Khartoum’s revolutionary murals

Introduction

Since the overthrow of former president ‘Umar Al-Bashir in April 2019, and the announcement of a transitional Sovereign Council in August 2019, the people of Khartoum have repainted large swathes of their city in revolutionary street art and poetry. This series of photos was taken in December 2019, exactly one year after the start of the Sudanese revolution that led to ousting the president. It showcases a selection of the creative and thought-provoking revolutionary murals (jidāriyyāt) now adorning the Sudanese capital. In a striking contrast with the policies and rhetoric of the previous Islamist regime, under which women bore the brunt of state control, the capital is now awash in the imagery of the Nubian queen (kandāka), who embodies a return to an imagined past (stretching back to the ancient Kingdom of Kush) when women held important roles. Also notable are the many depictions of the Sudanese nation as ethnically diverse and religiously inclusive—unlike the singularly Islamic (and often ethnically Arab) national identity advanced by the former regime.

Women of the revolution

This photo was taken in the area between the Blue Nile Bridge and the military headquarters in downtown Khartoum. In stark contrast with the more than three decades of Islamist party rule, images of empowered women have proliferated in Khartoum’s post-revolution street art. The central figure in this mural resembles the ancient Nubian queen (kandāka). This icon went viral during the revolution, after the now-famous photo emerged on Twitter of 22 year old Alaa Salah leading a protest chant wearing shining white robes and golden earrings. Behind the kandāka in this mural are depicted women of various ethnic groups, represented by their diverse dress, hair styles and skin tones.
Piss off tyrant

This photo was taken at a primary school in the neighbourhood of Block 8 in Al-Hajj Yusif. It says “Piss off tyrant” (fūt yā zālím), while a Nubian queen (kandāka), modelled on the famous image of 22 year old protester Alaa Salah, punches former president Umar Al-Bashir in the head.
A woman’s voice is revolution

This photo was taken at the At-Taqwa Girls’ Primary School in Al-Hajj Yusif. “A woman’s voice is revolution” (ṣawt al-mar’a thawra). An epithet of Salafi Islamists was “a woman’s voice is immodesty”. In Arabic, immodesty (’awra) rhymes with revolution (thawra). This play-on-words points to the important role women played in Sudan’s revolution, and the ostensible end of Islamist rule in Sudan.
Mum

This photo was taken opposite the Police Officers’ Club in Burri, near the military headquarters in downtown Khartoum. “Mum, don’t cry. I haven’t died yet. Mum, I’m still alive. Only my corpse has died” (yaimma mā tabkī anā lissa mā mat, anā imma lissa ḥayy bass mātat aljussa).
They killed us here

This photo was taken in the area between the Blue Nile Bridge and the military headquarters in downtown Khartoum. On the left: “Mum, you have to forgive me, I snuck out while you were sleeping [to join the protests]” (yā ammī lāzim ta’fī lay shān zughta khalaytkum niyām). On the right: “They killed us here” (qatalūnā hunā).
New Sudan

This photo was taken opposite the Police Officers’ Club in Burri, near the military headquarters in downtown Khartoum. The mural subtly critiques the “old Sudan” under the Islamist National Congress Party (NCP), by portraying Sudanese citizens of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds coexisting in harmony. Importantly, the symbols of Christianity (the crucifix) and Islam (the minaret and crescent) are blended harmoniously, with the word “ease” (*maysara*) written in Arabic nearby. Under the NCP, Sudan was ruled as an Islamic state, and heterodox Muslims and non-Muslims were marginalised.
Retribution

This photo was taken in the area between the Blue Nile Bridge and the military headquarters in downtown Khartoum. “Our martyrs haven’t died, they live on with the revolutionaries. What is dead is the treacherous consciousness. We swear we will bring retribution” (ṣuḥādānā mā mātu, ʾāyishīn ḍamīr khāʾīn; ḥāllifīn najīb at-tār).
Don’t jinx our good fortune

This photo was taken opposite the Police Officers’ Club in Burri, near the military headquarters in downtown Khartoum. This mural’s phrase roughly translates to “[Careful] you’ll be jinxed, beautiful civilian rule” (bisihrūka yā samha yā madaniyya). To the left of this phrase is an image of a woman burning incense. Many Sudanese burn scented wood, bark and seeds (bakhūr at-taimān) to ward off the eyes of those who envy their good fortune. The artwork implies that we need to burn incense because civilian rule (madaniyya) is enviable good fortune. It is also common practice in Sudan to say “mā shā’ Allah” (as God willed it) when you see something nice to avoid the owner falling ill to evil or jealous eyes.
Khartoum’s wrestling stadium

“Sudan” and “Revolution”. This photo is of the newly repainted East Nile wrestling stadium in Al-Hajj Yusif. Until recently, the Khartoum State Wrestling Federation was controlled by ruling regime acolytes, disparagingly known as kīzān, who have been more interested in making money from ticket sales than improving the stadium infrastructure or investing in training equipment for the wrestlers. In late August 2019, after the establishment of the new Sovereign Council, and after years of neglect, the wrestlers and fans collected funds and repainted the stadium which included a mural dedicated to Al-Wasila Nadir, a local wrestler who was killed in the protests.
Slain Sudanese wrestler

This photo was taken at the East Nile wrestling stadium in Al-Hajj Yusif. “Martyr of the revolution and loss to the wrestling community: Al-Wasila.” On 3 June 2019, Al-Wasila Nadir, father of three, was shot and killed by Rapid Support Forces (Janjaweed) during a protest in the working class district of Al-Hajj Yusif. His friends have painted his portrait on wall of the local wrestling stadium, where he played for the Jungle Lions wrestling club.
Can the poor rule?

This photo was taken at a primary school in the neighbourhood of Block 8 in Al-Hajj Yusif. Districts like this one are made up of old communities who are marginalised ethnically and economically, as well as newer arrivals who have fled conflicts. This thought-provoking mural on a primary school in Al-Hajj Yusif asks “can the poor rule [a new Sudan]?” When the revolution arrived in Khartoum from the provincial cities, it was the professional and middle classes who led the protests. As such, the working class districts were not as heavily involved in the protests initially. However, as the protests in downtown Khartoum began to articulate deeper goals of regime change (rather than simply ‘bread protests’), they snowballed with all walks of life – all occupations, ethnicities, religions.
We will build it

“We will build it: the homeland we’ve dreamed of” (ḥanabniḥū waṭannā albinḥilm bīhū). This is another common phrase plastered on walls around the capital, referring to the decades of infrastructural, socio-economic and political neglect under the former NCP regime. This photo was taken at the At-Taqwa Girls’ Primary School in Al-Hajj Yusif.
Collecting donations for new murals

This photo was taken at the At-Taqwa Girls’ Primary School in Al-Hajj Yusif. A member of a local neighbourhood’s Resistance Committee collects donations from passing motorists to paint revolutionary murals on the local school. The next photo features the finished artwork they were working on the day the photos was taken.
Revolution to be continued...

This photo was taken at the At-Taqwa Girls’ Primary School in Al-Hajj Yusif. “Revolution continues” (thawra mustamirra).

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