



Arab Reform Initiative

Research Paper, 9 November 2021

# **Sudanese Professionals Association: Structure, Evolution, Roles and Coalitions - Challenges and Future Prospects**

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## Introduction

Strong trade unions and professional associations are among the most important forms of civil society organizations. These organizations are the best suited to contribute to overcoming dictatorships, driving democratic transformation, promoting freedoms, and ensuring that economic and social rights are maintained in the various sectors which they regulate. These include health, education, housing, transportation, labour and employment, freedom of association, as well as the right to protest and strike. Professional associations, such as labour unions, have always been a target for totalitarian regimes in the Arab region. Autocratic regimes aim to control organizations and unions, void them of any substance and goals, and exclude them along with their leadership from professional and political participation that might potentially lead to networks and connections that could threaten those regimes or even advance the interests of union members.

Nonetheless, the Arab region has seen a few experiences where efforts were mobilized to organize, overcome the aforementioned context, and impose successful attempts to change it. Among these experiences is the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) – the most prominent organized effort in the protests that led to al-Bashir’s resignation on 11 April 2019 after years of networking attempts among independent trade unions and months of various means of protest.

This study explores how we can understand the role of independent trade unions in the democratic transition based on the Sudanese experience. It also looks at the capacity of these organizations to challenge attempts by dictatorial regimes which prevent associations that may drive or lead any social change that opposes them. This paper will also examine various dimensions of the current experience based on the previous historical context of trade unions in Sudan before the SPA and subsequent mobilization efforts. Additionally, it seeks to analyze the SPA’s structures, alliances, development before, during, and after the December Revolution, as well as decision-making mechanisms. The study also considers the



SPA's role in the movement, negotiations with political forces and the army during the transitional phase, organizational challenges in the current political context, and its structural alignment with the assumed roles as well as potential prospects.

This study uses an analytical approach based on desktop research and the analysis of articles and texts concerning the SPA. It also reviews the SPA's discourse during the transitional period, relationships with other parties based on firsthand accounts, statements and documents it issued, and written views of its members. A series of interviews with some members and key figures have been conducted, taking into account the gender and age diversity within the SPA community.

## I. Background: Union Activity in Sudan pre-SPA:

Labour activism emerged in modern Sudan as a direct result of the substantial changes brought about by British colonialism and its engagement in the economic and social lives of the Sudanese people. The emergence of production projects and infrastructure-related activities in Sudan was key to the boom of a sector made up of menial workers and craft professionals. This set the stage for the establishment of various labour unions.<sup>1</sup> Historically, labour activities mainly centred on opposing colonizers and their policies. In 1908, sawmill workers were the first to hold an organized strike, demanding better working conditions. The air of activism gradually made its way to public cafés in local markets to discuss labour issues. British colonizers were pressured into establishing workers' clubs in the three cities of Khartoum (Khartoum Pan, Omdurman and Khartoum North) in 1934. This trend was propagated afterwards across all labour cities in Sudan. Various labour groups took on educational, training and political roles in fighting against colonialism by demanding the establishment of trade unions and the spread of wall newspapers and labour theatres. The first labour magazine was issued in 1946, "*Al-Amel Al-Sudani*" (The Sudanese Worker).<sup>2</sup>

## Trade Unions and Political Action (1947 - 1985)



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Trade unions in Sudan were officially established in 1947. The Railway Workers Affairs Association became the first modern union to be established in the country. Afterwards, the idea was developed and more pressure was exerted on the British. The colonizers finally recognized union rights to organize. As a result, the first Labor and Employment Act was issued in 1948, along with the Union Registration Regulations of 1948. Accordingly, the Sudanese union movement gained legitimacy and momentum. On 18 May 1949, the first labour conference convened and adopted the Labour Union Constitution; efforts continued and culminated with the establishment of the Sudanese Workers' Trade Union Federation in November 1950. These laws and regulations remained valid until 1960.

These developments resulted in the emergence of the “Multi-organizational Front,” which organized and led popular actions all the way to civil disobedience and strikes. These efforts ultimately mobilized the October 1964 Revolution, which overthrew Ibrahim Abboud’s dictatorship (1958 - 1964). The same was true for the Sudanese popular uprising in March 1985, when the people chose their leadership represented by the "Union Association." Some believe that the political conditions fostered by the rescue regime<sup>3</sup> had a different impact on union action in Sudan. Consequently, it manifested in two main aspects. On one hand, the regime’s repression and crackdown on activists harmed political parties. Indeed, it weakened their ability to engage directly with the people, thus isolating generations of Sudanese from tapping into the political legacy and struggle of these parties and groups. On the other hand, the void born out of the forced absence of political institutions strengthened the role of civil society, namely unions and other civic organizations, which sought to fill the public sphere with their demand-centred activities.<sup>4</sup>

## Surviving the al-Bashir Era

Al-Bashir's regime was vehemently against union action in Sudan and sought to dismantle and control associations by dissolving legitimate unions within institutions. Nonetheless, the legacy of union activity in Sudan persisted and never ceased. Efforts were made to reinvigorate the Union Association, which was established in 1985 and dissolved by the rescue authority in June 1989 long before the establishment of the SPA. The **regime worked on dismantling unions and**

<sup>4</sup> Sudanese Professionals Association: Structure, Evolution, Roles and Coalitions - Challenges and Future Prospects



**displacing workers through the Public Interest Law. It targeted labour leaders and accused them of being leftist – particularly members of the Railway Workers Affairs Association, the Gezira Farmers Union, and other institutions known for consolidating union action in Sudan.<sup>5</sup> The rescue regime quickly held a conference for union dialogue in August 1990 to abolish existing legitimate trade unions.<sup>6</sup>** However, the labour protests and movements did not subside. In 1994 and 1996, several professional sectors organized protests and strikes, such as the doctors' strike in April 1996.<sup>7</sup> Just as they were key players in previous Sudanese uprisings, unions and union associations were also direct victims of dissolution, liquidation, confiscation of funds, and replacement with loyalist unions, or the imprisonment and abuse of their key figures under other laws.

## Union Action among Professionals

After 2005, Sudan experienced an openness to freedoms and political engagement following the signing of the Naivasha Peace Agreement with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. With improving economic conditions in the wake of the war, workers in public institutions had a growing interest in union action, namely school teachers, university professors, physicians, lawyers, and media professionals. As such, various initiatives emerged to organize union action around various issues, including the Teachers' Committee Against Financial Cutbacks and the Legitimate Sudanese Doctors Syndicate, which organized strikes and memoranda submissions to governing bodies. However, coordination and cooperation among these movements was subpar. They relied mainly on individual networking among party members already active in unions.

## Coordination among Union Components and the Birth of the SPA

The real cooperation among opposition union components began during 2010-2011 following the elections and the secession of South Sudan. Political and professional actors from the opposition movements focused their efforts on creating effective union alliances that could advocate against regime policies and

<sup>5</sup> Sudanese Professionals Association: Structure, Evolution, Roles and Coalitions - Challenges and Future Prospects



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unilateral political decision-making. As a result, what was then known as the Sudanese Professionals Federation was established in 2012. The name was later changed to the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) in 2013 through joint coordination among the Teachers' Committee, the Journalists' Network, the Legitimate Sudanese Doctors' Syndicate, and the Democratic Lawyers Association. The current SPA Facebook page was created at the end of 2012. The very first post defined the SPA as an alliance of professional unions. The Secretariat's Media Bureau also shared videos documenting some SPA activities during the same year, such as seminars and appeals launched by the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors to help those injured during the 2013 protests.<sup>8</sup> Before the revolution, the page was characterized by a discourse focused on professional demands. Although it stayed away from political demands, comments made by some union members touched on political discussions. Protest momentum in Sudan, coinciding with the Arab Spring may have helped push for greater coordination. At the time, totalitarian regimes also found themselves unable to hold their ground before international leading telecommunication companies. In fact, economic liberalization now required more integration rather than restrictions, thus allowing for more digital spaces to enhance coordination among these entities.

This extended union and organizational legacy further strengthened the role of the SPA in leading political change. Indeed, many leaders of the Union Association that was established in the mid-eighties, have contributed to the rise of the SPA and were among its leadership. Union leaders had worked to form legitimate shadow unions to express their non-recognition of unions and bodies brought about by the al-Bashir regime. In 2012, approximately 200 professors from the University of Khartoum agreed on establishing an unofficial union. Other professionals in Sudan were encouraged to follow their lead, which led to the formation of the following bodies: the Legitimate Sudanese Doctors Committee, as the counterpart of the Sudanese Doctors Syndicate; the Sudanese Journalists Network, as a counterpart of the General Union of Sudanese Journalists; and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers as an alternative to the Government Bar Association; in addition to many clandestine committees and organizations in other bodies and institutions.

These efforts were made despite some differences regarding SPA establishment and history. Some consider that the SPA started with all clandestine efforts that



led to the SPA and the launch of the SPA page on social media platforms in 2012, while others believe that 2016 marked the true beginning of a strong SPA presence in the public eye. This is the history adopted by the SPA website. The SPA was established in 2016 by virtue of the first Charter for Professionals, drafted by three founding members: the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, the Sudanese Journalists Network, and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers.<sup>9</sup> However, the SPA effectively launched its activities in 2012, even if it remained secret until 2016,<sup>10</sup> when the SPA Charter was drafted. Disagreements on the recording of the rise of the SPA can be traced back to the subsequent waves of memberships, the advocacy and union bodies that followed, and the organizational dimensions the SPA took until it reached its final form with most of its membership base.

## Role of SPA and 2018 Revolution

Although the SPA's role in preparing for the first week of mass mobilization in 2018 remains unclear – especially demonstrations across various states that resistance committees helped coordinate – the SPA played a pivotal role in mobilizing the masses in the capital, Khartoum, by calling for a march to Parliament to submit a memorandum demanding better wages on 25 December 2018. The widespread public response prompted the SPA to continue mobilizing, rallying, and calling for protests, thus playing a prominent leading role as the situation continued to develop.<sup>11</sup> The resulting organizational development allowed the SPA to actively participate in planning the revolution against al-Bashir's regime.

## SPA: Extension of Previous Experiences and New Roles

In form, the SPA role during the December 2018 revolution seems almost identical to previous professional organizational experiences and their important political roles in Sudan. It also gives a glimpse into the role that unions played in October 1964 and April 1985, respectively. On 17 October 1964, the Sudanese organized a popular movement where the “Multi-organizational Front” – a union organization – played a decisive role against the rule of President Ibrahim Abboud (1958 - 1964). In another similar experience, a spontaneous popular uprising erupted in March



1985, in which participants opposed President Jaafar Nimeiry (1969 - 1985). Professors at the University of Khartoum were quick to organize a union association of lawyers, engineers, money-changers, and public insurance employees. They were joined by the University Students' Union, and the Doctors' Syndicate, who also organized a strike and marched to the presidential palace. Following consecutive strikes and demonstrations demanding the resignation of the president, the army under the command of Abdel Rahman Swar al-Dahab, declared its allegiance to the people and thus ended Jaafar Nimeiry's rule on 6 April 1985.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, union organizations and associations had a similar key role in mobilizing against military regimes through political strikes and phased civil disobedience, down to halting all economic activity and paralyzing the whole country. These efforts led to the ousting of Presidents Abboud, Nimeiry and later, al-Bashir<sup>13</sup>.

## What Sets the SPA Experience apart from Previous Union Activity in Sudan?

Despite the similarities between the roles of trade unions and coalitions across all three revolutions (1964, 1985, and 2018), the SPA experience is unique in terms of the general context and political conditions, as well as its organizational structure.

Upon examining the post-independence period, one can comment on the “weak political action and organized political movement in 1940s post-WWII. This existing movement failed to manage the country and establish democracy or promote development. It was followed by 30 years of al-Bashir regime that further weakened political action and prevented all activity. Anyone able to engage in clandestine action had to proceed with restrictions. They were denied normal communication and political variable analysis, thus requiring a change of starting points, rhetoric, etc., and causing this period of weakness.”<sup>14</sup>

However, under al-Bashir's regime, an extended and relentless movement boomed, contributing to and supporting professional and trade union action with political cadres drawn from the active youth who joined the SPA post-revolution.



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The growth of sectors affected by the regime and its wars in the south and in Darfur revived organizational endeavours. In its first and second waves, the Arab Spring also inspired the Sudanese, who had nothing to lose on the eve of the SPA's rise. Furthermore, the telecommunications revolution and the reach of social media platforms provided new tools to overcome the traditional security crackdowns led by security and military regimes, including the al-Bashir regime. This resulted in the rapid shift from clandestine to overt action at a lower cost compared to previous organizational attempts. Nonetheless, the SPA became distinguished thanks to its pages on social media, which contributed to reiterating the demands voiced in the streets into clear expressions, as well as banners and slogans that attracted millions of Sudanese.

In addition, the SPA was also known for keeping up with society's evolution towards decentralization, the flexibility of organization, thought, and movement. Historically, organizations, demonstrations, change, and revolutions would take place in the capital, Khartoum, and then spread to the provinces and rural areas. However, this time around, the revolution started from the far corners of the rural areas – in roaring demonstrations – then gradually moved to the centre. There, the SPA fostered these actions and led the great demonstration that lasted for four or five months until the regime was overthrown.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the nature of organizational and technological developments, along with decentralized virtual activities, have greatly contributed to creating and facilitating organized waves of discontent that were able to successfully change the centre of governance and power.

Some SPA key figures believe that the association's approach is different from previous organizational attempts in terms of the work methodology based on phased goals aligned with SPA nature, capacities, and operational context. The pre-2016 union coalitions were mostly burdened by politicization and partisan agendas. Their activities were dominated by sloganeering and galvanization, making them an easy target for the regime's security services, which often succeeded in dismantling them, reducing their impact and distorting their image. Like the ruling regime, the opposition political parties were also responsible for thwarting efforts to form the pre-2016 trade union coalition. This was due to their continuous attempts to make unions bear the brunt of standing up to the



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repressive regime. By establishing the SPA, unions tried to prevent these negative consequences. SPA founders agreed to employ a well-thought-out methodology when establishing the association. The objective of union joint action was to ensure the greatest consensus on professional issues and demands. This was reflected in the SPA Charter and bylaws. SPA leaders included a year-long action plan developed through a series of workshops to rally the largest possible base of supporters in the shortest possible time, through advocacy and professional activities that mobilizes the bases around common and unifying, uncontentious issues. Of course, there were the aspirations of realizing the political dream of change and overthrowing the regime, but this was not foreseeable at the time or intended given the SPA's weak base. Within a year of implementing an action plan, the SPA's main ambition was to become a strong body with a serious role in the public scene and political life. As such, the first matter raised by the SPA was the issue of wages, given its significance at that time.<sup>16</sup>

The SPA then enhanced its activities and tools, shifting from an organizational movement to an association of professionals. This change was implemented to enhance its capacity to achieve the aspirations of those who practice the same profession. The SPA also sought to build a unified and strong union movement with members drafting regulations through dialogue, seminars, charters, detailed action plans, and engaging in a rapid transition from clandestine to public action – all while mobilizing under an oppressive regime. The SPA later attempted to change the regime by raising general issues that went beyond professional matters, such as wages, educational reforms, health and service reforms, and issues of concern to professionals and non-professionals alike. The movement opposed the privatization of the health sector, and rejected the regime's economic policies that for decades had resulted in worsening living conditions, increased drug prices, and undermined union freedoms and labour laws. These efforts helped pave the way for the movement and its leadership. This was all clear in the statement of the Commitment to “Build and Serve”, which the SPA issued and called on individuals and entities to sign.<sup>17</sup>

The SPA deployed through advocacy and voiced its demands as a stepping stone that would help it gain legitimacy among professionals and the Sudanese people. However, with the start of the revolution, the SPA forged alliances with many



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parties, leading to the coalition of the Forces of Freedom and Change. The SPA then became a political coalition that relied on the legacy of a social movement spanning across professional unions.

These developments can be summarized chronologically as follows:

Year	Organizational development	Issues and Objectives
2012	Unofficial collaboration between the Committee of Sudanese Doctors and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers.	Revival of associative union action and organization of independent unions.
2014	Sudanese Journalists Network joins SPA. SPA Facebook page goes online.	Planning starts to include sectoral campaigns aimed at raising wages and improving working conditions across various sectors.
October 2016 - July 2018	SPA is officially established through a written charter based on an official alliance among the three committees that also explains the SPA's Statutes, methodology, and raison d'être. SPA now includes eight-member entities.	The objectives mentioned in the charter are <sup>18</sup> : 1- Restore the freedom, independence, and democracy of trade union action based on professional groups. 2- Reclaim union and professional rights of workers, guaranteed by international instruments and covenants, in addition to the acquired rights, and combating injustice and job exploitation. 3- Strengthen professional associations in respective fields of work to expose established and opportunistic unions affiliated with the regime, and defeat them in elections. 4- As it works to restore the independence and democracy of trade union movements and reclaim rights, the SPA strives to address pressing daily issues of professionals.
December 2018	Restructuring the SPA to match up to its role in organizing the movement and leading demonstrations and protests. Memberships reach 17 entities. Creating new committees and increasing the number of media committee members.	Calls for raising the minimum wage and a march to the presidential palace. Participation in the Atbara demonstrations against the deteriorating economic conditions and the rise in bread prices.
January 2019	Engaging in a broader coalition with the Revolutionary Front and the National Consensus Forces, within the Forces of Freedom and Change.	Adopting popular demands of overthrowing the regime, holding its figures accountable, and contributing to formulating and elaborating demands.
April 2019 - March 2021	Withdrawal from the forces of Freedom and Change. Some splits and reorganization. 15 entities as shown on the Association website.	Focusing on key events during the transition period. Attempting to combine professional and general political demands. Elaborating protest demands of professionals



## Role of SPA in the Movement

The SPA paved the way for the revolution. When the SPA issued a statement calling on citizens to take to the streets in downtown Khartoum at the beginning of demonstrations to protest high prices and low wages, not many had heard of the SPA. However, thousands responded to the call,<sup>19</sup> although the political opposition parties remained silent for the first few days. In early January, these parties united and joined the calls for changing the regime, but people on the ground were responding to the SPA rather than political parties.<sup>20</sup> By the end of January, the SPA seemed to largely express the demands and aspirations of the Sudanese protesters. Its Facebook page hosted the largest forum of pro-movement actors. It formulated the demands of the demonstrators, identified protest locations, provided medical and logistical support to all demonstrations, disseminated data and publications, and through its committees, documented injuries and deaths among protesters. The SPA called for a mass demonstration on 25 December, to march to the presidential palace to hand over a memorandum calling for al-Bashir to step down. The demonstration was met with excessive violence and dispersed. Nonetheless, the SPA has been organizing many daily protest activities since then.<sup>21</sup>

In general, the union entities within the SPA has initially relied on using professional issues, such as low wages, deterioration of the work environment and conditions, as a way to place further pressure on authorities, and reveal its inability to provide the rights and fulfil the demands of the masses. Many unionists had believed that this would prompt the people to take to the streets and demand that the regime be overthrown. Therefore, the popular movement that was born in December 2018 was aligned with SPA efforts.<sup>22</sup>

## II. SPA: Structure, Evolution and Alliances



# Keeping up with the Revolution: Structure and Evolution

When it was first established in October 2016 as an organization, the SPA was made up of three founding subcommittees: The Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, the Sudanese Journalists Network, and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers. In mid-2018 on the eve of the day that the movement was declared, the SPA included eight professional lobbies which were not recognized by the government of the ousted President al-Bashir. This included the following founding committees: Sudanese Engineers Association, University Professors Association, Teachers' Committee, Sudanese Veterinary Preliminary Council, and the Committee of Sudanese Pharmacists. "A group of doctors, teachers, engineers, pharmacists, university professors, farmers, veterinarians, money changers, auditors, civil aviation staff, and journalists have participated in the first meetings."<sup>23</sup>

The SPA currently consists of fifteen professional member organizations and bodies.<sup>24</sup>

According to some SPA leaders, the association was not marked by a dramatic structural evolution from the pre-revolution phase. In fact, it maintained the administrative and organizational composition that was first approved by its founders. They had chosen to adopt a horizontal structure headed by an SPA Council made up of all concerned union bodies, with two members for each. The structure also included a Secretariat made up of five bureaus, staffed per the vote of the Council members, provided that each bureau includes at least one representative from each union body. However, during the revolution, some modifications were made to the SPA structure by adding a number of members to the SPA Council and Secretariat since new union entities were joining the SPA. These included: the Preliminary Committee for the Syndicate of Engineers and Environmentalists, the Human Resources Professionals Committee, the Professional Pharmacists Association and other bodies that have recently breached 16 union components. The grassroots movements also forced the SPA to expand the functions of some Secretariat bureau – such as the Events Bureau,



which previously focused on organizing regular SPA activities including exhibitions, seminars, and protests. During the revolution, there was a need to establish a Field Bureau affiliated with the Events Bureau. Its mission would be to lead the movement during the revolution. It was led by Professor Adel Keller.<sup>25</sup>

The functions of the Media Bureau were also expanded to include several departments. Activists partaking in the revolution without affiliation to any SPA founding professional body could also work and belong to this Bureau. The early SPA structure included an Organizational Bureau whose main task was to communicate and coordinate with professional bodies that did not sign the Association's charter. Developments within the popular movement required a more encompassing role from the Organizational Bureau, including contacting political forces and parties to ensure coordination with SPA. The Bureau was also entrusted with communicating the SPA Council's vision to other parties that joined the SPA in organizing and managing demonstrations on the ground.<sup>26</sup>

However, some individuals within the SPA believed that start of the revolution was critical to creating real transformation when it comes to the SPA's structure, nature, and role. Escalating revolutionary action on the ground required a more flexible structure that could manage new movements and unions emerging during the revolution. In the same context, the grassroots nature of the revolution attracted new groups to the SPA, which were not affiliated to any specific professional category. Work necessities required experts in different fields to join the SPA Secretariat bureaus, such as media professionals and some party cadres with experience in leading demonstrations and securing convoys.<sup>27</sup>

## Coordination and Alliances: Managing External Relations

The SPA structure expanded significantly during the revolution, with the expansion of the media bureau and the increase in the number of spokespersons in the country, as well as abroad. The SPA also launched a new phase of planning to manage the movement and direct it towards achieving the demands of the Charter of Freedom and Change by shifting towards a fully civilian government, which would lay the foundation of a new political experience for the country. The



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SPA worked to develop its structure and bureaus to keep up with the requirements of managing sit-ins. In fact, the number of Bureau members, particularly the Events and Field Bureaus, was increased. This Bureau became increasingly significant as protests area widened, given the growing need to secure entrances, control circulation, and check items brought in by attendees to avoid problematic breaches by affiliates of the previous regime. A new Secretariat for External Relations was also established and charged with external communication, both with political forces and parties that did not sign the Charter of Freedom and Change. Then, the same secretariat started engaging with the military and its command council. Later, it began operating under the Communications Committee established by the SPA Council, while also encompassing the Forces of Freedom and Change. As the SPA accepted new members, the Secretariat was replenished with cadres of qualitative capabilities. For instance, the Media Secretariat consisted of 12 people at the beginning of the revolution. During the demonstration stage, this number reached 45, with hundreds of volunteers. Service and coordination committees were also established to deliver material and in-kind support to protestors. Doctors also played a key role by establishing field hospitals.<sup>28</sup>

To manage protest areas, the SPA had formed ad-hoc teams, such as health and nutrition committees. Since it had no previous experience in managing sit-ins, it sometimes had to deal with developments as they were happening on the ground. The independent initiatives launched by civil society and all individuals participating in the revolution had the greatest role in facilitating the task of the SPA to ensure the success of the sit-ins that lasted for over a month.<sup>29</sup>

Some of these alliances were key to the SPA. Indeed, it had remarkable coordination with some movements, such as the “Girifna” (we’ve had enough) movement. This was an opposition coalition that included a group of civil society organizations, trade unions, and political activists from various movements and parties. One of the most prominent groups that sought to plan for the outcome of the revolution was known as the Freedom and Dignity Initiative, or “Hirak” for short. This was an initiative founded by a number of politicians, trade unionists and human rights advocates. Its goal was to create a consensus among the various political factions and society groups by collecting signatures for the initiative’s



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charter, which was called the “Declaration of Freedom and Dignity.” The SPA was among the signatories. Later, several political entities, such as the Sudan Appeal Coalition and the National Consensus Forces, joined the initiative. Despite difficulties in collecting signatures, the initiative garnered large consensus among many entities. When the popular movement started in 2018, the SPA initiated communication with the Hirak initiative to enhance coordination and cooperation, especially since the SPA was planning on organizing massive mobilization efforts to demand wage modifications. As a result of this communication, the SPA adopted the Charter of the Hirak initiative, Declaration of Freedom and Dignity, and made some amendments to its clauses to mould it into the Declaration of Freedom and Change. As such, the SPA’s direction shifted from focusing solely on union issues to overthrowing the regime and forming a transitional government<sup>30</sup>

In addition to union and professional components affiliated with the SPA, the association entered into a broader alliance with greater goals, calling on parties to sign a charter and be part of the revolutionary movement when it issued the Declaration of Freedom and Change. Therefore, the SPA became a driving force in the revolution. At this point, the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change was born. Formed during revolutionary activities in 2019, this alliance was tasked with handling the coordination and leadership of the movement on the grassroots level. Along with the SPA, it included the Revolutionary Front and the National Consensus Forces and the Opposition Federal Association.<sup>31</sup> Here, the SPA moved to the next step in its evolution to become part of a broader political alliance. Political forces affiliated with the Coalition became allies to the SPA. Opposition political forces that signed the document then became part of the SPA, namely the Sudan Appeal Coalition, the National Consensus Forces, and the Opposition Federal Association. This required additional coordination efforts made by the SPA through expanding the scope of its membership and bodies.

During negotiations following the ousting of al-Bashir’s regime, SPA members and allies in the Forces of Freedom and disagreed on some issues, which the Military Council used as an excuse to evade and postpone negotiations several times. However, the SPA’s negotiating stance was more consistent with two main parties within The Forces of Freedom and Change, namely the bloc of the National Consensus Forces and the Civil Forces Association, given the shared outlook on the



need for radical change to achieve the revolution's goals. In contrast, the Sudan Appeal Coalition was closer to seeking a truce and accepting a partnership with the military.<sup>32</sup>

The SPA was also closely aligned with youth resistance committees, i.e. revolutionary committees established by SPA in the neighbourhoods during the demonstrations. Therefore, the SPA's relationship with some political forces during the negotiation was more coordination-focused than an actual coalition. This is particularly true for the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change, whose members had different negotiating tactics and stances. Although the resistance committees were originally formed from partisan forces, the SPA's support for these committees' actions and the large number of volunteers during and after the revolution both ensured that the overwhelming majority of these committees did not belong to political parties. The strength and effectiveness of these committees were made clear on the one million-person demonstration of 30 June 2019, after the violent dispersal of the General Command protest on 3 June. Committees were able to completely galvanize people to protest what had happened and to demand that negotiations be halted with the Military Council whose forces had carried out a heinous massacre. However, both parties (the Revolution Forces and the Military Council) went on to sign within reason, an agreement providing for a civil-military partnership during the transitional period.<sup>33</sup>

The SPA's alliance with the largest possible number of civil and political forces before and during the revolution was indeed a major power factor. However, the lack of clarity in the frameworks of cooperation with those coalitions brought their differences to the surface. The common goal of overthrowing al-Bashir had already been achieved, so it was unclear what would happen next during the transitional period. This was evident in the crisis between the SPA and some affiliated union entities, on one hand, and with the resistance committees and neighbourhoods, on the other. This dispute also strongly resurfaced since May 2020.

## Lack of Representation for Women

The SPA also suffered from a structural crisis that goes against its principles and goals, as it lacks a fair representation of women. In fact, the participation of



women in the revolution was not proportionately reflected in all of the institutions brought about by the uprising. Women had a strong presence across all stages of the popular movement. For instance, female lawyers were the most available for emergency trials, defending detainees, activists, and leaders of revolutionary groups who were imprisoned by al-Bashir's regime. Moreover, female doctors had been the pillars of all field hospitals supporting the demonstrations. Female protesters were also the most courageous and daring in standing up to the regime's oppressive apparatuses. However, despite their active role, women were not fairly represented in power structures and negotiations after the victory of the revolution.<sup>34</sup> This is noticeable and clear in the representation of women in the committees of the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change and its central body – the SPA Secretariat and Council, as well as the post-revolution Sudanese government.

### III. Structure, Management and Decision-Making Mechanisms:

Since its establishment and until the December 2018 revolution, the SPA had worked under the radar to ensure the secrecy of activities and conceal SPA members' identities for fear of arrest. According to an SPA official spokesperson, the task at that stage was getting organized and politically contextualizing the people's without the intention of evolving into a political party or any other official form.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of the SPA's clandestine nature in the beginning, leaders and affiliated organizations remained anonymous. The association strived to clearly articulate the people's demands. It utilized secret tactics while mastering the art of manoeuvring and working around a brutal police state. These conditions prompted the SPA to hold consultations locally and abroad in order to choose the best moment to take action. Indeed, the movement chose August 2018 without revealing its members and bodies or internal processes. This was so that the organization could avoid the regime's anticipated backlash, which could include the repression and detention of its members if their names were made known to al-Bashir's security agencies.<sup>36</sup>



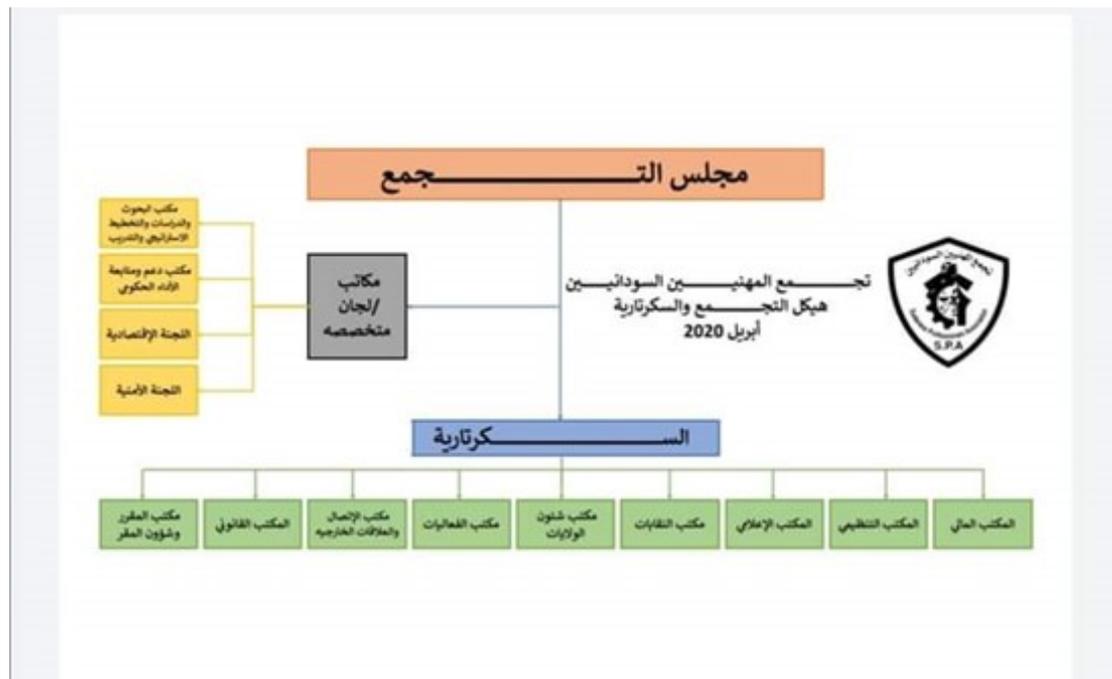
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However, one could say that the SPA built its structures horizontally following a pattern similar to the decentralized administrative organization of the Sudanese State. The SPA has a Secretariat and a Secretariat General. It consists of a central body and offices belonging to the country's respective states. The political and security conditions surrounding the establishment of the SPA had played a key role in dictating the methodology and approach in terms of membership, selection of leaders, and identification of decision-making mechanisms. Between 2012 and 2016, the crackdown practised by the rescue regime towards political and trade union action in Sudan made it imperative that most of the internal organizational activities remain secret. Member unions had to keep their coordination secret because they were not legitimate trade bodies in the eyes of the state. Accordingly, the SPA's leadership and decision-making mechanisms remained secret. In July 2012, the SPA established its first leadership Council, which selected some of its members to staff an executive bureau to start work and decide on the SPA's role in supporting strikes organized by doctors at that time. In 2013, the SPA endorsed a popular movement against the government's economic policies and proceeded to provide support through various means of resistance. Strikes, seminars, workshops, and statements were the most prominent forms of action during that period.

The SPA maintained its cohesion through the administrative and structural arrangements made by its constituent entities in the early days; namely the drafting of organizational regulations; a clear distribution of tasks and role; the adoption of an annual action plan; and the continuous training of members. All of these steps contributed to the SPA working efficiently as one body without discrimination. The anticipation of the regime's actions and behaviours also played a key role in helping the SPA plan ahead to sustain revolutionary action on the ground, even after the arrest of some of its leaders. The SPA Council formed an alternative shadow Secretariat and ensured constant communication with its leadership, even before the demonstration began. When the regime's security agency arrested well-known SPA members Mohammed Naji al-Assam, Ahmad Rabih Sayed Ahmad, Ibrahim Hasballah, Taha Osman Ishaq, and others, the shadow secretariat had filled the void created by the arrests and succeeded in developing the SPA's capacities, thereby ensuring it continued to lead the revolution.<sup>37</sup>

As for the post-December revolution phase, the SPA showed its ability to manage and organize itself to lead the popular movement on the ground, through a comprehensive structure and a specific leadership illustrated in the following chart:

## Organizational Structure of the Sudanese Professionals Association 2020



## Conflict Management

During the revolution and negotiation talks with the Sudanese Military Council, the SPA seemed to function more like a liaison among its different member organizations whose differences were becoming more pronounced. The strongest point of contention was during the SPA Secretariat General elections in May 2020.<sup>38</sup> The SPA had chosen the composition of its new Secretariat General, and it did not include some of key revolutionary figures. These member entities rejected the new Secretariat General, including the Environmentalists Association, the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, the Committee for the Restoration of the Journalists Union, the Meteorological Professionals Gathering, and the Democratic Coalition of Lawyers. The Central Committee of Doctors stated its rejection for “all outcomes of the SPA Council meeting, having disregarded all proposals to discuss



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the remarks of the last session, the budget and the political vision.” It accused the SPA of clearly submitting to a partisan bloc. The Democratic Coalition of Lawyers withdrew its representative from the new Secretariat General, and called for action to revoke the “shameful” and “invalid” decisions. The SPA also rejected the outcomes of the meeting, calling for the drafting of an SPA statute with specific tasks and prerogatives. Meanwhile, the Environmentalists Association said it refused to turn the SPA to a “façade and a political party.” It also called for “holding accountable any member who violated the SPA Charter and regulations and infringed on customs and democratic union action.” Disagreement Over the Secretariat General of the “Sudanese Professionals Association”, Anadolu Agency, 13/5/2020, <https://bit.ly/2B4Zgq1>

In July 2020, internal disputes escalated among SPA member organizations. In fact, the SPA suspended the membership of 5 professional unions: the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors, Engineers Association; HR Professionals Association; Meteorologist Association; and Environmentalists Association. This decision was made a few days after the SPA’s official Facebook page was hacked and taken over by dissidents. Some SPA members were able to retrieve the hacked Facebook page, which caused disputes in conjunction with the million-person demonstration on 30 June. The SPA said that its decision to suspend the membership of the 5 associations was due to their continuous violations of the SPA Charter and regulations. It also relieved all official spokespersons of their duties and withdrew its representatives from the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change and government committees and councils, pending a review. The SPA also took legal action against those who “hijacked its official page.”<sup>39</sup>

Then, a crisis arose because the SPA signed a political agreement with some armed groups. On 26 July 2020, a day after retracting its recognition of all existing structures under the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change, the new SPA Secretariat signed a political alliance agreement with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu. As a result, the SPA was accused of allying with armed groups at the expense of the Forces of Freedom and Change, as well as seeking to build a new political bloc aimed at reviewing the constitutional document signed after the ouster of al-Bashir’s regime. It was also accused of



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organizing to review laws and decrees; calling for the fair redistribution of wealth in Sudan; restructuring the armed and other regular forces; and handing over the accused of the Darfur crimes to be tried before the International Criminal Court. These demands would put the government-sponsored by the Forces of Freedom and Change in a critical position. These demands were rejected by some SPA bureaus. The Gezira bureau in central Sudan announced its rejection of all organizational steps taken unilaterally by the central body without the offices in the states.<sup>40</sup>

One of the SPA's biggest strengths is that it is a coalition made up of elected professional associations. However, since the SPA was born under the previous regime without the election of new leaders for its sub-organizations, this turned its strength into a contentious matter.

Since it consists of 15 professional associations and some political forces, the SPA structure is characterized by organizational flexibility and decentralization. However, the transitional phase required broader dialogue to make decisions and also to safeguard the unity of the organization. The latter proved to be a difficult feat in light of society's expectations, as well as SPA members themselves.

The SPA also had solid regulatory and organizational documents, as well as converging political leanings that strengthened the relationships among its members. These regulations may have guaranteed the SPA's unity until its goals are achieved; however, its transformation into a functional group, coupled with Sudan's prolonged transitional period made it difficult for all members to commit to the organization's regulations and Charters.

On the other hand, the SPA had some weaknesses, including its inability to welcome new members. The founding members also felt the weight of political developments more than new members. The processes to manage its offices, political alliances, and its structure of subcommittees were also poorly streamlined. This became apparent when it came to electing SPA leaders. The organization was faced with a crisis, as it was unable to abide by or gain consensus to amend its regulations. Moreover, the groups controlling its structures – the Council and Secretariat – currently only consist of people from central Sudan, who are distinguished from their counterparts in the provinces in terms of class and



intellect. This is contentious since Sudanese provinces and peripheral areas were the primary driving force of the revolution.<sup>41</sup>

The SPA also lacks clear processes for transparency, governance, and decision-making. The regulations available on its website are not made available on all media platforms. Its administrative and financial regulations are also not yet clear. In addition, its democratic process within its administration, the relationships among key members, and its decision-making processes are also ambiguous. If this lack of transparency is a product of the SPA's covert behaviour predating the revolution, the current phase requires more clear and disseminated guidelines to regulate relationships with external coalitions, unions and other political entities to hold leaders accountable and establish clear criteria for the admission of new organizations.

The nature of issues coming to light in the post-revolution period affects the SPA's key players, as well as the organization overall. Much is expected of the SPA, given the growing aspirations of its members to take on administrative positions or management roles during the transitional period. The SPA is often held responsible or blamed for mistakes made by the transitional government and military representatives in the Sovereignty Council. Therefore, coordination and reconciliation among professional and political unions seem to be a very complex and daunting task.

After revolutions, public employees usually feel that professional or political alliances have already fulfilled their functional roles and therefore must step aside or be repositioned in the public sphere. They also feel that professionals should be separate from political entities, and the private from the public. Regardless of the validity of this schism, it often creates conflicts among political and professional movements during the post-revolution transitional phase.

## IV. SPA Role in the Movement

The most prominent event organized by the SPA was a demonstration that took place on 25 December 2018. It was the first time the SPA called for a march towards the presidential palace “to hand over a memorandum to the Presidency of the Republic, calling for the president to step down immediately, at the behest



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of the Sudanese people and to avoid bloodshed.” The SPA cleverly anticipated an improvement in wages; the violent popular uprising in the city of Atbara; and the first march causing al-Bashir to step down only six days after the start of protests.

Then, the SPA contributed to issuing the Declaration of Freedom and Change on 1 January 2019, which was released with the endorsement of four main players: the Sudanese Professionals Association; National Consensus Forces; Sudan Appeal Coalition; and the Opposition Federal Association. The Declaration outwardly demanded the ousting of al-Bashir, a comprehensive and just peaceful transition, and the establishment of a transitional government with a mandate of 4 years. Thus, the SPA transformed the uprising from a movement with scattered demands into a bonafide revolution with clear and specific goals – not just demands for better wages for professional sectors.

On 6 April 2019, the revolution, led by the SPA, witnessed a radical transformation in its call for protests. That month, following SPA’s calls for mass mobilization, a number of demonstrations took place in the capital. Although police and security agencies tried to disperse them, the persistence and perseverance of demonstrators broke the security cordon around the Sudanese Army Command Center (General Command). The demonstrators accessed the main streets around the centre. Many ambushed the residence of the head of the regime in the State Guesthouse, thus securing a conquest for the rebels and a defeat for the regime and its security agencies.<sup>42</sup> In other words, protest activities managed by the SPA succeeded in imposing the General Command strike as a *fait accompli*, which contributed to tipping the scales of power from the regime towards the protesters.

The SPA then quickly turned into a main driver and organizer of popular and opposition movements against the al-Bashir regime. Even the manner in which demonstrators followed the SPA garnered attention. To a great extent, protestors adhered to the times, places and slogans set by the SPA, which was remarkable. The SPA also succeeded in using national symbols affiliated with revolutionary nostalgia, such as the Atbara train and patriotic songs. This was all key in feeding into the struggles of the public and connecting the youth to Sudan’s revolutionary past. In terms of planning for demonstrations and grassroots action, the SPA didn’t just settle for the media aspect, but it also had ad-hoc bureaus such as the Events



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Bureau and Field Committees. These SPA subcommittees prepared for demonstrations by documenting the number of participants and the success of mass protests. There were also other committees in charge of protecting demonstrators and identifying points of movement, as well as managing field hospitals and providing provisions and resources for protestors. On the other hand, the SPA had a field committee for monitoring and analyzing data regarding the size of demonstrations, as well as monitoring the measures taken by the regime and its security forces, and other variables that took place on the ground.<sup>43</sup>

The SPA succeeded in assembling independent professional entities to reach goals that unions had long tried to achieve during al-Bashir's era. It also succeeded in managing independent union action for nearly four years before the revolution, and in managing alliances with political forces that were key in bringing down the regime. Thus, the SPA was successful in engineering the Sudanese Revolution, as well as managing a very difficult negotiation phase with the military that had for decades been known for internal strife and military rule. Even though the SPA had faced difficulties in maintaining its alliances or even actively participating in the management of the transitional phase to establish a new regime, it remains one of the most prominent actors on the Sudanese political scene. It contributes along with other players to the discussion about the transitional phase; the peace process; the new constitution; the parliament; the roles of the various parties; how to manage the transitional phase; assessing adopted policies; and voicing professional demands.

The SPA, however, is still faced with numerous challenges and crises with regards to its role, structure, rhetoric, as well as alliances and coalitions. There is a disconnect between the SPA's central leadership and offices across various Sudanese states due to some decisions made by the SPA, such as the movement's alliance with armed groups and its attempt to withdraw from the Forces of Declaration of Freedom and Change. According to many members, the SPA is a group of individuals where not every member of a professional union or trade union is necessarily considered a member of the SPA. It is also not a federation of free trade unions or labour unions that was elected in a democratic context, professionals given their vocation and function acted and agreed to organize thus



calling for the restoration of the union movement.”<sup>44</sup> The SPA movement has not yet been tested in a democratic or transitional context. As such, individual alignments could encounter dual loyalties between political organizations to which SPA members belonged.

The SPA’s biggest challenge in the transitional period is balancing between its union and political roles, as well as clarifying the relationship with the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change, and the extent of divergence and convergence between the two entities. The dispute is growing in intensity due to the SPA’s absolute support of the Forces of Freedom and Change movement and the Abdalla Hamdok government and its policies.

One of the SPA’s key strong points is the accumulated organizational and political experiences of its members and leaders. Many were part of previous attempts to organize professional and labour efforts into similar federations. They also shared previous political and organizational experiences, as most of them were affiliated with some political parties such as the Communist Party, the Ba’ath Party, the National Umma Party, and others. Their previous participation in similar associations also positively impacted the development of a model coalition of unions. Therefore, the SPA, which led the revolutionary movement in 2018, was a natural extension of the preceding organizational attempts. The founding members remained the same until 2012, to which the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors and some post-revolution unions were added.<sup>45</sup>

## V. SPA’s Role in the Transitional Phase Negotiations and Arrangements

On 11 April 2019, Sudanese Defense Minister, Awad Ibn Auf, announced on official state television the arrest of President Omar al-Bashir and the formation of a Military Council to govern the country for two years. The SPA and Sudanese opposition coalitions then voiced “their complete and utter rejection of the army’s statement and considered it a coup against the revolution. They also stated that demonstrations would continue until power was handed to a transitional civilian government. They called for maintaining the sit-ins in front of the General Command of the Armed Forces in Khartoum and the rest of the provinces.”



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In a later statement, the SPA issued an appeal to army officers, calling on them to stand against “the regime’s so-called guardians who were attempting to hijack the revolution.” The statement also called upon the Sudanese to stay in the streets across the country until power was handed over to a transitional government that represents the revolution actors.”<sup>46</sup> After revolutionary actors held their ground and vehemently rejected military rule for the transitional phase, Awad Ibn Auf eventually announced his resignation, along with his deputy, Kamal Abdel Maarouf. This came after the military assumed power for one day, led by the transitional Military Council that was established after the ouster of al-Bashir. Following Auf’s resignation, Army Inspector General, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan was appointed as his replacement.<sup>47</sup> Some described this step as a “new victory for Sudanese protestors.”<sup>48</sup> The SPA refused the appointment of al-Burhan, saying “no to people who change masks from al-Bashir to Ibn Auf and al-Burhan.”<sup>49</sup>

Between 11 April and the dispersal of the protest in front of the General Command, neither the military, the SPA, nor the Forces of Freedom and Change were ready to negotiate. Some SPA leaders assert that the SPA’s agenda in the post-regime period did not include dialogue or negotiations with the Military Council. Its slogan was: No negotiation, no dialogue; yes to handing over full power to civilians. SPA leaders believed that any negotiation talks with the military would mean failure of the revolution and derailment of its victories course so far. After a closer look at the facts, the rebels and SPA had the upper hand, which mean that they were not the weaker party that needed to negotiate. This was the rebels’ general outlook of the al-Bashir regime.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, early on 13 April 2019, the SPA took the initiative to release the names of its negotiating team with the Military Council.<sup>51</sup> Then, a turning point came when the Rapid Support Forces<sup>52</sup> announced that it was siding with the revolution in mid-May and refused options to forcibly disperse sit-ins. Faced with this new reality, revolutionary players had to choose between continuing the sit-in at the risk of dividing the army and turning Sudan into the Syrian model; or starting negotiations with the army and its militias, and thus sharing power based on this step. Consequently, SPA leaders supported the second option.<sup>53</sup>

The Military Council tried to circumvent the Forces of Freedom and Change by



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highlighting the Sharia and Rule of Law bloc, which rejected bilateral negotiations between the Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change. Given this reluctance, the Forces of Declaration of Freedom and Change submitted on 1 May 2019 a constitutional document to the Military Council detailing its vision for the transitional period. It identified the three levels of governance (federal, regional, and local). The document also identified the creation of transitional government institutions, including a national sovereignty council; a council of ministers holding the supreme executive authority in the country; a legislative body empowered to legislate and oversee the performance of the executive authority; an independent judicial power; and regular forces that are subject to the decisions of the sovereign and executive authorities. Then, they demanded that the transitional Military Council respond to their constitutional document in writing within 72 hours maximum. The SPA here took the initiative to bring forth carefully calculated documents to the negotiating table.

Then came the violent and deadly dispersal operation for the sit-in in front of the General Command in June 2019, where 108 people died and more than 500 were injured.<sup>54</sup> This tested the negotiation process and led to a loss of trust between the Military Council and revolutionary actors. In a statement, the SPA accused the Rapid Intervention Forces, led by Military Council member and Vice-President of the transitional Military Council, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as “Hemetti,”<sup>55</sup> of being directly responsible for the dispersal,

According to some observers, the Military Council was making arrangements to take power and organize elections within a year before negotiations with the revolutionary bodies even began. There was no explicit or official recognition that the Forces of Freedom and Change represented the revolution. Their proposal for a civilian government was to have it as an executive body under the Military Council’s authority, provided that no political actor is prevented from participating, even those who were part of the regime ousted by the revolution.<sup>56</sup> This became evident on the evening of the sit-in dispersal, when the head of the transitional Military Council, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, made a televised statement to state that all agreements reached with the Forces of Freedom and Change are null and void. He said he intended to form a technocratic government and hold general elections within nine months. However, with determination from



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the Sudanese people and the perseverance of the Forces of Change, in parallel with external pressures – whether by the United States or the African Union on allies of the Military Council in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – al-Burhan declared the very next day that the transitional Military Council's was ready to negotiate again with the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change.<sup>57</sup> The news regarding the military's committed violations and the violent dispersal of protesters also did not help the general's case.

Some believed that the decision to engage in negotiations with the military was a major turning point in the course of the revolution, with effects still rippling to this day. The outcomes of negotiations, after several months-long nationwide popular protests, did not live up to the expectations of the rebels and the Sudanese people. As a result, disputes echoed between the SPA members and rebels unaffiliated with any organizations.

Mohammed Naji al-Assam, a member of the SPA negotiation committee, believes that the SPA's participation in the negotiation process with the Military Council was not a unanimous decision made by relevant bodies. For example, the SPA Secretariat was not initially aware of the decision. None of the members of the negotiating delegation, most of whom were members of the SPA Secretariat, were aware of the decision. Therefore, some forces wanted to impose the negotiation option as a *fait accompli*, especially given the subsequent confusion of SPA decisions, such as recanting on its previous announcement to form a civilian transitional government from inside the sit-in square. This had a damaging impact on the SPA's image and credibility among young rebels.<sup>58</sup> This step was the result of a debate over the decision between a radical movement that refused all talks with the military given the bloodshed, and a more moderate course of action that saw in continued protests without negotiation a reproduction of the Syrian or Libyan crisis in Sudan.

As a response, the SPA and the Forces of Freedom and Change used popular momentum and international pressure to demand the resignation of the political committee of the Military Council, which was managing negotiations with revolutionary actors. This is indeed what happened thanks to the pressure exerted by the SPA grass-root bases and the continued protests. New tasks for the transitional period, along with new demands were added to negotiation talks so



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that those involved in the violent dispersal of the General Command sit-in would be held accountable. This also resulted in more radical positions vis-à-vis the previous regime and the military.

During the two months between the dispersal of the sit-in and the signing of the agreement between the Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change, the SPA combined negotiations, protests, and lobbying as a strategy to impose its demands on the military. On 4 August, the Military Council represented by Hemetti, and the Forces of Freedom and Change represented by Ahmad Rabih – a “founding member of the SPA” – signed the draft constitutional declaration “that consisted of 70 legal articles specifying how power will be transferred from the Military Council to the Sovereign Council and other transitional state bodies.” The “Constitutional Document for the Transitional Period for 2019” can be viewed via the following link: <https://bit.ly/3m65hop>

The SPA’s role in the negotiation process was not limited to being a voice for the people’s demands, it also included coordinating between different blocs and resolving differences and disputes within the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change itself – namely between the Sudan Appeal and National Consensus coalitions. The SPA also had a role in communicating with the motivated base and providing information about the negotiation path and developments. The Policies Committee at the SPA-Freedom and Change was the main body that prepared the terms of negotiation with the Military Council. They had the same output, in terms of the structures of the executive authority and legislative council, and the civilian-military sovereignty council. The rationale behind the military’s participation in power was the need for them to ensure security during the transitional period and prevent a military coup.

On 21 August 2019, following the successful mediation of the African Union and the Ethiopian Prime Minister, as well as the support of the United States and the European Union, a 39-month transitional phase was launched to end with elections. During this phase, power would be shared between the army and the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change – which was seen as the leader of the popular movement. Both parties signed a political declaration that reversed the balance of power between the transitional Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change.<sup>59</sup> The declaration also outlined the nature of the



partnership between the two blocs and their respective political goals. They also signed a constitutional agreement that included details on governance structures and requirements needed during the transitional period, especially for the peace process with armed groups. Among basic measures, the Military Council was dissolved and the Sovereignty Council was formed. It consists of a combination of military and civilians, with more civilians in number. Abdullah Adam Hamdok, who was nominated for the post by the SPA, was selected as prime minister.<sup>60</sup>

However, the relationship between the SPA and the government whose prime minister the SPA had named was riddled with tensions. In January 2020, the SPA harshly criticized the government for violating the constitutional agreement by appointing three ministers of state, while the document stipulated that the cabinet should not have more than 20 ministers.<sup>61</sup> The relationship between the SPA and the government was further shaken, especially after disputes over the government's stance – either supporting or opposing its policies and measures for the transitional phase – between the Forces of Freedom and Change, on one hand, and the SPA and resistance committees, on the other hand. The latter even called for the million-person protest on 30 June. Abdullah Hamdok gave a televised address to the Sudanese people on the evening of 29 June 2020, showing that the message was well-received. He stated that within two weeks, a series of decisions would be made to rectify the course of his government and make a ministerial reshuffle that would include seven ministries. However, the resistance committees, along with some political forces that believe that the government had accomplished nothing after nearly a year in power, insisted upon taking to the streets and calling for the appointment of civilian governors across the states, as well as the establishment of a legislative council, and prosecuting old regime figures. They also called for resuming an investigation into the massacre of the General Command of the Army sit-in dispersal and improving the country's economic state.<sup>62</sup>

Hamdok tried to calm the SPA's anger and the resistance committees by dismissing the Minister of Health, a defecting SPA member. He kept his promise to change six other ministers. He also promised to respond to the million-person procession of 30 June. However, when the structures of the transitional authority were being identified, the SPA announced that its leadership would not participate



in any level of government. However, it nominated people for a number of positions within the quotas allocated to blocs affiliated with the Coalition of Forces of Freedom and Change. These nominations included Mohammed Hassan al-Taishi for Sovereign Council member, Abdullah Adam Hamdok for Prime Minister, and Lina el-Sheikh for Minister of Social Development and Labour. At a later stage, some SPA leaders occupied some government positions, such as Rashid Saeed Yaacoub; Deputy Minister of Culture and Information; Amjad Farid Kabir; Assistant to the Prime Minister; and Taha Othman, a member of the Empowerment Elimination and Anti-Corruption Committee – a committee affiliated with the Sovereign Council.

Over time, the SPA became divided into two camps: one in support of the Hamdok government and also demanding that the Freedom and Change entity be safeguarded, while the other called for the elimination of both so that they could be held responsible for the failures of the past period. This adds to the complexity of the matter. The sharp polarization within the SPA, and the Forces of Freedom and Change, help us understand the problematic aspects that have hindered forward movement on many important issues. It has also pointed to the presence of a large gap between the government and supporters. This issue is exploited by parties that want to maximize and consolidate their gains during, and also well beyond the transitional period. Others are seizing the opportunity to take power, namely the remnants of the old regime who benefit from disputes among revolutionary actors by using the rifts to reinforce their presence with the people. This, however, does not negate the presence of partisan differences. To add to rifts, there were also accusations that the Sudanese Communist Party “hijacked” the SPA and tried to infiltrate professional bodies at the expense of its allies, hence jeopardizing the SPA.<sup>63</sup>

In the context of the crisis between the SPA and Forces of Freedom and Change, the SPA was very critical of the Central Council of the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change. Tensions grew following the Juba Agreement for Peace between the government and some armed groups. The agreement required some amendments to the constitutional document that was to be endorsed. The SPA believed that the agreement would introduce unnecessary constitutional and legal complications to the transitional period, especially amidst an already precarious



political situation. According to the SPA, it was possible to develop a way to implement the agreement without tampering with the constitutional document that was subject to various views. However, despite some flaws, it represented a consensual reference for managing the transitional phase, through understandings between the Forces of Freedom and Change and the Military Council. The current form of government was even shaped based on this reference. As a result, the SPA began making the same accusations towards the Forces of Freedom and Change as the one used by the Military Council to evade negotiations with SPA after al-Bashir's ouster. These would include accusations regarding how the Central Council of the Forces of Freedom and Change was formed, as it was perceived as being unrepresentative of the revolutionary players; and therefore, does not reflect all of their opinions. This means that the Council is not authorized to unilaterally form a Legislative Council, or qualified to represent all rebels.<sup>64</sup> As such, the SPA may also be at risk of cracks and divisions due to the sharp polarization marking the transitional period, as well as the complexities of the Sudanese scene. Other contributing factors could be the SPA's inability to balance between its relationship with the government and its constituent union bodies, as well as its relationship with grassroots movements, or its evolution into an organizational political body that has already served its purpose. To stay relevant and prevent this from happening, the SPA must reinforce any connections it has with the professional and labour demands that are still relevant to the Sudanese people.

## VI. SPA: Matching Structures and Roles

When it was first established, the SPA could have been described as an entity whose role is to improve and develop trade unions that could take independent, professional action. However, given the stalemate in the public sphere and the developing situation in Sudan, the SPA found itself caught in a transformation well beyond its organizational and administrative capacities. The SPA has made several attempts to adapt to new developments, by modifying its structure, alliances, or roles. Perhaps, engaging in an alliance with some political forces, then leading a political coalition greater than the sum of its constituent bodies – such as the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change – was a major cause of the



current disruption in its overall roles and composition.

Despite the developments in terms of its structure and roles, some believe that the SPA has not yet evolved from a unifying professional and organizational entity to a partner capable of governing the transitional period. So far, its future roles are not even clear. The SPA is still struggling with defining its future roles and their appropriate structure. This confusion is evident in the expulsion and then re-admittance of some bodies that sometimes disagreed with the association's leadership. Therefore, the structure, regulations and role of the SPA do not meet the requirements of the current transitional phase. The revolution won and the SPA has become a partner in governance through various ways, including choosing some ministers and officials, recommending some of its members for governance positions in various neighborhoods and regions, or by sometimes playing the role of the opposition. To keep up with pace of this stage,<sup>65</sup> the SPA needs to develop a new path towards modernization.

The SPA's alliances truly affect its structure. Given its membership in a broader political coalition, such as the Forces of Freedom and Change, there seemed to be competing roles between the two blocs, with signs of conflict already surfacing. The SPA accused the Central Council of Forces of Freedom of siding with the government and trying to unilaterally form a Legislative Council that didn't represent the Sudanese people. Meanwhile, the Central Council accused the SPA council and its Secretariat of being politicized and left-leaning, hence damaging its role as a union and professional entity. This heated dispute led to the SPA breaking away from the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change on 25 July 2020.<sup>66</sup> This dispute is based on a conflict of roles, weak coordination, and opposing sides. Since the revolution which fostered their alliance was over, the SPA and factions associated with Freedom and Change movement are now polarized. If disputes between the two movements continue at this rate, it may lead either to the dissolution of the Forces of the Declaration of Freedom and Change or the SPA itself – especially since alliances and coalitions between the two entities overlap both vertically and horizontally. Although the SPA was a key player in disseminating the Declaration of Freedom and Change, the SPA's withdrawal is a severe blow to the latter. The SPA and relevant alliances need new mechanisms to handle the ever-growing transitional tasks required to achieve post-revolutionary



success with local, regional, and international support.

Problems faced by the Forces of Freedom and Change and the balance of power between its constituent political parties also reflect on the SPA. They both suffer from structural weakness, given the differences in the political weight of fundamental constituents within this coalition. They have different intellectual and political directions, a lack of unified leadership, and the inability to create consensus on decision-making mechanisms. This was clear when the Revolutionary Front – which represents the armed movements in the conflict-rife regions of Darfur, South Kordofan and the Blue Nile – began to object to the initial political agreement in July between the Military Council and the forces of Freedom and Change.<sup>67</sup> The Revolutionary front is an essential movement with the forces of Freedom and Change.

Some SPA leaders believe that the organization's increased politicization during the revolution and transitional period had distanced it from its trade union essence. They also believe that it brought some differences among its members to the surface, thus exposing structural weakness. It also became clear that long-term harmony between union entities within the SPA had caused the organization to neglect establishing an internal conflict management mechanism.<sup>68</sup>

Based on requirements set by the Sudanese political scene, as long as the SPA does not separate its professional tasks from its political role and partisan commitments, it could be viewed as a temporary functional organization whose existence is linked to the state of the transitional period. Given its current composition, the SPA is not expected to transform at any stage into a political party because it lacks the necessary elements and conditions for this transformation.

## VII. SPA Future Prospects

Like many political and social actors in Sudan, the SPA is still trying to answer the long-overdue post-independence questions about the state. These included questions of governance, the constitution, as well as the relationship between religion and state – which remains a complex issue in Sudan. Some questions centre on citizenship and how Sudan deals with different nationalities and



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ethnicities, as well as various economic reforms that could guarantee a fair distribution of resources among the different ethnicities and groups. The SPA is considering these matters during the transitional period as a permanent constitution and election law are drafted.<sup>69</sup>

In this context, the SPA presented its vision for the country, the economic system, and the governance model in Sudan during the transitional phase in two papers on 21 April 2019, just days after the ousting of al-Bashir: “A Proposal for Governance Structures and Drafting the Constitution for the Transitional Period in Sudan” and “A Proposal for the Characteristics of Rescue Program for Sudan during the Transitional Period.”<sup>70</sup> It is a vision based on a civil, democratic state that relies on the values of freedom, dignity, social justice, equal citizenship, separation of powers, and the rule of law. The rescue plan focuses on urgent economic measures for the transitional period, addressing living hardships, and ending the war by achieving peace with armed movements. It also touches on increasing economic stability by maximizing production and focusing on the agricultural sector, civil service reforms, healthcare, and educational reforms. It also discusses how to achieve justice in the distribution of wealth and power and building balanced economic trade relations with neighbouring border countries. The SPA presents detailed policy points and alternatives to the current situation. Therefore, it is vital for the SPA that decision-makers in Sudan include these policies and alternatives in their agenda during the transitional period.

The SPA is also trying to play the role of mediator between the Forces of Freedom and Change and union and professional groups on the other side. In addition, it is trying to ensure that it has oversight over the transitional period, whether by pushing for the establishment of executive institutions, Empowerment Elimination Committees, or by lobbying for the restructuring of the Central Council of the Forces of Freedom and Change to ensure a balanced representation in the Legislative Council. To this date, both entities are still disputing the details. The SPA is still critical of how the Forces of Freedom and Change manages its relationship with the SPA, other political factions, and the government. Freedom and Change is a political coalition, whereas the SPA is still trying to maintain its union and professional form.

The SPA still needs to support and train its cadre to manage and balance the



relationship between union and professional action, on one hand, and political activities, on the other. It also needs to build capacities in managing consensus and negotiations with other political factions. In this context, it is possible to hold workshops that bring together groups of the Sudanese Professionals Association and some regional union organizations such as the Tunisian General Labour Union and strong union organizations in Algeria, Morocco, and Jordan.

To overcome current challenges, the SPA needs to reconsider administrative and structural arrangements implemented by its constituent entities in its early days and engage new entities and members, especially when drafting new regulations or adopting annual action plans. Therefore, the SPA needs training on how to plan strategically and develop think tanks to be able to support its work and enhance its performance and structures.

## Interview list

**The interviewees were chosen based on the following matrix:**

**Suggested interview list:**

Category (has at least one man or one woman at each level)	Men	Women
SPA leaders	2	1
SPA Members	1	1
SPA Members who came into power after the revolution	1	1
Unions that dealt with the SPA	1	1
Government officials that dealt with the SPA	1	1
Parties that dealt with the SPA	1	1
Civil society organizations that dealt with the SPA	1	1

1. Ibrahim Hasballah Abdul Mawla, member of the Democratic Veterinary Committee, member of the Secretariat of the Sudanese Professionals Association, personal interview in his office in the Animal Production



- Research Centre, Khartoum North, Sudan, 1 October 2020, 11 a.m.
2. Ihsan Fakiri, member of the Sudan Doctors' Syndicate, activist and leader of the “No to Women's Aggression” initiative, personal interview in her house in Kafouri neighborhood, Khartoum North, 5 October 2020, 5 p.m.
  3. Ahmad Rabih Sayed Ahmad, member of the Teachers’ Committee, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, personal interview in his office in AL Moa'lem Medical City, Khartoum, Sudan, 7 October 2020, 6 p.m.
  4. Qamariya Omar Mohamed Hussein, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, member of the Teachers’ Committee, personal interview on 27 September 2020, 10 a.m., in her office in the State Ministry of Education, Khartoum, Khartoum North, Sudan.
  5. Mohammed Naji al-Assam, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, member of the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors, personal interview on 7 October 2020, 10 p.m., Africa Conference Hall, International University of Africa, Khartoum, Sudan.
  6. Faisal Bashir Bakhit, member of the Professionals Association Council, member of the Central Council of the Forces of Freedom and Change, member of the Engineers Union Restoration Initiative, personal interview in his office in Khartoum 2, 8 October 2020, 2 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.
  7. Salah Jaafar, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, member of Professional Pharmacists Association, personal interview on 30 September 2020, 5 p.m., Sudanese Professionals Association headquarters, Khartoum, Sudan.
  8. Samaher Al Mubarak, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council and Secretariat, member of Professional Pharmacists Association, personal interview on 30 September 2020, 8 p.m., Sudanese Professionals Association headquarters, Khartoum, Sudan.
  9. Mohammad Omar El Sayed, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, member of the Democratic Coalition Lawyers, personal interview in his office, 10 October , 2020, 11 a.m., Khartoum, Sudan.
  10. Mervat Hamad El Nil, political activist, member of the “No to Women's Aggression” initiative, leader in the Civil Forces, personal interview, 6 October 2020, 5:00 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.



11. Tamader Ismail, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Secretariat, personal interview in her office in the Ministry of Education, 7 October 2020, 9 a.m., Khartoum, Sudan.
12. Rashida Haroun, former candidate for the Sovereignty Council, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Council, personal interview at the Teachers' Union office, Federal Ministry of Education, 30 September 2020, 1:45 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.
13. Aya Ahmad Khojaly, civil activist, president of the "We Are for Them" charitable organization, personal interview in the International University of Africa, 3 October 2020, 4:45 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.
14. Muhammad Alamin Abdulaziz, member of the Sudanese Professionals Association Secretariat, leader of the Sudanese Revolutionary Front, personal interview in the Grand Hotel, 1 October 2020, 3 p.m., Khartoum, Sudan.
15. Nujoud Najmuddin Omar, researcher and political activist, member of MANSAM, personal interview in the International University of Africa, 4 October 2020, 11 a.m., Khartoum, Sudan.



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