



Thirsty for Change

Alaa Salah
Sudan

The young woman's pose is defiant. She stares straight ahead, eyes wide open, a look of fierce determination on her face. One arm is raised to the sky, her finger pointing upward toward the heavens, as she stands on a car in the midst of a crowd in Khartoum, Sudan. She joins in on the chorus of voices of the peaceful protesters calling for the government to fall. Around her, the crowd swarms, cheers, chants "*Thawra!*" - "Revolution!" They turn their cameras to snap a photo of Alaa, whose all-white garb and golden, moon-shaped earrings make her stand out all the more amidst the falling dusk, the smog of the city.

It was this moment — and one of these snapshots — that changed Alaa Salah's life.

Taken by a local photographer, Lana Haroun, the photo quickly went viral when Lana posted it online. Alaa's powerful pose inspired more protesters to join the fight to peacefully topple President Omar al-Bashir, whose reign had become more and more authoritarian — and was leading to a number of horrifying consequences: bread and fuel shortages, the oppression of women, imprisonment of political dissidents.

Alaa became known as Sudan's "Lady Liberty" and the "Woman in White"—and the photo brought international attention to their cause.

The photo was published on April 8, 2019. Three days later, al-Bashir's regime came tumbling down.

But the work of toppling the regime didn't take place over just three days.

Alaa remembers the first day young people took the streets to call for the end of the repressive dictatorship: December 19, 2018. She was a 22-year-old student at the time. She had lived a relatively normal childhood, growing up in Khartoum, the capital, and attending private schools. When she graduated from high school, she went to university to study architecture and engineering.

Despite her relatively privileged upbringing, she still felt the harsh effects of the regime at times. One night, she remembers, she was out on a stroll with her brother, coming back from an event. The police approached them and asked them what they were doing. They made her prove that her brother was related to her — because at that time, in Sudan you could get harassed, or even thrown in jail, for being out in public with someone of the opposite gender. "It was really terrifying," she says.

Everyday life was hard in Sudan. Many young people were not allowed to get an education. Lines for bread snaked out of bakeries; people queued at the bank to take out money, but came away empty handed. The police set up checkpoints where they checked for IDs without giving a valid reason why.

Alaa, and many others in her generation, grew up thirsty for change. They watched as other Arab countries were rising up against the dictators who had monopolized power for so many years: in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt. But throughout this period, Sudan's dictator, al-Bashir, somehow managed to hang on. He ruled over a massacre in the Darfur region that had killed more than 600,000 people. And he turned a blind eye to the widespread violence: against women, against the press, against defenders of human rights.

“There was a lot of energy piling up inside of me, because that regime was full of corruption,” Alaa says, her anger still palpable. “They were killing people! There was a lot of hunger, and pain, and rape, and violence. For 30 years! And that was when the revolution started.”

As is often the case in countries that experience conflict and unrest, there was a reason for the conflict that no one was talking about: and that “elephant in the room” was climate change.

To many observers and analysts, even some in positions as high up as at the United Nations, the war in Sudan’s Darfur region was one of the first modern conflicts fought over climate. The Sahel region, where Darfur is located, used to be called the breadbasket of Africa, and was known for its lush agricultural lands. The Nile River runs through that part of the country, nourishing the region.

But as climate change has accelerated, the region is drying up: this has led to tensions between farmers of different ethnicities who produce crops, and raise cattle there. The Sahara Desert has expanded—moving about 60 miles south in just 40 years. Rainfall during that time has decreased by 15 to 20 percent. By as soon as 2030, just 10 years from now, the main crop produced in the area, sorghum, could decrease by 70 percent due to climate change.

It was the food shortages Alaa experienced growing up that eventually led her generation to rise up. People were hungry. And these food shortages weren’t just a result of corruption — although that too played a role —it was also because of climate change.

Alaa saw firsthand how changes in the climate had had an impact on populations outside of Khartoum, where she grew up. “Usually the rain would come in August, but more recently it would be in June. These changes in the climate have affected certain regions,” she says.

Farmers had to begin to bring their cattle further and further from home in order to feed them. Others would have to sell their cattle in exchange for seeds so they could grow other crops.

“There have always been problems, but the previous regime was not willing to put forward sustainable solutions,” she says.

The moments during and just after the Sudanese revolution were filled with hope for the future. After the military staged the coup that overthrew al-Bachir, they eventually settled on a power-sharing agreement with civil society organizations and protest groups: a major step toward democracy. Al-Bachir went on trial, and was convicted of corruption and sentenced to two years in prison.

Not all of the promises of peace and stability from the new regime were kept, though. In June, security forces shot dead 87 protesters. There were still outbursts of violence; but it was nothing compared to what the people had suffered before and during the revolution.

The promises to include more women in politics also fell through, and many of the women who had led the movement felt that their voices were once again being left out. So in the fall of 2019, Alaa and a group of women activists from Sudan traveled to the United Nations in New York City, where they called on world leaders to ensure equal gender representation in Sudan’s newly formed parliament.

They’ve received the support of some notable figures, like the actor George Clooney and his wife Amal, who denounced the corrupt regime.

Alaa knows that the fight for justice doesn’t end when the dictator falls; it ends when everyone has an equal chance at success. She’s made it her life mission to ensure that all Sudanese youth can get an education; and she is working with local nonprofits to expand educational opportunities across the country.

“In developed countries they have paid a lot of attention to education and that’s why they’re improving,” she says. “In developing countries on the other hand, education has been marginalized and it hasn’t been taken care of.”

For many children in Sudan, even getting to school can be life-threatening. When Alaa heard that 22 children had drowned crossing a river to try to get to school, she was heartbroken. *No child should have to risk their life to get an education*, she thought.

For Sudan, education and climate change adaptation can go hand in hand. The country's next generation, growing up for the first time not under a dictatorship, could become the scientists who are coming up with creative solutions to address desertification, waste management, pollution of the Nile River, and many of the other problems the country is facing.

Alaa wants Sudanese children to know that they are the country's future; and that by staring down their challenges and being committed to solving them peacefully, as she and her fellow activists did in the spring of 2019, they can make their country a better, more just place to live.

"Every dream can be a reality, and every imagination can also be a reality," she says. "Between the dream and the reality, there are so many challenges, and the challenges could be big, they could be frustrating. If there's hope, you can get to that reality, but you need to work really hard, and you have to believe in your cause. And you have to stand up for it!"

Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation.

Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace.

If, however, they are left on society's margins,

all of us will be impoverished.

Let us ensure that all young people have every opportunity

to participate fully in the lives of their societies.

Kofi Annan, Secretary General United Nations

Call to Action: Learn how you can support Sudanese women and children in their fight for a more just society and a better life for all. Follow Alaa on Instagram https://www.instagram.com/lwolia_salah/

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
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