Women in Sudan: „We won’t be silent in the face of the tyrant“(Alaa Salah)

by *Clay Ikarus, Revolution Deutschland, in Fight! Revolutionary Women’s Magazine, 13, März 2025*

In 2019, thousands of voices responded to activist Alaa’s promise with “Thawra!” (Arabic for “Revolution!”). Today, Sudan has been embroiled in a bitter war for almost two years, keeping the entire population in a state of fear and terror. Women and children are particularly suffering from the current situation. Most recently, reports of a mass suicide of Sudanese women fearing sexual violence shocked the media. But how did it come to this, and how can the struggle for liberation evolve?

A brief historical overview

The history of the Sudanese civil war began in 2018/19. The dictator Omar al-Bashir (also: Umar al-Bashir) was in power at the time and wanted to introduce massive austerity measures. This was the last straw, as the population was already facing several crises: a housing shortage, a broken health and education system, and most ATMs were empty, so people couldn’t access their money. Meanwhile, any political opposition activity was violently suppressed. Nevertheless, the masses took to the streets. The initial demonstrations and strikes, initiated by the SPA (Sudanese Professionals Association, an umbrella organization of 17 individual unions), grew into a movement of resistance fighters who organized themselves in neighborhoods across the cities. They succeeded in overthrowing the dictator. Women were at the forefront of this movement, making up more than half of the protesters. They also became the face of the movement internationally. Some may remember the famous image of Alaa Salah, a

23-year-old student who motivated the crowds. She later spoke as a representative of Sudanese civil society before the UN Security Council, demanding that those responsible for the old regime be held accountable.

The revolution improved the situation of women in Sudan. The Public Order Law, which not only suppressed political struggles but also dictated women's behavior and dress code, was abolished. The practice of female genital mutilation was criminalized. However, even though the revolution was mainly carried out by women, they did not achieve full equality in the new transitional civilian government under Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Only a fifth of the cabinet was made up of women, even though fifty percent had been demanded. With the implementation of economic reforms dictated by Sudan's foreign creditors, Hamdok gradually lost more and more of his support among the population.

Unfortunately, the history of the Arab Spring repeated itself in Sudan. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under the leadership of General Abdel Fattah Burhan, which supported the revolution and promised to oversee the transition to a democratic system, ultimately turned against the civilian government. Together with his deputy Hamdan Daglo, lieutenant general of the paramilitary unit RSF (Rapid Support Forces; Islamist paramilitary group), they overthrew Abdalla Hamdok in 2021 and introduced a military regime that ruled with violence and crushed the achievements of the revolution. Unfortunately, the massive protests against this military coup came too late. The civil revolution ended in a counterrevolution. We must not forget that Saudi Arabia and Egypt provided significant support to the military in Sudan, as they had hired Sudanese mercenaries for their own war in Yemen and were financed by the US with several billion dollars.

Sudan itself is only part of the arc of crisis that stretches westward across the Sahel zone and also includes Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. These countries have experienced military coups that

have massively weakened French hegemony or replaced it with others—militarily, often with Russian involvement, and economically through China. In the east, this arc of crisis even extends to the states on the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia are strategically located on the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which connects the Indian Ocean with the Red Sea and from there with the Suez Canal. Twenty percent of the world's container ship traffic passes through this strait. It is no wonder that rival imperialist groups also want access to Sudan's geostrategic location on the Red Sea, and obviously also to it's ressources. Once again, it is US imperialism and its allies, competing with Russia and China, as well as the involvement of regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, which supplies weapons to the RSF: they have all interfered in Sudan and ultimately want to see their warring faction ruling over Sudan in their interests from a throne built on corpses.

The current civil war

In April 2023, the conflict between the SAF and the RSF escalated, leading to an ongoing war and one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. Entire neighborhoods and villages have already been destroyed by the fighting. More than 14 million people have been forced to leave their homes, over 40 percent of farmland is uncultivated, causing the country's wheat production to decline by 75 percent. Twenty-six million people, about half the population, are suffering from famine. Tens of thousands of civilians have already been killed and many more injured. The atrocities committed against the courageous and militant women of Sudan are particularly alarming. They are subjected to torture and mass rape. The fear of this drives them to suicide. On one day, more than 100 women took their own lives at the same time to escape this fate. The RSF is particularly notorious for this violence against civilians. They repeatedly take women and children hostage, torture and kill them.

In addition, medical care has largely collapsed, leading to a

massive increase in the spread of diseases: cholera, malaria, dengue fever, measles, and rubella are now causing death alongside hunger and war. At a donor conference in Paris in April 2024, €2 billion in aid was pledged. Not only is this insufficient, but the supplies are intercepted by the warring parties and do not reach the population.

But what about liberation?

Unfortunately, the revolution failed due to the same problems that plagued the Arab Spring: as long as the army's high command, the Islamist parties and the state bureaucracy remain intact, the danger of a counterrevolution persists. What is needed is a revolution that goes all the way, smashes the repressive power of the state, takes control of the economy from the corrupt capitalist class, and puts power in the hands of the working people. This means that democracy alone cannot survive; a socialist revolution in the sense of permanent revolution is necessary, because the imperialist world system will always try to make Sudan a pawn in its own game. The people in all these countries have already proven that they have the courage and the power to overthrow dictatorships. They have learned to organize themselves into resistance units and have thus defied entire armies. It is necessary to rebuild this strength, to network across national borders, and to resume the struggle for liberation. In doing so, it is important to learn from the mistakes of the past and not repeat them. The goal of a popular front with the bourgeois forces must be discarded and replaced by the creation of a revolutionary program and a party for the workers.

In Sudan, this means that people within the military forces must raise their weapons against their corrupt generals, and workers must collect every weapon they can find and reorganize themselves underground. Workers in neighboring countries must also reorganize themselves and take up the struggle so that they can support their class brothers and sisters in Sudan. However, this process must be

linked to a revolutionary program in order to be successful. It is therefore necessary to oppose any imperialist intervention, to have aid deliveries to the population monitored by committees to ensure fair distribution, and to convene a constituent assembly that places the means of production under the control of the workers.

For us in the Western countries, it is important to fight against any interference by our states in the uprisings in African and Arab countries and to seek solidarity with Sudanese activists. Together, we must oppose all economic embargoes that weaken the Sudanese economy and dismantle dependencies that arise from so-called development aid from Western countries. Instead, Sudanese society should draw up a reconstruction plan that demands reparations and ensures that these demands are met. Together with the unions, we must stop our governments from supplying weapons to warmongers, whether in Sudan, Yemen, or Gaza!