

# THE SPREAD OF NON-VIOLENT ACTION THE CASE OF THE 2018–2019 REVOLUTION IN SUDAN

Case Study Report



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## HOW CIVIC MOBILIZATIONS GROW IN AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXTS

This case study is part of a [larger project](#) examining when and why citizens mobilize to challenge the state in hard authoritarian contexts. The project compares 21 recent episodes of mobilization in order to understand the factors that contributed to the mobilization's growth. Four mobilization episodes (Ethiopia in 2015-2018, Vietnam in 2016, Sudan in 2018-2019, and Belarus in 2020) were selected for in-depth case studies.

The project was made possible through the generous support of the United States Government. Our donors do not influence the organization's research priorities, report findings, or policy recommendations. The positions of this publication do not represent the positions of the United States Government.

\* This person wishes to remain anonymous.

On the cover: Sudanese protesters take part in a rally against military rule on the anniversary of previous popular uprisings, in the capital Khartoum on April 6, 2022. Pro-democracy activists have warned online of a people power "earthquake of April 6" – a momentous day in Sudan's history that was key in bringing down earlier strongmen. In 1985, the day saw the ouster of president Jaafar Nimeiri following a popular uprising. In 2019 it marked the start of a mass sit-in outside army headquarters, after months of protests, against Bashir's three decades in power. (Photo by AFP via Getty Images)

## Introduction

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To contribute to the Civic Mobilizations project’s goal of understanding what helps and hinders mobilization growth, we sought to analyze a case in which there were attempts by international organizations to support nonviolent civic movements. Unfortunately, international support for mass mobilizations can be hard to detect—these programs are kept confidential to protect participants and avoid the erroneous perception that the movement is being led or sponsored by outside actors. We were able to identify Sudan as a case because of Freedom House’s activities as one of the very few organizations to support movement leaders in the 2013–16 period. Through Freedom House’s network we also identified two other international organizations that were involved: the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and an organization that asked to remain anonymous. Given this density of programming, we settled on Sudan as our international support case. We hope that this report will help members of the donor, international nongovernmental organization (INGO), and implementer communities to better understand the potential for and constraints on international support for civic mobilization.

An important disclaimer: We do not mean for this focus to be mistaken for an attribution of success to the efforts of outside supporters. We explore the role of international actors because that is who we are and the audience we can address. The revolution belongs to the Sudanese people and the movement leaders who work tirelessly for freedom and democracy for their country. We wish only to better understand how international actors can support them.

### Episode background and research questions

In September 2013, thousands of Sudanese took to the streets to protest austerity measures and rising food and fuel prices. It was the first large street protest in years, though protests did not gain traction outside Khartoum. Activists from the Grifna and Change Now movements and members of other political opposition groups wanted to seize this opportunity to create a large-scale mobilization to achieve their various political visions and social objectives. Within three days, the regime responded with a violent crackdown, killing over 200 activists and severely injuring countless more. This response ended the demonstrations as activists, surprised by the level of violent repression, became discouraged and withdrew their efforts.

Five years later, in December 2018, new protests broke out. This time, when the crackdown came, the protests didn’t stop. The mobilization persisted for months, culminating in a mass sit-in; in April 2019, Omar al-Bashir was deposed by a military coup. After the coup, activists turned their attention

to the military government, and within three months had secured an agreement for a transition to civilian governance.

What changed in those five years such that, by 2019, protesters were able to weather crackdowns and a coup and secure a (temporary) transition to democracy?<sup>1</sup> One answer that has been given by analysts is the increased use of strategic nonviolent action (NVA) by the movement.<sup>2</sup>

While our understanding of NVA evolves as new tactics are used by movements globally, for the purpose of this case study we understand strategic nonviolent action as a way for people to shift power in a society through mass participation in nonviolent tactics such as strikes, boycotts, protests, and civil disobedience. These tactics operate within a framework that posits a causal relationship between activities—their sequencing, timing, and level of participation—and changes in the power structure.<sup>3</sup>

In our assessment of international support for civic mobilization, we noted that Freedom House, USIP, and the anonymous organization had provided support for

nonviolent action to Sudanese movement leaders in the period from 2013 to 2018. Given the known outcome of the successful mobilization that employed nonviolent tactics and the potential connection with international programs that were training movement leaders in their use, we posed the following questions:

- What effect did INGO programming have on the use of strategic nonviolence in Sudan during the 2018–2019 revolution?
- What was the value of strategic nonviolence to movement leaders in the 2013 to 2019 period?

## Hypotheses

In order to investigate these questions we employ the logic of process tracing, in which we begin with a known outcome and a hypothesis that explains the emergence of that outcome. We then gather evidence to confirm the hypothesis or the counterfactual and, if the data allows, refine the hypothesis until it matches the available data. In this case we take the successful mass mobilization, which included a vast and varying cross section of Sudanese society and primarily used the tools of strategic nonviolence, as our known outcome.

Hypothesis: The use, spread, and successful implementation of strategic NVA in the 2018–19 Sudanese revolution was largely due to international support provided to movement leaders.

Counterfactual: Strategic NVA would have come into mass use in the 2018–19 revolution regardless of international support.

As a result of data collection and our analysis, we make the following claims:

1. Strategic nonviolent action came into mass utilization in Sudan through the efforts of motivated Sudanese activists, community organizers, and political opposition actors who employed a training of trainers model developed in tandem with international actors.
2. Politically motivated Sudanese actors used NVA as a framework to reflect on past experiences and devise better strategies that employed a broader set of tactics and approaches they did not consider before.

## Study methods and limitations

This case study is based on interviews conducted with actors involved or familiar with the 2018–19 revolution and the growth of NVA. We used interviews as our primary data collection method in order to capture the microprocesses of individuals learning about NVA, using its tactics, and teaching it to others. We used a snowball sampling technique that leveraged Freedom House’s network to conduct interviews with former trainers, trainees, a political party leader, activists, and representatives from Sudanese and international nongovernmental organizations.

Our analysis is constrained by the availability of interviewees. Crucial actors such as the Sudanese Professionals Association agreed to be interviewed but were unable to meet because of power outages and government-enforced internet blackouts. While these interviews could have lent texture and detail to the analysis, we believe that we triangulated key networks well enough to be confident in our claims.

## Report road map

To make our case, we first provide a brief history of the movement prior to 2013 and the immediate aftermath of the attempted revolution in September 2013. Next, we discuss each of our claims individually and provide evidence to support them. Finally, we provide recommendations for practitioners interested in supporting nonviolent civil resistance.

To protect the identities of those who agreed to be interviewed for this report, all names have been redacted and replaced by letters. Most of the interview participants remain active in Sudanese politics today. Where possible, we describe the political position of the interviewee. All quotations have been edited for clarity.

## The lead-up to 2013

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By 2013, Omar al-Bashir had been in power for 24 years. Bashir came to power in 1989 via a coup against a democratically elected leader. His coalition was backed by ultraconservative Islamists and right-wing military.

During the late Bashir era, Sudanese politics were characterized by center-periphery dynamics in which Bashir ruled the center of the country, using the military and other forms of state power to control every element of political and social life. While political parties existed, there was no serious electoral competition. Meanwhile, the periphery of the country was dominated by near-constant violent conflict between the army and rebel groups who vied for territorial control. These two loci of power were linked by political parties that operated in the center but had connections with rebel groups in the national periphery. In this context, a common view among activists before 2013 was that any major political change would require violence. In fact, many leading nonviolent activists report having previously belonged to political parties with ties to rebel groups. It was taken as a fact of political life that violence and politics were wed.

In spite of the dominance of violent forms of politics, there is a rich history of organizing, particularly through labor unions, that gave and continues to give Sudanese activists a frame of reference for what civil resistance can look like. As Stephen Zunes noted,

Labor unions and other civil society organizations played a critical role in the successful pro-democracy uprisings against military dictatorships in 1964 and 1985. However, in 1992, the Labor Unions Act changed the sector-based unions to institution-based and minimized their power from nationwide sector-based to limited institution-based micro-unions. Other independent organizations—from human rights groups, political parties, religious leaders, to the Rotary Club—were suppressed by the regime, and organizing was extremely challenging. The independent business sector was limited as well, with the government making it very difficult to run a successful company unless it was clearly pro-regime. Opposition political parties were severely restricted in their activities and the older, more established parties had little credibility or support among younger Sudanese.<sup>4</sup>

One interviewee discussed how the legacy of union leadership helped to legitimize the Sudan Professionals Association (SPA)—one of the organizations that led the 2018 revolution—in the eyes of many Sudanese. “[In the beginning] the SPA didn’t have that much of a constituency behind it. It is in the minds of Sudanese. I mean this is why it succeeded, because in the minds of the Sudanese, it’s in their dreams, that the previous ones [revolutions] [were] led by the trade unions.<sup>5</sup>”

In addition, Sudan has a number of groups that have worked on promoting nonviolent action in connection to the peace process. Since 1994, the Organisation for Nonviolence and Development has promoted the use of nonviolence as a peace building tool for the nation’s army–rebel group conflicts. Their approach has not typically extended to using nonviolence to achieve democratic political goals in the center of the country.

By the late 2000s, interest in civil resistance was building among activists focused on the Bashir regime. Beginning in 2009, another set of activists emerged to form Grifna (a term that translates to *fed-up* or *disgusted*). The idea of Grifna was to create a new kind of organization that, unlike the opposition political parties in Sudan, would have a democratic leadership structure and try to avoid centralizing its identity in an individual (always male) figure. One of the original organizers, B, explained:

We wanted to make political parties jealous. Like, “We are those young people doing this and why are you just sitting and giving very high language statements on your websites or to the newspapers? Go out in the streets and talk to the people” and things like that... I remember I told [my friends], “We need a name that no one can forget. We need a name that if someone saw it on the poster on the street, they would not continue... So, we were discussing many names and one of my friends, he mentioned *grifna*, which means *disgust* or *fed up* and we immediately laughed, and we said, “this is it!” This is the name that no one will continue walking, it’s not like a company trying to advertise for anything, it’s not like a traditional political party, it is something very strange. If I saw a poster for someone saying “grifna,” I would definitely stop and say “Why you are, why you are *grifna*? What is it?”<sup>6</sup>

These organizers grasped key movement-building principles like decentralizing leadership and reaching beyond traditional opposition groups to engage those who are not usually affiliated with opposition politics or movements. But, because of their innovation, they faced resistance from people who had been working in opposition for years. Interviewee B recalled:

Also we agreed that we are not going to go to closed doors, we are going to markets, we are going to do things at the very local level. And we are targeting the majority of people. We want them to join, we don't want them to follow. We want everyone to be in Grifna. We don't want them to clap their hands for us and treat us like the traditional Sudanese leaders. [The] next day, there was a small forum. It was Saturday, I remember; every Saturday there is, in our neighborhood, a group of old people who need to have a cultural forum and they hate the regime. So in their meetings they will just complain about the regime.... We told them, "we want to start this." So they laughed, they criticized it, "This is nonsense, nothing will change in this country, this regime can only be defeated by an army or by using arms" and things like that, or "you are naive."

However, after the Arab Spring, as Sudan watched nonviolent movements successfully depose dictators in Tunisia and Egypt, a broader swath of Sudanese activists started to believe that another approach to politics was possible. One activist, A, who had previously belonged to a political party connected to an armed wing, explained:

In 2011, after the Arab Spring revolutions, we started to hear about nonviolent actions and protests that succeeded in Tunisia and in Egypt and even the other countries before that... If that worked in Tunis and, within no time, worked in Egypt, it could work here in Sudan... I met one of my friends and he told me about establishing a nonviolent movement, a youth movement, with Change Now at that time. Within like fifteen minutes I told him I am in, I am with you. This is something very great and I love it and I think this is what we have missed—to have like a youth movement which collects people from different political parties and ideologies in the same area working together, trusting each other and working together in civilian work.

With these two movements building, organizers saw an opportunity in September 2013 as austerity measures were squeezing households and the prices of food and fuel were increasing. This was the first collaboration between Grifna and Change Now and many who were involved believed that they were on the precipice of a revolution.

It seemed like it was very organized, there is a lot of meeting, preparation meetings for this demonstration and we start to announce our Coalition Grifna and Taghyir AlAan [Change Now] and at that time, at the same time we started to think on professionals committees, shadow committees, we need some people, teacher and doctor and something like that. So we started to connect our friends in these groups and also we started to connect the political parties. So it seemed like it's a revolution with the complete aspects to succeed. But what happened is, on the first day of protests, it was huge in Khartoum. In 2011–2012 it's not like that, and a lot of people joined this demonstration. It seemed like this is the revolution that they want, and it seemed that everything is work[ing].<sup>7</sup>

Within three days, the crackdown started. At least 200 participants were killed and many more were injured. Movement leaders were scared and quickly abandoned their street protest strategy. A describes their mental state after participating in the street protests and hearing about the murder of their friends and allies:

After the violence began, I attended a meeting with a lot of organizers and political parties. It was a sad moment for me. There was a lot of anger and people disagreed about the future of the revolution. People said this regime could not be moved. They said to me, "Do you think Bashir is like Mubarak and Ben Ali? This is a different thing, these people will kill everybody!" For me as an activist, and for a large number of my colleagues and my generation, we feel like we are guilty for all that blood, feel like we are part, we are a reason for the killing of these people. I just decided that I will stop, I will stop everything—working in a political party and working in the movement.<sup>8</sup>

By this point, the attempt at mass mobilization had collapsed, but the individuals who were working to build it did not. Within a week of the violence, A was nominated by their movement to attend a Freedom House training on movement strategy. They did, and over the next five years went on to become one of the leading movement strategists and NVA trainers in Sudan.

We provide these examples to reinforce the reality that while several INGO programs contributed to the growth of knowledge about and utilization of NVA, there was an existing cohort of motivated and knowledgeable activists who were prepared to lead mass mobilizations and a public historical memory of labor union organizing and revolutions of the past.

## Claim one:

**Strategic nonviolent action came into mass utilization in Sudan through the efforts of motivated Sudanese activists, community organizers, and political opposition actors who employed a training of trainers model developed in tandem with international actors.**

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### The Beginning of International Interest

As documented by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan's *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?*, international support for Sudanese social movements in the lead-up to 2013 was very limited.<sup>9</sup> Most international attention was focused on supporting peace processes or on counterterrorism. This continued to be the case between 2013 and 2018. Nevertheless, there was a small cohort of individuals working in international NGOs who saw the ongoing efforts at mass mobilization in Sudan and attempted to bring their expertise to bear. We will discuss this more extensively later in this section, but this effort was mostly uncoordinated and outside of the scope of donor interest. The international actors who began working on strategic nonviolence in Sudan either had experience in nonviolence resistance themselves or were experts on the topic.

Only the United States Institute for Peace had programming specifically dedicated to supporting nonviolent action. Two interviewees contacted for this case study cited a presentation given in 2014 by Maria Stephan, former director of the nonviolent action program at USIP, as a starting point at which they became interested in NVA.<sup>10</sup> The presentation was given to the Framework Group, a discussion series focusing on developing center-periphery connections and policy that could support the peace process. Later, when the movement against Bashir intensified, it began to focus more on policy for a political transition and a post-Bashir government. One attendee, D, who worked for an international NGO, said,

I don't know who came up with the idea to invite Maria Stephan, but during one of those meetings, she gave a basic introduction about nonviolent action and how to go about it. And for myself, it was very interesting, 'cause... I was also looking for ways that would provide a possibility to support fundamental change, next to the stuff that we usually did like peace building and lobby, advocacy which did not seem to make any serious difference in the situation in Sudan. And then Maria came and gave a short introduction and I found it really interesting, so I started studying it and shared it with my Sudanese partners.

Following the presentation, D began studying NVA on their own and eventually attended the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict's summer school. D was convinced and began including NVA training in their existing Sudan programs. To do so, D hired F, a skilled trainer from a Sudanese organization that had been providing basic NVA training to Sudanese activists in the preceding years. By 2015, F helped D's organization to deliver NVA training that itself followed the NVA playbook—encouraging participants to take what they learned and start building community networks and opportunities to organize around their daily issues.

We used to invite people to be trained on nonviolence basics and training of trainers and so on. But when we shifted, we saw that it's time for Sudanese youth and Sudanese activists to make use of nonviolence methods and nonviolence strategies. That was the difference, maybe. Yes, we were training people for nonviolence and we were encouraging them also to make nonviolence their lifestyle, but later—2015 was when we started this series of trainings—we were really genuinely thinking that it is high time now for Sudanese people to start to practice this method or this approach. That's why it was completely different for us.<sup>11</sup>

D described how the shift to actively practicing NVA worked with their participants. They were not, at first, targeting high-level political change, but rather providing space for informal groups to meet and discuss their common issues, creating space and networks for more complex and ambitious organizing in the future.

We were working with these lady football teams, tea sellers, tuk tuk drivers, but at the same time also some of these more intellectual people, that were of course also part of the framework group. So they started doing this [NVA organizing], and it turned out it was very different. Some of these tea-selling ladies, they were arrested all the time, so instead of having a training, I think, they got a place where they could start talking about their own issues and start organizing... I recognized that what we did was also a part of what the theory of organizing would say, so as you would bring people together and have them addressing [an] issue that is relevant to them, a small one that sort of builds the confidence and to make them feel and understand that they have the power to influence the situation around them despite everything else.<sup>12</sup>

Others discussed a training sponsored by Freedom House in 2013 as the beginning of their turn to NVA. The program through which the training was delivered was originally designed to support organizations' strategic planning but evolved over time to build participants' NVA capacity. A, who entered the training believing violent struggle was the only way forward, described a dramatic change of perception during the training.

There was a great facilitator...I remember his name. He just started the training, because I'm in civil society, I know how the first day usually goes, "hello the objective of this training," like that, and so on. Instead... he asked us, "What was your objective for this protest?" and we discovered that we were 15 participants, each of us had a different objective. Some of us said, "We want to remove the regime," some of us "We want to stop increasing prices," some of us said, "Continuing the revolution from 2011," some of us "United people." And then we had on the board like 15 objectives. We were shocked at that time. And at that time I feel very sad about it, it is the gap, that's the gap that I keep thinking we need to correct. And then he told us, "OK, let me ask you another question. Which of these objectives was reached?" Not even a single one of the objectives is reached.... And I feel that this is a very important thing, this is the big thing that we missed.

After this initial training, Freedom House worked with A to expand the program and bring in more participants. A helped

Freedom House to identify high-impact individuals who were already engaged in nonviolent approaches to politics. One such participant, G, was a high-ranking member of an opposition political party. G attended a series of trainings over the course of two years, all focused on preparing participants for nonviolent movement leadership. The events were often attended by movement leaders from Serbia, Egypt, Tunisia, and Kenya who shared their experiences with civil resistance, exposing Sudanese participants to the ways that nonviolent struggle took shape in different countries.<sup>13</sup>

When we had training with Freedom House, at that time our thinking completely diverted and we started to think about many things, even the activities that we had [done] in the past and how we can change our way of doing things, how can we use the experience of many countries around the world and even in the region here. We also learned so much from the experience of Otpor in Serbia, what happened in Tunisia, what happened in Egypt, and many other places, and we just benefited so much from the comparison between what was happening there and what we are doing now and how we can use this in our activities. So that's why, for me, when we returned back to Sudan, we were just thinking about how to use what we had learned in the training. So, for me, once I returned back, I used this inside my political party and I did many trainings. Me and other people from my party, we did many trainings for our party members and even we organized many campaigns, many activities using tools and using all the knowledge and skills and experience that we had from the training.<sup>14</sup>

## The nonviolent snowball

International donor programs look for multiplier and sustainability effects—changes that will outlast the program and have exponential impact over time as they reach more people. These NVA training programs have some of the strongest multiplier and sustainability effects we have observed. Those who participated in international nongovernmental organizations' programs describe going on to train tens of thousands of Sudanese activists in the years following their participation in the programs.

A, for example, built connections with grassroots groups in Sudan: student groups, so-called demands groups, and *mubadarat* (initiatives), including volunteers from the Nafeer, a group that was helping with flood recovery.<sup>15</sup> They also began traveling all over the country doing training-of-trainers trainings.

We [went] back to Sudan, we had a plan, funded also by Freedom House, we trained 500 activists in all the capitals of states of Sudan. And they trained their people, like it's like a snowball. We trained numbers and they trained more and more and more... And I love to believe that this is the beginning of people starting to hear and understand what non-violence is in Sudan. And I remember when we trained a number of people in the armed movement in Darfur. Those people came to the training and said "This will not work. You people from Khartoum love to talk about your suffering but you don't know what it's like." By the end of the training they said, "Yeah, this will work"; they understood.<sup>16</sup>

After work with the Freedom House project ended, A continued their work training community organizers and activists on NVA. At first the work was self-funded and self-organized but it was later funded by the USIP Nonviolent Action program. USIP's funding of local activists, the one described in this report and others, was an important contribution to strengthening the movement and NVA thinking within it.<sup>17</sup>

Another mass multiplier, G, went on to train their entire party apparatus, members of the Forces for Freedom and Change Coalition, and countless others in Sudan and the diaspora. Notably, G was also one of the prominent individuals to engage with armed groups and young men who were considering joining them. Here they describe the process:

And it became very effective, became very known, and even we did that for others in many initiatives, in many political parties, and even those guys and members of even armed movements and many organizations, women organizations, youth organizations all over Sudan. Maybe we did that for almost one thousand of them. And for me that was very effective, especially during the September Revolutions, and I saw many things, especially tactics that we suggested and ideas that we delivered to those guys. I think it was becoming a political culture, all people everywhere doing the same things.<sup>18</sup>

## A changing zeitgeist

As G and C discussed, when the protests broke out in 2018, it started to seem like nonviolent action had achieved a level of cultural virality. "People were discussing it on the streets without knowing its origin."<sup>19</sup> This came from training and training-of-trainers efforts by movement leaders as well as from natural diffusion through people's networks and social media.

E, who attended Maria Stephan's presentation at the Framework Group meeting, discussed how their trainings were only the beginning of a whole neighborhood learning about NVA.

The idea is that after carefully selecting the trusted participants, we give them an orientation led by an expert in NVA, then we ask them to do more readings about the topic (Gene Sharp's and others related references and videos). Subsequently, everyone should go to his/her respective neighborhood or the neighborhoods where s/he has good contacts to conduct the orientations/trainings in an interactive manner. It is important to say that we were cautious not to miss or duplicate neighborhoods. The events should take place on Fridays and Saturdays as normal social gatherings, and the number of trainees should be between 10-15, fully trusted ones, avoiding drawing attention. They should ask the trainees to do further readings as well.<sup>20</sup>

H, a Sudanese activist who runs a YouTube channel, discussed how knowledge diffusion was uniquely possible in this generation because of both access to the internet and having been raised in the generation that benefited from an increase in Sudanese petroleum exports. This generation had the tools and time to get involved with political initiatives and build relationships with peers.

And also that we have more access to the internet, which made us have more, we could build more networks, stronger networks, and have more knowledge provided from the internet. Also, the Arabic Spring made that possible. I think those are the things that made our generation kinda build this circle. Then this circle was a base for I think the beginning of this revolution... [Because of these connections] when you go to protest, you would actually know all the participants in this protest, because you somehow came across them at one of the initiatives, or one of the organizations, or in a lecture, or workshop, etc. We had this network.

G concurred that social media was a major contributing factor to the mass diffusion of NVA.

And because of social media, people can also share these things and develop their ideas continuously. I saw that very clearly... I think what we had in the trainings was used in Sudan and we noticed. I think it became like a culture now. Yes, we need that to be developed a bit more now [after the 2021 coup], but back then it became like a culture.<sup>21</sup>

## **Infusing NVA**

In discussions with current and former INGO staff who worked on NVA programs, it was clear that NVA training and civil resistance programming faced a lack of interest from donors. In order to deliver NVA content, INGOs used existing leadership, capacity building, and advocacy programs and infused them with NVA and related topics. INGO staff also specifically sought out participants for these programs from within the movement instead of registered civil society organizations. Staff described making attempts to interest donors in continued or increased funding for civil resistance programming but having their pitches fall flat.

Out of all international organizations working on NVA, only the United States Institute of Peace, through their nonviolent action program, described “increasing the use of NVA” as their explicit objective at the time of implementation.

Notably, staff at the INGOs who supported strategic nonviolent action in Sudan often had personal experiences with NVA or learned directly from those who had. Having lived under dictatorship and succeeded in their respective resistance political struggles, they recognized the potential for a similar approach in Sudan and leveraged their positions to provide what support they could. They recognized the need to “think and work politically” and identify movement leaders who could work adaptively and flexibly.<sup>22</sup> This is an important lesson for donors to support technical approaches recommended by the program staff who are closest to the situation.

## **Claim conclusion**

In the previous sections we have seen how international support for movement building and nonviolence began slowly after 2013. While donors remained uninterested in programs that centered NVA techniques, individual staff at INGOs that were already operating in Sudan seized opportunities to provide trainings, strategy sessions, and peer-to-peer exchanges for movement leaders. Over time, as these movement leaders built their NVA capacity, they themselves became trainers and diffused NVA strategy and thinking throughout Sudan, from Khartoum to Darfur and beyond. We have also seen how a generation supported by petroleum exports became interested in this content and shared it organically throughout their networks and on social media.

In weighing the evidence, we observe that Sudanese movement leaders did seek out information on strategic nonviolence without the support of international programs. We also consider the counterfactual in which these leaders would have connected with their peers in Egypt, Tunisia, and Kenya without INGO support. Given this, we cannot say that NVA would not have permeated movement leadership without external support. However, we observe that the massive upward scale shift in the number of Sudanese activists trained in NVA originated with individuals who participated in INGO training of trainers programs and were later given funding to continue to scale up their efforts.

Though the exact number of individuals trained in NVA by INGOs and Sudanese activists is unknowable, because of the consistent stories told by multiple actors within these systems, we are confident in our claim that strategic nonviolent action came into mass utilization in Sudan through the efforts of motivated Sudanese activists, community organizers, and political opposition actors who employed a training of trainers model developed in tandem with international actors.

## Claim two:

Politically motivated Sudanese actors used NVA as a framework to reflect on past experiences and devise better strategies that employed a broader set of tactics and approaches they did not consider before.

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Why was NVA important in Sudan? Scholars of nonviolence have well-developed arguments for why nonviolence is more successful at toppling regimes and transitioning to democracy than violent conflict,<sup>23</sup> but this study is principally concerned with how the nonviolent framework was helpful for building the movement in the first place. In this section we argue that NVA was important because it provided a framework for reflection and strategizing to a set of actors who were already politically motivated and had lived through recent unsuccessful mobilization attempts. Through NVA, these movement leaders were able to identify what had gone wrong in their previous attempts and devise approaches rooted in international best practices and adapted for their context.

### A note on hope

Following the violent crackdown in 2013, trainers interviewed for this study recalled a deep sense of depression and powerlessness among activists. There was a widespread view that civil action of any kind was impossible and that “the only thing Bashir understands is the gun.”<sup>24</sup> Trainers such as C recalled that at first they were persuading more than training, trying to convince activists that it was still possible to gain traction by nonviolent means.<sup>25</sup> What gave training participants hope, as A described, was NVA’s fresh perspective. Through the NVA framework, participants saw that the Bashir regime was not uniquely entrenched compared to other dictators, that there were tactical options other than uncoordinated street protests, and the regime was not a monolithic entity with every actor in complete lockstep. Before any reflection and re-strategizing could take place, a sense of hope and possibility was needed. NVA trainers and peers from nonviolent struggles abroad provided that.

### Rethinking their approach

In the lead-up to the 2013 protests, many activists believed that they were close to a successful revolution (which meant different things to different people, as we have seen). The near immediate crushing of the protests with lethal violence caused activists to wonder if there was something fundamentally missing in their approach.

G, the political party leader quoted above, described the value of the NVA framework, through which they could analyze their ongoing actions and map their activities within a broader system. “So, exactly when we went there and had the training, for me the important thing is that they always mentioned that ‘You are doing many things, but you want to do it in this way. In the scientific and systematic way.’ It’s just like they helped us, the training helped us to just do what we are already doing in different ways.”

Interviewee A described how activists, citing “3.5 percent rule” from Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan: the idea that if 3.5 percent of a population participates in a nonviolent mobilization, they will succeed in overturning the regime,<sup>26</sup> began centering movement expansion as their core post-2013 tactic. It should be noted that by the time A gave this interview in September 2022, they had been steeped in NVA theory and practice for nearly ten years. These are their reflections as a now-expert, not as someone recently trained:

We did the same things and repeated again and again and again. But sometimes we need just to talk with somebody, to be reachable, especially when I watch the documentary about Otpor and Nashville. These people had success sometimes by just talking with another person, not protesting, and not killing someone. Sometimes we just need to smile to have your objective reached. Sometimes you need to use other creative things which make you enjoy what you do, not just going out and protesting, killing people, or getting a gun and fighting.

On the topic of what has been missing in the movement since the 2021 coup, A said,

I come to your question [of] what is missing now and during our revolution. The point is nonviolent works, but under two conditions. The first condition is a clear strategic plan, a clear vision of the struggle. And the second thing is you need to extend your movement, not minimize it, so you need to recruit more people every day using tactics to bring in more people. Without these two conditions, nonviolence cannot work.

This process of slowly expanding the movement took time. And those leading its expansion knew that it couldn't be an elite-driven process. Individuals had to take ownership of the movement and utilize NVA strategy to make progress in their own communities. They had to use different tactics depending on their community and the issue at hand. Explaining their approach to youth engagement, a Sudanese expert who worked for an INGO talked about how participants were recruited selectively from across Khartoum state to maximize the coverage of NVA-based activities.

I told [each group] that this time is not going to be just a training, like when you just enjoy the meals and then you go. No, this time, each group, each individual, is asked to make an activity in his/her neighborhood and this is why the 120 participants I selected were from almost all the neighborhoods in the Khartoum state. My idea was very strategic. That each one, in three weeks of time after the end of the training, would do an activity in his/her neighborhood. And I told them to never choose a controversial type of activity, because at this stage I want you to gather trust between the population of the neighborhood. So, activity after activity, there will be a sort of a trust in the neighborhood with that person and after a while there will be a good network between the 120 in the Khartoum state.<sup>27</sup>

The same expert also discussed the accumulated experience of youth who were involved in the 2013 revolution. They described that the failures in 2013 indicated to young people that innovation was needed, so there was a natural receptivity to new ideas about how to organize.<sup>28</sup>

The logic of movement expansion extended even to armed groups who were currently engaged in violent conflict with the regime. F described one such experience training an armed group in Western Darfur:

We conducted that training, it was really critical, and at that time, after that training, it was a bit longer, it's not three days, because we were targeting people who are intending to establish an armed group, we needed to place more focus on discussions and use different methodology, different exercises. And the success story of that time, after the training, all of them agreed that OK, we don't need to establish any armed group. This is one of the first success stories that happened as a result of one or two workshops.<sup>29</sup>

This experience training armed groups in the “national periphery” underscores the fact that NVA trainers and movement leaders saw this as a nonelite process that would require the understanding and participation of a diverse cross section of the population across the entire country.

### Using the playbook

The strength of NVA is not just its focus on movement expansion, but also its robust analytical framework and tactical repertoire. Though we don't analyze the dynamics of individual tactics in this section, we see actors consistently succeeding while intentionally using NVA best practices.

When discussing why the nonviolent playbook is so essential, F, one of the Sudanese trainers explained that nonviolent discipline helped the movement to maintain its moral authority and that nonviolence would itself protect movement actors in a way that violence could not. Discussing the components of NVA, they said,

How to strategize, number one. Number two is how to stay committed to nonviolence, because at some point the government also tried to shift the demonstrators or the movement itself to violent movement. It was very important to see how we can encourage, how we can commit ourselves to nonviolence, to stay nonviolent. Because at some point also people, especially youth, could get frustrated and turn to violence and this is what the government wanted at that time, it was for them they hoped that this movement is a violent movement, not nonviolent. Because when it's violent, they can very easily try to confront them, to use violence. But if they are using nonviolent means, it's not justified that you oppress, that you use violence, you use bullets, live bullets, to kill or to injure them, it's not justifiable. That's why we concentrated on how to stay committed.

With commitment to nonviolent discipline spreading through activist circles, major movement actors were able to develop long-term strategies that would allow them to

build popular support without directly confronting the regime until the moment was right. In 2018, as the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) was emerging as a national leader, A was contacted to help design their organizational strategy. When they began the session, the SPA wanted to organize their strategy around regime change as their goal. A, using the NVA approach to organizing that instructs movement leaders to build trust with their constituencies before pursuing maximalist political change, suggested instead that they identify an issue that they could advocate for that is relevant to professionals in Sudan. They chose salaries, noting that Sudanese teachers, doctors, and lawyers earned significantly less than their counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt—strategically chosen comparisons because of their recent successes with nonviolent revolution. This approach helped the SPA leadership gain the trust of their membership; when the time came to pivot toward removing Bashir, their membership agreed to participate.<sup>30</sup>

In another example, G, a high-ranking member of a Sudanese political party, explained how they used NVA tactics in the major political coalitions that eventually led the movement against Bashir. “Until one year ago, I was a representative of the party in the FFC [Forces for Freedom and Change] and I used to use many things that I learned during the coalition discussions. So I used NVA and I think in many cases I had influence in many things happening in the FFC.”<sup>31</sup> This influence included use of NVA tactics to plan the April 6, 2019, protests against the military government. According to the NVA playbook, singular large demonstrations are risky because they allow the regime to centralize their security forces, arrest leaders, and use different forms of violence against demonstrators. In order to scramble the security forces, the FFC-SPA coalition arranged for a number of activities to take place all across the country in the two-week period leading up to April 6. This way, they theorized,

security forces would be unable to locate and crack down on any centralized leadership, and, by the day of the big protest, would be physically exhausted. G reported the attempt at dispersion was successful, allowing for a successful demonstration.

In a final story, G described using “pillars of support” analysis<sup>32</sup> discussed in their trainings with Freedom House to identify different elements of the security forces that may have been more sympathetic and able to do something to support the revolution, then figuring out a way to target those individuals. They reached out to low- and mid-level officers who would be able to pressure higher-ranking officers to support the revolution. They also attempted to do this with the Rapid Support Forces, a group that was commonly used by the regime to attack protestors.<sup>33</sup>

### Claim conclusions

By the time international actors took an interest in promoting nonviolent resistance in Sudan, there was already an active and skilled cohort of movement leaders who were dedicated to using nonviolence for political change. But after facing a string of failures using a stable set of tactics, many were discouraged and were seeking a new approach. NVA provided a framework in which movement leaders could reflect critically on their tactics, learn from successful nonviolent struggles abroad, and trace a new strategy for the future. Given the evidence presented by core members of the movement and trainers in contact with activists across the country, we are confident in our claim that the value of NVA was the framework through which Sudanese actors could reflect on past experiences and devise better strategies that employed a broader set of tactics and approaches they did not consider before.

# Practitioner lessons and recommendations

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## A movement takes time to build

Every movement actor quoted in this report attended years of trainings and peer exchanges before they became capable trainers and users of nonviolent strategy. Though we cited the use of training extensively in this report, we do not want to give the impression of a plug-and-play solution. The trainings were highly customized to the local situation and attended by carefully selected participants. The trainings occurred over multiple years during which the same leaders were invited back to learn about new topics and connect with local peers and counterparts from nonviolent struggles abroad. To quote F, “Even the trainings took more time than the campaign itself... You [trainees] should be aware of what you are going to do, it’s not just happening spontaneously, it’s not just going in the streets.”

Additionally, it takes time to reach the kind of mass understanding of nonviolent resistance that enabled the success of the 2018–19 revolution. Donors and implementers should be mindful that movement leaders trained by their programs (a process that itself takes years) will then need another several years to redeliver NVA training to a wide audience across their country.

## Past failures enable success

NVA trainings delivered under the programs described above were not abstract. They provided frameworks through which participants could reflect on their unsuccessful past mobilization attempts. In interviews, both trainers and participants emphasized the importance of this reflection, suggesting that the training was especially helpful to those who had been active movement participants already and could use their experiences as a basis for reflection.

## Find actors already working in the movement and train them to train others

Movement leaders who were invited to participate in trainings were just that: movement leaders. Some of them worked for CSOs as their day jobs but that was not the capacity in which they were invited for training. As can be seen in other sections of the [Civic Mobilizations report](#), CSOs do not lead antiauthoritarian movements. Moreover, trainers in Sudan were careful to be picky and look for talent when recruiting for training. Time and resources were scarce; they wanted to train only those who would be most likely to contribute to the movement and train others in NVA.

We identified a number of people and to see who is potential, who has skills, facilitation and training skills, because we can’t start from scratch. To deliver trainings, or proper training of trainers where you did provide them with thematic knowledge and skills on nonviolence and then on training and facilitation skills, this takes a long time.<sup>34</sup>

## Invest broadly and allow for experimentation

Donors interested in supporting nonviolent social movements should allow for flexibility in the implementation approach at every opportunity. Interviewee C emphasized that their success was enabled by using a “trial and error” approach that allowed them to experiment with many different activities and ideas that existed on the ground. This had three benefits. First, it helped INGOs and partners to learn and refine their activities over time. Second, some of the activities that appeared weaker at first in fact produced significant results. And third, this flexibility enabled them to think and work politically and respond rapidly to changing conditions. Interviewee C explained that this would not have been possible with a more rigid results framework.

## **Work informally**

Likewise, it is critical not to try to NGO-ize movement leaders. Movements are definitionally temporary. Creating stable organizations, with all the necessary focus on management and compliance, is diametrically opposed to the kind of flexible support required by movement leaders. Moreover, once trained, movement leaders should be free to train, strategize, and lead without donor or implementer involvement. International actors cannot plan a revolution; they can only provide tools and resources to help local actors lead.

## **Loosen reporting requirements**

Movement building in Sudan between 2013 and 2018 was nonlinear and unpredictable. One thing that helped actors was the lack of strict programmatic structures within which they had to operate. As one actor quoted by Chenoweth and Stephan put it when describing why a particular organization was helpful, “[It was] flexible and came with zero paperwork.”<sup>35</sup>

## **Nonviolence for the violent**

As stated multiple times throughout this report, Sudanese movement leaders did not confine their training and organizational efforts to the usual suspects. They reached far outside of urban areas and trained members of rebel armies and militia groups. Trainers described NVA as “hard to accept” for people in areas affected by war since violence was a part of the mainstream political culture. Nevertheless, Sudanese movement leaders understood that their country was affected by war and any successful democracy movement must include those who participated in the armed conflict.

Table 1: Timeline of Participants' Involvement

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
<b>A</b>	Participated in Change Now. Began attending Freedom House training.	Began recruiting participants for Freedom House trainings. Receiving series of training from Freedom House.	Receiving training from Freedom House. Began training groups in Sudan.	Continued training groups in Sudan. Continued receiving training from Freedom House. Began doing NVA trainings independently.	Continued doing NVA trainings independently. Training groups on behalf of Sudanese NGOs. Eventually acquired USIP funding. Receiving training from Rhize.	Continued training in-country in collaboration with other Sudanese NGOs and with USIP funding.
<b>B</b>	Member of Grifna with the developed knowledge on NVA.	On pause from political activism.	Unknown	Unknown	Political activism.	Political activism.
<b>C</b>	Worked for Freedom House's Sudan program.	Training Sudanese groups.	Training and mentoring Sudanese groups.	Mentoring Sudanese groups.	Freedom House funding ends.	
<b>D</b>	Unknown	Attended Framework Group meeting with Maria Stephan.	Continued developing their knowledge on NVA. Attended International Center on Nonviolent Conflict Fletcher Summer Institute.	Continued supporting in-country trainings.	Continued supporting in-country trainings.	Continued supporting in-country trainings.
<b>E</b>	Unknown	Developing their knowledge on NVA. Developing ideas for a program to increase capacity for NVA in Sudan.	Began offering NVA trainings through their INGO.	Continued supporting in-country trainings.	Continued supporting in-country trainings.	Continued supporting in-country trainings.
<b>F</b>	Unknown	Unknown	Started working on an INGO program as an NVA expert. Began training youth on NVA.	Continued training youth on NVA.	Continued training youth on NVA.	Continued training youth on NVA.
<b>G</b>	Unknown	Began trainings with Freedom House.	Receiving training and mentorship from Freedom House. Began training others on NVA.	Receiving training and mentorship from Freedom House. Continued training others.	Continued training others.	Continued training others.
<b>H</b>	Hasn't received NVA training from international or local NGOs					

# Notes

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- 1 The struggle for democracy is ongoing in Sudan. The military staged a second coup in October 2021, removing civilian leaders from the power-sharing transitional government.
- 2 See Marija Marovic and Zahra Hayder, *Sowing the Seeds of Nonviolent Action*, United States Institute for Peace, May 3, 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/sowing-seeds-nonviolent-action-sudan>; Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?* (International Center for Nonviolent Conflict, 2021) <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/external-support-for-nonviolent-campaigns/>.
- 3 For further discussion of NVA principles see Peter Ackerman and Christopher Kruegler, *Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century* (Praeger, 1993).
- 4 Stephen Zunes, 2021, *Sudan's 2019 Revolution: The Power of Civil Resistance*. International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Zunes-Sudans-2019-Revolution.pdf>.
- 5 Interviewee E, local staff of an international NGO providing NVA training.
- 6 Interviewee B, one of the founders of Grifna.
- 7 Interviewee A.
- 8 Interviewee A.
- 9 Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?* (International Center for Nonviolent Conflict, 2021).
- 10 Maria Stephan is chief organizer and co-lead of The Horizons Project and coauthor, with Erica Chenoweth, of *Why Civil Resistance Works* (Columbia University Press, 2011).
- 11 Interviewee F, a local Sudanese NVA trainer.
- 12 Interviewee D.
- 13 Interviewee C.
- 14 Interviewee G.
- 15 Initiatives, or *mubadarat*, in Sudan are volunteer groups that organize, fundraise, and offer support to communities in need. They were numerous and their focus ranged from providing medical care to poor families, like Sharia Hawadith, or supporting education by collecting schoolbooks for orphan children, like Sadqat, and so on. The initiatives were largely started by youth who wanted to serve the community, alleviate hardships, and fill in the gaps where the government was failing to provide services. Demands groups also formed at the grassroots as interest and advocacy groups that mobilized their communities around critical socioeconomic issues, such as land grabbing and dams building in different areas in the country. For more on Nafeer see Isma'il Kushkush, "As Floods Ravage Sudan, Young Volunteers Revive a Tradition of Aid," *The New York Times*, August 30, 2013.
- 16 Interviewee A.
- 17 Interviewee C.
- 18 Interviewee G, a leader from a political party.
- 19 Interviewee C.
- 20 Interviewee E.
- 21 Interviewee G.
- 22 Interviewee C.
- 23 Principally that nonviolent movements are safe homes for defectors to leave the regime, thus avoiding a tit-for-tat civil war in which each side needs to stick to their guns to avoid being killed.
- 24 Interviewee A.
- 25 This led to a complex dynamic in which many activists felt that international trainers had little understanding of the use of violence to achieve political means in Sudan and why people were so readily drawn to it. This is a cautionary example for international actors who intend to promote a particular set of tactics among activists.
- 26 Erica Chenoweth, "It May Only Take 3.5% of the Population to Topple a Dictator—with Civil Resistance," *The Guardian*, February 1, 2017.
- 27 Interviewee E.
- 28 Interviewee E.
- 29 Interviewee F.
- 30 Interviewee A.
- 31 Forces for Freedom and Change was one of the coalitions that led the 2018–2019 revolution. It was composed of unions, political parties, neighborhood resistance committees, and civil society organizations.
- 32 See, for example, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/pillars-of-support-2/>
- 33 Interviewee G.
- 34 Interviewee F.
- 35 Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns: Poisoned Chalice or Holy Grail?* International Center for Nonviolent Conflict, 2021, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/external-support-for-nonviolent-campaigns/>.

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