

Special Thematic Section on "Multiple Perspectives in Conflict Settings: From Diversity to Pluralism"

Leadership Strategies of Mobilisation and Demobilisation in Sudan

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Abstract

A Sudanese Revolution overthrew the sitting regime in 2019, and a transitional government is in place. This article explores Sudanese respondents' take on how the former regime managed to stay in power for so long. The National Congress Party in Sudan held on to power for three decades against all odds after taking over in a coup in 1989. Widely unpopular, the regime relied on repression and coercive tactics to stay in power. Based on interview data from three locations in Sudan 2011 and 2012, respondents' accounts of the NCP leadership strategies for staying in power are explored in this article. The interview data speaks to two highly intertwined processes. First, to the mobilisation of support from those the government needed in key positions around the country, in the elite, and the security forces. Second, the data speaks to the demobilisation of people in general. Respondents point at five strategies deployed by the NCP to stay in power: Creating a secure repressive base; divide and rule strategies; controlling the media; creating a confusing and closed system and, lastly, not pushing people too far. For each tactic, it seems the regime attempted to demobilise people at large, but also tried to mobilise those it needed. These five strategies are in this study seen in light of leadership, identities and collective action, and the analysis emphasises agency through the concepts of group efficacy and illiberal statebuilding. The study contributes to developing a psychology of demobilisation as it explores the attempted hindering of collective action. Exploring these issues in a non-Western conflict case like Sudan is a particularly important addition to understanding leadership demobilisation in conflict settings. Seeing this in light of the more recent processes of people's power in Sudan makes it even more relevant.

Keywords: demobilisation, illiberal statebuilding, collective action, leadership, Sudan, efficacy

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Prior to the toppling of the National Congress Party in Sudan, in 2019, the regime had been in power since 1989. Widely unpopular, the regime relied on repression and violence to stay in power. Historians pointed out that by 2000, the Sudanese "regime's main claim to success was that it had remained in power" despite the lack of popularity and political support.

Why was this study done?

Over two visits in 2011 and 2012, I interviewed a diverse sample of Sudanese about the identity strategies of the Sudanese regime, and most of those I talked to also told me about how the regime had managed to stay in power for so long. I wanted to explore these accounts of the regime's tactics to overcome uprisings. How did they demobilise people to retain their own grip on power? Most of the research on collective activism focuses on Western settings, and it often emphasizes different societal processes of collective action, but rarely highlights situations where extensive constraints are put in place to avoid collective action. The Sudanese accounts thereby offered a valuable opportunity to explore demobilisation.

What did the researcher do and find?

I interviewed 68 people, in three places in what was then Sudan (in Khartoum (north), Juba (south) and Kassala (east) (Sudan has since split into Sudan and South Sudan). From what the people I interviewed told me, I have drawn out five strategies they presented as important ways the regime managed to stay in power. First, creating a strong security system enabled the regime to repress uprisings and dissent as well as keeping themselves safe. Second, through divide and rule strategies they made groups quarrel and fight amongst themselves rather than uniting against the central government. Third, by controlling the media, the regime tried to control the narratives on the conflicts and the ruling regime's popularity. Forth, by creating a confusing and closed system, several respondents said it was hard to figure out what was really going on, and thereby difficult to see how to challenge the system. Lastly, by not pushing people too far, the regime were careful to thread carefully not to increase the incentives too much for opposing the regime. For each of these strategies, it seems the regime attempted to demobilise people at large so they would not raise against them, but also tried to mobilise those it needed to stay in power (for example, it was crucial for the regime to mobilise security groups to protect the regime and use repressive means against any uprisings).

What do these findings mean?

The demobilisation of collective action takes place every day, across the world. The material from Sudan gave accounts of how an extremely long-reigning authoritarian regime managed to stay in power. The five strategies people pointed out should not be read as a "handbook of repression", but rather as insights into how regimes work to demobilise their opponents and the people at large. Understanding such regimes better may open up to valuable discussions on how to engage in collective action under such circumstances. The long-reigning NCP regime has since been toppled by popular uprisings, which gives hope that despite elaborate strategies for demobilising people, people can still come together and mobilise for their chosen cause. In Sudan, this probably came down to people being pushed too far for too long.

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The former ruling party of Sudan, the National Congress Party (NCP), referred to itself as the salvation (*Al-Ingaz*) regime. The regime was widely criticized for human rights violations and poor management of the state (see for example [International Crisis Group, 2010, 2011](#)). The party was unpopular (common estimates of support were around 10 percent) and it engaged in armed conflict in the East, in Darfur and in Southern regions. Still NCP managed to remain in power until 2019, after taking over in a coup in 1989. As [Holt and Daly \(2011, p. 159\)](#) put it: "By 2000 the ... regime's main claim to success was that it had remained in power, against the virtually unanimous – but disunited and ineffective – opposition of all other major political groupings in the Sudan, North and South." According to the [International Crisis Group \(2011, p. 1\)](#), the cardinal problem in Sudan "has always been governance." Relatedly, Sudan is a country experienced in overthrowing governments (in 1964 and 1985) led by strong labour unions and university uprisings ([Berridge, 2015](#); [Gallab, 2014](#)). In both cases, the military aligned themselves with the protests against the then incumbent military governments (see [El-Battahani, 2016](#)). NCP was not about to let this happen to them, and was actively balancing the mobilisation of those it needed and the demobilisation

of people at large in the country to hold on to power. 2019 came with a new display of people's power, where the uprisings spearheaded by labour unions brought the NCP down, after three decades in power (see [Berridge, 2019](#)). This study was however conducted in 2011 and 2012 and reflects the respondents' presentations of the situation in that time period.

Where many regimes either create a 'we' based on shared identities (e.g. [Moss, 2014](#)); rally us-ness through hate speech towards others (e.g. [Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017](#)); or love speech towards the leader and the followers (e.g. [Reicher, Haslam, Platow, & Steffens, 2016](#)), Sudan from 1989 to March 2019 offers a whole other scenery. There the NCP had to turn to other, more coercive ways of staying in power. [Gallab \(2014, p. 199\)](#) emphasises that the NCP regime faced opposition from the very start, "because of its totalitarian and violent nature... As a coercive-intensive state, the Islamists [the NCP] have created a garrison state in which they cannot believe or imagine it could exist in peace with itself or its citizens". [Gallab \(p. 199\)](#) further emphasises that most if not all the movements against this regime actively mobilised around one specific goal: "*isgat al-Nizam* (the overthrow of the regime.)"

When I conducted a study on social identities and regime strategies in Sudan in 2011 and 2012, most of the respondents talked about how the NCP managed to retain their grip on power. This current paper uses this material, and explores respondents' accounts of the NCP leadership strategies for staying in power. The interview data speaks to two highly intertwined processes. First, the *mobilisation* of support from those the government needed in key positions around the country, in the elite, and the security forces. Second, the *demobilisation* of other people. Demobilisation will here be seen as active measures taken by the government to hinder mobilisation of people against the regime. These mobilisation and demobilisation tactics do not constitute a conclusive or comprehensive list explaining why NCP was in power for thirty years: from 1989 to 2019. Sentiments on the NCP are context-specific and changing, depending on the interviewees, the focal issues at the time, as well as the setting for the conversations. The study takes as its starting-point the respondents' explanations of why NCP was still in power, and thus focuses on leadership strategies. This is not to deny the opposition agency, but follows naturally from focusing on what respondents said the NCP did to stay in power. It is further important to emphasize that the respondents in the study mainly represent opposition leaders and local population who range from fiercely opposing to somewhat opposing the regime, hence this paper should be read in light of that. Had I interviewed mainly NCP representatives and supporters instead (who frequently turned down interview invitations), the narratives would have been very different (that said, I also recognise the disagreements *within* NCP, see for example [Sudan Tribune, 2012](#)). This study thus presents conflict narratives that were not as prominent in the public sphere in Sudan as the government narrative at the time, due to the strategies to quell dissidence and alternative accounts.

The study contributes to developing a psychology of demobilisation as it explores collective action (and the lack thereof) in conflict settings. Mobilisation has been discussed in the collective action literature, but demobilisation linked to authoritarian regimes less so (though see [Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017](#)). In analysing narratives on how the NCP remained in power, this article should not be read as an instruction manual on how to repress, but rather as a contribution to understanding such regimes and processes better. Exploring these issues in a non-Western conflict case like the Sudan is a particularly important addition to understanding leadership demobilisation in conflict settings. Seeing this in light of the more recent processes of people's power in Sudan makes it even more relevant, and illustrates the context-dependent and changing nature of collective action and demobilisation.

Leadership, Identities and Collective Action

Looking at the combination of leadership and the use of identities is vital when seeing leadership as connected to groups. Identities are further directly connected to collective action, as social identities make collective action possible (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). If one did not feel for the cause, one would not partake in the collective action (see Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). A coercive and unpopular regime like the NCP in Sudan (1989–2019) makes for an interesting starting point from which to analyse and discuss leadership, identities and collective action.

Leadership and Identities

The social identity tradition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), shows that the categorization of others as well as oneself into groups influences how we think, feel and act toward our ingroups and outgroups. Social category definitions influences collective mobilization, and therefore Haslam et al. (2011) argue that those concerned with shaping the social world will actively define the nature of categories as a function of their social projects, and seek to strengthen their position as ‘entrepreneurs of identity’. According to Haslam et al. (2011, p. 163) “a group of people with a shared identity will always have more power than a group without it”, making identity for leaders “the most important of all resources” (p. 164).

Different regimes differ in their reliance on identities. As pointed out by Francisco (2005, p. 58) “Long-lasting autocracies have little or nothing to do with citizen support of the dictator. ...Dictators do not require “legitimacy” or popular support, much as they might desire it.” Such regimes are typically kept in power by repression so that opponents cannot mobilize against it (Wintrobe, 1998). That said, many coercive regimes are not necessarily internally most marked by their human rights violations and brutality, but instead characterised by the love and devotion shown them by many followers: “the most striking aspect of tyrannies may be the sense of participation and devotion” (Reicher et al., 2016, p. 71). However, turning to regimes that are widely unpopular, these may not be able to rely on “love speech” even among their own ethnic groups. In Sudan, many who belong to the most powerful ethnic groups who were represented by the NCP (the Ja’Alin, Shaygia and Danagla-groups) were strong opponents of the regime, disagreeing with the ethnocentric identity structure of the regime (see Moss, 2017). In such cases where political regimes do not have a shared identity with most of the country’s citizens and many from their own groups oppose them, the identity factor must be handled.

Collective Action

The focus on groups have often been accused of stripping humans of agency and choice. Instead, Reicher and Haslam (2006) point out that groups *enable* people to be agents. When people see themselves as part of a shared identity, this gives members the opportunity to come together for common goals and shared visions. Together they can overcome hindrances and work to achieve their goals and their visions for the world (Drury & Reicher, 2000, 2005) – the very definition of agency. Klandermans and Oegama (1987) pointed out four stages of action mobilization: becoming sympathetic to an issue or cause; becoming a target for the mobilization for this cause; becoming motivated to engage in action on behalf of the cause, and lastly, overcoming obstacles to participation. In repressive settings, collective action is impeded at every stage (McGarty, Thomas, Lala, Smith, & Biluc, 2014). Here leaders often work to hinder a strong, shared identity that can unite against the regime; and through this people are frequently demobilised.

A key concept in collective action research particularly interesting to coercive settings is the concept of efficacy. Efficacy has been pointed out as a key explanation of collective action, where people will engage in collective

action if they think partaking makes it is more likely that their goals will be achieved (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). It has been suggested that this type of efficacy might be tied to the group. This can be defined as “the shared belief that one’s group can resolve its grievances through unified effort” (Van Zomeren et al., 2008, p. 506) – i.e. closely linked to agency. Two factors have been found to increase efficacy: how strongly one identifies with the movement and the size of the social movement (Van Zomeren, Leach, & Spears, 2012).

The ability to act to influence and change ones’ own situation is context dependent. Demobilising people is key for leadership in coercive settings. As seen above, the NCP was on guard against uprisings that could threaten their grip on power, and engaged in repression to hinder collective action. Tilly (1995) sees repression as hindrances by the state or state actors to both individual and collective action by challengers. Some research on collective action emphasises that state repression and control will lower collective action, as stakes are high (Tilly, 1978). Others show that moderate levels of repression will increase collective action and uprisings (Muller, 1985). Yet other studies contradict this – in studies in the West Bank for example, Khawaja (1993) found that repression generally increased collective action, and worked as a mobilization for uprisings against the regime. According to Zwerman and Steinhoff (2005) important research has focused on interactive models of social movements related to repression (see Davenport, 1995; Loveman, 1998; Tilly, 1978), but they emphasise that such models privileges the state actors who are attributed agency. The models seem to suggest that if the group involved in collective action is rational, it will have as its main goal to stay out of trouble, and thereby change course to avoid state repression or to retreat from the scene when the repression becomes too severe. Other studies of high-risk activism however show different trajectories. For example, in a study on the period following the Bank of America bombing in California, Flacks and Whalen (1989) found that commitment among activists mobilizing for the cause was higher - not lower - in periods when both repression and activism was intense. These activists were then more likely to increase rather than lowering their commitment and to retain their commitment longer (see also Loveman, 1998).

Background, Sudan

Analyses of leadership strategies in Africa often downplay agency. According to Jones, de Oliveira, and Verhoeven (2013, p. 5), the West has a tendency to place African leadership within one of three categories: a liberal paradigm; the failed state category, or descriptions using neo-patrimonial terminology. They argue that important cases in Africa, including Sudan under the NCP, do not fit within these. Instead, they suggest, one should look to the concept of *illiberal* statebuilding when it comes to peacebuilding, describing Sudan amongst other cases as one in which the former government “rule in defiance of liberal peace precepts, having first used war and then the post- conflict situation to establish a hegemonic order and a stranglehold over the political economy.” They emphasize that analysing the actions of these states up against Western concepts of statebuilding makes it easy to conclude these are failed states. Instead they call for an analysis that recognizes that regimes such as Sudan under NCP sets itself goals and reaches them (if so by coercive and repressive means). The states are thereby focused on internal regime politics, or “wider elite projects” (Verhoeven, 2013, p. 120), and ignoring the fact that these regimes are running the state based on plans and goals is an oversight. It removes agency, without which such states are both misunderstood and the leadership (and their actions) underestimated (Verhoeven, 2013). Talking of illiberal peacebuilding, de Oliveira (2011) points to states where post-war political elites can rule in defiance of civil freedom, rule of law, to instead focus on establishing their own order, as it can be argued the NCP did. Such an analysis emphasizes leadership agency rather than ignoring it.

The first Sudanese civil war officially lasted from 1955 to 1972. With widespread fighting also in the interim period from 1972, until the breakout of the second civil war in 1983, these two are often seen as one continuous civil war. The second breach lasted until 2005, taking enormous tolls on the civilian population: more than four million fled their homes, and the number of casualties is estimated at near two million civilians (Johnson, 2011). The war ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, which shared power between the NCP and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM, the ruling party in the south) for a period of six years, followed by a referendum on self-determination for the South. In the January 2011 referendum, 98.83 percent of South Sudan voted for independence (Southern Sudan Referendum Commission [SSRD], 2011), and 9 July 2011 South Sudan became its own country.

The National Salvation Revolution (the forerunner of NCP), led by recently ousted president Bashir, took power in a military coup in June 1989, removing the UMMA party and president Sadiq al-Mahdi. All political parties were banned, parliament was dissolved and the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation (the RCC) was established. The RCC further dissolved the largest professional associations and trade unions, and arrested their leaders. Doctors protested in late 1989, and al-Bashir had one of them executed and famously said at a public rally in Khartoum: "anyone who betrays this nation does not deserve the honour of living" (Africa Watch, 1990, p. 95). In 1993, Bashir dissolved the RCC, thus strengthening his own power position. In 2010 Bashir won Sudan's first multi-party elections in 24 years, under widespread complaints of both intimidation and vote-rigging. Bashir and NCP thus held government in Sudan since 1989, with various coalitions¹, until its fall in April 2019. This study focuses on data from 2011 and 2012.

The two Sudanese civil wars are often simplified as wars between the south and the north. de Waal (2007) places more explicit focus on leadership, claiming a better description is that the conflict was between the central Islamic regime (who saw themselves as Arabs), and the people marginalized the most by central regimes: southerners; the Nuba from South Kordofan, and various groups from west, east and south-eastern Sudan. Most of these are non-Arab and many of them non-Muslim, and all of these were excluded from political power and national wealth (Sharkey, 2008). The "Sudanese nationalism" as defined by the NCP ruling elite, was narrow and degraded various groups to second, third and even fourth class citizens (Moss, 2017).

This paper is a context-focused contribution to the psychology of demobilisation, which allows for the respondents' take on the tactics of the NCP. Understanding authoritarian regimes such as Sudan under NCP through an illiberal statebuilding framework allows agency, where policies and strategies are recognised and discussed. This in turn could contribute to a greater understanding of this type of political leadership.

Method

This article is based on 59 in-depth interviews conducted in Sudan over three months in 2011 and 2012 (two visits). Fifty-one interviews were one-on-one. The remaining eight were group interviews with two to four participants. One such group interview was with political leaders from an opposition party, one with political leaders from the NCP, and six with local population. Six of these eight were *spontaneous group interviews* where the respondent chose to bring along others for the interview. These group interviews provided nuances as the respondents debated the topics amongst themselves, and various intragroup disagreements and agreements became available. Two were planned focus group interviews with local population, one with four Darfuri, one with five from Nuba Mountains

– all students. These areas were strongly marginalised by the NCP government, and these two group discussions ensured narratives from key areas of demobilisation by the regime. Five respondents (one political leader and four locals) were interviewed twice (both in 2011 and in 2012). These repeated interviews were beneficial for trust and establishing rapport. This also allowed for new events to be discussed in light of the respondents' earlier narratives on the situation.

Sample

Sixty-eight participants were interviewed in the 59 interviews. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling in urban areas in Khartoum (capital, North), Juba (capital, South), and Kassala (town, East). The sampling was a diversity sampling focused on two main categories: regional and national political leadership, and local population. I interviewed 17 political leaders (2 female, 15 male). Among the political leaders, I wanted to speak to different main parties, and tried to talk to the heads of parties and other senior party officials. Official letters were sent to the party headquarters asking for interviews. These were followed up on by myself and my research assistants. Here I also made good use of snowballing. Leaders in the opposition were forthcoming and generally agreed to be interviewed. Access to then incumbent NCP was much harder despite continuous efforts, making the number of NCP representatives limited. The 17 leaders were from the following parties: NCP (4), NUP (3), DUP (1), HAG (1), PCP (1), SPLM-N (1), SPLM (1), Communist party (1), miscellaneous smaller parties (4). They held the following positions: Minister (1), secretary in ministry (1), heads of party (4), senior party officials (7), regional/district leadership (4). For the general population participants, the main recruitment was done through networks and universities, as well as snowballing. I aimed at diversity across gender, age, socio-economic status, region of origin, and occupation. Here I also wanted to talk to academics and civil society. Most participants were between 40–45 years old, but the age-range was 22–80. More men than women were willing to be interviewed, despite targeted sampling of women, resulting in 42 interviews with men and only 9 with women. Respondents had the following occupations: Taxi drivers (2), academics (9), civil society representatives (7), lawyers (2), students (14), businesspersons (2), day-workers (7), sales representatives (3), unemployed (5). After discussions with local contacts and research assistants, we chose not to recruit based on tribalⁱⁱ membership as such information is sensitive. Asking for it could be perceived as wanting to classify respondents according to tribal lines, thus potentially contributing to negative identity processes many respondents opposed. Many of the respondents expressed that tribal membership per se was growing more and more important under the NCP regime, but openly seemed to identify more with different main identity “clusters” (e.g. Southern; Eastern, see Moss, 2017). These identity “clusters” were presented as given different status by the NCP regime (something most of the respondents denounced as detrimental to the country). Of the respondents in this study the majority belonged to the “highest ranking” cluster – the Arab-speaking Muslims in the north, whilst 26 respondents belonged to the three other clusters (in order of status, see Moss, 2017): six respondents were from the East; seven respondents were from the West; and thirteen respondents were from the South. In the sample, only the four NCP representatives as well as one local respondent were openly pro-NCP. The rest of the respondents range from somewhat opposing to fiercely opposing the NCP regime. Both the leadership sample and the local population sample are not likely to be representative. This precludes statistical generalisations based on the material, but this was not the purpose of the study, which seeks to explore respondents' accounts of the NCP leadership strategies for staying in power so long.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in people's homes, at cafés, universities and offices, depending on each respondent's choice. The interviews were done in English and Arabic, with the help of two female research assistants. In using research assistants, some of the direct meaning may be lost in translation, but the cultural and social insights add nuances to the material and help navigate difficult situations. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes (the group interviews approximately 90 minutes). Only ten of the 59 interviews were recorded (depending on participants' wishes). This is not ideal, but to be expected in this type of situation (see Moss, Uluğ, & Acar, 2019). Using a coding system, extensive notes were taken for all the interviews, and particularly interesting quotes were taken down verbatim. The notes from the recorded interviews were checked against the recordings, and showed good overlap (approximately 80 percent of the words). Respondents were given the opportunity to edit the transcript of their interviews (when they had access to email and spoke English – amounting to 24 of the 59 interviews). The respondents who edited the transcripts (3 of 24) only made minor adjustments to the text. Allowing for this read-through seemed to increase trust, and was particularly beneficial for establishing rapport in the leadership interviews.

The overarching focus of the interviews was on social groups and identities in Sudan. Questions did initially not target what strategies the NCP used to retain their grip on power. However, asking people to discuss identity policies and the identity situation in Sudan quickly led to expressions of frustration towards policies many felt were damaging the country and direct discussions of how this regime had managed to stay in power despite the limited support. Half of the interviews were conducted in 2011, during the upsurge of the Arab spring. This is likely to have influenced people's responses, and the Arab spring was frequently brought up in interviews.

Ethical Concerns and Methodological Challenges

Psychology in general is little concerned with natural studies from the field in intergroup conflict. Conflict contexts require more vigilance from the researchers as consequences for being interviewed can be larger than in non-conflict settings (see Moss et al., 2019, for a discussion of doing research in conflict environments). Doing research that involves discussions of an incumbent regime in highly repressive societies further demands strict ethical adherence. Permits for the study were organised through a university in Khartoum. Still, one of my research assistants was at one point approached by people who offered to buy my “real” CV, and who wanted her to keep them informed about our interviews and my analysis (they did not specify who they represented). Travel permits for Kassala and permits to do interviews in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) outside Khartoum were not given easily, and we took great care not to go to any areas without such permits.

Conducting research on regime processes, where the main bulk of the data is from opposition and local population should be analysed with care. The respondents have strong incentives to present the situation in specific ways to emphasise their own political projects. However, across all the main different opposition parties, and across a broad sample of respondents, many similar concerns were brought forth.

Analysis and Results

Transcripts from the interviews were written out in full, and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The respondents' understandings were treated as valid and subjective, taking a social constructionist

stance, whilst also recognizing the various incentives people in conflict may have for framing a topic in a particular way. The material related to opposition and NCP strategies on retaining power was structured into themes. These were reworked and sharpened into two intertwined tactics that people presented as reasons to how the NCP retained their grip on power: the mobilisation of those the regime needs (key people around the country, the elite, and the security forces) and the demobilisation of people at large. As these processes are intertwined, five main themes that speak to both mobilisation and demobilisation tactics were constructed from the material: Creating a secure repressive base; divide and rule strategies; controlling the media; creating a confusing and closed system and, lastly, not pushing people too far. For each tactic, it seems the regime attempted to demobilise people at large, but also tried to mobilise those it needs (see Turner, 2005). The chosen few who were mobilised to action for the regime would then lose out or even face retributions if NCP lost power, so it is at times presented as a self-maintaining system (which has in its form collapsed, with the overthrowing of the government in April 2019). Another level of mobilisation could be at play for those who agreed with the NCP or saw them as the best alternative. As the material mainly speaks to those opposing the regime, the main focus of the analysis is on the demobilisation. It should be emphasised that the NCP representatives were not discussing these issues in their interviews and are thereby not included in the analysis. For practical reasons, I will combine the analysis with theoretical discussions of each of the five themes, and then sum up with an encompassing discussion at the end. Extracts from respondents is marked with *int.* for interview for general population and *pol.* for political representatives.

Creating a Secure Repressive Base

Discussing NCP policies and power, the respondents frequently pointed at the strong security apparatus in place (such as Sudan Armed Forces (SAF); the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS); People's Defence forces (PDF), and Rapid Support Force (RSF), see El-Battahani, 2016). This repressive base was necessary for the regime to stay in power – the coercive regime needs its coercive agents (Turner, 2005, p. 12). The regime has used various methods to ensure loyalty – that is *mobilising* the security forces to support the regime. Strong security forces further *demobilise* people, respondents say, as opposition was costly. Here the mobilisation of the forces will be discussed first, followed by the demobilisation effect of the forces. According to most of the respondents, the security forces were not serving the people, but the regime. A high-level political representative (pol.1, 2012) underlined the army's loyalty to the regime, emphasizing that it placed the regime above the law: "The army knows orders, not the constitution. They are not loyal to it [the constitution]." Another respondent said: "NISS serves only the NCP. The same goes for the army. They don't care about the nation" (int.11, 2011). After an attempted coup by parts of the army in 1990, the NCP – who were an Islamist government – altered the military doctrine to entail that SAF's task was to defend the Islamic state rather than the nation "i.e. defending the Islamic regime rather than providing national security as such" (El-Battahani, 2016, p. 3). Asking a businessman in Khartoum (int. 26, 2012) how the NCP were managing to keep control of the army, he said: "They [the NCP] are clever. They are clever and they have the funds." The NCP developed special economic schemes to motivate SAF to protect the "status quo", including rewards for officers to set up their own businesses. El-Battahani (2016, p. 4) argues that this entails the officers were welcomed into "crony capitalist networks".

Several of the respondents pointed to the tribal factor in increasing loyalty to the regime. One respondent in Khartoum said "They changed people in key positions in the army and other forces to make sure key people belong to their tribes. They expect them to be more loyal" (int. 20, 2012). The main Riverine tribes are Ja'Alin, Danagla and Shaygia – i.e. overlapping with the key groups represented at the top level of NCP. "In Sudan, northerners dominate power, and members of ethnic riverine communities dominate SAF and key security services. It is believed

that this strategy serves to prevent, or at least limit, military moves against the leadership” (El-Battahani, 2016, p. 6). This is also the case with NISS’s inner circles. This is not to say that the general population in the Riverine tribes support the NCP. A respondent in Khartoum explained: “Tribe is complex here. I belong to one of these tribes in power, but I do not support this regime, nor does most anyone else I know. But the NCP manages to tie the ones it needs to them” (int. 2, 2011). This tribal mobilisation, signifying a move from an institutionalised, meritocratic security system to patrimonialism, forged strong and direct ties linking various security organs to NCP. The cost of giving up power for the security forces in a patrimonial system is thought to be much more extensive than in alternative systems (see Roessler, 2011).

Some respondents differentiated between the army and the police on one hand, and the more private security apparatus of the government on the other (for example NISS and RSF). The former were instrumental in supporting the public under previous uprisings against the government (in 1964 and 1985). A few respondents emphasised that the army and police are seen both by the regime and the public as more possible to sway and get to act on the side of the people against the regime. This is something NCP was aware of, and handled – for example by the strengthening NISS at the expense of SAF “...SAF no longer has the monopoly of the means of violence, a development that casts doubts on its future role in the event of regime changes” (El-Battahani, 2016, p. 3).

The way dictators handle the state security forces is the key determinant of whether the population will resort to high-level mobilization against the regime (Francisco, 2005). If security forces are controlled and rewarded in such manners that they will do the government’s bidding, then the likelihood for collective mobilization against the regime may be reduced. As shown above, the security forces swear allegiance to the regime. When the army is held loyal to the regime rather than to the nation, this closes the door for opposition to claim the army represents the nation more than the regime, and thus call on the army to protect the people against the regime. In Sudan, the security apparatus is mobilised also based on certain economic advantages and tribal memberships. However, the loyalty of SAF and even NISS was however not taken for granted by the NCP government, which continuously handled this mobilisation (see for example Sudan Tribune, 2012).

Being able to quell uprisings and revolts is crucial to staying in power. A strong security apparatus willing to repress uprisings on behalf of the government may contribute strongly to *demobilisation*, as opposition in Sudan was made both costly and dangerous (Amnesty International, 2010). In an interview, a political party representative (pol.4, 2012) emphasised that the government handled rebellious regions with force, to remain in power: “There is fighting in Blue Nile, in Darfur, in South Kordofan, and in the East. The central government is most interested in power.” Asking an academic in Khartoum (int. 23, 2012) whether other parts of Sudan may want to secede (such as South Sudan did) he said such initiatives could not come from the grass root as “most people have no chance to do anything positive. This kind of unity we currently have is based on the military power of the central government.” According to this respondent, the security apparatus thereby directly limited the potential for people to initiate processes for change.

During the Arab spring, tensions rose. One respondent (int. 2, 2011) told me that she had partaken in planned demonstrations against the regime in Khartoum in this period, and that the Facebook-event had had large numbers who were going to join but that they had been very few who actually turned up. They had been arrested very quickly. The respondent said that after this, the security forces had started posting false “demonstration” events on Facebook. If people showed up to demonstrate they were arrested. As it was difficult for people to know whether an event-invite was genuine or not, people quickly stopped going, a respondent said. In November 2011, President

Bashir stated the Arab spring was not coming to Sudan any time soon: “Those who are waiting for the Arab Spring to come will be waiting for a while” (Sudan Tribune, 2011, November 23). According to Bashir the Arab Spring in Sudan had been when he took power in 1989. The various rebellions across Sudan were met with ruthless counterinsurgency campaigns (Deng, 2008). According to Gallab (2014, p. 195) the NCP strongly upgraded its state torture apparatus. If one sees crowd behaviour as intergroup encounters (as detailed in the elaborated social identity model of crowd behaviour, ESIM, Drury & Reicher, 1999), then those who wish to engage in collective action may avoid it in fear of the security forces. According to the respondents, people were well aware of the costs - the arrests, disappearances and beatings of people who have formerly engaged in protests or vocal opposition of the regime. Thus, the knowledge of this style of intergroup encounters may have deterred people from engaging in such crowd behaviour in Sudan (though in other settings massive repression may lead to an increase in collective action, see for example Khawaja, 1993). Several times in discussions of the security forces, respondents emphasised and acknowledged the NCP’s active, clever and planned engagement with the issue: “They [the NCP] are clever”; “They know what they are doing”; “They have orchestrated this well”. Again, even though most of these respondents disagreed with the NCP policies, they still recognised the successfulness of NCP tactics in mobilising security forces as well as demobilising people at large to secure their main goal: retaining their grip on power. Again this can be seen in light of the illiberal statebuilding framework.

Divide and Rule Strategies

Most respondents claimed the government actively used a strategy of divide and rule. A prominent academic in Khartoum (int. 23, 2012) said:

They [the NCP] try to focus on differences to benefit themselves. When you satisfy one group over another, the first group will become more satisfied, whilst the second will revolt against the first group – not against the government. To some extent this is divide and rule policies. This is the general mood; the government is establishing such traditions here.

Through divide and rule tactics an incumbent ruler can increase his grip on power. In creating a significant outgroup (since other groups are favoured over yours) people focus on local grievances, instead of uniting against the government. Through this, the NCP can be said to have been *mobilising* the people who benefitted from their rule, and *demobilising* others by making them focus on intergroup issues. Milosevic made use of divide and rule tactics in Serbia, where he orchestrated hostilities against the Croats to demobilise opposition against the regime. In their analysis of this case, Elcherath and Reicher (2017) found that it was not enough to state that the Croats were enemies. Instead, this tactic relied on the use of practical provocations, where thugs attacked Croats and Serbs were forced to point out Croats in their neighbourhoods. In Sudan, demobilising opposition through divide and rule strategies has, according to the respondents, focused on the NCP siding with some groups over others through two main avenues: violence and privileges. A political representative (pol.6, 2012) said:

Now, they [the NCP] have armed and privileged the Arabs, so that the non-Arabs become ‘the others’. This is ideological – since the Arabs are seen as superior, but it is also political. I think it is a way of governing, using divide and rule strategies. It is not to make the country better, but to keep power.

A political representative (pol.1, 2011) talked about the privileges, and explained how this worked at a local level through opportunistic tribal leaders who agree to support the NCP government to get services and benefits from the state (these can thus be said to be *mobilised* by the regime). These leaders said to their tribe that siding with NCP and becoming their local representatives would get them privileges – to the detriment of other tribes (but

commonly also to the detriment of the tribe these leaders represent as the benefits are mostly kept by the opportunists themselves, this respondent claimed). “These ‘tribal heroes’ put themselves forward allegedly for the interest of their own tribe. They further try to portray people of other tribes as enemies, as dangerous, and as the root causes of their own trouble.” He further talked about the need for services and opportunities to improve for such local divide and rule tactics employed at local level to cease:

If the root causes of my trouble is the lack of services and jobs, and these start being provided, then it would be much more difficult for a local leader to convince my tribe X that tribe Y is stealing our opportunities.

This presentation of the situation is also echoed by the [International Crisis Group \(2010\)](#).

The violence committed by some groups against others, and the arming of some groups over others, are topics frequently mentioned when explaining divide and rule strategies in Sudan. An academic in Khartoum (int. 11, 2011) discussed the violence in Darfur, where groups armed by the government created chaos and intergroup fighting, and emphasised that he believed the NCP would retain these divide and rule tactics: “They would rather disintegrate the country, than equalize it.”

Most respondents spoke of this divide and rule strategy as deliberate and well-planned by NCP, which again speaks to the concept of illiberal statebuilding where regimes set themselves goals and act to fulfil these. As a high-level political representative said (pol.2, 2011): “A lot of thought and philosophy was put into this by the government – on using the differences between groups to weaken them.” In an interview, a political representative reiterated that this was a deliberate policy (pol.3, 2011):

When they [the NCP] divide Darfur by ethnic lines, 50 percent will fight the other 50 percent, or 30 percent in one state will fight the other two states. They won’t unite, and vote for the same party. This is the current regime’s policy to weaken the other parties. The government here deliberately uses ethnicity in ways enabling them to stay in power.

These tactics were thereby seen as intentional policies from the NCP. A political representative said (pol.1, 2011): “It is easier to rule when the population is fragmented rather than united. People in various tribes and social structures are thus given opportunities and used to create such internal rifts between and within tribes.” A student in Khartoum (int. 27, 2012) said:

It is controlling. They are trying to make us think: ‘I am an Arab like you, he is not, we are the same tribe. Darfur is another continent – he is Darfuri, I am not.’ That way you [the NCP] can have control - through weakening the unity factor in the country.

I asked her what the consequences are of such policies, and she answered: “Nationalism is decreasing, we all talk about it. People feel alienated; they feel this is not their country.” A political representative (pol.1, 2012) also pointed at the lack of nationalism, and said it was the explanatory factor as to why divide and rule tactics worked: “We don’t have a sense of nationality – people are local or tribal in their attitude. Egypt is holy to Egyptians – here we hardly understand the place called Sudan.” This lack of nationalism, he argued, makes it easier to divide people. This could in turn also contribute to lowering efficacy, as efficacy is linked to group identity dynamics ([Van Zomeren et al., 2012](#)). The more one sees the movement as a shared identity, the more likely it is that one will feel efficacy and want to act on behalf of the cause. According to the elaborated social model of crowd behaviour ([Drury & Reicher, 1999](#)), forming common identities is what makes crowds manage to achieve common purpose

and take shared action. Through divide and rule policies as discussed here, such common identities can be precluded.

The sentiments from the interviews are echoed by several other sources. The [International Crisis Group \(2011, p. i\)](#), says the NCP orchestrated an elaborate process of fragmentation through divide and rule tactics “to prevent the emergence of a unified counterweight to NCP dominance of the centre”. This exacerbated ethnic and regional divisions. According to [de Waal \(2007, p. 1040\)](#), the government in Khartoum used divide-and-rule tactics, and allowed local militias to “*run amok*” and destroy the livelihoods of the marginalized areas of Sudan. This effectively diluted united opposition against the government, and caused in-fighting between groups instead of them uniting against the central government. This then enabled the lengthy political survival in a context of mounting opposition. According to [Gallab \(2014, p. 195\)](#), Sudanese speak of these NCP tactics as “tribal domination and tribal damnation.” Through divide and rule strategies, a ruler can retain his grip on power by decreasing the chance of a strong opposition against him. Divide and rule demands a deliberate strategy of causing intergroup conflict among groups ([Acemoglu, Verdier, & Robinson, 2004](#)), which overlaps with the sentiments in the interviews that the NCP had an explicit divide and rule strategy. This again can be seen in light of illiberal statebuilding, where these tactics may be part of a deliberate plan to stay in power. As emphasised by a political representative (pol.2, 2012):

The government is actively trying to weaken the national associations. The government has an active use of divide and rule policies. The resulting fragmentation is one of the more conspicuous aspects of these policies.... The government believe it is a good development.

For the NCP it is a good development, he continued, because it allowed them to stay in power.

Controlling the Media

Controlling the media is a common feature to control narratives. Alternative narratives to that of the regime in power can encourage resistance. Leaders therefore need to analyse the existing resistance to their projects and form strategies to *demobilise* such resistance and alternative narratives (see [Haslam et al., 2011](#)). One high-level political representative (pol.1, 2012) said: “They [the NCP] control the media – you have to publish their versions of events. If you are a little bit outspoken – they will limit you. You and your version of events will be dismissed... The government has comprehensive control.” This may have served to *mobilise* those who supported the NCP, as it produced a worldview aligned with how they saw the world, and offered legitimization for the power structures of the country. Prior to the 1989 coup, Sudan had 134 different newspapers, and was recognised as one of the most free and diverse press corps in the Middle East and Africa. After the coup, the new regime immediately dismantled this media system, replacing it with the Sudan News Agency, from which all publications were to get their news ([Gallab, 2014](#)). In 2010, several radio stations were restricted or banned (including the BBC); filtering systems were put in place to block access to certain anti-government sites; and the regime created a “Cyber Army” of hackers to “frequently attack and shut down hostile websites” ([Elzobier, 2014, p. 91](#)). A political representative (pol.3, 2012) in Khartoum said: “They [the NCP] are not actually a strong party, but they have very strong control over the media and the economy, and they know how to play this.” Here again, political opponents seem to be recognizing the successfulness of NCP policies, even though they disagree with the policies. She continued: “anything now is a fake picture reflected in the media, even in forums you won’t find the opinions of the people.” Through the censorship of the media, and helped by the vastness of Sudan, many scholars argue that people in

Khartoum and other central cities knew little about what went on in more remote and conflict torn regions of the country. On regional uprisings and state violence, one academic in Khartoum said (int. 35, 2012):

People in central northern Sudan know little about these processes. They know there are military operations in these areas, but the details of these are not open to the public. The media is prevented from reporting on it. The government is thus trying to silence these areas.

In emphasising that the NCP regime was controlling media, the respondents do however not give the impression that people in general were being won over by the government narratives. A political representative in Khartoum (pol.3, 2012) said the narratives presented in the media were blatant lies, and that the government did not care that they were contradicting themselves:

I feel everything can happen in Sudan, and that it is so blatant. I remember the government showed us pictures of Garang [then leader of the south], telling us he was our enemy. Then 3-4 years later, he was presented as our hero. They [the NCP] do not care that they are lying to our faces even when we know they are lying.

Writing on Zimbabwe, Reid and Ng (2003) emphasize that by systematic hindrance of alternative narratives combined with the spreading of the government's own narrative, may lead to psychological exhaustion in the population as well as lowering their opportunity to see reality differently than that of the strong government narrative. The situation in Sudan was somewhat different, as exemplified in the quote on Garang above, where the respondent is aware that she is being lied to. Gallab (2014) emphasises that many in Sudan have rid "themselves of the grip of the regimes' propaganda machine" by obtaining and disseminating information through other channels. Social ceremonies such as weddings and funerals have for example been used to that effect. Further, some people have access to alternative media channels and some to Internet, making the *full* control of narratives difficult. Control over media is important to demobilize active resistance, but hearts and minds are not necessarily won. Though controlling media to *hinder* the opposition is crucial, as emphasised by Elzobier (2014, p. 91): "...the opposition groups are in a hopelessly disadvantaged position compared to the regime. Without access to radio, TV stations or newspapers, their message must be delivered to the masses through the government's sinister filters..."

One respondent (pol.4, 2012) linked the point of controlling the media to the fifth theme: not pushing people too far. The interview was done under the Arab spring period, where many said the regime worried they would have a Sudanese Arab spring on their hands: "Most newspapers are owned by the regime. Now some other papers are also allowed to be published, to quell the uprisings." According to this respondent, the regime was able to have a flexible approach to their restrictions, where they analysed the mood in the population and made sure to ease up somewhat when it seemed needed – not to push people too far.

Creating a Confusing and Closed System to Maintain the Status Quo

Many of the political leaders I interviewed as well as some local population respondents mentioned specifically that the NCP created a confusing and closed system, making it hard for opposition to gain traction and for people to oppose the regime. A chaotic situation is difficult to navigate, and makes resistance difficult. Several respondents claimed that the government purposefully constructed a confusing situation, with unclear categories of who supports and opposes the regime (mainly based on divide and rule strategies). This made it dangerous to rely on people for help in challenging the regime. Further, the removal of regime critics from government employment and replacing these with loyal representatives created a closed system, furthered by confusing and unclear paths of gaining advantages and earning a living in a system dependent on NCP and their cadres. Again, the NCP demonstrated

a dual mobilisation-demobilisation tactic. A political representative (pol.1, 2011) complained about the confusion, saying that the government created this type of setting deliberately:

This regime is often spoken of as a status quo. The regime effectively shields itself, and has created a very closed system. This creates a strange situation in Sudan, where you fail to do anything about the current situation. Even if you try, you fail. Everything is happening around you, and there is no way for you to influence it or understand it. Therefore this is a status quo that it is very hard for us to break free from.

The element of a closed system brought up here is also emphasised in [Berridge's \(2015, p. 206\)](#) analysis of former uprisings in Sudan, where the NCP has been “far more rigorous than its predecessors” in assuring that the oppositionists are denied access to the leadership of the “modern forces”: professional, student and labour unions. He says this was a key element in former uprisings: the control of these unions by groups opposing the regime, enabling strong and fast mobilisation. According to Berridge, the ruthlessness the NCP used against these “modern forces” is “possibly the most significant reason for the longevity of al-Bashir’s military regime” (p. 206). A political representative (pol.4, 2012) emphasized that this closed, confusing system concerned many spheres of life:

You have to offer the people something; it can't go on like this, as the government is only serving themselves. The government is an Islamic movement; they have built their own system. They may win another election, but they can't stay for long. Things are changing. The government is controlling the foreign trade, and they are making life hard for others. You apply to do business, you show a feasibility study of your business plan, then they turn you down and they use your plan instead. Their policies and ways frustrate people. It is difficult to understand how their system really works.

“The NCP are reserving advantages for themselves,” this representative went on, a claim that was echoed by many respondents, including this political representative (pol.1, 2011):

This [the status quo] is further enforced by the system of support NCP have established, in the way that services are dependent on you showing support for them: “Say you support us, or you will not get anything.” Your receiving of services depend entirely on your relation with the NCP.

The same goes for government employment according to many respondents. Extensive efforts went into purging workplaces of regime critics. In 2001, the international Arabic newspaper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* reported that from the NCP took power in 1989, they had dismissed from service 73,640 government employees (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat* 2001, as cited in [Berridge, 2015, p. 206](#)). Several respondents also said that education and wealth distribution were at the core of this confusing system, making people unable to influence the structural inequalities imbedded in the system. One political representative (pol.3, 2012) put it like this:

People don't understand all the details of what is going on, because the ones who make the syllabus, are also the ones who distribute the wealth. The government has a theory, a list of more or less important groups of people, and this influences both the syllabus and the distribution of wealth. Your place on their list decides your access to the distributed wealth. Then I wonder, who decides this for me? This is all just distributed according to the government's interests. The government does not have good intentions. They have been preoccupied with civil wars and economic theft.

These chaotic structures were usual tactics from the regime to confuse both their opponents and their friends ([Verhoeven, 2013](#)), to make sure their regime and power was kept in place. When the situation is confusing, it becomes harder to challenge the status quo. A representative explained (pol.1, 2011):

People at grass-root level are now helpless. Everything is monopolized. All opportunities to make money are controlled by the state. If you build your own business, and you are not an NCP supporter, they will come in, take over, destroy you by taxes and so forth. You either have to submit or leave. So, the power space is very limited.

As discussed earlier, efficacy is strongly linked to collective action. Believing that joint action can lead to change increases the chance of collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). If, on the contrary, the regime can make people see that it is no use, efficacy may decrease. Here the collective group in itself was unclear (who was for and against the regime?); the system within which to operate was closed off, and the situation was confusing. Achieving a sense of agency – where the group feels they can influence or alter their own situation – may thereby have been challenged (see Van Zomeren et al., 2008). Research also demonstrates that when a group fails to achieve its goals and it experiences powerlessness, it will be difficult for it to establish a strong group identity, and thereby difficult to establish a clear and efficient leadership (see for example the BBC prison experiment, Reicher & Haslam, 2006). This NCP chaos strategy that several of the respondents point to, may thereby have contributed to demobilising collective uprisings against the regime.

Not Pushing People too Far

As discussed above, there are different takes on collective action in repressive contexts, where some studies claim repression will lower collective action (Tilly, 1978); some claim moderate repression will increase collective action (Muller, 1985), and some that collective action will increase in the face of repression (Khawaja, 1993). The Sudanese case (with this data from 2011 and 2012) may show a combination of these explanations. According to the respondents, moderate levels of repression suppresses collective action, but they emphasise that people as well as the regime know that there are some limits. If these lines are crossed, many people will protest and engage in collective action against the regime. The calibration of repression could in this case have two key elements: what type of repression is conducted, and who is repressed.

If you repress people by removing rights or imposing punishments, which are seen as illegitimate by all, then you may unite them. Many of the respondents emphasised that the government had a good grasp of how far they could push people to avoid revolts in urban areas. A leading academic in Khartoum (int. 35, 2012) explained:

I don't think the government will push the people to the limit. They realize the danger of this – they see that certain items should not be affected, like fuel, bread, to some extent medicine. But non-essential items on the other hand, they believe people can survive without these. ... When the minister of finance was confronted with a collapsing economy, he said: 'Bring me a Sudanese who did not have his breakfast this morning.' They [the NCP] believe that if people are able to have their breakfast, they will not demonstrate. When it comes to the point they don't have money for the bus to work, to eat, or to feed their families, then they will demonstrate. I agree, I think this is true.

One respondent in Khartoum (int. 20, 2012) talked about an intersection in Khartoum, where there had been many accidents. People called for the government to install streetlights to avoid further accidents, and finally took to the streets to demand these lights:

The next morning they were putting up the streetlights. This regime is excellent at balancing what they need to provide – what is worth it for them, and what they can withhold. It is a cost-benefit analysis, and they are great at knowing how far they can push people.

Here the NCP, according to the respondent, had a good grasp of the situation and gave in as they saw it as a potential trigger for large-scale mobilization. This fits well with identity entrepreneurship (Haslam et al., 2011), where leaders know group identities well enough to know what not to take from people in order to avoid causing large-scale outrage. Many respondents did however emphasise that the situation at large in the country was getting close to uprisings against the regime. A political party representative (pol.3, 2012) emphasized that things were getting so bad she thought people now were waiting for the trigger for full-blown mobilization against the regime:

Sudanese people have done these things [overthrown governments] two times before. We are waiting for a trigger. Everything here is very bad, the economy is bad, the government is very bad, the governance is disgusting, and they do not want to reach agreements. They are not taking care of human rights. They are not take care of the people. Girls are assaulted and abused, and even raped by officials. Those are people who should always be good mannered. People now feel they are being assaulted by the government – not just regarding not getting services et cetera, but feeling assaulted. The last few years we have been assaulted as citizens, and assaulted as women.

This respondent said the government had gone far, but also indicates in the extract that they had still not gone too far. A businessman in Khartoum (int. 26, 2012) agreed it was just a matter of time before the NCP was removed by the people: “One day the Sudanese people will come with their claws to drag you [the NCP] to the streets.” However, again there were also references to the opposite. A student in Khartoum (int. 27, 2012) said: “Now they [the NCP] are calming down. They are afraid of the streets. They have a fear of us being like the Arabs of Cairo.” This reiterates the point made by the political representative above on the media censorship: that newspapers were being allowed beyond those of the government to abate the anger towards the government. Both extracts indicate a regime that managed to read the boundaries of repression.

The NCP being careful not to push people too far as discussed in many of the interviews overlaps with the concept of ‘the dictator’s dilemma’. Francisco (2005, pp. 58-59) explains the dictator’s dilemma as the “backlash threshold”: “How much repression is sufficient to deter protest without causing backlash and high-level mobilization?” According to many of the respondents, the NCP managed to balance this well and were careful to hinder actions that could become a symbolic basis for unification. Despite this, many respondents indicated that people were getting closer to this threshold.

The second element of the calibration of repression is *who* the regime was pushing too far and not. Extensive segments of the population in the peripheries *were* pushed too far. The central groups experienced a restricted freedom of speech; restricted access to media; whilst basic services such as access to food and general everyday safety was not impeded in the same manner as for peripheral groups. Demobilised by the measures above, these groups remained geographically peripheral and marginalised and several respondents said the government saw some of these groups as less of a treat. This focus fits with the relative deprivation theory, where those most oppressed are not the ones leading revolutions – which instead are often led by the young, educated middle-class (see McGarty et al., 2014). One respondent from South Sudan (int. 30, 2012) talked about the regime’s brutal repression and warfare in the South, expressing disbelief that the regime was still in power with their track-record: “...their aim is to remain here forever. Ibrahim Ghandour of NCP said they will go from power to the grave. They killed our boys...” The government seemed to be much more cautious with their repressive measures when it came to groups valued more by the government (for an account of identity hierarchy in Sudan, see Moss, 2017); and who were better placed to rise against the regime.

Discussion

In coercive settings such as Sudan under the NCP, the regime relies less on popular support to remain in power. The five themes represent how the respondents portray the leadership strategies in Sudan for demobilising people at large, but also mobilising those select people the regime needed. Combined, the mobilisation and demobilisation tactics are presented by the respondents as key reasons the NCP regime was still in power. In the analysis of the material, two concepts stood out as particularly relevant. *Group efficacy* has proven a vital concept for collective action, and seems involved in the different themes above. Similarly, the concept of *illiberal statebuilding* is also essential to avoid underestimating the NCP project in Sudan. These two concepts are discussed below.

Group Efficacy

People are more prone to engage in collective action when they feel a sense of group efficacy (see [Hornsey et al., 2006](#)). It was thus in NCP's interest to ensure that the repression they used was sufficient to quell subjective feelings of group efficacy in the population. However, repression does not necessarily dampen collective action indefinitely: in some periods and settings strict repression will decrease public mobilization, but in others it could escalate it (see [Loveman, 1998](#)). A clear majority of the people I interviewed said the solution to Sudan's problems is a regime change. Several also referred to past experience in Sudan where the people have overthrown military regimes. According to [Gallab \(2014, p. 143\)](#) the experience of resistance have taught the Sudanese important lessons: "One of the most important of these lessons was that, although military coups take power, past experience has shown that such regimes cannot keep power indefinitely. This has left a lasting impression on the people's political imagination and political culture." But – precisely due to the fragmentation of the population, combined with a very efficient security apparatus, control of the media, a confusing and closed system, and the NCP's skills in not pushing people too far, most respondents said that their own ability to influence change in Sudan was obstructed by the regime. This is context-dependent and could change, as a political party representative (pol.3, 2012) said: "we are waiting for the trigger" (this arguably came in December 2018, in the form of rising bread prices, which turned into a movement to remove the regime; [Maclean, 2018](#)). As discussed above, two main factors are found to increase efficacy: a strong *identification* with the movement and the social movement being *large* ([Van Zomeren et al., 2012](#)). Regarding the first factor – identification - [McGarty et al. \(2014, p. 729\)](#) suggest that "the formation of mass-opposition movements involves a process by which opponents of the government come to see themselves as a coherent social group..." This does not have to mean that people see themselves as a shared category; these could be opinion-based groups (see [Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds, & Muntele, 2007](#)). Such groups have a shared identity based on opinions, which could become the basis for creating an "us" as opposed to another "them". However, [Bliuc et al. \(2007\)](#) emphasise that the members of these groups see them as real groups, often with their own norms. For Sudan, based on the above analysis and previous work (see for example [Moss, 2017](#)), I would suggest that was not the case in 2011/2012. The opinion-based group identity in Sudan was precluded by divide and rule policies, where intragroup conflicts stood in the way of a strong unified effort. One thing is seeing the regime and its supporters increasingly as an outgroup needing to be replaced (see [McGarty et al., 2014](#)), but another is seeing oneself as a shared group. People could come together over the shared cause, but this was made difficult by the NCP fragmentation tactics: intergroup fighting and a fragmented, highly diverse nation (with no strong sense of nationalism, as pointed out by several respondents – in contrast to countries such as Egypt, see [Kharroub & Bas, 2016](#), on the use of national symbols to increase efficacy and thus engagement in collective action in Egypt). Later, in 2018, the situation became one where people experienced being pushed

too far, and this again acted as a powerful mechanism for mobilizing together for a shared “us” – first against raising prices, then against the government (Maclean, 2018). Regarding the second factor - the expectations about the size of the social movement - Klandermans (1984) shows that this is one of the most important determinants for whether people will participate in collective action. The larger the number, the more social support for the collective action, and thereby the higher the belief in the action. Through several of the five factors discussed above, the regime was both reducing the number of the participants actively opposing the government, and they were making it difficult to be sure who else opposed the regime due to factors such as divide and rule, the closed and confusing system, and controlling the media. McGarty and colleagues (2014, p. 728) point out that “if it is believed to be dangerous to express dissent, it will be difficult to determine whether that dissenting view is widely shared by others.”

Illiberal Statebuilding

From the above discussion on efficacy, one sees that for collective action to take place, it is often with the presence of three factors (see also McGarty et al., 2014). A sense of injustice (which most of the respondents in Sudan express very vocally); a belief that participation in collective action will lead to change (group efficacy, which was obstructed in Sudan), and lastly – and relatedly – a shared identity with the others involved in the collective action (which I argue was also obstructed in Sudan). If however, these factors “exist in isolation... then collective action is unlikely to take place” (McGarty et al., 2014, p. 731). The NCP, according to the respondents, managed to orchestrate the situation in Sudan so as to fulfil its main goal, as explained by Holt and Daly (2011, p. 159): “By 2000 the ... regime’s main claim to success was that it had remained in power, against the virtually unanimous – but disunited and ineffective – opposition...” A businessman in Khartoum (int.27, 2012) said about the president: “Bashir came, and he did not have the back up of a big chunk of the people.... He therefore depended on other things than loyalty to keep him in power.” The president needed to make use of other tools to retain the NCP grip on power when loyal followership was off the table. This study took the illiberal statebuilding framework as a starting point. Here in this study, the core topic is the demobilisation and mobilisation the NCP engaged in to stay in power. Those the regime needed were mobilised, as emphasised by a political representative (pol.5, 2012):

There is no genuine support for this regime. The support comes from their leaders and the elite, whom they support, and even the tribal leaders whose loyalty they pay for. At the ground level they do not have any supporters, just the elites in different sects and elites.

From the very start of the regime, others were demobilised. Already in December 1989, Bashir said at a public rally: “I vow here before you to purge from our ranks the renegades, the hirelings, enemies of the people and enemies of the armed forces...” (Africa Watch, 1990, p. 95). A political representative (pol.2, 2012) talked of power as the sole motive of the regime:

Now they (the NCP) have one objective, and that is to keep their authority, to keep power. That has been the main objective for so many years. Now they have forgotten about the ideology itself. They are now squarely working towards a strategy guaranteeing them power.

Most respondents talked about the NCP policies as deliberate and planned, which is in line with the illiberal statebuilding framework. Many of the respondents recognised the NCP’s skillful mastery of the political game. A political representative (pol.5, 2012) pointed out: “This regime manages to stay in power. There is a clever, genius mentality behind it...” Some respondents thought the regime would - using NCP terms - “go from power to the grave”. A high-level political representative (pol.1, 2012) said: “This government would resist a popular, social

uprising.” Showing that they were both willing and able to engage in repression, the NCP made opposition dangerous and costly. Through the five themes above, the NCP thus heightened the barriers for participating in collective action (i.e. the fourth stage of [Klandermans & Oegama's, 1987](#), model), making the overthrow of the regime more difficult.

New Developments

19 December 2018, protests broke out over the rising bread prices and shortages in Sudan. The protests spread, and quickly turned to a new popular uprising to overthrow the regime. The Sudanese Professional Association, spearheading these demonstrations, said in a statement: “The demands of this revolution are crystal clear. The regime and its head must step down” ([The Guardian, 2019](#)). 11 April 2019, President al-Bashir was overthrown, ending three decades of NCP power. A transitional military council was set up, but protests continued as people wanted a civilian government. Strong demobilization tactics were deployed again (the shutting down of the internet; killings, beatings and arrests), but the protests continued. In August 2019 a deal was reached between the opposition and the military council, to form a sovereign council. 8 September 2019, the joint civilian-military regime was sworn in, to rule for a 39-month transition period before new elections. Seeing these developments in light of the above discussion illustrates how particularly perhaps the fifth aspect of not pushing people too far became a breaking point for the NCP (which at that point came down to the financial situation of the regime). It also demonstrates well the context-dependency of collective action.

Limitations and Further Research

The limitations of this study should be pointed out. A convenience sample was used, and there are a few potential sample biases in the material. First, despite targeted sampling, I only managed to speak to four NCP leaders and one local sympathetic to the regime. I achieved a broad sample of other voices in Sudanese society, but the respondents mainly opposed the regime. This however fits nicely with the special edition, as these sentiments were frequently repressed by the regime. Second, it was very difficult to recruit women to the study, despite targeted sampling. Lastly, due to strict travel restrictions and conflict breaking out in areas of South Sudan at the time of research, the material is limited to three urban sites. This is not ideal, particularly in Sudan with the strong conflict between centre and periphery.

Several issues raised in this study should be included in future research. The analysis of the absence of collective action in repressive settings is interesting, and further psychology studies from other contexts would be beneficial. Studies of collective action in settings where repressive measures have long managed to demobilise the population, but where the population then engages in massive collective action to topple the regime should also be the focus of studies (again, the recent developments in Sudan offers an excellent case). Specific studies of leadership strategies in intergroup conflict are also interesting, and both in the work on collective action and on identities, the focus on leadership needs to be expanded (following the work of [Haslam et al., 2011](#), [Reicher & Hopkins, 2001](#) etc.). When conducting such studies, the analysis of both locals and leaders with a specific emphasis on agency is important. This is particularly so in African contexts – not because they have *more* agency, but because it has been relatively common to analyse these settings without allowing for agency (see [Jones et al., 2013](#)).

Notes

- i) Despite the current and former coalitions and union governments, this paper focuses on NCP policies, as NCP at the time of the study (2011/2012) had the actual power.
- ii) The controversial concept of tribe is used in this paper as this concept is more frequently in use in Sudan than the concept of ethnic group. According to de Waal (2005), tribes in Sudan can be characterised by region or politics, not necessarily ethnicity, thus making it a more fitting concept.

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