Broken Walls: Challenges to patriarchal authority in the eyes of Sudanese social media actors

“[T]he fundamental power struggle is the battle for the construction of meaning in the minds of the people. [...] For society at large, the key source of the social production of meaning is the process of socialized communication. [...] In recent years, the fundamental change in the realm of communication has been the rise of [...] mass self-communication [which] provides the technological platform for the construction of the autonomy of the social actor [...]”

Manuel Castells, Networks of Outrage and Hope, 2012, pp. 5-6

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In 2011, a wave of commentators had accused Middle East specialists of having overemphasised the stability of authoritarian regimes. A few years on, with the re-assertion of counter-revolutionary ‘old guards’, epitomized by the military ousting of the first Egyptian president elected by transparent popular vote, pundits were pointing fingers at those who they said thought, too easily, that smart youngsters armed with smart technology could effect fundamental change in the region. But are we perhaps too fixated on the news headlines, preoccupied with the outwardly political, to notice what is going on on the ground?

The lead narrative, typical not only in international reporting but also among many local commentators, moved from euphoria to disillusion. Whereas in the so-called “Arab Spring” of 2011, social media were hyped up as having brought about a “Facebook revolution”, where the “wall of fear” protecting the established system was said to have been broken for good; in 2013/14, broken hopes, disillusionment and despair (iktiʾāb) dominated much of the perception of developments in the Middle East. For many, the “Arab Spring” was replaced by the “Arab Winter.”¹ Not a few revolutionary activists withdrew from public political engagement; the most prominent one to choose silence was Wāʾil Ghunaym, administrator of the Facebook page Kullinā Khālid Saʿīd <http://fb.me/ElShaheeed> that had been the most popular social media site promoting the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Immediately after the military takeover in July 2013, he stopped updating both this Facebook page and his Twitter stream, only posting this explanation half a year later:

“Since 3 July 2013 I have taken a decision to withdraw from the political scene, after two and a half years of intense and persistent efforts to push Egypt towards the future that I wish for it as one of the young people of this country who was not driven by any other interest than that of Egypt and its people and their right to live in a state that respects their rights and that advances to take its place
among the developed countries. But unfortunately, after all my efforts have failed and my warnings and my advice were thrown to the wind, I took the decision to withdraw so as not to be part of a sedition (fitna) where Egyptian blood is spilled and [human] rights are thrown overboard.”

At the fifth anniversary of the January 2011 uprising, Egyptian star blogger ʿAlāʾ ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ, from the prison cell he was sent to for five years in February 2015, concluded his musings on how his own narrative had changed since the revolutionary heydays: “The only words I can write are about losing my words. [...] I have nothing to say: no hopes, no dreams, no fears, no warnings, no insights; nothing, absolutely nothing.”

Such ‘speechlessness’ may be said to have characterized the general mood among many secular opponents of the reassertion of the old regime forces throughout 2014. After a year of frustration and despair, however, some decided to break their silence, to write again. Thus, in April 2015, prominent blogger Amir Ahmad Nasr returned to the public eye, opening a new website with a post he entitled: “Breaking the Silence: On Writing, Exile, and the Freedom to Speak Once Again”:

“For nearly two years, since 2013, I hardly wrote anything.

Partially due to forced censorship, and partially also due to the discouraging atmosphere of oppression and disillusionment that took over. / Tyrants returned. / Dictators regained their strength. / The prostituted and self-proclaimed bearded guardians of The Order flexed their superior organizational muscles and seized democratic gains only to fall behind bars, while their other more extreme and armed brethren rose to prominence.

[...] How much things have changed.

And thus the question persisted.

‘WHY EVEN WRITE ANYMORE?’”

His answer:

“Simply because there’s much more to the story than what may seem evident. Progress within the political maybe stunted. But if anything, thanks to demographic trends and exponential technology, the cultural and societal is hastening.”

This accelerating change in the cultural and social fields had been obscured by the overwhelming stupor in the face of political stagnation. To overcome this paralysis, also Wā’il Ghunaym emerged from his silence in 2015 by establishing a new social media platform, Parlio, to encourage civilized debate among “members who value thoughtfulness, civility and diversity.”

True, both these voices were raised in exile, in the diaspora. To gauge how such tension between broken illusions and defiant hope was reflected on the ground, I turned from Egypt (where research had become difficult and dangerous to carry out) to the Sudan for field work in January-March 2015, to see how Sudanese with smartphones were perceiving their situation after their own attempt at joining the “Arab Spring” had fallen asunder under the bullets of the regime in 2013 when widespread street protests had been drowned in blood. Though often ignored in a Middle East focused tunnel vision, the Sudan, like other countries in the region, has its own history with establishment power, political Islam, military-backed dictatorship and popular uprisings. Indeed, the Sudanese were surprised to hear the Tunisian revolution of 2010/11 described as the first time
that an Arab head of state was brought down by a popular revolt. The Sudanese had already done so twice, in what is referred to in Sudanese historiography as the “October Revolution” of 1964 that toppled General ’Abbūd; and the 1986 uprising (intifāḍa) that led to the removal of Field Marshal Numayrī from power. The civilian, parliamentary democracy that was then instituted, was aborted in 1989 in a new coup d’état carried out by a military/Islamist alliance that installed Brigadier ’Umar al-Bashir, the Sudan’s incarnation of the perennial military ruler. The six years between the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (splm) in 2005 and the secession of South Sudan in 2011 had been a period of relative political opening. The presence of the splm in the capital; efforts to make unity attractive to the Southerners; and international monitoring of the peace process in the run-up to the 2010 presidential elections and the southern referendum on independence or autonomy, all played part in this opening. After the South was ‘lost’ (as the Northern Sudanese commonly perceive it), the political climate became increasingly restrictive again. While tolerating a measure of talk, the regime is adamant in its endeavour to stifle all effective organized oppositional action.

On this restrictive official public sphere, however, new technologies of communication have encroached, particularly with the spread of mobile telephony and of social media since the mid-2000s. These technologies have changed the dynamics of the flow of information and of networking in the Sudan just as elsewhere; and it has been within this altered dynamics that new actors have emerged on the Sudanese public scene, different from established political parties just as much as from the numerous ngos that are populating the country: actors akin to what Bayat has called “social nonmovements”.

This change is happening despite the fact that internet penetration in the Sudan, due to socio-economic reasons, is ‘only’ around 25-30%, half of the average in the Arab states. Mobile phone diffusion in 2015 was an estimated 77%, covering all strata of society. Smartphones are getting cheaper and more available, making internet use among the urban young increasingly a fact of life. Beyond that circle, internet use in the Sudan in 2015 was often synonymous with the use of WhatsApp, which is less resource-intensive, and enables people on a lower budget and with limited bandwidth to join group conversations and keep abreast of family and friends’ news. For users branching out from WhatsApp, YouTube and Facebook are the most visited web sites in the Sudan, while Twitter plays a more marginal role compared to other African countries, notably Egypt. Clearly, the relative popularity of the various platforms is in part a factor of what one’s friends are using. In addition, WhatsApp has long been regarded in the Sudan as a “more private” platform compared to other social media sites, since group communication there is by invitation only. At the same time, users can easily copy private information and share it in other groups; this way, things that were supposed to remain private may become public by being spread from group to group, sometimes becoming so widely known that even the print media cannot ignore them any longer. Celebrity news and scandals have a particular propensity to achieving this status; Sudanese Arabic has its own word for these: shammārāt (literally, “seasoning”). If they involve prominent politicians, WhatsApp and Facebook are often publicly accused of lending themselves too easily to rumour-mongering, and calls to control or censor them or even block access to them continue to be
regularly voiced. A high-profile example occurred in January 2015, when the marriage ceremony of the President’s brother ʿAbdallāh to Shīrīn Nājī, four decades his junior and ex-fiancée of a Sudanese soccer star, was cancelled on short notice by presidential/security circles, after an outcry on social media comparing the exorbitant dowry promised to the bride (26.5 million usd, a luxury villa and car, a farm, and jewellery worth half a million usd) to the economic hurdles most young Sudanese are facing when they want to marry, and pointing to the obvious corruption this betrayed. Most observers agreed that this so-called “marriage of the century” (zawāj al-qarn) was cancelled in order not to embarrass the President in his campaign for re-election. A few weeks later, the Sudanese Consumers Protection Society, together with the Public Prosecutor and the National Telecommunication Corporation, launched a campaign to protect the people from harmful rumours...

To investigate how ordinary Sudanese internet users themselves think of their use of the net, and of the impact this has in their society, in the context of the restrictive political climate after the crackdown on the 2011-13 demonstrations, I undertook field work in Khartoum and River Nile States between January and March 2015. Initial plans to extend this field work to Kordofan and the Eastern Sudan were dropped, since informants from those regions whom I met in the capital indicated that internet use there did not substantially differ from what I was able to observe in River Nile. Over the course of my stay, I interviewed about three dozen people, ranging in age from 18 to near 70, and observed and talked informally to many others. Since my focus was on those people who actively use the net, the urban youth were more strongly represented among my informants. In what follows, I aim to present, in summary, the views of my interview partners on the impact of internet use in the Sudan, and thereby provide further empirical data towards a larger, more theoretically oriented debate that in itself is beyond the scope of this report.

The End of Patriarchy?

“Patriarchal authority has collapsed” (haykal al-sulṭa al-ḥawīyya inhārat)—this was the first point a Sudanese intellectual in his thirties made when I asked him about the impact of internet use on his society. And he followed up: “Virginity is no longer such a central issue as it used to be.” This may well have been hyperbole, but my informant was adamant that he was highlighting a most important development. The unquestioned validity of the foundational pillars of the old social and political order, he claimed, was being shaken by the new networking and communication technologies. Unlike people older than thirty, who had experienced their primary formation without the internet, and had to slowly learn to use and appreciate the new technology, those born after the mid-nineteen-eighties grew up with the internet “in place, as a fact of life”; for them, the use of the net is a matter of course, giving them better and easier access to a wide range of information, and facilitating the creation and flourishing of non-hierarchical networks. For example, in the old days, formal social and political organizations, such as political parties or NGOs, had been the main channels for public engagement. Now, on the other hand, many initiatives have emerged that rely on the internet to bypass such hierarchical structures.
“And the effect of this is that now, these new voices are more relying on themselves to create an audience, rather than on the party people were leaning on before. Before, you used to be a member of a party; and that party would get you your audience. Now, you create your audience yourself. This makes you much more independent. And you can also publish your ideas more easily. Before, you needed to know people in the newspapers for example, even only to publish an interview with an author. If you didn’t have such contacts, the author would ask, ‘Who are you??’ Now it’s different. You can publish on your blog, on Facebook, whatever.” “These people have created a lot of network initiatives to do something concrete to solve pressing problems, unlike the older parties and organizations that were preoccupied with furthering their own self-interest. [...] This younger generation, they are amazing [mud’hishīn], they have a lot of creativity!”

And on the personal level,

“before, we (the 30+) still had problems related to living our sexuality. The current young generation is much freer there. For example, the issue of virginity that people were fixed on before, that’s no longer that central, people are now more relaxed about it. [...] If a guy loves a girl and wants to marry her, and finds out she’s no longer a virgin, or if the two had sex before marriage, there’s a bigger chance now that he will be ready to cover that up in front of the families.”

In the Sudan, the generation that was the first to be socialized with the internet as a fact of life, was also a generation that grew up entirely under the current “Salvation” (Inqāḥ) regime. Thus, the impact of the internet must be seen in the context of this regime’s ideological campaigns and educational programmes, that aimed at the Islamization of all aspects of public and private life (the so-called “Civilizational Project”, al-mashrūʿ al-ḥaḍārī). The combination of youthful opposition and enhanced possibilities to access information beyond the regime’s ideological sway has led, according to my informant, to another difference between the older and the younger generations: a noticeable increase in barely hidden atheist attitudes. “Many of those who grew up entirely under the current regime have lost their belief in God because this regime has dragged God through the mire (Allāh masaḥō bēhu ‘l-ard).”

Of course, my informant conceded, these observations applied only to those who actually and actively used the internet, not to society at large. But since internet use was expanding, he was convinced that current trends were pointing in this direction. And while similarly radical views about the end of patriarchal norms were not shared by everyone, it was striking to see that activists themselves often continued to be positive about the opportunities offered by the internet, despite their own long experience and the political setbacks that they themselves had experienced.

But where was this impact to be found? During my field work, I was regularly asked, ‘What has changed in this country since you were here last, a decade ago?’ My interlocutors were surprised when I remarked on the many continuities. As insiders, they were convinced that their country had ‘totally changed’. To them, the experience of social change beneath the façade of superficial similarities and of a political regime that has managed to stay in power for over a quarter of a century, really was fundamental.

Asked for an example, several interlocutors told me how the photo of a renowned religious shaykh, member and spokesman of the Sudan Scholars Corporation (Ḥayʾat ʿUlamāʾ al-Śūdān), had spread like wildfire on WhatsApp, showing the master masturbating. “All of the Sudan has seen it!” What does this do to the status of our shaykh and of the institutional authority that he represents?
Everyone has seen him naked. The story spread satirically to challenge the grand old taboos of religion, sex, and politics in an image revealing the emperor’s new clothes:

“What’s it with these shaykhs? They’ve got a thing called ‘standing in the night’ [qiya’m al-layl, a (satirical) reference to a practice of supererogatory religious worship], and they practice it even in daytime. Whenever its hour comes, they’d go ‘stand’ for you, even for no reason. The problem’s only that this shaykh of ours has got 4 witnesses who make up for the need for the testimony of two males. They know this ‘member’ perfectly, in a conjugal way. Thus, the just sentence must be the impounding of this ‘member’ or of the exhibited articles, especially since their user is a member of the Corporation of Religious Scholars in the Sudan and a member of the Just Peace Forum of al-Ṭayyib Muṣṭafā. And by the way, al-Ṭayyib Muṣṭafā: [the recently deceased oppositional poet and activist] Maḥjūb Sharif whom you’ve fallen upon, he’s there with the august, with Martin Luther [King] and the like—but your guy, where’s he, except among the ‘loosers’?”

No wonder that Sudan Scholars declared that WhatsApp and Facebook were leading to insubordination (maʿāṣi) and that using social media for such purposes was religiously absolutely forbidden (ḥarām qaṭ’an)....

Sceptics

I discussed the theses of my ‘hyperbolic’ informant with many other interlocutors, and as expected, not everyone agreed with the most daring portrayal of social change, with the idea that patriarchal authority had collapsed, and that the question of virginity had lost its central importance for how men were looking at their future brides. On the contrary, many of the people I spoke to emphasized how important the family and the social group still was; how conformist Sudanese remained (“they have a herd mentality rather than an individualistic one” / al-tafkîr bi-aqlîyyat al-qatî’ akhtar min aqlîyyat al-fard); and that such conformity with group norms was, after all, vital in a society where the individual cannot rely on public welfare.

Under these circumstances, they said, moral conservatism was still thriving, and often even strengthened by social media. Hashtag-bullying of deviant positions is exemplified by the case of Yosra Akasha, a well-known blogger and tweep. When she published a lengthy justification for casting the veil she used to wear, she was subjected to a cyber bullying campaign; the hashtag #اركب_الناقعة (“hump the dog”) was used to threaten her with rape and murder, to the extent that she felt the need to take a lawyer. Her attempts to call her opponents to rational debate (‘you may disagree with me, but then publish a blog post or something explaining your argument in reasonable terms, and don’t just throw out insults!’) fell on deaf ears. In the Sudan, an informant said, you may be free not to wear the veil, but you must not talk about it, or more precisely: you must not publicly claim that such ‘deviant’ behaviour is right. The hashtag “hump the dog” had previously also been used to threaten a Sudanese girl who had published statements that could be seen as supporting atheism and insulting religion. In other words, a few dissenting voices may exist, but they remain a clear minority; Sudanese society at large has not changed. As my informant concluded, in English: in this socially very conservative society, “the internet didn’t actually allow to materialise” [its potential].
Optimists

The difference in how ‘optimists’ and ‘sceptics’ among my informants assessed the impact of the internet in the Sudan can partly be explained by a difference in perspective: while the ‘sceptics’ look at society at large and express their frustration over how slow ‘progress’ is to materialise, the ‘optimists’ tend to reflect on how the internet has affected their own lives and social networks. The ‘optimists’ extrapolate from their own experience to envisage a wider development affecting larger sections of society as the net becomes a central part of their socialization. They do agree with the ‘sceptics’ that old authorities and old modes of thinking still wield considerable power. But they see this power as being on the defensive, and regard many of the struggles that are going on, both on- and offline, as rearguard fights of the old regime. Indeed, the very harshness of the old regimes’ reaction in the face of opposition, not least opposition in thoughts and words, can be taken as an indication that challenges to their power have grown. They cling to power more aggressively precisely because they feel threatened more fundamentally. Under these circumstances, every satire turns into an existential threat. The historian can easily point out that satire and disrespect for the authorities are nothing new in the region. But it remains striking to see that such disrespect today is perceived and presented by the actors themselves as a significant change, compared to the image of the past and the norms that they were fed by these authorities during their upbringing, in school, in the media, in the mosque. Real change is happening on the social level, they explain, irrespective of the rearguard fights that get so much attention in politics. What we witness is a generational shift noticeable in particular among those younger than thirty, who grew up with the internet in place. For them, the net was a fact of life that became part of their early socialization. It made them, in their own view, less dependent on the older generation for information and guidance, more networked with peers, and more open to information and influences from outside the circle controlled by the family. Whatever the objective sociological reality may be behind such an image, it is displayed as a conscious attitude by many young, and recognized (often deploringly) by many in the older generation.

While many urban young proclaim that beneath the surface of political stagnation, socially real change is happening, there is reason to believe that the most radical formulation of such change—that virginity has lost its key symbolic importance—is not something that has been embraced by the majority, even of the young urban elite. Gender equality in how pre-marital sexual relations are judged is far from being achieved, and when it comes to marrying, at least the façade of the bride’s virginity remains highly important also for this generation. Only a few would risk marrying a partner of whom the family does not approve.

Ideas in Flux – changing faster than facts?

The picture that emerged from my interviews was thus not clear-cut. While answers were too disparate to point in one single direction, however, almost everyone agreed that the social situation in the Sudan was ‘no longer’ stable, that things were in flux, that the country had changed a lot and was in a continuous process of change, even if the nature of this change was debatable.
This very experience of instability and lack of clarity led many to feel a pressing need to discuss taboo issues, and the semi-public space of social media has become a favourite venue for such discussions. An (invitation-only) Facebook group for Sudanese girls has as its first rule: “All debates about religion, sex, customs are fully accepted and welcome on condition that they are not abusive and are expressed in civilised language” (kull al-niqāshāt fī al-dīn al-jins al-ʿurf maqbūla tamāman wa-habbāba bi-shārt ʿadam al-ibtidhāl wa-bi-lugha rāqiya). Politics, the outsider notes, these girls will skip around, but the other great traditional taboos, religion, sex and social norms, are definitely what they want to raise for discussion.

And beyond mere Facebook debates, it may be argued that also in wider sections of society, old social norms are no longer stable and accepted as a matter of course, the proof lying in the fact that even those who defend conservative morality, family values, ‘Islam’ etc., do so out of a deep conviction that these values are suffering an onslaught, not only by outside forces, but from within their own society. People are ‘no longer’ abiding by these norms as a matter of course; therefore, the guardians of order have to defend and uphold them, and launch hashtag campaigns when girls are dropping the veil, for example. And on the other side, those who most loudly argue and complain that Sudanese society remains backward and conservative, do so precisely because they are unhappy about this situation and would like to change it.

“A country where it is forbidden and immoral for a boy to embrace a girl when she weeps, or the other way round, where society forbids this even before the police—the people in such a country are full of complexes and mental illness, so beware of them and take your precautions when you have to live with them.”

“Kandake”, whom we already met above, went a step further and directed her criticism against her own comrades in the struggle for political change in the Sudan, who are stuck in old gender stereotypes. She deconstructed a post on the oppositional news site Raṣd al-Sūdān that called for a boycott of the April 2015 General and Presidential elections:22

Amal [♀] grew up and didn’t find Badr [♂]. Badr went abroad but didn’t find work. Amal cried: ‘Let’s marry!’—Badr: ‘But the money…’—A: ‘Come back home, Badr!’—B: ‘These are hard times!’—A: ‘My father’s home’s big enough!’—B: ‘What shall we eat??’—A: ‘We’ll survive on a few dates!’—B: ‘Hunger will make us sick, and I don’t have money; the ruling Islamists have it all!’—Badr fell silent, and Amal went and cried. Then she said: ‘The only solution is to boycott the elections!’—B: ‘That’s right! Boycotting the elections is the solution!’

This text is modelled on “Amal wa-Badr”, the former first elementary school reader that has become synonymous for the ‘good old days’ in the Sudan. In the original, Amal cries about the loss
of her pen, and Badr finds it and comforts her. Kandake uses this example to demonstrate that someone who writes like this “is mentally stuck in first grade, thinking he’s better than women just because he was born a guy”. Among the stereotypes she points out are: a girl’s greatest problem is to remain a spinster, “leftover stock”, and her greatest wish is therefore to find a husband; to achieve this, she is ready to “sacrifice her independence and privacy” and live in her father’s house. She’s ignorant of market prices (not knowing that dates are extremely expensive) and naïve—it is the male who has to come to her rescue, the male who knows that a one-sided diet is a health risk, that hospitals are expensive, that the ruling classes are corrupt. And when she finally proposes a solution, it is “that the people should boycott the elections—not that they should overthrow the system—so that Badr can earn money and marry her and save her from spinsterhood”. Someone who writes like this, Kandake concludes, will always postpone dealing with women’s rights until after the revolution...

So are we—to quote Asef Bayat—“back to the old ways? In a sense we are; partly because the old order is largely back in business. But something is fundamentally different: these are the old ways in new times, when the old order faces new political subjects and novel subjectivities”. The novel subjectivity is represented by women like Kandake, who will not stay silent in the face of widespread but retrograde gender stereotypes, but will continue to dispute them and fight them by pouring scorn on them.

**Privacy**

The second point, that most everyone among my interviewees agreed upon, was that there was greater space for privacy now than a generation ago, that privacy had become more important, more insisted upon, and more respected. Interestingly, the first family to mention to me the importance of the privacy offered by internet and mobile communication, and the fact that it had become the new norm to respect this space, happened to be a highly committed Islamist family. Privacy may of course have been respected in earlier periods as well, at least partly, and in certain social circles and settings, but it was not something that most Sudanese ever had enjoyed as a rule in their daily lives. Now, with the widespread use of mobile communication technology, this is radically changing, and noticeably expanding beyond the urban middle and upper classes, where mobile phone use first became ubiquitous. Nowadays, the young can withdraw into the private space of their mobile communication tools, and possibly into their own private room (inʿizāl), so that even their sexual affairs were conducted more or less in public.

Today, parents regularly express worry about what their offspring do in these new private spaces, and what happens there is no big secret. According to a 2010 study, romance and sex were the topics most prominent in university students’ SMS communication. My informants emphatically concurred. Cheap phone rates late at night, as well as boys buying phones for their girl-friends,
paying their bills, or simply giving them money as a gift, encourage such communication without parental control, including telephony, texting, and the exchange of pictures and videos. The nature of such communication can be quite explicit; witness the text message reproduced here that I erroneously received while outside Khartoum. And new research suggests that the young do not limit themselves to virtual sex chat, but that there is a clear link between increased private communication and increased premarital sex, with the number of extra-marital births having exploded with the spread of mobile telephony. Among young Sudanese who volunteered to be interviewed for a study on premarital sexual activity, 95% of boys and 30% of girls reported to have become sexually active before the age of 20; 30% of girls became active between ages 20-30.²₅

What is even more striking, however, is that my informants tended to agree on a change in attitude among the parents of these mobile phone kids. Although parents know that their daughters are chatting the night away with their boyfriends, and although they do not like it, the newly emerging norm is to respect this space of privacy (khusṣūṣiyah). “It is considered bad behaviour if parents check their children’s phones” or if one secretly accesses the phone of one’s spouse; and it is deemed more normal today if people get up and leave the room (ta’tazil) to receive a phone call that they prefer to answer in private (“sometimes, they’re not even asked if it was a boy or a girl they had been talking to”). Parents frequently expressed a measure of resignation in the face of this phenomenon, as if the new respect for privacy was imposing itself despite their will, but without their being able to do much about it. Once their children had reached a certain age, privacy was there to stay.

Beyond romance and sex, this growing importance of the private and personal space also begins to manifest itself in a phenomenon unheard of in the Sudan in earlier generations (or regarded as extremely weird): the fact that young people (for the time being, generally men) move out from home and start to rent their own space (not a university dorm) before they get married. Clearly, this option is available only to a limited section of the population, for purely material reasons, but my informants emphasized that it is an option that those who can afford it begin to implement in practice, whereas in earlier generations, moving into one’s own space remained the natural prerogative of a married man.

As I have stated before, and as the example of unmarried men living by themselves should make clear, the changes described here do not apply to Sudanese society at large. To my informants, however, there appeared to be a strong correlation between the regular use of (largely mobile) ICT, and the growing importance given to a person’s private space—with all the imponderability that this entails. Less direct parental control and greater individual privacy create an opening not only for greater freedom, but also for more uncertainties.
The new generation of “nas with notepads” may struggle with these uncertainties, but they are clearly embracing the freedom they find through technology, and assert their right to develop their own ideas and express their own feelings. Many of these feelings revolve around “Me, Myself & I” and the wish, demand, and right to raise “my” voice and be heard—with attendant aspects such as the wish for love relationships and companion marriage (an ideal fuelled by films as well as social media; cf. the spread of new expressions such as “love story”, “chicks”), and the assertion that “if the words of my shaykh contradict my reasoning, I go by my reasoning, because in the end, my shaykh is only one, while my reasoning is connected to many of my friends, and so it is stronger.” Defiant self-assertion of a girl that had been suffering from lack of self-esteem was dramatically expressed in the poem “Dear mirror” performed during a “Nas with Notepads” evening I attended on 2 March 2015:

“Soon, she spoke up
And fell in love with her words as they unfolded from the whisper she used to hide beneath her tongue:
‘I am a child of the universe
No less than the trees and the sun
And I deserve to take up space!’”

Clearly, such attitudes are not a majority phenomenon as of now, but they are quite prominent among these ‘nas with notepads’, and some of my Sudanese informants expected that such self-assertion will expand its reach with the expansion of the new communication technologies and the use that people make of them—obviously, in social and economic contexts that allow for such use in the first place. And while there was no unanimity about the precise impact of the internet in the Sudan, typically those among my interviewees who held that that net has not, or not yet, changed their society, that it hasn’t “materialised” (v.s.), were nevertheless adamant to affirm that it has changed them, that it has opened up a world to them, has led them not to feel alone in their thoughts, and has enabled them to become active and engage themselves in a variety of ways.

“[N]ew strategies and forms of consciousness,” Deniz Kandiyoti noted, “do not simply emerge from the ruins of the old and smoothly produce a new consensus, but are created through personal and political struggles, which are often complex and contradictory [...].” Such personal, complex and contradictory struggles are very much in evidence in the Sudan today. And while the course of the future cannot be foreseen, the young Sudanese who grow up on the internet today very much feel that they are partaking in significant social change, driven by their own individual change. This has recently been described for the Sudan also by other researchers:
“In societies that place great value on an individual’s respect for and responsibility towards their community, individuals change with and within changed social space that they have helped to change. Since individual actors are as much subjects and creators of their realities as they are created by them, social realities change together with the individual agents who change with them, within them and through them.”

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**Bereft, Angry, Impatient**

Ahmed Hardallo, a young Sudanese poet famous among the “Nas with Notepads”, spit out these words to his father’s generation:

“This is a tale of sadness
This is also almost definitely not political activism
This is more actualism
Of a man who bore this country’s earth
Sacred
The last
Who felt kinship to a population pulsating with hatred
One who could not bear the rescue
Or the saviors and their statements
One who, bereft of an anchor, would seek succor in any promised land but this
Chased away by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs
Escaping gangsters in uniform
An anarchy of breeds
Of parents that bleed to bequeath upon their offspring
A piece of land, of earth, of dirt, of the dust that they bit
As they marched to the piper’s pit
That melodious trip
Terrorizing over territories
For traitors’ trials of peace
Of a unity that negated the cosmos
That relegates the big bang theories—
Nursery rhymes
Those binding ties, blending cries and blinding sighs of mothers’ eyes
That brim with tears that threaten to fall on boys they lost and souls they crossed
And only in the peaceful lullaby of death
That permeates the membranes of the false prophets
Blaspheming in the name of the mundane, fabricated papers
[...]
And the fathers return
Waltz into the crematorium
And burn
And dissolve back into that
The emotion feeding this outburst is palpable in Hardallo’s performance on YouTube, his anger and frustration at the obedient submission of the ‘fathers’ to their own humiliation, their readiness to bite the dust, in the service of a false and destructive order; his outrage over the realisation that the rotten, dirty old ways are still rearing their heads, even though they are waltzing into their own destruction. The poem is a recognition of the power of the old ways even as they are bound eventually to disappear, while resolutely distancing the speaker from a similar attitude of submissiveness. This frame of mind appeared to me to be quite typical for today’s internet-savvy Sudanese youth: perceiving the persistent power of patriarchal authority, they prove ingenious in persisting to carve out spaces to raise their voice in defiant self-assertion. True, individuals have always protested against the old and the unfair. In the new world of young Sudanese internet users, however, room for privacy is growing more common, facilitated by technical and socio-economic change; individuals are becoming more assertive in claiming this private space for themselves; and they are loudly demanding their right to be ‘myself’. Part of why some of them are dismissive about the impact of the internet, is that they are impatient with the overall societal progress of what they have experienced themselves; they want to see more of the freedom they themselves have tasted. As one of my interlocutors quipped about the others out there: “They need to move the fuck on! Wallāhi ʿl-ʿAẓīm!”
Historian Peter Sluglett concluded his opening speech to the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies Annual Conference 2015 with the words: “Liberation in the Arab world looks as far away as it ever did.”


Amir Ahmad Nasr retraced the experience blogging online dedicated to him in his book My Isl@m: How fundamentalism stole my mind – and doubt freed my soul, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2013.


A year later, Italian ph.d. student Giulio Regeni was abducted and tortured to death while conducting research in Egypt; he was the first foreigner to join a growing list of Egyptians who have suffered a similarly sinister fate. Over the eight months before March 2016 alone, the Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms and the El Nadim Center for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence recorded 735 cases of “enforced disappearance” in Egypt; the majority (498) of victims vanished without a trace. These numbers are regarded as conservative since many families are afraid to speak out (Farid Adly, Viviana Mazza, Monica Sargentini, & Federica Seneghini: “Spariti in Egitto: Giulio e gli altri”, Corriere della Sera, 29 March 2016 <http://www.corriere.it/reportages/esteri/2016/03/29/retni-scomparsi-egitto/>., accessed 30 Apr. 2016).


Asef Bayat, Life as politics: How ordinary people change the Middle East, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

This is based on statistics assembled by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU). In 2014, internet penetration in the Sudan was 26%, compared to an average 53% in the Arab states. Syria, Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Mauretania, and Iraq were trailing the Sudan in these statistics.


In the interest of maintaining informants’ anonymity, detailed names and dates have been withheld in the following when referring to information and opinions gathered from them. I use double quotation marks for literal quotations, single ones for paraphrases.—On patriarchy, see i.a. Robert Fernea: “Gender, sexuality and patriarchy in modern Egypt”, Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies, 12 (2003) nr. 2, 141-153; Abdellah Hammoudi, Master and disciple: the cultural foundations of Moroccan authoritarianism, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997; Valentine M. Moghadam: Development and patriarchy: The Middle East and North Africa in

15 A similar growth in the public or semi-public expression of atheism has also been observed in Iran and in other Arab countries.


22 Of course, some women’s organizations (notably the Islamic women’s rights organization Mada Masr) have also been critical of the more fundamentalist elements in the Islamic community, see Nāsīr Ṭabrāzī, “Women and ICT in Africa and the Middle East: changing selves, changing societies,” paper presented to the conference Women, Gender and ICT in Africa and the Middle East: changing selves, changing societies, ed. Ineke Buskens & Anne Webb, London: Zed, 2014, 249-261.

23 Asef Bayat, “Revolution and despair”, l.c.


25 Ikhlas Ahmed Nour Ibrahim, l.c.


28 Deniz Kandiyoti, “Bargaining with patriarchy”, Gender and Society 2, 1988, nr. 3, 286. The warning that she continues with is no less valid today: “The breakdown of a particular patriarchal system may, in the short run, generate instances of passive resistance among women that take the paradoxical form of bids for increased responsibility and control by men.”

29 Buskens, introduction to Women and ICT in Africa Studies and the Middle East, l.c., p. 11 (emphasis mine).

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