

Mai Ali Shatta



Nonviolent Action for a Peaceful Revolution

Sudanese Women inspired by the power of cooperation for change—Necessity to protect and enhance their achievements

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Mai Ali Shatta, born in 1984, was confronted with violent conflicts in her home country Sudan at a very early age already. To break the vicious circle of spiraling violence, she embraced trainings in nonviolent action which led to her imprisonment and finally expulsion. In German exile, Mai became a trainer for KURVE Wustrow, conducting the courses "Strategising for Nonviolent Change in Social Movements" and "Campaigning for Nonviolent Change". She has also continued to train Sudanese activists, especially women, and is convinced that their peaceful demonstrations contributed to bringing about the Sudanese Revolution of 2019.

"Peaceful demonstrations by civilian activists have definitely contributed to bringing about the Sudanese Revolution. This alone is proof of the powerful impact of nonviolent action. And I'm particular proud of the part that women played in this context." For Mai Ali Shatta, the recent changes in her home country Sudan are the fulfilment of a long-time dream: "Women from all over the country came together in unity, independent of their class, ethnic or religious background, in order to campaign for a new society. With their rallies, they took a leading role in promoting 'Freedom—Peace—Justice', the slogan of the Revolution."

Many of these women had undergone trainings in nonviolent action which Mai had facilitated with support from KURVE Wustrow. It was a totally new concept for most Sudanese people, as she explains: "We were all raised in an environment of violence with ongoing armed conflicts in the southern and western parts of the country, draconic Sharia laws, suppression of all anti-government voices and harsh punishment for any act of dissent against the ruling regime. Consequently, we took it for granted that violence could only be fought with counter-violence." Mai admits that she got involved in fistfights herself during political controversies at her university where she studied computer engineering with a special

focus on fiber optics—a rather unusual career for a Sudanese woman.

Her change of mind occurred when she was about 20 years old: In 2005, her father was attacked and beaten up so severely that he sustained permanent disabilities. Mai gave up one year of her studies to accompany him on numerous hospital visits: "I was full of anger and longing for revenge, but I realised at the same time that the continuing spiral of violence would eventually destroy our family altogether. So I began to look for alternatives." In 2007, she came across the Sudanese Organisation for Nonviolence and Development (SONAD) which offered workshops in nonviolent conflict transformation. These trainings convinced her to become an agent for nonviolent change.

Initially, it was not easy to win over her fellow student activists, as Mai remembers. They viewed a renouncement of fighting as mere cowardice and felt vindicated by the observation that nonviolent action against the long-term dictator Omar al Bashir led to imprisonment just as often as acts of violence did. Still, Mai persevered in trying to convince more and more people that the power of words would eventually prevail over the power of fists or guns. During a big demonstration at her university, she spoke for half an hour about the teachings of Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mar-



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tin Luther King and other freedom fighters, and eventually she found more and more followers to support the concept of nonviolent conflict transformation. She became a renowned trainer in this field and coordinated, in particular, women human rights defenders.

It still took more than a decade, however, before these efforts helped to bring about the Sudanese Revolution of 2019. Mai got imprisoned and tortured several times and was finally exiled to Germany in 2012 after an intervention by Amnesty International and other human rights groups. She often points out how important it is for oppressed activists to get international support. Whilst settling in Germany, Mai was also assisted by

KURVE Wustrow and the organisation Act for Transformation in Aalen near Stuttgart. She is very grateful to all the people who supported her in those difficult times, as she stresses.

For KURVE Wustrow, Mai became a trainer in campaign strategies for nonviolent change, including related aspects of safety and digital security. Furthermore, she supports refugees and asylum seekers in Germany and the whole European Union, especially when they are threatened by expulsion. She also became a founding member of “My body belongs to me”, a campaign against female genital mutilation (FGM). This campaign made sure that the threat of FGM is now widely recognised as a ground for asylum. Mai always encourages migrant women to stand up for their rights: “It’s not enough for me to be safe in exile. I know what it’s like to live with constant threats and intimidations, and I want to support all those who need assistance for leading a life in safety.”

Meanwhile, Mai continued to train Sudanese activists who were brought together in safe spaces outside their country. In 2017, she facilitated the formation of the Bana Group for Peace and Development, a network of women human rights defenders from all parts of Sudan. The name stands for the medicinal Bana tree which symbolises the

African movements for liberation from slavery and marginalisation. Activists of this network joined the street protests which started in December 2018 and finally contributed to toppling the Al Bashir regime in April 2019. "It was the first time in Sudan that women became that visible and took such a prominent role in nonviolent action for change", says Mai. "To watch this, even though only from abroad, was one of the greatest moments of my life."

Sudan is now ruled by a transition government with a civilian prime minister and a largely civilian cabinet. However, the process of true democratisation has only just started, as Mai emphasises. She is working closely with KURVE Wustrow to set up a Civil Peace Service (CPS) project in partnership with the Bana Group. In her opinion, it is vital for civil society to make sure that the achievements of the Revolution don't get hijacked by antidemocratic forces during the ongoing transition process. Some recent developments made her fear that this could happen, therefore civil society has to be on guard, she stresses: "Our achievements have to be protected and enhanced, and our dream has to be followed further. We need freedom, peace and justice for all people in a united Sudan."

Only then will it be possible for her to return home without having to fear for her own safety or that of her

family. Mai is still hopeful that her dream of a peaceful and democratic country will come true. For this, she relies especially on the power of nonviolent action by women. "Sudanese women have become a strong unit to build a new country. That's my hope for the future."

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