Chapter 14

Egypt, Syria and Sudan: results and prospects

Were there experiences during the two waves of uprisings discussed here which could be compared to the historical examples outlined in the previous chapter? Do any of the revolutionary councils and popular committees thrown up in the heat of these revolutions merit comparison with the Chilean *cordones*, the Iranian *shoras*, the Polish Inter-Factory Strike Committees or the Russian *soviets*? In this chapter we will discuss three contrasting case studies from Egypt, Syria and Sudan, examining examples of independent unions which exercised workers' control to some workplaces and the neighbourhood Popular Committees in Egypt, the Local Coordinating Committees and Revolutionary Councils in Syria and Sudan's Resistance Committees in the revolutionary process.

These bodies all emerged out of revolutionary mobilisation from below, and like their predecessors discussed in the previous chapter, all showed some potential to develop along the axes of permanent revolution, moving back and forth from mobilising for disruption to the construction of political and social alternatives, crossing the porous membrane separating the spheres of 'economics' and 'politics', and transforming unevenness in the social formation and class structure into levers of revolution. But this potential was only ever partially realised.

In Egypt, examples of workers' control were restricted to small numbers of workplaces without forging strong connections with the mass movement in the streets, and the efforts to build neighbourhood-based revolutionary committees which could mobilise to defend the revolution fizzled out after a few months.

From one perspective, the local revolutionary councils which governed Syria's rebel municipalities presented a far more politically developed challenge to the existing state. These were instances of rebel government under siege from the old regime, holes in the fabric of the state's claim to sovereignty. However, these civilian bodies had to negotiate power with armed forces on the rebel side which were at best indifferent - and often actively hostile—to any form of democratic and popular control from below.

Moreover, seen from a different vantage point the Syrian experience of revolutionary democracy was strikingly *underdeveloped* compared to the experience of Egypt and Sudan. Unlike its counterparts there, the Ba'athist state in Syria was able to stop workers in key public services, transport networks, government ministries and major industrial workplaces developing a democratic challenge to its authority from below *inside* these institutions.

The Sudanese Resistance Committees, which are rooted in mobilising committees at neighbourhood level, have begun to articulate visions of radical reforms to the existing state,[139] but by the time of writing had not been able to break down the internal structures of its armed core.

In fact, that goal did not even figure in the discussions of most Sudanese activists about revolutionary strategy, where instead the emphasis was laid on taming the existing national army and the state's militias.[140] Nevertheless, the Resistance Committees demonstrated that it was possible to combine effective mobilisation in the streets with an enlargement of the space for popular democracy and a form of revolutionary leadership which clearly articulated an alternative to the reformist opposition parties hoping to negotiate their way back into power with the generals.

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139 Alneel, 2022

140 Alneel & Abdelrahman 2022.

Egypt: separating economics and politics

The experience of Egypt in 2011 and 2012 showed the promise and the limits of many 'spontaneous' forms of popular organisation during a revolutionary crisis. It demonstrated the difference that the intervention of organised revolutionaries makes in a revolutionary crisis, but also the problem of generalising from examples without sufficient numbers. Perhaps above all it illustrated how the separation between "economic" forms of struggle and the political dynamics of the revolution reasserts itself, even in the midst of surges of strikes. The popular uprising of 2011 built on years of interlaced social and political struggles, including waves of mass strikes which had broadened the organisational experience of millions of working class Egyptians. However, the relative inexperience of activists and organisers combined with the political dominance of conservative reformist forces (especially the opposition Islamist parties) proved a huge obstacle to the development of forms of popular revolutionary organisation in the workplaces and neighbourhoods which could have stopped or at least challenged the slide towards counter-revolution.

The major sit-ins in Tahrir Square and other iconic locations in city centres showed some of the possibilities for self-organisation by ordinary people—with the establishment of their pavement pharmacies, makeshift field hospitals and clean-up squads (who piled up bags of rubbish and put a sign on top saying "National Democratic Party HQ" in a corner of the square overlooked by the burnt-out hulk of the real NDP building).[141] There were security teams and volunteer checkpoints at the entrances to the sit-in, and a widely attested absence of violence or abuse between protesters inside, at least at the height of the 18-day long uprising. Tahrir Square was the scene of extraordinary displays of solidarity between Muslim and Christian Egyptians, particularly on 'Revolution Sunday', 6 February 2011.[142] Graffiti of the symbol of the 1919 Revolution showing the crescent embracing the cross appeared in chalk

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141 This and other examples cited here are taken from my own observations of Tahrir Square when I was there between 5-6 February 2011.

142 Alexander, 2011b.

around the square and Muslim protesters kept watch while Christians celebrated public prayers.

However, the internal organisation of the sit-ins did not generate new forms of popular revolutionary organisation. In Tahrir Square, the organisation of the perimeter security and the setting up of stages and tents did not evolve much beyond tacit cooperation between existing opposition organisations, or rather between specific sections of existing organisations, sometimes acting in defiance of their national leadership. This was the case during the early phase of the 18-day uprising, when Muslim Brotherhood youth activists were clearly an organised presence in Tahrir Square, in opposition to the leadership of the Brotherhood's insistence that the organisation was not supporting the protests.

The Square was an important space for more plebiscitary forms of popular democracy where organisations and individuals could test the mood of the crowds through call and response from the stages with chants and slogans. The crowds in the Square could thus shape events and sometimes force reformist leaders to respond to demands which gained traction among the crowds.[143] But using the sit-ins as a space for collective deliberation and discussion which could result in actual decisions and establish expectations of democratic accountability proved difficult. One reason for this was that in contrast to the Sudanese experience, the sit-ins in Egypt were relatively short-lived. The first wave of sit-ins ended with the fall of Mubarak in February, and longer-term protest encampments were not re-established until November that year.

Moreover, mobilisation for protests in the squares relied heavily on social media, especially Facebook pages and events, which sometimes substituted for 'offline' forms of popular organisation. Although Facebook pages did exhibit some similar characteristics to the physical squares themselves in

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143 The Muslim Brotherhood's leadership found this out to its cost when it entered negotiations with Mubarak's vice-president Omar Soleiman on 6 February 2011, only to be decried for betraying the revolution by activists in Tahrir Square and other sit-ins. The exit strategy for the regime which emerged from these talks turned out to be a dead-end, however, largely thanks to the escalation of the revolutionary crisis through the mass strikes beginning around the same moment. See Al Jazeera, 2011 for a contemporary report.

terms of providing spaces to test out slogans and demands (with 'likes' and comments providing rough metrics for those looking to use this method to gauge the popular mood), their centralised and opaque administration systems made this method of mobilisation harder to subject to democratic control from below.[144]

The difficulties in creating 'new' forms of popular revolutionary organisation in the squares need to be considered in relation to the development of these forms in neighbourhoods and workplaces. During the 18-day uprising in January 2011 there was an organic relationship between some poor, working class and lower-middle class urban districts and the creation of 'the squares' as revolutionary spaces.

Mass mobilisation from these districts, organised through interventions by activists in mosques and churches and through marches to turn out crowds to join the uprising was critical in tipping the balance in favour of the protesters and driving the security forces off the streets of major cities.[145] In some cases, this involved actively redirecting the energies of protesters in poor and working class districts away from localised confrontations with the police (such as besieging or burning down police stations) towards the symbolic contest over control of the streets in the city centre and the taking of the main public square.[146]

The combination of a large number of attacks on police stations with the failure of the Central Security Forces to stop crowds of protesters taking control of Tahrir Square during the 'Friday of Anger', 28 January 2011 led to a shift in tactics by the regime, Ahmed Ezzat argues:

> The police completely fragmented and the state was paralysed as its attempts to stop the protests had failed. The police had been defeated but the state's rhetoric now changed to raise fears of a security vacuum through propaganda about how crime would increase.[147]

Across all social classes the response by ordinary people

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144 Alexander, 2011a; Aouragh & Alexander, 2011.

145 Shenker, 2016, p217-8

146 Alexander & Bassiouny, 2014.

147 Alexander, 2021b.

was to organise themselves to fill the security gap, protect property and people from attack and secure food supplies for vulnerable people. Vigilance committees, makeshift barricades and checkpoints and neighbourhood security appeared across residential districts during the 18-day uprising. Often called 'Popular Committees', these bodies focussed on attempting to protect local residents and businesses following the withdrawal of the police. As Ezzat notes, while the committees appeared because of the developing revolutionary crisis, they were not formed to mobilise support *for* the revolution, even if in some cases (especially in poor and working class areas) residents were organising to protect themselves from the return of the police, who they expected to engage in looting and violence to discredit the revolution.[148] Rather they reflected the uncertainty experienced by ordinary people in the midst of strange and often frightening events.

Later, in some cases they intervened in issues such as cooking gas distribution, attempted to force the expansion or provision of basic services such as water and power, and sometimes went on to challenge the power and violence of the local police, corrupt businessmen and political figures.[149]

As Asya el-Meehy points out, they were not necessarily democratic, and in fact as time passed, tended towards a range of models of unaccountable, top-down intervention in politics—being transformed into NGOs, or GONGOs (Government sponsored NGOs) either through direct state funding or patronage, or through reliance on donations from Islamist charities. In the countryside, popular committees tended to be formed by appointment and provided a route for the reconfiguration of traditional politics, even creating spaces for the rehabilitation of members of the old ruling party.[150]

By contrast, the formation of Popular Committees for the Defence of the Revolution was an overtly political attempt by the revolutionary left to connect the neighbourhoods and the protests in the squares. Ezzat and other activists from the Revolutionary Socialists hoped to nurture popular revolutionary organisation rooted in poor and working class areas which could connect these areas to the growing

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148 Alexander, 2021b.

149 El-Meehy, 2013.

150 El-Meehy, 2013.

revolutionary movement. The initiative was inspired by reports reaching activists in the sit-in of the spontaneous formation of popular committees but began in Tahrir Square itself a few days before the fall of Mubarak, with activists inviting individuals and groups from different neighbourhoods to help set up a network of Popular Committees.

Within a short while there were around 20 active committees across Greater Cairo, Fayyoum, Alexandria and some of the provinces. A four-page bulletin, *Revolutionary Egypt*, listed active groups and provided phone numbers for anyone wanting to contact their local committee. Donations paid for the publication and the activists could barely keep up with the demand: "we distributed 30,000 copies in a single day", remembers Ezzat.[151] After the fall of Mubarak the focus shifted towards more activities and campaigns in the neighbourhoods, including information stands and meetings to spread the word about the revolution's demands and agitation over local issues.

The Revolutionary Socialists were at first practically alone in attempting to connect revolutionary organisation at neighbourhood level with mobilisation for the major street protests and sit-ins. A large part of the problem was simply one of scale, but the embryonic network of revolutionary Popular Committees was hampered by the fact that its opponents in the state were far better organised. "The problem was—and this was an issue with the revolution as a whole - we weren't ready to develop the movement, but the state was ready," notes Ezzat.[152] And as the stakes rose and the tempo of confrontations with the military increased, the gap between the task of mobilisation and the available resources to do it widened. "Events were faster and stronger than us on every level—organisationally, politically and in terms of propaganda. We had no means to get the message out. We couldn't recruit enough people".[153]

However, the other reason for the difficulties in incubating popular revolutionary organisation at neighbourhood level was that this political space had been monopolised by Islamist movements during the pre-revolutionary decades. This was primarily the Muslim Brotherhood which sustained a formidable base of electoral and charitable organisation across

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151   Alexander, 2021b.

152   Alexander, 2021b.

153   Alexander, 2021b.

Egypt following its revival in the 1970s after the repression of the Nasserist era. The Brotherhood's main competitors were drawn from Salafist currents, rather than the Left. There were plenty of examples of localised social and political struggles which were to some extent organised independently of the Islamist currents. These included battles over housing issues, over police violence and torture, over access to utilities, or over pollution.[154] But these campaigns lacked connections to each other and were usually isolated from the national political arena, unless they sparked wide-scale repression.

By contrast, the ground for building popular revolutionary organisations in the workplaces appeared much more hospitable. There was a fresh residue of organisation for collective action through strikes and workers' protests which had convulsed most sectors of the economy since the mid-2000s. In a small number of cases this had broken through into independent union organisation, but the conditions for the explosive growth of workers' organisations and their potential radicalisation in the context of the revolution were clearly evident. Moreover, the Brotherhood's strategy in relation to building in the workplaces left much greater space for activists from other political currents to organise. Although the Brotherhood had many worker members and made some efforts to get leading figures elected to positions in the official trade union federation, its activists were discouraged from organising workers to use their class power directly—through strikes, workplace occupations or protests. Instead, the Brotherhood broadly related to workplaces as vote banks for its candidates.[155]

The potential of the workplaces to act as incubators for popular revolutionary organisation was not simply a question of the presence or absence of particular political currents, however. Strike organisation maps directly onto some of the axes of permanent revolution outlined earlier in this chapter in ways that are more difficult to replicate in other settings. This is visible in the way that strikes moved from disruption (stopping production and services) to the construction of alternatives (even if this was limited in the pre-revolutionary period to

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154 The long running battle over Qursaya Island in the Nile which pitted its poor residents against military-led efforts to redevelop it is one example. See Ali Eddin, 2013.

155 Alexander, 2021a.

building the strikers' *own* organisational capacity, for example through arranging logistics and food for workers' sit-ins, organising security at occupied workplaces, developing their own communications infrastructure). Strike organisation had demonstrably breached the walls separating 'economics' from 'politics' before the 2011 revolution on some occasions, winning *de facto* recognition for the independent union created by the Property Tax Collectors from a hostile state, and fragmenting the regime's apparatus of political control over the workplaces. This had political implications beyond the workplaces themselves, as the ruling party's electoral apparatus was partially rooted in the workplaces with the state trade union federation playing a crucial role in mobilising voters for the NDP's candidates. In addition, larger and longer strikes did create spaces for discussion and deliberation through mass meetings, as well as opportunities for rank-and-file members to exercise some control over the conduct of negotiations and the outcome of disputes.[156]

The strike wave which erupted after the revolutionary uprising had begun, generalised and expanded these experiences to much wider layers of society. 'Independent unions' mushroomed and the numbers of strikes and workers' protests soared. Revolutionary struggles in the workplaces began to breach the limits of trade unionism and in a minority of cases created conditions for workers' control. What set this process in motion was the battle for *tathir* (cleansing) of public institutions from managers loyal to the old ruling party and the regime. This took the form of strikes and protests by workers demanding the removal of *feloul al-nidham* (remnants of the regime).

There are many documented cases of workers forcibly removing their bosses themselves—for example by ejecting them from the building as the journalists at state-run magazine Rose el-Youssef did during the 18-day uprising, or by locking them in a cupboard as the staff of the Workers' University, the regime's trade union training centre did. Striking workers at Manshiet el-Bakry General Hospital agreed that the security guards (all members of the newly-founded independent hospital union) should be instructed to escort the hospital director off the premises after he refused to resign. Workers at Cairo Airport organised strikes and blockades of the airport

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156 Alexander & Bassiouny, 2014, p157-191

access roads to force the Ministry of Civil Aviation to appoint a new civilian director for the first time in the Airport's history in July 2011.[157]

There were several ways in which *tathir* worked along the axes of permanent revolution outlined earlier. Firstly, the removal of *feloul* (remnants) of the ruling party immediately posed questions of whether to stop work in the absence of the boss or to self-manage. It also raised the question of who should replace him, and through which mechanism should the replacement be chosen, moving seamlessly from the tactics of disruption to questions of construction. In a small number of documented cases this included direct intervention by workers in both of these questions, not simply the 'vetting' of candidates proposed by higher levels of the state. The independent hospital union at Manshiet al-Bakry organised an election for a replacement to the old director, with hustings for candidates and ballot boxes supervised by bus drivers from the independent union at the Public Transport Authority. Council workers in one of the municipalities of Alexandria were reported to have to also elected a council worker to replace the general who had previously occupied the post of director.[158]

Movement between the political and economic aspects of the revolutionary process was deeply embedded in struggles for *tathir*. The demand to remove members of the ruling party from positions of power was clearly a political question, but it could not be separated from economic demands for several reasons. These included the fact that striking workers inevitably raised a whole host of other demands alongside their call to remove the *feloul*, including better pay, more secure jobs and the right to organise independent unions. Moreover, the strike wave which persisted and expanded in the immediate aftermath of Mubarak's fall was a direct challenge to those among opposition activists and the emerging revolutionary movement who argued that now the dictator had gone, everyone should "get back to work" and wait for constitutional change and elections to bring about change.

The bodies which developed inside workplaces to carry out tasks along the axes of permanent revolution included strike committees and independent unions. The loosening of state

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157   Bassiouny & Alexander, 2021.

158   Alexander & Bassiouny, 2014.

control over the workplaces and the early successes of *tathir* created conditions for experimentation with forms of organising which had been previously extremely difficult to carry out. In some cases, this process was shaped by the democratic impulses of workers' collective action, through mass meetings and workers' conferences which elected committee members for new independent unions.

There are some examples where the comparison with the workplace councils of the Iranian revolution are clearly apt. The degree of democratic control exercised by the hospital workers in Manshiyet al-Bakri general hospital over their workplace, the clear relationship with the basic processes of the revolution and the transformation of service delivery and patient care all point to this. There were a number of deliberate choices made by the organisers of the independent union in the hospital which worked at the micro level to deepen these processes. One of the most important was the levelling of professional hierarchies by creating a single hospital union representing all grades of staff, careful attention to democratic internal organisation and the partial extension of those principles to the management of the hospital.[159]

However, the label 'independent union' was also applied to new bodies which lacked firm roots in the struggle—sometimes set up opportunistically, without setting up mechanisms for democratic accountability and in isolation from strikes and collective action.[160] The loosening of the regime's control over the workplaces not only created the conditions for deeper and more radical struggles, it also paradoxically made reformist strategies for solving to workers' problems appear more realistic and achievable. Tendencies towards bureaucratic models of trade union organising in the independent unions were already visible even in the short period between the emergence of the first independent union in 2008 and the eruption of revolution in 2011. Some these pressures were inherent in trade unionism itself, which by its nature seeks to negotiate the amelioration of workers' conditions of exploitation through a combination of negotiation and the pressure of collective action. There were also specific forms of bureaucratisation driven both by pressures towards NGOisation and by intervention from the international

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159 Ibrahim, 2012; Alexander & Bassiouny, 2014.
160 Bassiouny & Alexander, 2021.

trade union bureaucracy (especially the ITUC), which worked closely with the leaders of the Property Tax Collectors' Union.[161]

One of the key absences in the experience of the independent unions both before and during the revolution was in cross-sectoral or geographically-coordinated strike action. The federations of independent unions which were set up during the revolution never became effective *strike organising* bodies, instead they usually functioned more like pressure groups or campaigns for workers' rights. They often focussed specifically on winning concessions from the state over questions which mattered more to the emerging trade union bureaucracy such as the right to organise and legal recognition for the independent unions, rather than coordinating action on the core problems faced by rank-and-file workers. The independent union movement was also beset by bureaucratic competition partially driven by personal rivalries and not only by matters of political principle or differences in practice.

The approach of leading figures in the independent unions to the relationship between economic and political struggles in the context of the revolution was complex.[162] It was not the case that they simply eschewed 'politics' and argued that trade unions should stick to 'economic' questions or distance themselves from the revolutionary movement (although there were certainly some who began to push for a more 'professionalised' and 'apolitical' approach to trade unionism). There was some suspicion of 'party politics' (*hizbiyya* in Arabic), but the party allegiances of activists in the independent unions were quite heterogenous. These included not only well-known figures in the Nasserist opposition Dignity Party such as Kamal Abu-Aita, the first president of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions, but even members of Salafist political parties such as Al-Nour and Al-Hadaf. When I asked him how he dealt with possible contradictions between his role as a political activist and his role as trade union leader, Abu-Aita told me that he kept "two shirts" in his cupboard, a "political shirt" for engagement in electoral or party political activities and a "trade union shirt" for his role in EFITU.

When it came to the question of whether trade union activists

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161   Alexander & Bassiouny, 2014, p83–7.

162   This section is based on the author's discussions with leading Egyptian independent trade union activists during 2011-2

could participate *as organised workers* not in party politics, but in the revolutionary mobilisations in the streets and squares, such neat distinctions were hard to maintain. EFITU was in fact formed in Tahrir Square at a meeting held during the 18-day uprising which launched the revolution, and EFITU's leadership did attempt to build an organised presence for the independent unions in the Square at various points. This included organising a May Day march and celebration in the Square in 2011, setting up a tent during the sit-in which re-occupied Tahrir in November 2011 and attempting to organise a trade union march a few days later. Independent trade unions were also present in the Square in December 2012 during the mass protests against the new constitution following the Muslim Brotherhood's election victory in June 2012. EFITU's leaders made statements calling on workers to strike in support of the November 2011 sit-in and backed the call by a coalition of revolutionary movements for a general strike on 11 February 2012.

The problem was that none of these efforts did in fact mobilise large enough numbers to embed the independent unions (or any other kinds of workers' organisations) as a component element within a revolutionary movement, let alone as part of its leadership. Workers' struggles took place *in parallel* with the mass mobilisations in the streets in the early stages of the revolution, and although they accelerated the dynamics of the revolutionary process as they *interlaced* with street protests and sit-ins, the separation between its political and economic aspects was never really overcome. Unlike in Sudan in 2019, political general strikes did not emerge as an effective weapon in the struggle against dictatorship, either on a local or national level. The revolutionary movement which developed during 2011 firstly castigated workers for 'selfish' strike action in the wake of Mubarak's fall, then largely ignored the workplaces as a possible space for revolutionary mobilisation for the rest of the year.

The weakness of the organisational connections between collective action in the workplaces and continuing revolutionary mobilisations in the streets helps to explain why the shift towards agitation for a general strike in February 2012 on the anniversary of the fall of Mubarak did not produce the results which revolutionary activists hoped for. However, it was unlikely to have been the only reason. The cycle of parliamentary and

presidential elections in 2011 and 2012 meant that there appeared to be a choice between the ballot box on the one hand, and street protests or strikes on the other as means to bring about further political and economic change.

The Muslim Brotherhood and its allies certainly counterposed voting to collective action when campaigning against the February 2012 general strike call.[163] Millions of Egyptians who had known only the ritual of the sham elections which returned the ruling party to office every few years were prepared to give the former opposition party a chance in government. Meanwhile, the mood among the revolutionary youth currents was strongly for a boycott of the elections. Electoral abstentionism also affected the nascent Democratic Workers' Party, an initiative involving the revolutionary left and key trade unionists.[164]

Between 2012 and 2013, the implications of the economic and political struggles in the workplaces and streets for the development of the revolutionary process began to diverge, rather than simply running along parallel tracks in broadly the same direction. The movement in the streets confronted a government which was led by the Muslim Brotherhood following Mohamed Morsi's narrow victory in the presidential elections of June 2012. Over the course of the following year, the politics of the National Salvation Front, a coalition of parties which included Liberal, Arab Nationalist, Stalinist organisations and figures from the old ruling party came to dominate the mass mobilisations on the streets.

Meanwhile, battles in the workplaces continued over issues of pay, working conditions and the right to organise, but started to take on a defensive character as employers went on the offensive against the gains made by the workers' movement during the first year of the revolution.[165] The focus of the NSF's demands on fighting the "Brotherhoodisation" of the state and its open alliance with a key component of the old regime, the judiciary (even if this was often cloaked in liberal rhetoric about the "separation of powers" and "judicial independence") began to feed back into the workplaces. In the Civil Aviation sector, for example, this language was used to rehabilitate

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163 Alexander, 2021a.

164 Alexander, 2021a.

165 Alexander & Bassiouny 2014, p221–3.

the appointment of military figures as a bulwark against a Brotherhood takeover.[166]

The pivot around which the cycle of revolution and counter-revolution turned was the events of 30 June 2013 the massive protests against Morsi which provided the backdrop to the military coup of 3 July. Could things have played out differently with the development of different kinds of popular revolutionary organisation? Asking this question is no mere indulgence in counterfactual fantasy, but a necessary part of debating strategies for the future. One problem which the experience of the mass movement in the streets during 2012-3 exposed was the over-reliance on mobilisation through social and mass media channels and their lack of roots in spaces where ordinary people could debate through the demands and slogans being raised, propose alternatives or additions or seek to change the movement's direction.

In the case of Sudan, where the Resistance Committees often developed genuine, democratic roots in neighbourhoods where their leadership was known to local people, and where they could be held accountable over their choice of demands and slogans in forums they deliberately created to build a popular base for the revolutionary movement. The contrast with the plebiscitary broadcasts of the key Facebook pages mobilising the movement against the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt especially during the run-up to the 30 June demonstrations is stark.[167]

Yet why did organisations in Egyptian workplaces not provide this kind of alternative leadership for the revolutionary movement? Here the tragedy was that despite extremely high levels of strikes and protests, trade unionism as model for workers' organisation was not able to reconnect the severed social and political souls of the revolutionary process. For that to happen, a much larger layer of activists in the workplaces needed to adopt an explicitly revolutionary agenda.

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166 Alexander & Bassiouny 2014, p317.

167 One of the key youth movements which called for the 30 June protests and played a major role in mobilising against Morsi was Tamarod (Rebellion). Unverified recordings which leaked in 2015 suggest that the Egyptian army and the UAE funded Tamarod's campaign against Morsi. See Kirkpatrick, 2015.

The tragedy of Syria's revolutionary communes

The Syrian experience provides the clearest examples of instances of revolutionary government which in some cases did emerge out of the self-organisation of ordinary people as they mobilised to confront the Ba'thist state. Ghayath Naisse argues:

> In many places there were elections for representatives of the population for the first time. Although this did not happen everywhere, there are many examples of elections of councils to manage people's lives in 2011 and 2012. They oversaw sanitation and waste disposal, organised bread for people to eat and provided education. The popular classes created their own organs of self-organisation that were at the same time coordinating the development of the revolution.[168]

These "organs of self-organisation" included the revolutionary councils which sprang up following the retreat of regime forces from Idlib and Aleppo provinces by mid-2012. As Abdesalam Dallal and Julie Hearn note:

> Civilian revolutionary organisation stepped in with the formation, initially, of revolutionary councils or *al-Majalis al-thawriyyah*, later known as local councils (*al-Majalis al-Mahalliyah*). These often sprang from the local coordination committees (LCCs, *Lijan Attanseeq al-Mahalliyyah "al-Tansiqiyat"*), which had been set up to organise and document the initial pro-democracy protests. Revolutionaries now saw their attention focused on meeting the emergency needs of a village or town under attack.[169]

The first instance where revolutionary activists created a local revolutionary council was in the town of al-Zabadani in the Rif Dimashq province close to the Lebanese border in January 2012.[170] The political inspiration for this experiment reportedly came from Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz, who was involved

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168 Alexander, 2021a.
169 Hearn & Dallal, 2019a.
170 Hearn & Dallal, 2019a.

directly in the council's formation. Aziz's 2011 article arguing for the creation of revolutionary organs of local government to take over from the local authorities of the Ba'thist regime was widely circulated.[171] Other rebellious suburbs of the capital also witnessed the formation of revolutionary councils, including in Barzeh, Darayya and Douma. Anand Gopal's detailed account of the formation and development of the Local Council in Saraqib between 2012 and 2017, provides a compelling narrative of the major challenges faced by Syrian revolutionary activists.[172] This "melancholy one-post-office town" in Idlib province with a population of around 30,000 was in many ways an unlikely incubator for experiments in democratic self-government. As in much of the rest of the country there were few prior experiences that activists could draw on to guide them in developing any kind of political organisation, let alone institutions of self-government. Before the revolution "there was no point in thinking about politics, because we felt like the regime was everywhere—even in the bedroom," Hossein, one of the leaders of the Local Council told Gopal. These young university students, farmers and labourers had "no clear idea of what should replace the government".

> None of them besides Hossein had ever read a political tract or attended a party meeting. The regime had so impoverished civic life that the activists' unity was based entirely on what they opposed: corruption, the rising cost of bread, the daily degradations of dictatorship.[173]

Hossein argued against armed resistance but emerged after a spell in prison to find that his friends, "once mere teachers and construction workers, were now armed, each a master of his own brigade". In the autumn of 2012, it seemed that these fighters, mainly local men who had taken up arms to defend themselves against the state, had been vindicated. Across the country, the Syrian army was rapidly losing ground to the hydra-headed armed rebellion. The remaining government forces were expelled from the town in November, leaving the revolutionary activists with the question of how to keep the lights on and ensure people would be fed. They formed a

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171 Al-Shami, 2021.

172 Gopal, 2018.

173 Gopal, 2018.

12-member local council to govern the town and named Hossein its first president.

The Saraqib Local Council clearly enjoyed a much deeper popular mandate than the institutions of dictatorship which had ruled for the previous fifty years. Local residents repeatedly risked their lives to defend its "civil" authority against attempts by armed Islamist groups (first Ahrar al-Sham and later the al-Qa'idah affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra) to seize control of the town and its resources. They confronted the gunmen with mass protests and several times forced them to withdraw. They created a flourishing culture of democratic discussion in an active local media scene and mobilised a successful campaign for an election which was eventually held in 2017, despite Jabhat al-Nusra storming the town at the conclusion of the vote.

The conditions of war and siege created intense pressures on the fragile growth of democracy from below, however. Survival was often the most urgent task, and Hossein was well aware that success in the struggle to keep the lights on and flour arriving in the town bakery was key to the Local Council's authority. Unlike many in the region, Saraqib's council managed to do both, at one point securing continued supplies of flour by threatening the governor in regime-controlled provincial capital Idlib that revolutionaries would blow up the main electricity line which ran through the town.

In Manbij, close to the Turkish border, the "politics of bread" also illuminate the limitations on the authority of the Local Council which ruled the town of 200,000 as a miniature city-state between July 2012 and January 2014. As Yasser Munif notes, the origins of the Local Council in Manbij were directly rooted in the popular movement opposing the Assad regime which mobilised at a neighbourhood level through protests and "creative peaceful actions".[174]

> The revolutionary council and activist groups in the city also began a process of de-Ba'thification, deploying a combination of traditional knowledge and decolonial practices. The experimental legal system that the city assembled in 2012–13 is one such example. It was based on the Unified Arab Law, tribal customs, vernacular knowledge, and articles debated at the

174 Munif, 2021.

revolutionary trustee council's monthly meetings.[175]

Manbij's flour mill is one of the largest in northern Syriaand can process enough wheat to feed 1 million people a day, far beyond the needs of the city itself. Even after withdrawing from Manbij, the Assad regime continued to supply the mill with wheat and to pay the mill manger and staff, hoping to bolster its base of support within the city and stage a rapid reconquest with support from inside.

> In 2013, the director and his employees threatened to leave, due to repeated disputes with various powerful actors in the city. As a result, the revolutionary council created a team of volunteers to shadow the mill's technicians and engineers, in order to gain the necessary skills to operate the mill independently. In this way, the revolutionary council sought to strengthen the city's autonomy.[176]

The Ba'thist regime's retention of a degree of leverage over the operation of essential manufacturing, production and service sectors in Manbij was not an isolated case. It negotiated with ISIS to keep the lights on in Damascus by continuing to employ the workers operating the oil refinery at Palmyra despite losing military control of the area to the jihadist group.[177]The regime also continued to pay the wages of teachers and other state employees in areas which fell to rebel control, although often using this leverage as a form of remote control to reward loyalists and punish teachers active in the opposition.[178]

The case of the Manbij flour mill demonstrates how when the Ba'thist state's control over the lives of Syria's people began to fragment it often did not evaporate all at once, producing fully "liberated territories" where new revolutionary institutions could begin to exercise authority (even if this was contained within small, besieged enclaves). Rather, it often created conditions for layered, competing sovereignty with multiple bodies jostling for power in different spheres of life.

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175 Munif, 2021.

176 Munif ,2021.

177 Solomon, 2015.

178 Khaddour, 2015, p7.

By the time that the local revolutionary movements were able to exercise any degree of local control over public affairs and service delivery, the fragmentation of forces opposed to the regime were already well under way.

A part of this story is the rise of armed Islamist currents deeply hostile to the democratic and "civil" impulses of the wave of popular mobilisations which had launched the revolutionary process. As Saraqib's experience illustrates, local s had to first contend with the challenges of working with (and sometimes against) local armed brigades which labelled themselves part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) but lacked any kind of coherent national command structure. Islamist armed factions, whose military rise was fuelled by funding from the Gulf and the influx of commanders who had gained experience fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the international jihadist conflict circuit, proved even more difficult to deal with. This was not only because they were more efficient fighters and better funded, but because their political vision directly competed with the civilian revolutionary groups in areas such as the creation of alternative justice systems and service delivery.[179]

In addition, the local councils had to contend with the pressures of co-optation by Western governments, especially the US and its allies, as the latter attempted to divert the trajectory of the revolution in a direction which suited their goals. The US and other Western governments recognised and provided diplomatic and financial support to exiled opposition parties, hoping to weld them together into something which could ultimately replace the Assad regime.

> The United States and its donor partners viewed the Syrian opposition's fragmentation as a major weakness in its potential to emerge as a viable counterstate. Consequently, they devised local projects to build up a more cohesive, broader political opposition body to the Assad regime. The scores of local councils that surfaced early in the uprising had clear revolutionary credentials and grassroots energy, but donors believed that these activists needed to cohere into a larger "political mass" to counterbalance the regime.[180]

179 Alexander, 2015

180 Brown, 2018.

"Politically oriented assistance" to local councils in rebel held areas provided by the US and other Western donors between 2011 and 2018 included more than $1 billion worth of funding for interventions to support democracy and participation, build legitimacy and popular support for the local councils, improve their administration and service provision in areas such as water, sanitation, waste removal, bakery operation and power generation.[181] Meanwhile, the civilian revolutionary movements were also subject to intense pressures of 'NGOisation' as Julie Hearn and Abdulsalam Dallal have noted, as the relatively small amounts of Western aid which did find its way to these local bodies was made contingent on the professionalisation of 'service delivery', turning "revolution into a "humanitarian crisis" and transforming the consciousness of the young revolutionaries who came to work for them into that of "neutral humanitarians".[182]

In order to understand why the local councils and other popular revolutionary bodies ended up trapped in this situation, we have to go back to the specific ways in which they formed in in relation to the axes of permanent revolution mapped out in the previous chapter. The shift from disrupting the state to constructing the foundations of alternative local governments was clear to see in the relationship between the activist Coordinating Committees and the Local Councils in many areas of the country. The revolution was also in many ways a uprising of Syria's multiple peripheries: Dera'a in the south where the revolution began, to the rebellious working class and poor suburbs on the semi-rural fringe of Damascus, to Deir el-Zor and Raqqa and the northern governorates. The problem for the popular movement was that the regime was largely successful in preventing revolution reaching the public squares and workplaces of the major urban centres during its first year.

"The lessons from Egypt and Tunisia were to prevent people from gathering in major city squares. At all costs they had to prevent this," explains Ghayath Naisse.[183] On the rare occasions when protesters did manage to break through in large numbers, the regime's response was unspeakably violent".[184]The regime's

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181 Brown, 2018.

182 Hearn & Dallal, 2019.

183 Alexander, 2021a.

184 Alexander, 2021a.

ideological grip on public sector institutions had not broken down, argues Salam Ahmad:

> Whoever was planning to strike to demand their rights would be informed upon by their colleagues, and they would be detained and tortured. Society was atomised through these associations. People would proudly claim to be part of the trade unions or the teachers' syndicates; but these organisations were controlled by the Ba'ath Party and the security and intelligence services.[185]

Even one year into the revolution, the regime could still mobilise tens of thousands of workers from public services and state institutions to fill the streets with crowds cheering for the dictator. Activists like Salam were forced to join these rallies, mouthing slogans of praise for the regime during the day, while at night they would secretly organise protests in support of the revolution.

> One day, I was called by the head of the school to submit my identity papers, and he took my details and gave them to the Ba'ath Party branch in the nearest town. They would send us a minibus to go to Aleppo and show our support for the leader, and if I didn't go, the regime would come and get me. It was full. The main square of Aleppo, Saadallah al-Jabri Square, was full. University students, university lecturers, university staff, school teachers, school students. All the state institutions were gathering there, and the helicopter was, of course, livestreaming the rally. If you watched the television it was saying, "The people of Aleppo came together to show their support for the Assad regime. They came to support their support for the leader, confirm their willingness to stop the conspiracy and show their love to their home".[186]

The capacity of workers *inside* the state machinery to repurpose it to aid mobilisation for their own demands was one of the major differences between the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt,

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185 Alexander, 2021a.

186 Alexander, 2021a.

Sudan and Algeria, and those such as Syria and Libya. Coupled with strikes in critical industries and infrastructure such as transport, communications, and financial services—both those in private and public ownership—the rebellion of public service workers temporarily disrupted the circuits of state power at critical points in the uprisings.

The absence of the working class not just as a political actor, but even as an economic one had a significant impact on the trajectory of the revolution as the revolutionary mobilisations were unable to paralyse key state institutions or effectively shut down the major cities such as the capital Damascus and Aleppo during the initial phase of the uprising. This in turn allowed the regime to isolate rebellious districts through sieges and bombardment, accelerating the militarisation of the popular resistance as local men defected from the Syrian army to defend their families and neighbourhoods. The character of the organisations which came to dominate the armed struggle proved a powerful counterweight to the initial relatively democratic, egalitarian and anti-sectarian impulses of the popular movement.[187]

The absence of precursor class struggles *inside* a public sector spanning key industries such as food processing, power, water and telecoms infrastructure and nationwide public services, including the health and education systems, came back to haunt the activists of the popular revolutionary movements even *after* the regime's military withdrawal as we saw in the case of Manbij. Why was the director of the flour mill able to continue acting in the regime's interests unconstrained by resistance from among the mill employees? Why was the revolutionary council not able to persuade any of them to switch allegiance and isolate him? The plan formulated to 'shadow' existing employees suggests that part of the problem lay in the regime's ideological hold over people in technical and professional roles, rather than being simply about the failure of manual workers at the mill to support the revolution. Munif's account of this conflict emphasises the resilience of the Ba'thist bureaucracy but does not ask why it proved more effective than similar authoritarian ruling parties in the region at suppressing the internal class tensions between those at the bottom and middle layers of the employment hierarchy in the public sector who were coerced into party

187   Alexander & Bouharoun, 2016.

membership but had much more to gain from the success of the revolution than their senior managers.

The regime's ability to maintain an indirect presence in many of the liberated areas shows how questions of democracy in revolutions are never solely resolved in the realm of politics but will be inevitably posed in relation to the issue of 'who controls the workplaces?'. In order to properly break the hold of those Ba'thist bureaucrats over the mass of manual and white-collar workers inside the public sector both in the areas controlled by the regime and in the liberated territories, it was not enough to present an alternative model of revolutionary government. The school teachers, civil servants, nurses, doctors, transport workers, oil workers and flour mill workers who formed the backbone of the public sector also had to liberate *themselves*, through their own collective action against their party bosses.

The problem of whether revolution could be achieved *without* this process of self-liberation from below underlay the dilemmas faced by the form of autonomous government created by the Kurdish PYD party and affiliated militias in Rojava, the Kurdish name given to the three districts of Afrin, Kobani and Cizîrê (or Afrin, Ayn al-Arab and Jazīrat Ibn 'Umar in Arabic). There is not space here to do justice to the complexity of the political, social and military struggles over these territories and their relationship to the wider conflicts which engulfed the region.

However, some key points can still be distilled which are important to the questions discussed in this chapter, namely whether the communes or local assemblies of Rojava were another instance of popular revolutionary bodies akin to experiments in revolutionary democracy outlined in the previous chapter.

David Graeber, writing after visiting Rojava in 2014, argued that these autonomous areas were experiencing a situation of "dual power".

> On the one hand, there is the democratic self-administration, which looks very much like a government, replete with ministries, parliament, and higher courts. If you simply read the formal constitution of the Rojava cantons you would have very little sign this was anything other than an enlightened social

democratic, or perhaps at most democratic socialist, state. It includes numerous political parties but was largely set up by the PYD. On the other there's the bottom-up structures, organized by TEV-DEM, the Movement for a Democratic Society, many of whose members are also PYD or former PYD, where initiative flows entirely from popular assemblies.[188]

However, unlike situations where "dual power" was formed through contestation between *rival* authorities,

The unique thing is that this seems to be the only known case of a dual power situation where both sides are not just in alliance, as in Bolivia, but were actually set up by the same movement, even, in some cases, the same individuals.[189]

Cihad Hammy provides an account of the formation of the commune in Kobani which emphasizes that the initiative in creating these democratic bodies came directly from Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the PYD, rather than being born out of the self-activity of ordinary people.

The Canton system does not entirely follow my vision. Communes must be built," a PYD member read Abdullah Ocalan's letter from Imrali among a few other members of PYD in the Kobane canton in 2014. The member paused for a bit after closing Ocalan's letter and addressed his friends, "We have a new task to do, friends". ... After Ocalan's call for establishing communes in Rojava, some members of PYD and other civil people came to gather to initiate the first commune in Kobane. The group was comprised of 10 people—4 women and 6 men—varying in terms of age and social status.[190]

As Hammy and Jeff Miley point out, the way in which the PYD and its military forces established actual authority over the territories which would later become Rojava, differed

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188 Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016.

189 Knapp, Flach & Ayboğa, 2016.

190 Hammy, 2018.

substantially from the vision of direct democracy articulated by the anarchist writer Murray Bookchin, whose work has been influential in shaping Ocalan's political programme for the creation of "Democratic Confederalism".[191]

> The circumstances in which the revolutionary forces came to power thus differ quite substantially from the scenario of dual power envisioned by Bookchin. For Bookchin foresaw a grassroots movement gaining momentum, growing from the bottom up, progressively raising the consciousness of the citizenry, provoking a conflict with the state. What happened in Rojava, by contrast, was more of a military achievement than anything else, accomplished by cohesive and well-trained armed groups, affiliated with the PYD, who proved able to take advantage of a vacuum of power triggered by a civil war. A civil war, we should add, that it did not provoke, and towards which it did its best to maintain a posture of neutrality.[192]

A further problem was that the opening of a "third path" for the PYD, allowing it to continue "siding neither with the increasingly Islamized and armed [Syrian] opposition, nor with the Baath regime,"[193] was conditional on a particular conjuncture in the geopolitical conflicts in the region. Specifically, it required that the US, because it desired to enlist PYD military forces in order to halt the growth of ISIS, the jihadist movement which had seized power in Raqqa and Mosul, would put pressure on its longstanding ally Turkey to tolerate the existence of a PYD-administered Kurdish entity on its borders, despite the decades-long war by the Turkish authorities against the PYD's sister party the PKK (which counted Ocalan as its founder).

For a short while this compromise did in fact hold, as the result of a variety of factors, including a relative relaxation of repression against Kurdish parties and political activity inside Turkey allowing for example, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to win substantial votes in parliamentary elections and mobilise large protests in solidarity

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191 Ocalan, 2011.

192 Hammy & Miley, 2022.

193 Hammy & Miley, 2022.

with Rojava.[194] However, there was a sharp shift in the policies of the Turkish government, as Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP party reignited the war with the PKK in 2015 and embarked on a vicious crackdown against anyone arguing for Kurdish rights inside Turkey, which led to the arrest and dismissal of hundreds of academics and state employees.[195] The tragedy of Syria's communes thus was repeated in a variant form across Rojava. The establishment of "revolutionary" municipal authorities as a by-product of armed conflict, without the simultaneous expansion of workers' power in the workplaces (especially in strategically important industries and services on which the state relied to carry out its functions) meant that visions of alternatives to the state remained at best aspirations and at worst ideological cover for distinctly undemocratic military and bureaucratic forms of rule.[196]

Sudan: All power to the Resistance Committees?

Sudan's Resistance Committees are clearly much more advanced in terms of their scale and political development than the embryonic popular bodies of the Egyptian revolution and have created deeper and richer forms of popular democracy than was possible in the Syrian context. Yet at the time of writing, they were still grappling with the problem of not having overcome the military regime which seized power in October 2021. Although the Resistance Committees' work in developing popular charters and visions for radical political reform, often envisaged this process as being genuinely democratic and bottom-up, only a tiny minority of Sudanese revolutionary activists were prepared to raise the idea of building something which was an alternative form of state power.

Following the military coup of 25 October, which forcibly ended the "partnership" between the military and militia generals and civilian opposition parties in the Transitional Government, the Resistance Committees have emerged as a real and effective leadership of a mass popular movement committed to resisting the restoration of military rule through

194 Margulies, 2018.

195 Kaya, 2018.

196 Hammy & Miley, 2022.

protests, strikes and various forms of civil disobedience. The resurgence of the revolutionary movement from below has been accompanied by intense activity at a local level, which at the time of writing was engaging hundreds of thousands of people in political debates and discussions over the future course of the revolution.

Despite having confidently disposed of their civilian 'partners' in the Transitional Government the generals found themselves unable to calm the streets. Abdalla Hamdok, the Prime Minister who negotiated his way back out of house arrest by agreeing to most of the military's demands in a widely-decried deal backed by Western government and the counter-revolutionary quartet of regional powers (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Israel) on 21 November finally resigned on 2 January 2022. The upsurge in the popular movement did not benefit the civilian parties who had been kicked out power, however. As Muzan Alneel noted in March 2022,

> Activists have joked that the slogan of "The Three Nos" (no negotiations, no partnership, no legitimacy) adopted by the resistance committees has reversed the job description of these civilian parties. After the overthrow of the El Bashir regime, the entire purpose of these parties was to carry out negotiations, seek partnership with the military and provide them with legitimacy. This slogan has cancelled the role of these parties. They are as much in crisis as the military are.[197]

The same could be said of the Sudanese Professionals Association, which played an important role in the 2019 uprising against Umar al-Bashir, but split into two factions and was also tarnished by the failures of the Transitional Government its leaders helped to create.

Organised through district-wide 'Coordinations' (*tansiqiyyat* in Arabic), the committees now command a formidable machinery of collective action. The infrastructure of protest has come a long way since the first gatherings of desperate people in December 2018 shouting for bread and cooking gas on street corners. Their Facebook pages count 'likes' in the tens of thousands, they have their own media teams, press officers

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197   Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022e.

and networks to gather intelligence on the location of the police and adjust the location of barricades or the route of marches. They are not simply a product of the dynamics of revolutionary contestation in the capital. A report by the Carter Center based on a large-scale survey carried out in March 2021 mapped 5289 Resistance Committees across Sudan—the researchers found committees were a nation-wide phenomenon.[198]

Resistance Committees distributed by province[1]

Province	Number of Resistance Committees mapped
Blue Nile	338
South and West Kordofan	199
Eastern Sudan	705
Greater Darfur	809
White Nile & Greater Kordofan	601
Central Sudan	1,173
North Sudan	650
Khartoum	814
Total	5,289

During the period the Transitional Government was in office some Resistance Committees were already intervening in matters of everyday life in their areas, such as ensuring the supply of flour to bakeries and the distribution of bread and cooking gas. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic some sent out teams of activists to spread public health messages and distribute face masks and sanitiser.199 In many areas, a formal division of labour emerged between the neighbourhood political leadership embodied in the Resistance Committee and a Change and Services Committee which brings together revolutionary activists working specifically on improving the delivery of services. Often this division of labour maps onto a generational divide, with younger activists leading the Resistance Committee. Since the October 2021 coup more ambitious plans have been published by some committees. In a video posted on Facebook on 29 March 2022, the Resistance

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198 Carter Center, 2021.
199 Alexander and Bak, 2020

Committee in Burri al-Diraysa, a district of Khartoum, outlined local goals including the establishment of local productive and consumer cooperatives to "ease the burden of living and increase the income of the population", drafting a local government law in coordination with other Resistance Committees, taking initiatives in collaboration with the local Change and Services Committee to develop policies for local development projects and services in areas such as health and education, public libraries, green spaces and tourist facilities.[200]

The video connects this participatory experiment in re-imagining local government with the idea of "Basic Construction" (*al-bina'a al-qa'idi*). Initially this was a process which involved refreshing or setting up their internal structures on a more democratic basis through convening general assemblies and electing new leadership bodies, begun in the months before the coup of October 2021 by some Resistance Committees in the capital city and other major centres including Gadaref and Port Sudan. Some unions and workplace-based networks of activists including university teachers, pharmacists, media workers were reported to be undergoing similar processes. According to activist Khalid al-Sheikh on Facebook, Resistance Committees in the district of Khartoum Bahri launched a campaign of basic construction following the failed attempt at a military coup on 21 September 2021. The committees in Um Duwwan Ban, a small town 40 km south of Khartoum declared basic construction was the "real coup" against the military's "state of the ghouls".[201]

The political crisis of the Forces of Freedom and Change and the deepening split between the civilian parties willing to negotiate with the military and the mood on the streets and neighbourhoods pushed the Resistance Committees towards the development of a series of political declarations or charters. As with the process of 'Basic Construction', the charters were developed through a process involving widespread consultation and discussion with local residents through surveys, mass meetings and debates.[202] The scope of the charters showed that activists in the Resistance Committees now wanted to address the challenges facing the revolutionary movement at a national

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200 Thuwar, 2022.

201 Alexander, 2022a.

202 Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022.

level, by posing direct alternatives to existing state policies and institutions. Sami Muhammad Abd-al-Halim, official spokesperson for the Coordinations of Resistance Committees in Khartoum announced in December 2021 that the charter developed by the capital city's Resistance Committees would address "the economy, reform of the military and security apparatus, national borders and foreign relations and living conditions".[203] The document was eventually published in February 2022, under the title "Charter for the Establishment of the People's Authority".[204]

One of the first political charters to be published was, however, authored by the Resistance Committees in Wad Madani, the capital of Al Jazirah province in Central Sudan, and later revised and adopted by Resistance Committees in seven Sudanese states as "The Revolutionary Charter for People's Power".[205]As Muzan Alneel notes, the Madani RC's document proposed a more radical vision of a reformed Sudanese state than the Khartoum charter.

Many voices reject the road map for government formation proposed by the Khartoum resistance committees, which calls for appointing the prime minister first, and then the national assembly, state-level assemblies and legislative bodies. The prior publication of alternative proposals by the Madani resistance committees and others has boosted the voices of those who see the flaws in the Khartoum resistance committees' proposal. It is frequently argued that the Madani proposal is closer to implementing "people's power" because its road map starts from the local assemblies then goes to the state level and national assembly, which appoints the prime minister. The process of the different proposals being shared and discussed publicly is adding to the depth of the debates taking place.[206]

The charters point to the ambiguity which surrounds the highly participatory forms of democracy created by the Resistance Committees. Are they building the institutions of a new state, or refreshing the bottom layers of the old one? Mohamed Abdelrahman points out:

"Basic construction" is a plausible experiment, but we

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203   Ayin Network, 2021.

204   MENA Solidarity, 2022b.

205   Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022.

206   Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022.

should keep in mind that it can be hijacked by the state and absorbed into its bureaucracy. For instance, one view on basic construction suggests electing different representatives from the neighbourhoods through different geographical levels and all the way up to parliament. Yet, if basic construction is understood in this way, then its work has to be done within the legislative framework of the state.[207]

The scale and scope of the democratic experiment led by the Resistance Committees strongly underscores the argument that the emergence of such popular revolutionary bodies is related to the development of the process of permanent revolution along the three axes outlined earlier in this chapter. The connection between *disruption* of the military regime through protests, strikes and civil disobedience and the *construction* of alternatives is clear from the examples discussed above. Moreover, as the Resistance Committees moved from protest mobilisation and logistical support into the political leadership of the mass movement as a response to the coup of October 2021, the constructive aspect of their role became more apparent, growing in scope from building their internal democratic processes, to issuing political charters and consciously intervening to reshape local government, production and services in their image.

In contrast to Syria, movement along the second axis from political to economic struggles and back again was much clearer in the case of Sudan, although the development of popular revolutionary bodies in the workplaces lagged behind those in the neighbourhoods. The initial stage of this process preceded the eruption of revolution in December 2018, through strikes in the health and education sector led by junior doctors and teachers which built the independent union networks and laid the basis for the formation of the Sudanese Professionals Association. Health workers led the way in using the weapon of strike action, as opposed to protests, as the uprising grew in the last weeks of 2018. The rising profile of the SPA in the popular movement by the spring opened the door to the use of political general strikes as a tactic to increase pressure on the regime, especially after the fall of El Bashir in the face of manoeuvres by the military and militia leaders of the Transitional Military Council to retain political power for themselves.

207   Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022.

Although these general strikes were in a sense called 'from above', by the political leadership of the mass movement, rather than being led by workers' organisations rooted in the workplaces, they were widely supported, mobilising new layers of people in support of the revolution's demands, and clearly caused a crisis for the TMC. The general strike of 28-29 May was followed by the forced clearance of the protest sit-in outside the Army General Command in Khartoum and the massacre of over 100 protesters on 3 June. This was turning point for the revolutionary movement, and the context for the first intimations that the Resistance Committees could move towards political independence from the SPA and the FFC parties. As Magdi el-Gizouli recounts, the fury in some neighbourhoods after the 3 June massacre was channelled through the Resistance Committees as activists confronted the SPA leaders demanding they refuse backroom negotiations with the military and continue the struggle for civilian rule.

Representatives of the SPA and FFC were hard pressed to explain their choices to angry young women and men around the capital in political rallies organized by the neighbourhood committees. The Burri Lions, champions of Khartoum's epicentre of protest, were hard to convince and shouted down one speaker after another. Only the SPA star, Mohamed Naji al-Assam, an able communicator, could manage their disappointment with the compromise that the SPA and its allies were about to make with the establishment. Nobody showed up to soothe the anger of Kalakla.[208]

Another general strike 9-11 June further increased the pressure on the generals and paved the way for the signing of the agreement which established the Transitional Government in August 2019.

As in Egypt in 2011, there were signs that the political progress of the revolutionary movement could open the door to both waves of economic struggles and an upsurge in workers' self-organisation. During the years of the Transitional Government, independent union bodies began to grow and there were some important strikes, including one by workers at the Kenana Sugar Company, one of Sudan's largest agro-processing facilities.[209] However, the SPA's support for the Transitional

208   El-Gizouli, 2020a, p5.
209   Civil Disobedience in Sudan, 2019.

Government, and the opportunities for workplace organisers to work with, rather than against the new regime in sectors such as education and health meant that there was no spontaneous wave of strikes combining demands for economic gains and *tathir* on the same scale as the one in Egypt in the wake of Mubarak's fall. The relative weakness of the strike movement also reflected the different class structures of the two countries. Sudan lacks Egypt's public sector industrial base and a smaller segment of the population are working in formal employment at all. In addition, the precursor strike waves in Egypt were also stronger and more widespread than in Sudan.

The deepening economic crisis which engulfed the Transitional Government in its final year, combined with the political crisis resulting from the military's preparations for the coup, did not immediately translate into a revival of strikes and workplace-based organising in the Autumn of 2021. The huge political general strikes which played a vital role in the first phase of the revolution in Spring 2019 were not repeated, with the Resistance Committees mobilising street protests and days of "total civil disobedience" instead. However, the failure of the coup leaders to form a government and the political rise of the Resistance Committees did open the door to a revival of major sectoral strikes in early 2022. These included important strikes by court workers, financial sector workers, doctors, nurses and pharmacists and a major teachers' strike called by the Sudanese Teachers' Committee in March 2022.[210] Significantly, most of these articulated both 'economic' and 'political' demands, and some were directly supported by some Resistance Committees which mobilised solidarity demonstrations, and sent activists to visit picket lines and sit-ins. The teachers' strike, however, raised a dilemma for revolutionary activists, as it was driven by largely economic goals, including the implementation of promised reforms to the pay and grading system that the military regime had refused to enact in the midst of a spiralling cost-of-living crisis. The strike was powerful enough to force the government to negotiate directly with the teachers' union leadership and won some concessions. However, this in turn provoked recriminations from some activists who argued that the STC's leaders were giving the military regime legitimacy by sitting down for talks with Al-Burhan's government over their

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210   MENA Solidarity, 2022d.

demands.[211] What about the 'third axis' of permanent revolution: the movement along the different scales of unevenness between the system's centres and their peripheries? As Magdi el-Gizouli and Edward Thomas note, underlying Sudan's current political crisis is a long-term social one which has been structured into the fabric of Sudanese society throughout the country's modern history.[212]This takes the form of predatory and extractive state policies rooted in serving the interests of the 'centre' (meaning the river valley around Khartoum and its fertile agricultural lands) towards the 'peripheries' (such as the plains of the West and South which support valuable livestock farming and are rich in mineral resources including oil in the South and gold in the Jebel Amer area in North Darfur). Urban revolutionaries, whose bread is baked from imported wheat paid for through the livestock and gold exports from the peripheries, ignore the lessons of the co-option of the rural militias at their peril, el-Gizouli and Thomas argue. The question of peace, the supply of bread and the issue of who controls the land and its resources are intimately connected.

Could the Resistance Committees offer an alternative to the long history of pillage and plunder connecting the centre and periphery in Sudan? At a political level there is hope that they might—the fact that Hemedti's paramilitary forces continue to terrorise and kill in both Darfur and the major cities has helped to create a sense of unity. The anti-racist slogan—"The whole country is Darfur"—was revived again in December 2021, after government forces raped and assaulted women protesters during demonstrations at the Republican Palace. Building a stable political alliance between the poor of the towns and the countryside will pose much greater challenges. One of the conditions for such an alliance to develop must surely be for the revolutionary movement in the towns to develop forms of self-organisation which cross the threshold from demands *on* those in power to the execution of those demands under their own authority. Could this open the door to feeding the cities without leaving the countryside hungry? How could the machinery which currently generates profits for Gulf investors and their Sudanese cronies through agricultural and mineral exports be altered by such democratic, revolutionary authorities to meet

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211 MENA Solidarity, 2022f.
212 Thomas & El-Gizouli, 2021.

the needs of ordinary people?

A glimpse of both the potential and challenges of intervention by the Resistance Committees along this axis could be seen in responses to the mass movement by farmers in Northern State, who erected barricades across the highway to Egypt, cutting the flow of agricultural exports by road to protest over a huge rise in electricity prices. The farmers' movement mobilised support from Resistance Committees the capital, who sent delegations to join the barricades.[213]

However, some activists from the urban resistance committees had a tendency to ignore the original social demands raised by the farmers, instead focussing on the barricades as a way to damage the Egyptian economy and hit back at Egyptian president Abdelfattah al-Sisi, who has been one of the strongest regional supporters of the military coup. As Muzan Alneel notes, "There is a tendency for urban demands to simply take over, unless there is an organisation capable of putting out an analysis that goes to the root of the situation so that the urban and rural masses can come together".[214]There is also the question of how the Resistance Committees relate to the class composition of the neighbourhoods they represent. Within the tripartite capital city (Khartoum, Omdurman and Bahri) for example, there are huge social differences between areas. Magdi el-Gizouli highlighted the differing aspirations of the Resistance Committees of middle-class areas such as Riyadh and those like impoverished Kalakla during the first phase of the revolution in 2019.[215] In the wake of the signing of the agreement which led to the creation of the Transitional Government it seemed as if the well-heeled activists of Riyadh might slam the doors of power shut on the young men from Kalakla who had risked their lives on the barricades. But the Resistance Committees continued to build support for the revolution in the poorest areas of the capital—Kalakla, Janub al-Hizam —giving residents of some of these areas political organisation of their own and amplifying their demands on a national stage.

This underscores of course that processes of political differentiation are taking place between Resistance Committees (as we saw above around the different revolutionary charters)

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213 Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022.

214 Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022.

215 El-Gizouli, 2020a.

and raises the question of which version of 'the people' do they represent? Is it everyone except the very top layers of the old regime? Or is it "the mass of the people, their majority, the very lowest social groups, crushed by oppression and exploitation", as Lenin put it?[216]. *Some* Resistance Committees have acted as a vehicle for demands from the bottom of Sudanese society to shape the revolutionary process, but as the example of the Greater Khartoum political charter illustrates, city-wide coordination leads towards compromise in order to find a degree of cross-class consensus between the urban poor and workers on one hand, and those elements of the middle class which are supporting political revolution against the generals' regime on the other.

There is also the question which the Sudanese revolutionary movement has so far sidestepped—whether it is possible to really defeat the states special bodies of armed men, without the people taking arms to confront them? The belief that an armed vanguard can bring about political or national revolution from above was the preferred model for rebel movements against the Sudanese state in the previous generation. In many ways it was a step forward to turn away from this strategy, creating space for the emergence of the Resistance Committees themselves. However, as Mohamed Abdelrahman comments, a situation of dual power in Sudan will require both a split in the Armed Forces, RSF and militias along class lines, and the emergence of the people in arms as an alternative to the standing army.

"This is simply not discussed publicly at the moment. Actually, the discourse of "peaceful" revolution, combined with the need to "build a national army" representing the national interest rather than the interests of corrupt generals, is dominant. The closest the Sudanese Revolution came to breaking the state's monopoly on rifles was from 7 to 11 April 2019, when El Bashir fell. In those few days, soldiers and junior officers sided with the revolutionaries and fired at the security forces that tried to disperse them".[217]

For all the progress they have made, the Resistance Committees are running up against obstacles which they are unlikely to overcome alone. As Muzan Alneel notes

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216   Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022.
217   Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022.

"We may be reaching the limits of the resistance committees' role as the sole revolutionary leadership. It will serve everyone much better if there was a clear revolutionary voice, supporting the revolutionary inclinations within existing resistance committees and providing sharp analysis. Without a revolutionary organisation we are at the mercy of individuals and social media algorithms".[218]

The challenges of building such a revolutionary party will be the focus of the concluding chapter.

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218 Alneel & Abdelrahman, 2022.