ideology. Arabic was mandated, exclusively, as the official language of government, public, and legal affairs, as well as that of state-run media, barring autochthonous languages, and English (the former official language). Most notably, Bashir militarised tribal proxies to suppress non-Arab ethnic groups who accused the regime of racial and cultural discrimination, embedding a system whereby wealth extraction was predicated on this racialisation and violent subjugation. Co-opting colonial methods, Bashir entrenched ethnic divisions to extract resources (like oil and gold) from Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, South Sudan, and further regions while systematically underdeveloping them and funneling the profits to regime loyalists in the center (Thomas, 2025). Following the secession of South Sudan in 2011, and the subsequent loss of access to oil revenues, Bashir's government aggressively pursued neoliberal economic policies. The regime implemented harsh austerity measures, slashed public subsidies on basic goods (like bread and fuel), and privatised state assets. These policies devastated the working class and exacerbated systemic marginalisation (Hassan, 2019).

government. Crucially, however, the resistance of the RCs, and their greater demand for madaniya, was neither endogenous nor isolated; rather, this mass mobilization of civilians is deeply woven into the lineage of post-colonial Sudan, and the ongoing necessity for revolution shares a tragic ubiquity with the past, long plagued by institutional corruption, state repression, *"colonialism, and racial capitalism"* (Abbas, 2024).

Despite our limited sample size, this cyclical struggle was consistent across all of our interviews. Participants consistently highlighted the devastating reality in Sudan wherein democratic transitions have been perpetually suppressed by despotic resurgence, noting that the country has *"never had a sustained transitional period; after each transitional period, there is a military coup that happens, returning the country to an authoritarian regime"* (IMRC2). One interviewee expressed how brutality has been definitive of Sudan since its independence, noting *"after 1956 and until now, there is violence"* (IWCSO4). The visceral distress of this unyielding state brutality, in both physical and structural dimensions, was palpable, as another interviewee lamented that *"[Sudan has] been in the military government for so long, and now we see that after all of that, it doesn't bring any peace ... to the society or community, it doesn't give justice, we just keep killing each other"* (IMRC1). This experience among all of our interviewees was grievously commonplace; *"I've seen my friends killed in front of me, we've been through a lot of threats, we get arrested, we get shot, and after that, the war came"* (IWRC3).

The Philosophy and Praxis of *Silmiyya*

Yet, rather than breeding fatalism, our dialogue suggests that this unrelenting confrontation to sanguinary violence fostered an inexorable, ongoing, resolve among the current generation of the Sudanese, encapsulated, conspicuously, in the 2019 chant: *"we are the generation that is destined to break the cycle of coups"* (Bishai, 2023). Emboldened by an acute awareness of their political genealogy, the RCs are an overt personification of this declaration, drawing upon historical blueprints for successful protest; notably the 1964 October Revolution and 1985 April Uprising. However, the RCs did not look at resistance solely domestically; instead, they situated themselves within the global continuum of liberation struggles, anchoring the nexus between interior and exterior resistance movements through the principle of *silmiyya*.

Silmiyya sits, perhaps, as the predominant tenet of the RCs resistance, operating as the cardinal framework to compound the contemporary struggle within Sudan's history of protest and global anti-authoritarianism movements more broadly: the 2011 Arab Spring; the National Liberation Front in Algeria; and the Peoples Power Revolution in the Philippines have all drawn frequent comparison (Awad, 2022). One

member of the RCs referred to the inspiration of Nelson Mandela in his use of *silmiyya* as *"a tool, a practice, and belief at the same time"* (IMRC2).

He emphasized the exigency of this stance in the Sudanese context, *"we are civilians and we cannot face authoritarian regimes, we cannot be giving them legitimacy to throw more violence"* (Ibid). Another interviewee told us that *"peaceful actions were also rooted in the belief that sustainable political transformation cannot be built through a cycle of violence"* (IWCSO4). Such conviction is intertwined within the origins of *silmiyya* which, *"goes back into the history of [post-colonial] Sudan ... and the Southern people demanding the right to be part of the new Sudan government, [who] need[ed] their fair share of the power"* (IMCSO1). The dedication to the practice of *silmiyya* was illustrated in the unequivocal condemnation of violence: *"we said enough blood, enough losing friends, family, loved ones during the revolution, that's why we were very sustaining non-violent approach"* (IMRC1). Both our interviews and literature explicate that *silmiyya* and resistance, in tandem, paradigmatically function as a continuous thread of Sudanese identity; weaving commemoration and courage into the psyche of every generation, equipping them with the tools to channel former revolutionaries, and to apply their tactical memory to contemporary liberation movements. Thus, fully appreciating the vitality of the RCs requires a deeper examination of the historical trajectory that necessitated their emergence.

Historical Precedents: Coups, Elites, and Systemic Fragility (1958–1989)

In 1958, two years following Sudan's independence from Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule, General Ibrahim Abboud conducted a military coup to wrest control over the nation's first elected government. Abboud quickly enacted a series of policies that marginalized the historically exploited cultural peripheries of Southern Sudan (now South Sudan), particularly those of *"African and Christian groups"* (Duta, 2016)[4]. This southern alienation triggered dual crises: an armed conflict in the south, and civic unrest among students in the capital at the University of Khartoum, who vigorously opposed Abboud's Arabization policies. The resulting financial drain of an escalating civil war brought widespread economic stagnation and ensuing unrest, which culminated in 1964 after a police officer shot and killed Ahmad al-Qurashi, a student protesting in Khartoum. Unions comprising Sudan's social elite

[4] Abboud, through coercive modes of state centralisation, pursued a multifaceted regime of cultural erasure; conflating the Arabic language, Arab identity, and Islam as the prerequisite to be Sudanese. His regime systematically replaced indigenous languages through compulsory Arabic instruction, nationalised mission schools to dismantle non-Islamic institutions, and pressured Southerners to adopt Islamic names; "an act of ethnocide to deindividuate non-Islamic groups" (Seri-Hersch, 2020). Moreover, Abboud, under martial law, suppressed dissent. Together, these policies alienated the Southern intelligentsia and drove politicians, civil servants, and students into exile or the bush. This state-sponsored oppression directly catalysed the formation of the Anyanya armed movement in 1963, locking Sudan into decades of civil war (Ibid).

— mostly doctors, lawyers, and professors, those in possession of an *"elevated social status [who were] safeguarded against regime oppression"* — joined to strike throughout Sudan, which quickly led to Abboud's resignation (Berridge, 2014).

This uprising, turned revolution, ushered in a somewhat civilian-represented parliamentary democracy. However, the transitional government faced insurmountable challenges: attempts to resolve the civil war in the south intensified violence; economic instability and rising inflation were unaddressed; and the parliament was dominated by conservative sectarian elites (Berridge, 2014). Class elitism, insofar as the exclusion of the working classes from government action — highlighted by rush elections and the banning of the Sudanese Communist Party — ultimately damaged public faith in the commitment of this government to strive for genuine democracy. Four years later, in May 1969, Colonel Jaafar Nimeiry instrumentalized the transitional government's fragility and led a coup to overthrow it.

Nimeiry's regime faced a similar fate to Abboud's. As the severe economic crisis raged on throughout April 1985, and Khartoum endured a dramatic increase in the cost of basic necessities (notably bread and fuel), a coalition of trade unions and professional associations — again led by doctors, lawyers, and lecturers — coordinated a campaign of strikes. Emulating the 1964 Revolution, this campaign garnered unrelenting momentum that created a mass civic uprising. After eleven days of demonstrations, the military, mostly made up of middle-ranking officers, intervened to depose Nimeiry, paving the way for a transitional council and an, albeit brief, return to democracy (De Waal, 2010). Yet, as in 1964, this new civilian order remained deeply fractured along urban-rural and class lines, leaving the fragile democracy once again vulnerable to a putsch.

Bashir's Regime: Spatial Fragmentation and Racial Capitalism

In 1989, General al-Bashir, backed by the National Islamic Front, exploited continued multi-dimensional instability and led a *coup d'état.* Hyper-aware of how revolts, piloted by Sudan's social elites, had unseated dictators in 1964 and 1985, Bashir engineered a matrix of National Intelligence Security Services to pacify the professional classes. *Buyut al-Ashbah* (Ghost Houses) were created to paralyze civic opposition at its root: these saw the *"routine abduction, torture, and execution of dissidents, students, journalists, and union leaders"* (Berridge, 2014). In addition, Bashir sought to further insulate his regime from urban uprisings by shifting military focus away from the capital and outsourcing violence to rural tracts[5].

Bashir's state-sponsored atrocities were extensive; often driven by the gains of racial capitalism. His 2003 arming of Janjaweed militias against non-Arab ethnic groups, was not solely an ethnic conflict, but also a violent campaign of expropriation across Darfur which saw the killing

of over 300,000 civilians along with the displacement of millions; leading to an indictment for war crimes and genocide by the International Criminal Court (ICC-02/05, 2003). Bashir, insidiously, weaponized ethnic hierarchies, reinvigorating the colonial vestiges of the Arab-Afro binary with twin motivations: first, to oppose Sudanism and inveterate the *"idea of an Other within Sudan"*; second, surpassing the scope of ethnic animus, Bashir sought to, simultaneously, racialize indigenous bodies and land alike, systematically devaluing them, rendering them disposable, therein justifying their clearance from the nation's gold mines, and monopolizing resource extraction (Awad, 2022). Ultimately, Bashir's violence and racial capitalism, facilitated through purported *"security",* was positioned, largely, to keep the Sudanese population fragmented and prevent a unified, nationwide resistance movement by any means deemed necessary. Our oldest interviewee, who had supported the RCs, as well as former resistance groups, commented on the malevolence of Bashir's regime in quelling opposition, *"the regime was very aggressive and very brutal, it was banning any resistance to the regime to show that the idea of resistance doesn't work"* (IMCSO1).

This architecture of intentional fragmentation was, however, fundamentally disrupted by the decentralized structure of the RCs. While the Sudan Professionals Association, formed in 2016, was an initial vector of protest, the state terror enforced through Buyut al-Ashbah saw an increased frequency to silence activists: Lighthouse Reports documents the facility known as the fridge, whereby *"rooms are plunged into such low temperatures that detainees, often kept in solitary confinement, pray for death as a respite"* (Adamson, 2019). Having witnessed unwavering brutality in the discrimination, economic imbalance, racial violence, and institutional corruption of Bashir's Inqaz government, the youth — particularly those of lower socioeconomic backgrounds — sought to shatter the longwinded oppressive narratives of political homogeneity; those that presented them with an *"apathetic portrayal as violent troublemakers lacking political imaginaries altogether,"* and take heed of their futures (Khalafallah, 2025).

Predating the 2018 economic crisis that gave them nationwide prominence, the RCs had laid their grassroots structure years prior. In 2013, inspired by the Arab Spring Uprisings, many young people protested against the *"rabid austerity"* that followed Sudan's post-oil financial crisis after the secession of South Sudan, in what has been described as *"a rehearsal for the December 2018*

[5] Bashir weakened the Sudanese Armed Forces in Khartoum through a systematic purging of officers, seeing thousands of officers who didn't meet his requirements for loyalty executed and replaced by National Islamic Front loyalists: transforming the officer corps from a professional national institution into an ideological mechanism of the regime, compromising military competence in favour of political loyalty (Hassan, 2019). Notably, Bashir elevated the Janjaweed (later formalised into the Rapid Support Forces) to conduct brutal, racially-charged counterinsurgencies in marginalised peripheries. This "divide and rule" strategy effectively offloaded state violence to the provinces, devastating rural populations while protecting the regime's center in the capital (Ibrahim, 2019).

shutdown" (Gizouli, 2020). Moreover, severe flooding in the same year led to the coordination of emergency aid operations and localized support networks; the duplex crisis, intersecting with ossified state infrastructure for relief, birthed hyper-local collaboration (Elamin, 2025). It was when the price of bread soared in late 2018 that these collaborative networks rapidly developed into political organizations. These networks integrated everybody, in turn systematically mobilizing citizens and circumventing state security which could not compete with the overwhelming geographic range, nor physical volume of protest; thus, the very formation of the RCs, fundamentally, redefined the spatial and demographic dynamics of Sudanese resistance.

By bridging class divisions and uniting urban centers with peripheral neighborhoods, the RCs cultivated an unprecedented national solidarity. A capsule of this deep-seated harmony is presented by the April 2019 sit-in, held on the anniversary of Nimeiry's fall within Khartoum's military headquarters. The cross-regional mobilization of the RCs was crowned during their sit-in with their cultivation of Jaw al-Houb (atmosphere of love), fortifying their movement as a bastion of harmonious, intersectional power. The sit-in served as a microcosm of the broader cultural transformation the 2019 revolution brought to Sudan; one that unlocked the previously suppressed artistic expressions of music, dance, and public art (Awad, 2022). The band, Aswat Al Madina described how music during the revolution was a power in search of beauty (Diego, 2025). Beauty and hope, together, existed within a soundscape that allowed for marginalized groups to articulate their identities and dissent, in turn reinforcing the desire for collective resolve: the 2019 sit-in was the preeminent platform for this defiance.

Appealing to Charles Tilly's Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment Framework, the RCs overwhelming population, unity, eloquence, and commitment to *silmiyya* dramatically expanded their capacity to undermine Bashir and his enduring state brutality (Awad, 2022). Furthermore, the complete dedication to *madaniya* throughout the RCs framed them as a de novo entity, untainted by military patronage, who could, profoundly, assert their self-actualized sovereignty through collective legitimacy. Upon reflection on *silmiyya*, one interviewee shared that *"[non-violence] is the inclusive way to demand political change or protect civilian participation … [thus] non-violence became a principle that united people across different regions"* (IWCSO4). Our interviewees consistently credited that, through the decentralization of protest and regional and class unification, it was, substantially, the RCs who systematically dismantled Bashir's security state, which culminated in his historic removal in April 2019.

From Political Agitation to Survival: The 2021 Coup and the Emergency Response Rooms

The familiar pattern of military usurpation, however, tragically recurred in October 2021, after

General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) executed a coup that dissolved the most hopeful and successful civilian transitional government in Sudan's history, seeking to derail the nation's path toward *madaniya*. Moreover, this coup eventually fractured the fragile alliance between the SAF and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), which consequently plunged Sudan into a devastating multi-scalar (ongoing) war on April 15th 2023. Far from a simple factional dispute, this conflict represents an avowedly counter-revolutionary attempt to preserve extractive, parasitic economic systems: both the SAF, and RSF are heavily armed corporate syndicates vying for monopolistic control over Sudan's political economy (Abbas, 2024). They seek to maintain, and arguably supersede, the modalities of Bashir's racial capitalism and his neoliberal model of extraction. Their violent securing of gold, uranium, and prime agricultural land regards civilians and neighborhoods as geographic obstacles to be, brutally, cleared for the enrichment of these syndicates and their foreign sponsors; replicating the predatory, racialized dynamics long inflicted in Darfur, and violently expanding them to engulf the entire nation.

This catastrophic war has thrust the RCs into an existential crisis. Neighbourhoods have been transformed into active battlegrounds, and civilians have been subjected to grave human rights violations; sexual violence has been widespread, and starvation has been deployed as a weapon of war (Human Rights Watch, 2026). Satellite images from El-Fasher reveal the depravity of such bloodshed, while scholars warn of genocide in El-Obeid and El-Geneina (Hudson, 2026).

One of our interviewees noted that the RSF and SAF fear the RCs' aptitude to mobilize communities, *"so they become very brutal against the committees"* (IMCSO1). The RCs subsequently pivoted their primary focus from political agitation to mutual survival, establishing Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), grounded in the traditional practice of *Nafeer*, to address the vacuum created by the total collapse of state infrastructure and international aid delivery. Volunteers at ERRs have been subjected to all sorts of atrocities, one interviewee who had worked apart of her local ERR shared that, *"we have a lot of cases of rape of volunteers, people going missing, and so on"* (IWRC3).

Despite intense repression, the evolution of the RCs into ERRs represents one of the most significant civic developments in modern Sudanese history. By devolving power to the neighborhood level and prioritizing collective well-being over elite political maneuvering, the ERRs and the RCs alike, do not merely mitigate long-term suffering, they profoundly reconceptualize democratic participation in Sudan; forging a sui generis symbiotic relationship between civilians, political participation, and revolution. Such a relationship not only actively subverts the historic authoritarian practices of

Sudan's military dictators, but ontologically shifts the parameters of democracy; no longer is democratic participation defined by hierarchical repressive dictators, or fragile elite transitions, instead, the RCs demonstrate that even amidst war, the core ideal of *madaniya* endures fluidly, accommodating where necessary to support the will of the people. Thus, the Sudanese democracy envisioned by the RCs — inherently, an organic tribune of grassroots, subaltern emissaries — exists not as a utopian, abstract political conception, but as an active, daily practice of anti-colonial, anti-racial, revolutionary civic survival; simultaneously, prevailing as an authentic expression of sovereignty which derives directly from the people. The concluding words from one of our interviewees encapsulates the crux of the RCs, *madaniya*, and Sudanism: *"I have very high hopes and dreams, that eventually, no matter when this happens, we will have a country that represents all of us, and we will be very happy"* (IWRC3).

Part II - Horizontality and Local Coordination: A Background on the RC's Formalization and Structure

To understand the emergence and effectiveness of the RCs in Sudan's revolutionary uprisings, it is important to historicize the locally-rooted and non-hierarchical coordination of different groups of working peoples in Sudan. As political scientist Mahder Serekberhan poignantly outlines, *"unlike hierarchical ("Stalinist") forms of organizing that were adopted by the Communist Party of Sudan (CPS) and the Sudanese Women's Union (SWU)—both of which were instrumental in the 1964 and 1985 popular movements,"* the 2018/19 uprising borrowed experiences from *"concrete labor (social) processes that distinguish industry work from precarious labor and housework"* (2025, 733). As a result of this more diffused experience of oppression—in contrast to the institutional hierarchies of command embedded within industry labor—the RCs developed a style of autonomous, horizontally-led organizing different from the one adopted by railway workers. Indeed, while most RCs eventually came under an umbrella RC for organizational purposes, each RC was neither unitary nor static. Each neighborhood or locality was represented by one RC which brought forth different grievances and priorities for social and political change. As one of our interviewees explained, *"The structure is decentralized and based on collective coordination rather than hierarchy, so different RCs are responsible for specific tasks depending on their needs and the capacity of the community"* (IWCSO4). In this sense, the autonomous functioning of the RCs enabled all sections of society to organize around specific demands. Thus, while horizontally-led, the RCs remained incredibly dynamic and flexible to organize beyond ideological, ethnic, and religious divides.

Trust and Locality: RCs as Interpersonal Engagements

As political scientist Mai Hassan posits, the RCs served as "connective leaders" by building trust and fostering a sense of community (2024, 166). Locally implanted and inwards looking, RC volunteers made sure to build trusting relationships with the community they represented. As one interviewee puts it, her work in the committee was *"always about gaining the trust of different people in the neighborhoods"* (IWCSO4). Through regular informal meetings, each RC built a network of country-wide organizations working autonomously, yet also in coordination across different scales. As Serekberhan explains, such an interdependent structure created a political process which included *"the most oppressed and exploited populations"* (2024, 737).

To better understand how these decentralized polities functioned, it is useful to map out the different scales through which RCs coordinated. At its most basic (local) level, individual RCs are organized around the immediate need of their neighborhoods—families, neighbors, members of the same village. Where coordination across neighborhoods became necessary, RCs established state-level coordinating bodies that facilitated communication and synchronized protest actions. These intermediary structures, therefore, functioned primarily as mechanisms of horizontal coordination rather than as bodies with authority to command the political agendas of individual RCs. Sometimes, RCs had specialized teams, which included *"logistics, media [or] humanitarian response"* (IWCSO4). Across all RCs, however, a general sentiment of justice and resistance loomed. As one interviewee explained *"[we] said [we] were fed up, the system is no longer going to serve our future [and] is no longer putting us part of the decision making. This is the first goal we all agreed upon"* (IRMRC1). By dispersing decision-making, the Sudanese people created a bottom-up participatory process which delegitimized the state and its military apparatus, shifting the balance toward the overthrow of al-Bashir and the enactment of *Madaniya*.

A Derridean Claim to Sovereignty

In doing so, the RCs effectively claimed and asserted one singular truth: that the people were sovereign. As legal scholar Linda S. Bishai posits, in a Derridean *"coup de force,"* the committees' refusal to recognize the *Inqaz* government as sovereign was itself *"an act of sovereign power—a power that resides in the people when they choose to claim it"* (2023, 1480). Whilst Derrida's famous iteration referred to the American Declaration of Independence's birth of the American people via its phrase "we the people," the RCs action can be understood as a "daily practice" of self-actualization via denial rather than "a single written document" of "self-creation" (Bishai, 2023, 1479). This *"coup de force,"* is further evidenced in the committee's

mantra of *three no's*: "No Partnership, No Negotiation, No Legitimacy," which sought to set itself apart from any political parties, professional or civil associations (Alneel, 2021). To make matters even clearer, the Khartoum committee declared in their 2022 Charter, that there is "no room for legitimacy for totalitarian regimes" (Proposal for a Charter to Establish the Authority of the People). Through this political cry, the RCs effectively stripped al-Bashir's government of its legitimacy—and, in Weberian terms, its claim to the legitimate monopoly of violence[6]. From there on, no state repression or violence could restore the junta's desire to rule as coercion increasingly exposed rather than substantiated its claim to legitimate authority. The mantra of three no's represented an ultimate break from Sudan's authoritarian past where military violence reigned, and wealth and power concentrated in the hands of traditional riverine elites.

Diversity in Action

What makes the RCs such a fascinating democratic alternative is not merely its decentralized structure, but also, its ability to transcend Sudan's colonial past which sought to divide socio-ethnic sections of Sudanese civil society. In a country that has been called the "microcosm of Africa"— Sudan has more that 597 societal groups and 100 languages—citizens were able to organize around one single political goal: Madaniya (Musa 2018; Elradi 2018).

While the topic of socio-ethnic diversity came up throughout our interviews, each interviewee articulated the multi-ethnic, racial, religious, and generational project of the RCs. Notably, when asked about the challenges of political organizing, one interviewee answered,

> *"when we talk about [my hometown] Khartoum, there is a mass variety of people from different areas, ethnicities and backgrounds… But it's always about […] making sure that we have as many different people represented, so that we can help all the neighborhoods build their own RCs or ERRs" (IWCSO4).*

In this sense, the RCs did not seek to overcome differences through political homogenization, like its colonial past. Instead, the RCs relied upon broad civilian support, across different sections of society, enacting a *"fully functioning micro society"* (Elhassan, 2019) and "mini state" (Hassan, Mai and Kadouda 2019, 100). Describing the strong sense of solidarity and the infamous Khartoum sit-in in 2019, Muez Ahmen, a strike organizer told reporters, *"I can confirm that the 110 branches of the Bank of Khartoum are striking, also the banks of Faisal, Farmers, Animal resources, Alnilain, Exports development, Sudanese-French bank, Albaraka and others are all striking"* (Amin 2019). At the sit-in, chants about Sudan's matriarchal histories erupted alongside songs, slogans, and symbols that drew on Sudan's diverse African, Arab, and Islamic traditions. Women, labor workers, professionals

[6] In his lecture "Politics as a Vocation" (1918), the German sociologist Max Weber defines the state as a "human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory."

(lawyers, doctors, judges), occupied the same political space, not simply as participants in a national protest, but as active producers of its political culture. As Sudanese activist Yasir Arman put it, *"the discourse of this generation is generally embracing diversity, equal citizenship, anti-racism"* (2019, 1). By reflecting on the historical lessons of Sudan, the RCs mobilized across divergences, and re-negotiated sites of equal political participation.

Coordinated Discoordination: A Visualization of RC's Strategy

Whilst the RCs' diversity represented a thrust toward a multi-ethnic and inclusive democratic future for Sudan, its diversity also translated an equally important logistical advantage on the ground: if one RC was targeted by the police, another RC would mobilize to organize a counter protest in another locale drawing security forces away and alleviating pressure on the targeted committee. As Hassan explains, such tactics allowed the movement to absorb repression without allowing it to become concentrated in any single locality, thereby sustaining mobilization over the long run. The movement's dispersed social and geographic composition thus functioned not only as a democratic ideal, but also as a practical source of resilience: the repression of one node could generate mobilization elsewhere rather than bringing the wider movement to a halt. In this sense, the RCs performed what Hassan calls, *"coordinated dis-coordination"* which refers *"to the organization of distinct collective action among dissidents outside the public, main event"* (2023, 166). As Abdulhafeez, one member of the Khartoum RC explained:

> *"Their plan was simple. If Wad Nobawi was out on the streets and came under the grip of the police and security, they relied on the committee in the other two neighborhoods to hit the streets and take the pressure off them. "We called Wad Nobawi, Beit Al-Mall and Abu Rouf the 'terror triangle' because we were organized and had each other's back" (Abbas, 2019).*

"Coordinated discoordination" was not simply a tactical arrangement; it was built on a dense infrastructure of interpersonal trust, compounded with what our interviewees termed as a sense of profound optimism:

> *"[...] As Sudanese, we have a high competence to resistance itself. We have a high tolerance. After everything we have been through, we still laugh and we try to live and have a sense of life. I do believe in Sudanese tolerance, which is one of our most important survival methods. I think this is the only thing we have guaranteed so we are going to stick to that" (IWCSO4).*

Optimism was essential to sustaining the trust on which "coordinated discoordination" depended on. It enabled activists to understand repression not as evidence of the movement's failure, but as a casualty that could be endured and collectively overcome. In this sense, optimism reinforced the expectation that others would continue to mobilize even when the immediate prospects of success were uncertain. Trust in term gave this optimism

an organizational form. The ability of one committee to mobilize on behalf of another required members to act with the expectation that support would be reciprocated—that no neighborhood would be left to confront the security forces alone. Trust, therefore, enabled the proliferation of daily sporadic actions of protest in different regions, resembling *"guerilla-style"* attacks on military power (Serekberhan, 2025, 734).

This multiplicity and unpredictability across multiple locations, combined with the diversity of the RCs themselves, meant that protestors were extremely versed in their neighborhood's physical and social geography. In this case, localized knowledge was not merely useful for navigating repression; it enabled protestors to collectively transform the spaces in which political action took place. As historian Willow J. Berridge explains, protestors *"created a new cityscape as they took control of the streets, built their barricades and redirected traffic, used private spaces for public mobilization, slipped in and out of alleyways to escape and outflank the security forces, and redecorated the walls and bridges of Khartoum [and beyond]"* (2022, 17-18). The revolution thus did not take simply unfold within the pre-existing urban landscape. Protestors actively reshaped those spaces, turning everyday sites into arenas of political and democratic participation. As such, societal inclusion was not only symbolic of the revolution's protest; it was actively and collectively claimed to reshape the spaces in which political life was practiced.

Part III - Meaningful participation, activities and challenges

The RCs that spread across the country were defined, first and foremost, by who took part in them and how. Composed overwhelmingly of young people, they created a channel through which a generation historically shut out of formal political life could participate directly in decision-making. Khalafallah et al. (2025) note that membership of the RCs is drawn mostly from young people, yet transcends ethnicity, class and other social divides. Such a description was brought out repeatedly by respondents.

One former member of the RCs estimated that roughly 95% of RC members were young, describing them as *"very energetic, flexible when it comes to decision making," in contrast to an older political class that had "been there for ages… for so many centuries"* without producing change (IMRC1). This generational reading is consistent with the literature: Khalafallah et al. (2025) trace the RCs' mobilization to a generation raised under repressive governance, whose economic and political grievances against al-Bashir's regime found an outlet the traditional party system could not offer. El-Battahani (2021) similarly describes local RC's membership as drawn mainly from young, unemployed people across socio-economic classes, and notes that the movement deliberately sought to transcend party-

political divides. Malik (2022)'s interviews report that membership was dominated by students and recent college graduates, noting that one interviewee described these young people as *"notable for their audacity and commitment, both of which contributed significantly to the victory of the nonviolent December Revolution"* (Malik, 2022, p. 1501).

Women's participation, while less visible in formal leadership, was also extremely significant, both during the 2018/2019 revolution and during the current civil war. One female respondent from the RCs recounted that although women were "leading the overall processes" at the local level of the RCs and ERRs, they were rarely shown in leadership positions; she described going door to door across more than 200 neighborhoods to inform residents of the movement and build trust for their inclusion in the central RC, noting that *"although there were men with us, most of us were women but we still were not represented at the leadership level"* (IWRC3). The same dynamic, she said, carried into the ERRs, where women did the bulk of the work at the local level without corresponding recognition at higher levels of the structure (IWRC3). One female respondent from civil society recalled that "the community trusted the women more than before" and that women *"had a big role at that time,"* particularly once wartime displacement pushed many committee members into ERRs (IWCSO4).

Women, who had, historically, been "constrained as secondary" made up the majority of protestors, looking to dismantle, both, the patriarchal and oppressive authoritarian structures long enforced by the Inqaz regime (Bishai, 2023). As highlighted in African Feminism, women were not merely participants in protest but were the strategic backbone of liberation that crafted nationwide harmony (African Feminism, 2021).

Alaa Salah, the activist dubbed The Lady of Liberty and a Nubian Queen, became an emblem of the third revolution after photos of her dressed in a toub, reminiscent of the Kandakas, gained virality; atop a car, images of Salah conducting protestors through poetic cadence were hailed as symbolic of the RCs adroit nature to mobilize Sudan's pluralist citizenry, particularly through women (Salah, 2019). Salah's statement,

> *"My journey to you was forged by a long line of Sudanese women who have fought for peace and justice in our communities for decades, well before we arrived at this important moment in the future of Sudan. I wouldn't be here without them."*

Portrays the vigor of the RCs, and the essence of *silmiyya* which operates concomitantly with the harmonious synthesis of historical reverence and contemporary liberation, all directed to attain *madaniya* and cultivate a nascent, holistic ideal of democratic participation with Sudan (Salah, 2019). It is relevant to note that some are critical of Salah's virality, seeing her as a figure of ethnic

dominance which in turn obscures women of marginalized communities (Bishai, 2023).

Young people and women involved had a central role in leadership and decision making, and *"this created an opportunity for a new generation of Sudanese activists to participate directly in shaping the political and social decisions,"* as said by one of our interviewees (IWCSO4).

Activities and impact

Respondents consistently distinguished between the RCs' activities before the outbreak of war in April 2023 and after. Before the war, the committees' work was built around non-violent, community-facing methods: peaceful protest, sit-ins and sustained dialogue in public spaces. One respondent from the RCs recalled that, *"before the war, there was protesting, and also we coordinate with higher officials that are interested in the revolution, we wrote for them a paper on disobedience,"* alongside sit-ins that functioned as informal public forums where officials *"came up as a forum so they can listen to the vision [of] youth generations that want to change the system"* (IMRC1).

This non-violent orientation also had a digital dimension. Khalafallah et al. (2025) describe how the RCs and the Sudanese Professionals' Association used platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to coordinate protests, document abuses and sustain momentum despite repeated government internet shutdowns, deploying hashtags such as *#TasgutBas* (*"Just Fall"*), *#SudanUprising* and *#BlueForSudan* to draw international attention and mobilize diaspora support. Online space also became, in itself, a forum for political debate: the RCs used it to draft political charters in a participatory manner, articulating a vision of decentralized, bottom-up governance that rejected the centralized state structure inherited from colonial rule (Khalafallah et al. 2025). Malik (2022) situates this online activism within a longer trajectory of connective action in Sudan and all over the world, drawing, between others, from the Arab Spring. This connective infrastructure did not go uncontested: al-Bashir's government ran its own countermobilization online, including a "Cyber Jihad Unit" that used surveillance and staged provocations to discredit and identify activists (Malik, 2022). Even so, digital tools remained central to how the revolution was framed abroad. At the same time, Malik (2022) stresses that the revolution's digital and physical dimensions were mutually reinforcing rather than substitutes for one another: when the government imposed internet blackouts, organisers fell back on door-to-door mobilization and leaflet distribution, tactics credited with sustaining the "millions march" of June 30, 2019, one of the largest demonstrations in Sudan's history.

The commitment to non-violence of the Sudanese extended to how committees engaged with the security services themselves. One former RC participant, for example, described members appealing to soldiers' self-interest rather than

confronting them on ideology — a confrontation that could have led to violent exchange — telling military personnel, "you are not benefiting anything from violating us, you are part of us…" and asking, *"is your salary enough for you, are you satisfied with what you're gaining from the government?"* (IMRC2) According to the interviewee, some security personnel responded to this messaging by refraining from violence against protesters.

A second major strand of activity was civic education and population awareness, which respondents repeatedly identified as the RCs' most lasting achievement. One former member of the RCs described touring *"very remote villages and areas in order to teach people about civic education," on the grounds that safeguarding the revolution required citizens who understood "that their participation in public life is their right and not something that can be taken for granted"* (IMRC2). Another interviewee illustrated the scale of this shift through the words of an older neighbor: *"There was an old man living in my same neighborhood [who] told me that I didn't know a lot of injustice was happening in my country like this until you came up… you gave us a lot of information we were lacking"* (IMRC1). This shift in public consciousness and rights awareness was, in the eyes of several interviewees, one of the RCs' most durable and significant legacies.

Alongside awareness-raising, committees ran a parallel track of service delivery, often through a dedicated sub-body, referred to by interviewees as the "committee for services and change," that worked to secure water, healthcare, education and food distribution, and to pressure local government representatives where services fell short. In one of Khartoum's poorer districts, a female interviewee from civil society described this work as transformative for an area previously associated with crime: *"two years after our RC work, the area was accessible for everyone,", citing the creation of six community libraries, two of which were dedicated to children* (IWRC3).

The outbreak of war in 2023 forced a sharp reorientation of the RCs' work. As one interviewee summarized, *"after the war everything has changed totally… most of them displaced, immigrated, arrested; the remain[der] integrated with emergency rooms… they joined the humanitarian aid, they volunteer there to provide service to the community"* (IMRC1). The RCs have sustained their activism well beyond the 2019 transition by adapting their role to crisis conditions, combining ongoing political vision with humanitarian assistance (Khalafallah et al. 2025). Amidst what international bodies recognize as the world's largest humanitarian crisis, the ERRs have reimagined humanitarian aid. Grounded in the traditional Sudanese practice of *Nafeer*, the ERRs operate with an organic legitimacy that international relief agencies struggle to achieve (Otim, 2025). The ERRs provide a comprehensive matrix of crisis care: ranging from communal kitchens, safe spaces for women, emergency medical evacuations, and vital

psychological support for traumatized populations (Otim, 2025).

The ERRs function as neutral humanitarian bodies operating at the neighborhood level, running community soup kitchens and food baskets, and coordinating medical support, water and electricity provision, and shelter. They also carry out educational activities and social support, including establishing safe spaces for women and children, and in some cases coordinate evacuations from areas under active fire.

The ERRs that absorbed much of the RCs' membership after 2023 retained the same horizontal, neighborhood-rooted logic, but formalized it into a multi-tiered structure: local "grassroots rooms" fed into locality-level rooms, which in turn fed into state-level rooms, with thirteen of Sudan's eighteen states eventually coordinating through a national Localization Coordination Council (LCC) (IWCSO4). Needs were identified from the base level upward rather than dictated by donors, and coordination extended to a standardized internal accountability system. This structure allowed individual ERRs to decline donor priorities that did not match locally identified needs (IWCSO4). Funding for this work came from a mix of international donors and diaspora support: one respondent described her area's ERR running over 200 community soup kitchens in 2023, rising to 400 by 2025, and securing approximately USD 1.5 million for local projects (IWRC3).

Challenges

Interviewees pointed to several obstacles which limited the RCs and ERRs' impact, before and after the war. A structural challenge frequently raised was decentralization itself: the same horizontal, locally rooted structure that gave the RCs legitimacy and resilience also made coordination difficult (IWCSO4).

Women's representation emerged as a second recurring challenge. Although several female interviewees stressed that women played a central and trusted role in mobilization, community engagement and, later, in the ERRs, this contribution was not matched by recognition at leadership level but by risks, barriers, and stigma. One respondent described how, in her area, women led the overall organizing process at the local level, yet remained largely absent from leadership positions. She attributed this gap both to community attitudes and to the specific security risks women faced (IWRC3). This dynamic is rooted in a broader stigma restricting women's movement during conflict, driven by families' fears of rape and kidnapping, compounded by cases of volunteers being sexually assaulted or going missing (IWRC3). Economic pressure reinforces these barriers: as women increasingly became sole providers for their families amid the conflict, committees lost volunteers who could no longer sustain unpaid organizing work (IWRC3).

Externally, even where the RCs sustained a non-violent approach, they operated in a context of

severe repression. Khalafallah et al. (2025) note that al-Bashir's government responded to protests between 2018 and 2019 with mass detentions and security forces armed with live ammunition, rubber bullets and tear gas, alongside a strategy of publicly framing demonstrators as violent rioters or "foreign agents" to justify the use of force. This power asymmetry between the RCs' stated commitment to peaceful resistance and the state violence they faced has continued into the current war, forcing RC members to operate as humanitarian volunteers under active bombardment rather than as political organisers.

War-related fragmentation was described as the most severe challenge facing the RCs' future. One former member explained that many original committee members had been displaced, emigrated, or had been arrested, leaving a core who lack mobilizational capabilities: "they need motivation to come up again to the street" even though *"the vision is there, everything is there"* (IMRC1). A smaller number of former members, he added, had joined the military entirely, adopting *"a totally different"* mindset from the one they had shared as activists. This loss of members, united with tension within the movement, complicated efforts by remaining committees to maintain a unified political line.

Finally, respondents pointed to a broader, longer-term challenge rooted in Sudan's political history: decades of authoritarian governance had left much of the population unaware of its rights, a condition earlier regimes had actively used to sustain their power. Even where the RCs succeeded in raising awareness and delivering services, this legacy of impunity and low civic knowledge continues to constrain the movement's ability to hold successive governments accountable. These internal and external pressures help illustrate the strength of the RCs, which, as Khalafallah et al. (2025) argue, have kept their democratic aspirations despite the current war, even as their capacity to act on them has been severely tested.

Conclusion

Across this research, we have traced how Sudan's Resistance Committees and Emergency Response Rooms emerged, organized, and who has carried them forward. The report first situated the RCs within Sudan's longer cycle of revolution and coup, and showed how *silmiyya* became a thread connecting successive generations of resistance. It showed how the RCs' evolution into ERRs amid Sudan's civil war reflects not a retreat from politics but its continuation by other means. Building on this history, the report turned to the RCs' internal structure, demonstrating how their horizontal, non-hierarchical organization reflects a refusal to recognize successive juntas, and how ethnic, religious and regional diversity became a source of resilience rather than fragmentation. Lastly, the report asked who has driven this work: overwhelmingly young people, animated by a conviction that the existing political system no longer served their future, working alongside women whose trust and labor were widely

acknowledged by respondents even as formal leadership lagged behind.

Taken together, these findings challenge the two dominant framings this research set out to question. First, Sudanese youth are not passive casualties of conflict. They are, in the words of our respondents, the generation "destined to break the cycle of coups," and they are already practicing the civilian governance many observers assume can only follow a negotiated transition. Second, humanitarian response does not need to wait on state capacity or international access. The ERRs' adaptation into a functioning emergency infrastructure suggests that locally rooted and culturally grounded models of mutual aid can operate with a legitimacy and reach that many external actors struggle to replicate.

This is not an uncritical account. The same decentralization that gave the RCs their resilience also made coordination difficult once formal transitional structures emerged. Women's role was not matched by decision-making power. Displacement, arrest and conscription have fractured a movement whose vision, as one respondent puts it, "is there," even when the capacity to act on it has been severely tested. Yet these tensions do not undermine the RCs' significance. They are part of what any serious attempt to learn from this model, rather than romanticize it, must reckon with.

This research suggests that reimagining democratic governance and humanitarian action in Sudan, and in fragile settings more broadly, requires taking youth-led, horizontally organized structures seriously as sources of political and operational insight. The RCs and ERRs offer something more valuable to policymakers and practitioners than an operational structure. They prove that even under the most severe conditions, legitimacy can be built from below, and that Sudan's youth are already doing it.

Recommendations

1. Further research on women's and youth's meaningful participation.

Women's representation emerged as a recurring challenge. Although women were described as central and trusted actors in mobilization, community engagement and the ERRs, this was not matched by recognition at leadership level but by risks, barriers and stigma, including security threats, restrictions on movement and economic pressure. We recommend dedicated research centering women's own accounts, including women inside Sudan and in leadership and non-leadership roles, on how these barriers interact and what would enable women to hold decision-making roles. We also recommend further research on youth participation that does not treat youth as a uniform category. Such research should disaggregate by age, gender, location, socio-economic background and role within the

committee, and explore how these differences shape access to decision-making, exposure to risk and the form participation takes.Taken together, these findings challenge the two dominant framings this research set out to question. First, Sudanese youth are not passive casualties of conflict. They are, in the words of our respondents, the generation *"destined to break the cycle of coups,"* and they are already practicing the civilian governance many observers assume can only follow a negotiated transition. Second, humanitarian response does not need to wait on state capacity or international access.

2. Better support to ERRS through strengthened localization and protection of volunteers.

This starts by direct and flexible funding to ERRs to reach those doing the work without passing through layers of intermediaries. Localization goes beyond implementation roles and offers actual decision-making power. Furthermore, volunteers need all-encompassing protection in the face of targeted violence. For example, protection measures should take into account gender-specific risks such as sexual violence.

3. Peacebuilding to curtail perpetuating conflict.

Fawzi Ahmed maintains that due to the nature of the current conflict, insofar as *"the collapse of governance, [and] the militarization of politics ... durable peace will require long-term investment in reconciliation, inclusive governance, security sector reform, accountability, and economic recovery"* (Ahmed, 2026). Ahmed acknowledges the insufficiency of isolated peace agreements which have, historically, failed to address the institutional groundwork of brutality that, inherently, breeds instability; referencing the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement which *"reinforced the perception that political power is achieved through violence"* (Ibid).

The Revolutionary Charter for Establishing People's Power (TRCEPP), a product of the December Revolution, has been hailed as *"the most revolutionary text ever written"* (Politically Depressed, 2026). TRCEPP is a constitutional vision that was drafted by the RCs in 2023, outlining the need for a non-hierarchal, horizontal governmental roadmap that utilizes transversality, rejects austerity, promotes the redistribution of wealth, and ensures that, both, accountability and justice are delivered so that political processes are considered legitimate (The Revolutionary Charter for Establishing People's Power, 2023). The Charter declares itself as *"the first step towards transcending the chronic Sudanese crisis which ultimately plunged Sudan into a degenerate state, marked by civil conflicts; famines and armies of mercenaries, a state completely stripped off its national sovereignty"* (Ibid). Later in the text, the charter maintains that the persisting effects of colonialism — stemming from the vestiges of Turco-Egyptian and Anglo-Egyptian rule that influenced decades of despotism — *"engineer[s] a neo-social fabric to be built on colonial terms, out of the preexisting kingdoms and local states marked by ethnic, religious and cultural diversity"*

(Ibid). Such a complex social condition cannot be overcome by a monoscalar solution; the RCs advocacy for civic education, for example, is imperative but a detailed people's history is but one prong toward *"dismantling the political grip of the defunct regime" that must exist in conjunction with a myriad of other reforms"* (Ibid).

Both the ongoing war and Sudan's previous military dictatorships instrumentalized polemic ethnic binaries — contributing toward some marginalized communities viewing one another through, what Ahmed describes as, *"the lens of political or ethnic suspicion"* — which fractured Sudanism and sought to prevent unification (Ahmed, 2026). The future political order must include marginalized groups, namely, those from civil society (both Sudan's center and its rural peripheries) and women; such inclusivity increases the durability of institutional reform (Ibid). The RCs and ERRs alike present the astute power of integration, community-driven dialogue, and education in understanding and, subsequently, supporting local needs; the immense plurality of Sudan, in cultural, ethnic, religious, and historic dimensions does not allow for homogenous models of assistance: local ownership is imperative.

Ahmed's suggestions are echoed within the policy recommendations of Thania Paffenholz and Nick Ross who ask *"how can the armed actors be 'tamed' in such a way that the civilian led process can be viable and durable?"* (2026). They explore the reasonable means to include armed actors in the peace process: i) to engage armed actors each or jointly in a separate delegation that would be bound by the same rules and procedures applied to all other delegations; ii) for armed actors to only participate in the Jeddah process as a separate security track, possibly supported by granting SAF/RSF observer status in the Intra-Sudanese dialogue; iii) finally, proxy representation at the Intra-Sudanese Dialogue via political actors that are close to the armed actors, much like the Northern Irish peace talks with Sinn Féin acting as proxy for the IRA, the armed actor (Ibid). Ultimately, the lasting success of any of these approaches relies on the support of the international community and regional actors like the African Union; above all, however, their support must assist the civilian-led peace process — which is paramount to protect the agenda of mandaniya, and deliver genuine democracy in Sudan — interference from foreign bodies diametrically opposes the work of the RCs, risking the possibility of further embedding neo-colonial institutions. TRCEPP must be read alongside its historical context, emerging directly from a revolution, and as one of our interviewees maintains, *"[there] has never been any political party or organization that can unite the whole population like the resistance committees",* thus their voices and demands must be heard (IMRC1).



Figure 2. Summary of Key Recommendations

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