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POLICY BRIEF



## Sudan's Civic Future: Mapping Medania, Resistance, and Democratic Aspirations

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## Executive Summary

This policy brief emerges from research conducted amidst Sudan's rapidly shifting political landscape, particularly in the wake of the 2019 revolution and the April 2023 war. It aims to capture the voices and visions of civic actors shaping Sudan's democratic future from below. Sudan's ongoing 2023 conflict has underscored the central role of civiness (*medania*) in resisting militarised rule and imagining alternative forms of governance. This policy brief maps the evolving terrain of civic and revolutionary thought in Sudan, based on interviews, workshops, and field engagement with diverse civic actors. The insights here are particularly timely as humanitarian and development interventions by the FCDO and other donors are scaling up for post-war recovery.

## Key Findings

- ▶ *Medania* is an evolving concept. More than 'civil society', *medania* refers to civic values and practices that resist militarisation, prioritise the public good, and reimagine Sudanese citizenship and governance.
- ▶ New civic formations are reshaping politics. Neighbourhood Resistance Committees (RCs), women's groups, trade unions, professional syndicates, and grassroots initiatives are driving bottom-up visions of freedom, peace, and justice.
- ▶ Fragmentation and friction are productive and inevitable. Disagreements among civic actors over what constitutes justice, peace, and democracy are evidence of an emergent, locally grounded democratic discourse, rather than failure.
- ▶ Traditional and donor-backed models are misaligned. Many external actors still privilege formal civil society organisations, political parties, and electoral timelines, missing the deeper transformations led by new civic forces.
- ▶ A generational and regional shift is underway. The centre-periphery divide, generational change, and new gender and identity politics are reshaping what civicness means and how it can underpin Sudan's democratic future.

## Introduction

Sudan's devastating 2023 conflict underscores the significance of civic mobilisation, including neighbourhood Resistance Committees (RCs) and other forms of civiness or *medania*. This policy brief therefore identifies and maps Sudanese civic and revolutionary political and economic thought in historical perspective. This paper is the first of a series of LSE Conflict and Civiness Research Group (CCRG)'s contribution to the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep)'s outputs on Sudanese civic and revolutionary thought. Forthcoming work will utilise the findings from this mapping exercise to contrast an analysis of Sudan's ostensibly stalled internationally supported transition process with Sudanese understandings of civiness or *medania* and democratic transition in the country.

This brief is primarily the result of a series of interviews conducted with civic actors in Sudan, as well as an LSE-CCRG-hosted policy workshop for Sudanese civic groups and national and international humanitarian organisations operating in Sudan led by Dr Benson-Strohmayer and Raga Makawi. Following the conflict, both co-authors, and Raga Makawi in particular, conducted further detailed interviews with respondents engaging in civic activism within Sudan, alongside a series of documents and proceedings produced by members of the civic uprising. The LSE CCRG workshop took place in August 2023 and explored the applicability of key modalities from other conflict-affected countries where civic actors played a key role, notably the Syrian Civil Society Support Room (CSSR). This mapping exercise consequently holds lessons for peacebuilding and democratic transition processes in the Sudans and beyond, which are identified at the end of the brief.

This brief first maps how the concept of civiness changed as Sudan's revolution took shape in 2018, and notably examines the shifts that have taken place in the last year of conflict in Sudan, which emerged in April 2023. Studying civiness in conflict is especially crucial because contemporary conflicts, such as Sudan's ongoing war, often appear intractably embedded within enduring social conditions. Focusing on the civic provides a long-overdue and complimentary counterpoint to Alex de Waal's 'political marketplace' thesis, in which de Waal argues that conflicts in the Sudans and other parts of the world are the result of the transactional politics between practically always highly militarised actors.<sup>1</sup>

We embrace civicness as a concept rather than 'civil society' as we are especially interested in the interwoven origins and histories of civic politics. Whereas civil society, typically associated with NGOs and other community groups, can be easily captured by state and elite politics, civicness provides a more meaningful alternative that is typically resistant to co-optation and found within a wider range of communities. Within Sudan, for instance, civicness or *medania* is exhibited among public authorities such as doctors, teachers, and even some civil servants. In a sense, *medania* is both a call for a new form of citizenship—that is focused on the hotly debated ideas of the public good rather than the enrichment of a small elite—and a clarion call for a new type of Sudanese state that is free from the region's historically embedded pattern of militarised, coercive, and highly repressive control.

Our analysis is therefore of note to civic actors within Sudan as well as international groups hoping to support Sudan's democratic transition. Our central, driving hypothesis is that the only way Sudan's democratic transition is to be supported internally and externally, even or perhaps especially during the current conflict, is by first understanding what civic *medania* actors within Sudan uphold as the tenets or aims of the once-unthinkable democratic uprising. Our analysis therefore identifies tensions within the uprising.

Significantly, our analysis interprets friction within key terms of 'justice, peace, and freedom' as *robust evidence and a thriving example* of an emergent Sudanese model of democracy in action. While this sort of complex in-country debate is often confusing and complicated to take part in, and likewise for external democracy supporters to understand, it is therefore our essential starting point. Alternatives to this type of inductive analysis, such as projecting ideas of what democracy ought to look like in a country like Sudan, are unlikely to have in-country civic buy-in, which is vital to meaningfully support participatory, widespread, political, economic, and social change in a highly militarised country and wider region like Sudan and the Horn of Africa.

## Research Context and Methodology

This policy brief draws on a stakeholder mapping exercise undertaken between October 2022 and April 2023, with follow-up fieldwork and interviews completed from Uganda and Cairo after the outbreak of war in April 2023. The research involved seven local researchers, each conducting 10–12 semi-structured interviews, supported by a series of workshops and policy dialogues. The study received ethics approval from the LSE ethics committee in 2022, and an ethics workshop was conducted for all field researchers to ensure informed consent and attention to field-related risks. All interviews were conducted with participants' consent, and their views remain current and highly relevant, reflecting both pre-war and ongoing civic mobilisation efforts.

In total, over 70 civic actors and stakeholders were interviewed, including members of resistance committees, trade unions, women's groups, diaspora networks, and professional syndicates. The project primarily mapped civiness (*medania*) as articulated by neighbourhood-based and grassroots actors in Khartoum and Sudan's peripheries. This mapping exercise builds on earlier LSE-CCRG research and has directly informed other outputs, including a forthcoming joint Security Sector Reform (SSR) policy paper, Matthew Benson-Strohmayer's work on Sudan's fiscal fragmentation,<sup>2</sup> and numerous briefings for the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) on post-war recovery.

## New Civic Formations: Introducing *Medania* as a Policy Framing

In 2018, a revolution began in Sudan that would eventually alter the course of its politics. The removal of al-Bashir's Islamic regime in April 2019 engendered long-lasting ripples in the political establishment, instigating and sustaining a bottom-up political process that lasted until the start of the war in 2023. Throughout these years, the model of civic politics evolved alongside new approaches devised and set up by the new and youngest members of the social movement.

As our analysis illustrates, the etymology of the term *medania* alludes to civic/civilian/civilized and a multitude of other revolutionary ideals loosely connecting a set of political principles embedded in non-violent values in pursuit of lasting democracy. The idea of *medania*, like the revolution itself, went through multiple stages and assumed various iterations to serve the complex dynamisms of the agenda of the day, though at its core, it was agreed to mean first and foremost the absence of armed and security actors from the political and governance scene. Building on a fully civic state in character, the term can be fashioned to address the emergent needs of various groups mobilising towards the tripart aim of the revolution: freedom, peace, and justice.

### Unpacking *Medania* Through Mapping the Civic Terrain

In 2022, as part of our ongoing investigations at the CCRG, we embarked on mapping new civic formations in the post-revolution Sudanese political landscape. The aim was to first establish a baseline of what the term means for the multitude of actors who have sprung up in the aftermath of the revolution. We were also motivated by uncovering the continuities and disruptions in political evolution leading from previous revolutionary moments in the 1960s and 1980s, in hopes of situating the current political juncture vis-à-vis Sudanese history but also relating the developments in Sudan to the larger political shifts that have stoked the region since the 2011 Arab Spring. This exercise is also important in establishing a discourse on good governance from below to match the usually exclusive state politics in the drive towards democratisation.

### **Medania Mapping as Methodology for Democratic Change**

Our exercise is informed by our understanding that first, civil society in Sudan has long suffered from restrictions related to the availability of an open democratic space. This has been further exacerbated by funding limitations, also resulting from international donors' lack of confidence in the ability of both the actors and the process to flourish under autocratic conditions. The result has often been a shrinking and unstable civic space which more often than not failed to represent the issues and needs of the public, particularly the religious and ethnic minorities that resided in the country's peripheries, away from the decision-making spaces.

Second, we understand that Sudan's existing civic spaces that do possess decision-making power are frequently too close to elite circles. The dominant peacemaking model unfortunately contributes to this representational bias by privileging civic groups and agendas aligned with powerful actors involved in the peace deal, allowing them to have a larger share in dictating what the civic agenda should look like. Moreover, it is imperative to note the changes in civic politics post the 2018 revolution that have engendered a myriad of activities, expressions, and ideals, irrecoverably changing the terrain of politics. The Resistance Committees (RCs), Sudan's largest and newest civic formation post-2018, is one example of a horizontal and vast civic institutional structure that is determining – from below – the shape and direction of the Sudanese political landscape.

In response to these challenges, through a series of interviews we have attempted to uncover who the new actors are, what agendas they are prioritising, the level and depth of cross exchange between them and their ideas, if any, and how they relate, if it all, to previous forms of civic associations.

## Actors and Their Agendas

The mapping exercise sampled a medium number of cross-sectoral members of Sudanese civil society. Two typologies strongly emerge:

### Traditional forms:

- ▶ Members of political parties
- ▶ NGO national/local staff
- ▶ Professional unions and syndicates, including doctors, teachers, university professors and journalists
- ▶ Trade unionists in the private and public sector
- ▶ Politicians who were also members of Sudan's 2019 transitional government

### New civic formations (post-2018 Revolution):

- ▶ RCs and their vast membership
- ▶ Non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff in Khartoum and the periphery, particularly Darfur, Kordofan and the east
- ▶ International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and diplomatic mission local staffers who are active in RCs – they are particularly mentioned for their unique ability to bridge the communication gap between donors and the international community and grassroots politics
- ▶ Grassroots initiatives and rights-based organisations – these are usually short-term and issue-specific in nature. Their resilience is in their ability to adapt and transform in order to respond to the needs of the juncture – initiatives are especially useful/ designed to address these needs
- ▶ Members of the pro-democracy movement who served in the 2019 transitional government
- ▶ Political activists

## Medania: A Comparative History and Mapping of Civic Expressions and Thought

### 1) Professional Syndicates (journalists, doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.)

Professional syndicates were an integral part of two previous revolutions. In the 2018 revolution they continued to play a significant role in mobilising the public through the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), which is a labour-based pressure group that later emerged as the body leading the 2018 revolution at its inception. The SPA set the early guidelines for the revolution's political outlook and vision.

Traditionally, syndicates are professionally based, with networks linking sectors and regions together but with no cross-agenda overlap. In previous political junctures, including the past two revolutions of 1968 and 1983, civic mobilisation focused on the institutionalisation of civilian rule as well as reforming existing institutions through a set of principles mostly drawn from universal human rights discourse. These bodies tended to also be technocratic rather than political in their approach to reform, which limited political association among those with the professional capacity to shape reform within their sectors. These groups promoted a separation of spheres of influence between the state and civil society.

Within their new civic formations, members of these syndicates linked their existing professional networks to larger civic mobilisations by forming relationships with the resistance committees at the neighbourhood levels. These spurred the following political features:

- ▶ Members of syndicates are active within RCs and within their professional networks, with extensive overlap between the two as the preferred model for reform (cross-pollination) of popular and technical approaches.
- ▶ Mobilisation of the values and aims of the revolution, 'freedom, peace and justice' throughout public sector and service provision in health, education, legal rights, and more.
- ▶ Increased polarisation around ideas and forms of *medania* brought on by the overlapping of areas of interest and intersection between state power, technocratic role in politics and civic rights.
- ▶ Situating of livelihoods and labour questions as the basis of the new social contract and the democratic debate.

### Medania Within Professional Labour Syndicates

- ▶ Shared sense of activist identity emerging across professional profiles to shape the civic narrative and address historic imbalances in the hierarchy of rights usually afforded to some professions and not others.
- ▶ Adopting an institutional approach to end impunity, employing a holistic model that includes labour and livelihood as an identity that incurs rights, as well as centring people's welfare within the governance process rather than just the removal of the army from politics. This is a democracy-informed *medania* that challenges the unfair policies and politics of the civic and military elites. This step requires formulating and carrying out a vision for accountability at the institutional level.
- ▶ Centring the idea and value of a citizenship state and a social contract based on clearly defined legal framework for what constitutes rights.
- ▶ An alternative ideal of *medania* developed through the popular narrative based on individual and collective experiences, rather than the public relying on partisan political programs to develop civic-based programmes that inform the trajectory of democracy.
- ▶ Cross-professional variations in theorising *medania* ideals should be further explored. This variation is also reflected at the regional level, where multiple groups converge on the importance of secularism, even if expressed in different terms. The religious identity of the state is regarded as just as dangerous as a tribal one, whereas understandings of civicness call for the absence of both. Indeed, professional sectors and technocratic development are seen as the antidote to each. Varying political ideologies, when unified through the banner of technocratic professionalism, are acknowledged as an advanced form of civicness.

## 2) Trade Unions (private and public sector)

Trade unions, particularly working-class groups across various sectors, were historically a driving force in shaping civic values for democratic governance in the aftermath of every revolution, and 2018 was no different. According to trade unions, a clear legal framework is essential to protect labour rights from misuse as a tool of partisan politics. For most labour unions, *medania*, or the process of governance through civic institutions, fostered a fair and open space for labour and professional unions to adopt their own mandates, elect boards and representatives through fair and free elections without state intervention, and provide membership through political mobilisation and lobbying for political and economic rights. Missing from these postcolonial *medania* debates are women and informal labour, as well as the intersection of the two.

Two women featured in the debate on *medania* expressions through trade/labour union organisations. Before delving into their definitions, it is worth noting that both women represent—both in themselves and in their choice of political mobilisation—a new form of civic formation. Given that the two women were employed in the private sector, one working in petroleum and the other in tech—both male-dominated fields that are also captured by the state and partisan politics—the fact that these two women were actively mobilising for labour rights was unprecedented. It is also worth noting that both women came to labour organisations from their respective RCs. Both activists have a somewhat similar definition of *medania* that emphasises the rule of law, institutional reform and functionality, and accountability to the public and citizen's rights. The role of social movement and societal shifts in shaping the understanding of *medania* was significant. In one case, it was seen as the organisation of social forces to express an ideal of change, without which institutional reform and democratic transfer/transformation would not be possible. They both speak of the importance of civic authority over civic actors.

Civic authority, according to both women, draws from citizenship and other comprehensive rights that give the public both the right and ability to decide on acceptable civic conduct, even by civic actors. Currently, civic actors exist but a civic authority does not, adding to Sudan's political crisis. The presence of a *medania* rhetoric of peace and freedom, even if devised by the revolution, is rendered moot without means of application. According to both women, trade union organisation was one way to put the ideals of *medania* into action. Since work and livelihoods directly reflect the social contract and its limitations—as opposed to the superfluous nature of the democratic project—both activists organised to secure a larger space for workers' rights in the transition.

### *Medania Within Trade Unions (private and public sector)*

Traditional civil society—mostly liberal and funded through donor projects—has no space for labour politics. This reflects how civil society has been defined and categorised since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement,<sup>3</sup> shaped by partisan politics that are also in competition with labour unions for institutional representation.

New civic formations have enabled cross-sectoral and regional political associations between members of the Resistance Committees and other groups within their neighbourhoods. These associations include gender, class, and ethnic dimensions otherwise absent from political associations. These new associations have generated alternative civic understandings and expressions deemed necessary for democratic transition.

### **3) Party Members, Politicians and Technocrats in the 2019 Transitional Government**

It was not easy to track the history or essence of civil society and *medania* before the al-Bashir regime. One of the interviewees mentioned that in the 1970s, the values of civicness were developed around generic human rights and the preservation of the environment. This is understandable given the size of the state and its institutions, as well as the postcolonial political junctures Sudan went through, with only two short democratic periods in the 1960s and again in the 1980s. During military rule, the struggle for civic rights, i.e., votes for women and labour laws, were the remit of party politics and state-based unions.

Beyond state-related political mobilisations, Sudan has a humanitarian-based communal understanding of *medania* values. *Nafeer* is an example of a traditional practice in which people pool their resources to help during public catastrophes such as floods and famines. The 2018 revolution borrowed from these values to encourage people to support each other during periods of excessive restrictions.

It is also worth noting that most politicians interviewed relied heavily on traditional or antiquated values of *medania* to make sense of the post-2018 political discourse and to make a case against new civic formations.

In mapping new civic formations within this group, two members of the civic transitional government defined *medania* values as the absence of military rule, the presence of order, and governmentality. Both highlighted in different terms the crisis of open-ended political mobilisations and what this has meant for the future of governmentality. In the words of the previous deputy minister, 'if everyone has their own ideas of *medania*, what will it take to achieve a middle ground, if ever?'

Concerns regarding the unified teaching and learning of *medania* values also arose. In their technocratic capacity, the interviewees pushed back against the popular nature of civic values, suggesting that civicism has an ultimate goal—democratic rule—and for this to be achieved people must be unified in their mobilisation towards a single agenda. Technocrats and politicians, the civic actors closest to the state, applied *medania* values more functionally, whereby civil actors govern through political programmes and elections without the presence of armed actors.

According to one female correspondent (who was the most senior state official or politician to be interviewed) popular conceptions and mobilisations of *medania* were considered a risk to the viability of the state's civic political project. Despite work on gender equality in civil society over the past two decades, she made a case for community values that seemed at odds with new civic formations that tend to challenge the boundaries of established political thought and action, especially with regard to the women's and sexual rights agenda.

### *Medania* Within Partisan Politics

There is a clear rift between politicians and state-affiliated members of civic government, on the one hand, and the rank-and-file of the pro-democracy movement, on the other, on the meaning and values of *medania*. Civilian members of the transitional government have a more traditional understanding of what civicness means – a definition that is out of touch with the values and aspirations of the members of the movement.

Politicians and technocrats tend to take either overly conservative or literal approaches to civic ideas, driving a civic transition that fails to address wider grievances among marginalised Sudanese communities – or even among internal groups, such as union members, whose rights are disputed. Since both groups began from the same conception of civicness, as enshrined in the 2019 revolutionary manifesto and later in the 2019 constitutional declaration,<sup>4</sup> it is worth exploring where the diversions occurred and at what cost for the future of Sudan's reconciliation and democratic transition. Fragmentation at the level of political thought and ideology is severe and could upend the civic project.

#### 4) INGOs and NGOs

After 2018, INGOs and NGOs, especially in the urban centres, developed a new mandate on civic politics, an umbrella term for enabling civilian rule through supporting the establishment and functionality of institutions that can aid the transition to civic rule through a set of good governance measures and policies. In this context, international and national organisations reoriented their mandate from focusing on humanitarian intervention and development goals to developing tailor-made programmes to train and engage with young civic actors with the aim of aligning their *medania* values with the transition framework.

The general focus of these organisations is supporting the political process and ensuring a smooth transition – which at the time of writing is understood as only possible through elections. This approach reverts to the civic values of the al-Bashir era and earlier peace processes, which yielded little meaningful transition or political learning on how to employ civic values against military authoritarian rule. Concerns about the unsuitability of these approaches surfaced once again in the aftermath of the 2022 coup.

Structural issues, such as sanctions – which restrict access to development funding – prioritise political stability over democracy, or rather conflate the two. This gives primacy to funding and political support for projects and initiatives that do not necessarily reflect the *medania* values of the revolution, which focuses more on long term change over immediate results.

### *Medania* Within the Development/Humanitarian Charity Sector

Liberal civic values and the general understanding of democratisation that underpins them continue to shape the thrust of politics from above. International donors continue to financially and politically back standard ideals of *medania*, in support of civil rule through elections and against military intervention. The above mapping suggests that the rift between civic democracies based on electoral politics do not reflect the thinking and forms of mobilisations adopted by the younger generation members of RCs. There is a concern that this diversion will lead to a new set of ripples, even if the military is removed from the political equation, causing further destabilisation.

## 5) Diasporas

The presence of diasporas in post-revolution politics is of great significance. Previously, diaspora involvement in politics largely took place through political parties in exile, with members living abroad influencing local political dynamics through lobbying from a distance. At times, this involvement included problematic interventionist politics, with third-party countries acting as sponsors or even facilitators of coups.

In more recent times, second- and third-generation diaspora have taken on activist roles, their fluid transitional identities shaping and driving their interest in affecting developments in Sudan. These diaspora interventions have assumed a more realistic application in the context of humanitarian work, and more recently in supporting the transition to democracy following al-Bashir's fall.

### *Medania* Within Diaspora Networks

To get a sense of how diaspora are contributing to new civic formations in post-revolution Sudan, we consider their own testimonies. Two male members of the diaspora who live in Europe, travel to Sudan frequently and maintain close engagement with the revolution through transnational civic groups, praise the commonality of ground that new values of *medania* bestowed on the Sudanese. The ability to mobilise for a common agenda, even if short term—like sustained political pressure to remove al-Bashir in the early days of the revolution, or lobbying international actors to promote the installation of a civic government—suggests awareness that *medania* is a multi-stage process. Participation in shaping its various stages depends on one's affiliation, investment and interest. The common baseline remains a commitment to a governance process where the army is absent.

A more nuanced debate on the meaning and application of terms like *medania* in relation to liberal values is also present. One example is whether civiness necessarily requires secularism, while also questioning the role of religion in the process. Debates among diaspora allude to the language gap in reconciling local means with international frameworks, a true case of 'lost in translation'.

Debates on what constitutes civil society in the aftermath of the revolution gave primacy to new civic actors over traditional ones. The diaspora, while still invested in the multiparty systems as the only means towards democratisation, adopt grassroots *medania* discourse that situates traditional parties as an extension of military rule. In that sense they are situated between old and new civic formations, with an inclination towards the latter.

Diaspora from nearby regions and the west have been relocating to Sudan in the past ten years as part of a reverse migration process enabled by the opening of the market, particularly the third sector.

These groups are globalised in their outlook while adopting a set of westernised liberal values. Their activism straddles their current citizenship and ancestral homeland, their in-between identity giving them a sense of authenticity that is more useful for external representation than for local integration.

The civiness values they contributed to the *medania* debate were neither grassroots nor fully supportive of 'democracy' as a process of institutional reform. Instead, their values reflect a cross-pollination of Western liberal ideals, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, combined with a focus on identity politics (gender/sexual orientation/racial politics and more) and on developmental technocratic tools.

## 6) Grassroots

These include Resistance Committees (RCs), advocacy and activist networks, pressure groups, women's movements, initiatives, and general civil society work from below. Because of the ad-hoc and fluid nature of these new civic formations, the available spectrum of categories falls short of properly identifying them.

The below covers a sample of the variety of perspectives on what *medania* means in the popular revolutionary imaginary. The wide range of opinions is itself a marker of progress, though significant work remains to reconcile these views and operationalise the term towards a democratic transition.

- Mahsain Dahab, an RC member and women's rights activist, developed her understanding of the term *medania* during the 2019 sit-in. From her experience in the two-month country-wide collective gathering in protest of army rule, she contends that there is no one unified discourse on civiness, but rather that its ideals are emerging through multiple instances of mobilisation towards a common goal of 'change'. These moments were themselves subject to setbacks, as the agendas that underpin them lack consensus, inviting confrontation amongst members of the pro-democracy movement. Territorial claims over certain issues—such as peace (framed in terms of peripherality or ethnicity) or women's rights (framed in terms of religion)—limit their integration into the broader discourse on civiness.

- Hajan, a young activist from East Darfur and member of the Civic Lab, a community initiative leading on the localisation of the rights agenda, speaks of his experience developing a practical understanding of *medania* in a context shaped by Darfur's historic particularities. Hajan adopted the community mobilisation approach as a means for advocating for civic rights during the sit-in. He questions whether this is suitable for a highly militarised and securitised place like Darfur. His definition of *medania* highlights the role of context and history in fostering local engagement. He questions whether a community like that of Al-Dean in West Darfur can adopt the civic values of Khartoum without the necessary education and urban civic frameworks. *Medania* in this case, he suggests, might simply mean the peripheries' right to catch up.
- Feminist Eiman Omer offers a personal take on *medania*: 'To be civic is to be able to have and make a choice'. Here, the choice to elect leaders is intertwined with the ability to vote for laws and other rights that give women choices, and by extension, rights. Eiman also speaks of the contention around the development and use of the term *medania* and the community that is meant to deploy it. For new grassroots civic formations, building on the existing civil society discourse of civiness can lead to a myriad of challenges. First, the gatekeeping and power relations that shape access to the sector limit bottom-up influencing on the discourse. Furthermore, old and new iterations of civiness were never the only game in town. The presence of other civic paradigms, whether religious or cultural, often undermine the full realisation of *medania* as envisaged in the popular imagination. In the face of these limitations, members of the RCs and other grassroots bodies rely on the existing civil society discourse of rights, with its borrowed universal paradigms that can alienate grassroots transitional projects.

- Hamdan, a queer activist—his presence an important marker of a more inclusive civic space after the revolution—decries the conflation of civicness with welfare and the provision of services, which civil society seems to have taken over in place of the state. According to Hamdan, the risk of civil society and civic space being reduced to service provision comes at the cost of its crucial role advocating for what is and is not acceptable civic conduct – a point reinforced by other identity-related activists (feminists included). Accountability, justice, rights and other values that form the scaffolding of civicness should be the primary preoccupation of civil society, which is not the case at the moment. Without civil society—old and new—driving the reconceptualisation and application framework of *medania*, there might be no democracy project for application.
- Rouh Nasir, a young feminist activist working in the area of knowledge production, problematises the use and understanding of the term *medania* further by claiming that it is not one thing. Her political experience suggests that civicness can only be achieved in stages. The first stage is a shared agreement to adhere to the constitutional and institutional civic authority, wherever it may be. This in itself cannot be achieved without addressing the unequal power relations between the army and the rest of society. The second stage concerns the civic forces themselves. She defines *medania* as equal power relations between members of a society, and civil society as a space that fosters equitable dynamics on the basis of shared core values regulating civic and civil politics. Here she makes a clear reference to a mechanism for achieving *medania*. She emphasises solidarity as the most important value for fostering inclusion and integration and expanding the civic space while safeguarding independent opinions. A balance between these is the hallmark of democracy.

### *Medania* in New Civic Formations

New civic groups contribute to reconceptualising the term *medania* more than any other group in any category. Their lived experiences over four years helped lay the foundation for a more practical use of the term, rather than its previous conceptual utilisation. The operationalisation of *medania* as a multi-step process towards achieving democracy is also more pronounced in revolutionary discourse. This is informed by experience rather than a universal, value-based system of rights.

A multi-step *medania* system to arrive at an agreed upon set of civic values raises concerns about what it would take for the diverse multitude of pro-democracy forces to align and endorse these activities. This raises questions around legitimacy and consensus.

While the majority of grassroots bodies are preoccupied with expanding and integrating the civic project through the adoption and adaptation of many initiatives, projects, expressions, and ideals, traditional civil society, particularly political parties and their civic allies have adopted political settlements as their preferred approach towards civicism, mostly because this is more aligned with donor agendas and charts the most direct route to civic governance through elections, regardless of whether it brings democracy.

## Recommendations

### For donors and international partners:

- ▶ Prioritise civic consolidation over electoral shortcuts. Support long-term civic capacity, inclusive dialogue, and institutional reform rather than rushing toward elections as the sole marker of transition.
- ▶ Fund and engage with grassroots formations. Directly support Resistance Committees, trade unions, and grassroots initiatives, not just formal NGOs and party-linked groups.
- ▶ Avoid one-size-fits-all civic templates. Recognise *medania* as context specific. Tailor support to regional, generational, and sectoral variations (e.g. Darfur vs. Khartoum).
- ▶ Shift from service delivery to rights-based support. Avoid reducing civic actors to welfare providers. Strengthen their role in rights advocacy, accountability, and political reform.

### For Sudanese civic actors:

- ▶ Deepen cross-sector dialogue. Build bridges across grassroots, professional, and diaspora groups to find common ground on *medania* values and democratic aims.
- ▶ Advance a clear, inclusive civic vision. Invest in defining and communicating shared priorities, e.g., the contours of a new social contract that integrates labour rights, gender equality, and regional justice.
- ▶ Strengthen internal accountability. Promote civic authority that holds even civic actors to account, ensuring legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

### For regional and multilateral institutions:

- ▶ Champion Sudanese-led models of transition. Advocate for and protect the space for Sudanese civic actors to shape transition frameworks – do not impose externally designed pathways.
- ▶ Support knowledge production and civic education. Invest in civic education and knowledge initiatives that can help reconcile regional, generational, and identity-based differences on civic values.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See: [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101291/1/De\\_Waal\\_Sudan\\_a\\_political\\_marketplace\\_analysis\\_published.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101291/1/De_Waal_Sudan_a_political_marketplace_analysis_published.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://peacerep.org/publication/everyday-politics-of-sudans-tax-system-identifying-prospects-for-reform/>

<sup>3</sup> See: [https://www.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag337\\_5616aeb31cf24.pdf](https://www.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag337_5616aeb31cf24.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Available at: <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/Sudan%20Constitutional%20Declaration%20%28English%29.pdf>



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## About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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