Response by Mohamed Salih, Emeritus Professor of Politics of Development, International Institute of Social Studies, to the keynote speech given by Professor Jan Abbink at the conference 'Africa: 60 years of independence' on 30 January 2020.

The gist of the argument is this:

Professor Jan Abbink reminds us that demography is politics, not only in determining the number of electoral constituencies, equitable distribution of wealth and the factors of development among regions or between sub-national entities and the central government. He uses current debates on political demography to analyze the role of youth in the constellation of political stability and democratic transition in Ethiopia and Sudan. The keynote speech must have some implications beyond these Ethiopia and Sudan, and could be relevant to other African countries, with similar demographic characteristics.

After assessing the age-structure pattern, (such as median age, fertility ratio and dependency ration, it is explained that Ethiopia and Sudan are challenged with the grim reality that they have a very young population of a median age well below 25 years, high fertility and high dependency. This generation which is better educated than their parents demands significant employment opportunities and rising demands for social services, and better standards of living. Not only that the governments of Ethiopia and Sudan are not able, and probably will not be able to meet all these demands, but also the existing power and social structures are not amenable to radical structural change. Therefore, without demographic shift, it is difficult, almost impossible for the governments of these countries to provide these existential youth demands or produce structural transformation beyond tampering with the symptoms while leaving the structure intact.

At a larger synthesis, it could be understood that demographic shifts lead directly to more fundamental questions regarding the distribution of power, the capacities of different forms of government, and the formation and influence of ethnic and other identities on democratic governance and political stability.

Two main conclusions are pivotal:

1. Youth protests are destined to continue as long as the current demographic and other structural factors that negatively impact their economic, political and social aspirations and wellbeing have not changed. Therefore, it exposes the tension between youth agency and the governing political structures.

2. Both Ethiopia and Sudan are not yet in an age-structural transition, and this is why political stability and broad growth are unlikely, perhaps not yet occur. The gains are precarious and reversable, due to objective democratic characteristics" (p.13).

However, the conclusions raise two theoretical questions; first, by focusing on demographics, we risk reducing the factors that inhibit or augur political transformation to an expanding youth population, therefore using youth as scapegoat for government failure. The problem can be read as if it propagates the idea that a "a youthful, angry marginalized youth" has the capacity to topple government and yet not capable of changing the economic status-quo to the better;

Second, a political demographic theory focusing on youth deprivation replaces the Malthusian focus on natural resources scarcity with a focus on jobs, income and social services scarcity. However, the emphasis on the relationship between demographics and politics does not preclude competition or conflict over resources, as the Ethiopian case clearly demonstrates.

Two more questions relating to comparing and contrasting Ethiopia and Sudan vis-à-vis the role of ethnicity in the youth or demographic revolution: The near absence of ethnicity as a major factor behind the success of the uprising against Bashir and the implications of the uprising for the future of armed-liberation struggle in Sudan damning. Peace resistance has yielded what armed struggle failed to do since 1985.

First, post has brought about some old/new ethnic dimensions: 1) the radicalized Nuba Mountains youth pressure on the SPLA/SPLM-North to opt for the right for self-determination, if the peace negotiations do not agree to establishing a post-conflict secular Sudan. The intensification of the Nigers (black youth from marginalized Sudan, mainly Darfur and South Kordofan). These youth groups are ethnic-based and have similarities with Qeerroo, Ejjetto and Fano.

Second, the emergence of General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemetti, from the Rizeigat sub-tribe of the Baggara), the Commander of the Rapid Response Force, is a game changer in Sudanese politics. This should be seen as a post-revolution division between what is known after the death of the Mahdi as the political struggle between the Ashraf (Mahdi family which is from Northern Sudan) and Awlad Al-Balad (Baggara and other non-northern Sudanese). It is the first time that the descendants of Al Khalifa Abdullahi from the Baggara tribe (extending from Sudan, to Chad and Niger) to have a strong military presence in Khartoum (central and North Sudan). The implications of this are huge.