**Political renewal in Africa? Agency of protest and structure of governance in Sudan and Ethiopia, 2016-2020**

Keynote speech given by Jan Abbink, Professor of Politics and Governance in Africa, African Studies Centre Leiden, Leiden University, at the conference 'Africa: 60 Years of Independence', 30-1-2020

*Summary*

Sudan and Ethiopia have recently gone through remarkable phases of political renewal. Mass popular protests in the past years have led to changes of government and leadership. This is quite surprising for what were two of the most autocratic regimes in Africa. How did this come about? Was real 'system change' achieved? Is the 'power of the streets' enough to cause a transformation of the political system and of governance practices in these countries? What were the political skills of the protesters, and why were the regimes sensitive to change? I look at the political culture and historical heritage in these two countries – which fell outside the 1960s wave of African independence - to see if certain underlying 'structures' and political-demographic dynamics might complicate or hinder durable changes in the political system. I also discuss the future prospects of democratic breakthrough, civic-political freedoms and economic development in the two countries to see if they are on course to realize the ideals and demands voiced by the mass protests.

Sixty years after the wave of independence sweeping Africa, governance and politics on the continent are still a subject of great interest among policy-makers, researchers and the general public. Two crucial countries in Africa do not feature much in the discourse of sixty years of independence that we assess in the *Africa2020* conferences this year: Sudan and Ethiopia. Sudan because it was the first Sub-Saharan African country to gain independence on 1 January 1956: so, well before the big wave of 1960. Ethiopia, likely the oldest state formation in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), was never effectively colonized, although impacted severely by Italy in 1936-41.

Here I will compare the recent trajectories of these two neighbouring countries, often intertwined in their political and cultural history, and asses the remarkable events that have occurred there in the past two years. Indeed, Sudan and Ethiopia have proven to be somewhat of a surprise: on the flow of persistent public protests and political leadership contests, two dictatorial and stifling ideological regimes were removed. Unexpectedly, more democratically minded leaders were ushered in, promising a new political inclusiveness, social peace and economic change.

For those of us who have followed events there, it was difficult to hide our admiration for the youth protest movements and other social forces that helped the new leaders come to power. The changes we saw in the political domain and in the general atmosphere of the two countries are significant if not spectacular, and the stories of many of those involved are impressive.

I give a brief overview of the two episodes of political upheaval and renewal and relate them to the prevailing political cultures in the two countries. But I then will ask the key question of whether these political changes will hold, *or* whether they might be neutralized or absorbed, e.g. by time-tested structures of patronage, elite or party interests or conflict lines that have long been in place. Might protests and regime/elite change toward more democratic structures and socio-economic reform be *reversed* by what some would call the 'deep state' and by political practices that kept the former authoritarian leaders in the saddle for so long? Is what we see 'voluntarist' change depending on a couple of charismatic and well-intentioned individuals and on those digital media-skilled youth contestants, or is a process emerging toward structural or systemic change? What would be the wider, long-term preconditions of such structural change, assuming that youth protests, ideological breakthroughs, and elite change alone are not enough?

I here touch lightly on an old debate in social science: that of structure and agency in social life - a somewhat artificial opposition but narratively attractive. Agency – basically the use of social and individual space within societal conditions and thereby affecting them, or in other words, having the ability 'to have acted differently'[1] - is an engine of social change and movement. Based on personal or collective action, agency has, or can have a wider impact of societal processes and sometimes can refashion structure. Nevertheless, structures are defining if not limiting frameworks of socio-political action that are relatively durable, often resistant to change, and tied to deeper power structures, legal frames and economic inequalities. No doubt, collective political agency is cherished by people and plays its role, exerting pressure on government policies. But, simplifying a complex philosophical question: can 'agency' beat 'structure'?

A central point in my answering the question will be to take into account *demographics*. Chances to attain political stability and 'free' status or broader democratization - and also

[1] Cf. Pleasants 2019: 4-5.

some *economic* changes in terms of raising the *general* level of wealth and productivity - may occur in a more structural fashion if a number of demographic features coincide and are upheld and stimulated by resolute government policy. Statistical population data on a medium and longer-range are quite relevant for assessing chances of political system change, *apart from* and next to analyzing the political narratives, ideological debates, and protest events.[2]

My thesis is that, despite the game-changing massive protests in Sudan and Ethiopia, structural political change will likely not decisively push through. *Unless* demographic patterns in both countries shift – and that will take a few decades.[3]

Cautious optimism regarding Sudan and Ethiopia would be in order, but on what can it be based? Political demography shows us the longer-term basic population trends influencing or signalling political and economic developments in Sub-Saharan (and other) countries in unexpected ways. Research attention to such demographic factors is growing, as we see also from the debates in economics and development studies on the often-mentioned 'demographic dividend'[4]: the emergence of a large working–age population and its productive impact. While we can recognize the connectedness of economic factors with demographic trends, I here limit myself to the '*political* demography', meaning, what do demographic features say about political (in)stability, revolts and (delayed) openings towards democracy and civic rights? This is a subfield in rapid development[5] and can provide new insights on long-term trends, when *combined* with conventional historical and political-sociological analysis.

**Politics and governance in Africa since 1960 and the missing demographic factor**

Since Africa's wave of independence around 1960, scholarly analyses of its politics and governance have focused primarily on politics, ideological narratives, hegemonic structures,

[2] As done e.g., by Branch & Mampilly (2015) on youth protests.

[3] As I said, there are also *economic* correlates of this demography, often addressed in the debates on the 'demographic dividend'. That is a relatively separate discussion that I will not go into here. Suffice it to say that the notable economic growth in many African countries over the past 10-15 years is not correlated with *overall* welfare growth, equity, political stability, or irreversible democratization.

[4] See J. Cilliers 2018; also Louise Fox, 'Three myths about youth employment in Africa and strategies to realize the demographic dividend', February 7, 2019 (https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2019/02/07/three-myths-about-youth-employment-in-africa-and-strategies-to-realize-the-demographic-dividend/).

[5] Cf. Cincotta 2017c.

insurgencies, and governance conditions, and much less on the analysis of such statistical time series, except on economic growth figures (GDP).[6]

My contention is that a different theory, known as the *'age-structural theory'* (AST), can profitably be related to interpreting the movements of political protest, the chances for democratic breakthrough, and of attaining 'free status', for instance, as measured on, the commonly used index of Freedom House (with its annual reports).[7]

AST means relating the characteristics of a country's population composition (notably age group relations) with societal and political trends. The AST theory has shot into prominence by its focus on the nature and impact of the 'youth bulge',[8] but reflects on much more than that.[9] Demographic correlations and insights relating to politics were corroborated in many parts of the world, including Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. In much of the poorer, 'developing' world, notably Africa, an age-structural maturity reflecting a balance between age groups and generating more political stability, is still far off.

To assess the age-structural pattern of a country the theory looks at four key criteria: median age (the age that divides the population in two numerically equal groups: half below are younger, half above it are older), fertility rate (no. of children per woman), (high) population growth (in the sense of 'disturbing' the relation young people vs. working-age people), and the dependency ratio (i.e., the number of mostly 'non-working' dependents per working-age person). While the AST model was tested in many contexts and its predictions and outcomes are fairly constant, it is *not* a *causal* explanation of political processes but primarily gives 'timed expectations'. As such, it is a necessary but not sufficient element in predicting political change and democratization. But an analysis *not* heeding the

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[6] Since 1960, in Africanist political sociology, more attention was given, respectively, to the nature of the post-independence states (some of them formal democracies), the efforts of 'nation-building', the emerging autocracies of the 1970s, on neo-patrimonialist structures, then in the 1990s on democratization, followed by a focus on the fragile or 'failed states' and more recently on developmental regimes, an on 'Africa rising', mainly an economic narrative and rightly paying attention to the remarkable upsurge in economic growth figures.

[7] I am inspired here by the work of Richard Cincotta, one prominent representative of the theory.

[8] See Cincotta 2008-09; Cincotta & Doces 2012; Urdal 2006.

[9] As Richard Cincotta said: an 'age-structurally mature' population both "… affects and reflects multiple aspects of society and state capacity. After all, the past century's dramatic age-structural changes, where the world experienced tremendous growth in population followed by steep declines in fertility rates in many countries, are the result of many changes, including higher educational attainment (particularly women's education), gains in wealth, advances in sanitation and health care, and access to modern contraception." (2017c: 4).

demographic statistics underlying socio-political processes is always incomplete, not to say naïve.[10]

*Regarding Sudan and Ethiopia*, the thesis in brief is that a very young population, with the median age well *below* c. 25-26 years, high fertility and a high dependency ratio of working-age people vs. dependents, will not easily or rapidly show political stability and durable democratization, nor sustained, broad economic growth, despite the ostensive political changes after the mass demonstrations.[11]

**The events in Sudan and Ethiopia, 2016-2019**

First a brief overview of the remarkable events, the political drama, unfolding in Ethiopia and Sudan since c. 2016. I.e., the agency side of things.

To begin with, *Ethiopia.* Protests were seen throughout Ethiopia's post-1991 period, usually harshly suppressed, but the most recent cycle of unrest that emanated in leadership change was initiated in November 2015, by the authorities' confiscation of a football playing field used by youths in the town of Ginch'i in Oromia Region. Angry youngsters contested this action by local authorities, who used the customary reason saying that it was 'needed for investors'. This protest snowballed across the region in 2016 and went to other regional states as well, especially Amhara. In February-March 2017, new rounds followed throughout the country, fueled by a growing list of motives: ethnic discrimination, humiliation, land confiscation, unemployment, nepotism and corruption, lack of job market chances for university graduates, lack of freedoms. In several areas people armed themselves and formulated their grievances in ethnic terms. The various protests lead to state repression,

[10] In SSA, c. 62 % of the population is below 25 years of age!

[11] To compare: *China* at the top of its big growth spurt in 2010-2012 had a dependency ratio of 2.7-2.8 (per dependent, non-working person)! *Japan* is a country with a 'post-mature' age structure: median age 47, percentage of the population above 65: 28.4% (2018). This causes problems of political stability and economic carrying capacity at the other end of the scale…
Regarding the relationship between 'immature' age structure and democratic freedoms, we cannot easily *reverse* the trend lines or correlations, because authoritarian countries can also achieve stability and economic growth under a strongly controlled, ideological or monolithic regime under one party (cf. Cincotta 2017c).

arrests and killings that did not stop over the years. Solidarity across 'ethnic' lines also emerged.[12]

Gradually, political dissatisfaction in urban areas, rural youth protests, land conflicts, and communal clashes, alongside with growing unease *within* the single ruling party EPRDF about the division of power, the economic spoils and federal policy issues, political instability and unrest, combined and seemed to spiral out of control.

The EPRDF ruling party elite tried to move towards reform to accommodate the internal and external critics, as the price of protest containment and of enforcing party discipline had become too high: by late 2017, hundreds of demonstrators had been killed, and thousands arrested. Internet was frequently shut down, and business life suffered. Moreover, centrifugal tendencies threatened the grip of the ruling party and elite control of the economy. In February 2018, internal party elections then yielded an unexpected new PM, the young Abiy Ahmed, a regime functionary but a critical voice and emerging from a wider group of Oromo and Amhara reformists within the EPRDF party. His assuming power in April 2018 meant a watershed. He proceeded to irreversibly change the party and the relationship between its four constituents, abolished repressive laws, made promises to the youthful demonstrators, liberated the press and civil society, opened dialogue - often in person, via grass-roots meetings - with the population, opposition parties and civil society groups, made a major push to advance women in public life,[13] and announced free and fair elections for mid-2020. He turned around the style of doing politics in Ethiopia and vocally pleaded for a reversal of Ethiopia's hierarchical and autocratic political culture towards inclusiveness and synergy. His appeal to cooperation, to the human and cultural capital of all Ethiopians and shared purpose for the nation was unpreceded, and his speeches devoid of any enemy-image metaphors, as were the hallmark of his predecessors, always conjuring up domestic and foreign opponents.[14] The renewal that PM Abiy offered was received with enthusiasm and relief, especially in the first six months. Indeed, as he said in one of his speeches in 2018: "The questions of the youth are not solely one of economy and equitable benefit, we believe

[12] See for instance: Worku Aberra, " '*Tanan kaygna*, *Ethiopian kaygna*': Our Tana, our Ethiopia", 10 January 2018 (https://www.nazret.com/2018/01/15/tanan-kaygna-ethiopian-kaygna-our-tana-our-ethiopia/).

[13] Half of his cabinet consisted of women ministers.

[14] Cf. the analysis in Azeb Amha, 'To sway a nation: rhetorical characteristics and public impact of the political speeches of PM Dr. Abiy Ahmed', ASCL Ethiopia Country Day presentation, African Studies Centre Leiden, 12 November 2018.

they are also about justice and democracy."[15] He was right. But his opening the political system and embarking on a new course did not mean that the outcome - also for himself and his party – was ensured.

The first disagreements and grumblings soon started among people and organizations who chose to stick to an agenda of past grievances and group-thinking, pleading only for their own so-called constituency rather than play their part in the renewal of *national* politics. Indeed, ghosts from the past came back: the results of 27 years of ethnic thinking and politicking reemerged, and this led to disagreements and violent action – displacements, expulsions, mob killings, border clashes. Although the new government tried to prevent it, there was exclusion of people based on so-called 'ethnic' differences and interests presumed to be under threat. Paradoxically, 'democracy' in Ethiopia was interpreted by political actors mainly as "the right to express oneself ethnically", and not primarily in civic-national terms. Several opposition forces, supported by massive and often misleading and trolling social media campaigns, subscribed to this agenda of division and digression. Ethno-territorial identity appeals turned almost into mimetic group rivalry on the local level.

It could be said that the nation-wide demands for change, economic reform and political opening that demonstrators had initially asked for and that were taken up by the Abiy Ahmed government in 2019, became fragmented along ethnic-regional lines, subverting the unity message of the PM. The story is complex and cannot be recounted in full here, but much of the Ethiopian people and would-be opposition leaders were not able or willing to catch up with the new approach or to connect to the new discourse of inclusive national politics. Instead, many ethno-elites came to see the state more as a 'resource machine' to be put to work for *them*, and not for others.[16] It would be a mistake to think that the protesters are all noble 'democrats'...

Unless spectacularly successful government policies in the field of economics, education, land distribution, and political representation take root, I think Ethiopia will be faced with ongoing socio-political unrest in the near future, with large groups of unemployed and restless people, and no consolidated democratic structures. This is at least what the current population profile of the country, before the 'opening of the demographic window', would

[15] Cited in Azeb, op. cit.

[16] As Goldstone (2002: 8-9) already noted, elites and would-be elites are a main cause of conflict mobilization in conditions of resource shortage, land scarcity, etc. – not these conditions themselves.

lead us to expect. A complicating factor will be that 'ethnic demographics' will become more and more important: the ethno-territorial system in place since 1991 has put a premium on the size and competition between 'ethnic groups' – i.e., their elites - about land, resources and regional administration.

*What about Sudan?*

Sudan also saw a remarkable, unexpected turn-around with the fall of long-time autocratic president Gen. Muhammed al Bashir in April last year. A popular revolt had begun in December 2018 in the cities of Damazine and Atbara, initiating a new round in a cycle of insurgencies, already seen in preceding decades.[17] It spread to most central Sudanese cities and all was predominantly non-violent. We saw a cumulation of grievances and pent-up feelings coming out. A key role was played by young people and by the Sudan Professionals Association, a group of independent professional unions. One of the key slogans became 'Tasqut bas!': 'Just Go!' addressed to the regime, which was seen by most as having long outlived its expiry date (30 years..).

What seemed to have begun as so-called riots against bad living conditions and costs of basic commodities spiraling rapidly became a protest against the entire political system. It was obvious that these were *not* 'bread riots' as some global media were eager to describe them. There was more involved: a quest for freedom, breathing space, representation, anti-corruption, against the suppression or keeping down of young people and minorities, and also for the release of women from public restrictions and marginalization. Indeed, from the start, the strong presence and involvement of young women was obvious in Sudan's protests.[18] We all know the famous picture of Ms. Ala'a Salah, dressed in highly symbolic outfit, standing on top of a car, reciting a powerful protest poem.[19] She represented a generation born *after* Al Bashir's *coup d'état* in 1989 that had known no other regime than his (a generation sick and tired of lies, abuse and violence). Women indeed became a motor

[17] Of course beginning in 1964, when the first military regime was ousted, and in 1985 when President G. el-Numeiry was deposed. But riots and protests occurred also in all intermittent years, notably in 2011, 2012 and 2013, on a mixture on grievances like high costs of living, unemployment, repression of civil liberties, banning of opposition groups and trade unions, etc.

[18] Cf. Amel Mukhtar, 'The brilliant women making a difference in Sudan's female-led revolution', *Vogue*, 24 May 2019 (https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/sudanese-female-revolutionaries-speak-out?fbclid=IwAR1ZzhOrVXvEOtm8_N8cDkr56s1nqgUEFcq4ai_GBdkRjQeSVZz4QgbV3G4).

[19] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXiSxI0Vj3E.

of revolt and voiced an array of grievances. Notable from the start was of course also the enormous role played by social media[20] in expressing grievances and mobilizing demonstrations.

Rarely if at all in the protest movement were religious issues raised, except that protesters rallied against the political abuse of religion (Islam) by the Islamist regime of al Bashir which had imposed repressive laws on female dress and on public behaviour of women. This was all categorically rejected.

The response of the regime was initially violent dispersal of the protesters, with since December 2018 dozens of people killed by regime forces, thousands arrested, and Internet repeatedly closed off. It did not work. The continued pressure by street protesters led to the unexpected: on 11 April dictator Mohammed al Bashir, known for perennially fomenting armed conflict and decades of malgovernance, was deposed, forced by a frightened army elite choosing to 'sacrifice' him to save their power position. More unrest and persistent protests followed, with on 3 June a massacre of about a 100 people in Khartoum. After a difficult process of negotiation between civilian pressure groups and demonstrators united in the new coalition Forces of Freedom and Change with the army council, a transitional Sovereign Council was inaugurated in August 2019, with five key army leaders[21] and six civilians as members (among them two women), to prepare for elections in 3 years. A popular and capable economist Dr. Abdallah Hamdok, untainted by collaboration with the al-Bashir regime, was appointed as PM , and started reforms. After the instalment of the Transitional Cabinet in August and the repeal of repressive laws, women started to engage much more in public life, including setting up football clubs.[22] PM Abdallah Hamdok also started negotiations with insurgents in the troubled regions of Darfur and Blue Nile, and on Friday 24 January 2020 a deal was reached to end hostilities – a major breakthrough.

The Sudanese people seemed to have achieved a major political victory – despite that the system as such was not totally overhauled and that the 3-year transition period is long and will be full of risks. However, most impressive in the past 1,5 year was the unity of purpose

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[20] See: https://sudanrevolts.home.blog/2019/01/10/becauseweread-emergency-read-on-sudan/
And music: https://sudanrevolts.home.blog/2019/01/10/becauseweread-emergency-read-on-sudan.

[21] Retaining the Defense and the Interior Ministry portfolios.

[22] See BBC, 'The Sudanese women breaking taboos by playing football', 22-1-2020 (https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-50892130/the-sudanese-women-breaking-taboos-by-playing-football).

and persistence of the demonstrators, many of whom, after the new government was installed, turned to social and civic initiatives via citizens' councils to concretely improve living conditions and do what the state had omitted to do.

**Agency, structures, and demography**

So, in both counties, we saw a story of collective action of youths and social movements with a transformative impact and regime-change. The youth activists, women's groups, job seekers, and ethnic-constituency politicians/activists – all diverse and disunited categories - may be forgiven for thinking that they changed the course of history, that their agency has run supreme, and that future policies of the new transitional governments must obey their wishes and demands.

Is that view justified? Has agency won over structure? Up to a point, as we saw. But the 'structures' are resilient: there are long-term factors influencing politics and economic development:

- authority structures, hierarchical institutions, and (business) interest groups are still influential
- the size, geography and social and ethnic complexity of the countries in question are factors playing a role.
- foreign support to old and new political actors, based often on vested interests and expediency instead of principled assistance, can have a disturbing bad influence[23].
- the army in both countries – 'deep state' (?) conservative force, inherited from the repressive regime and in need of reform and personnel change.
- collective representations in the societal order: religious, ethnic and conservative cultural values tend to inhibit radical change.
- and above all: *demographic characteristics.*

This latter point is where age-structural theory has a contribution to make: as I have said earlier, population features have a relation to social and political peace, democratization, and overall development of a country, and in general, an age-mature population structure is

[23] In Sudan's case: Egypt, Saudi, Russia, Gulf states, China having kept al-Bashir in the saddle; even UK, USA and Norway & EU were cautious, initially not supporting the people's revolt; reason: the 'Khartoum Process' migration containment…. In Ethiopia's case: criticism of the previous regime, but caution among USA, EU, China, etc. so as not to 'destabilize' the country more.

conducive to the latter issues. A population structure skewed towards a high proportion of young, dependent people – i.e., what is labeled as 'not mature' - was shown by research to be not favourable to democratic development and stability, but more to periodic contestation and violent conflict. As I noted, the four features of the median age, the fertility rate, population growth per annum, and the dependency ratio are good indicators.
Here is a general AST graph to start with (from one of Cincotta's papers):

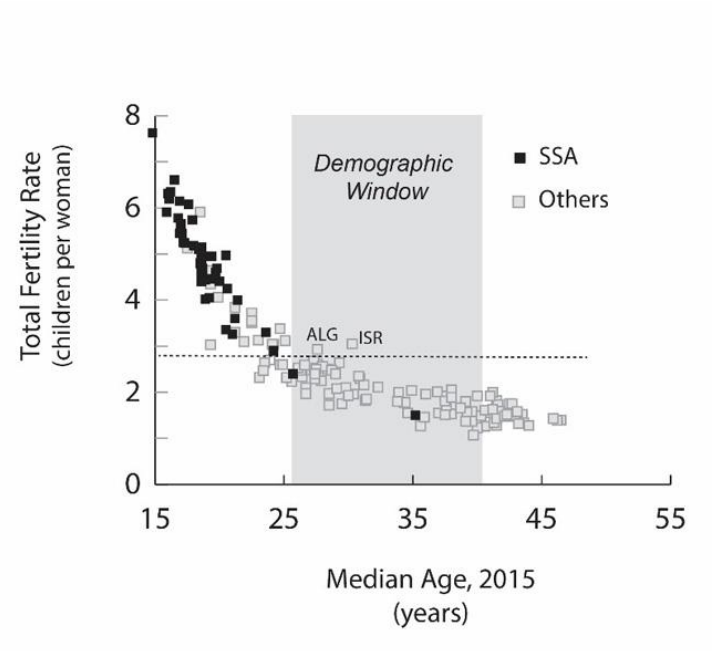


Fig. 1. Source: R. Cincotta 2017a (The dotted line is that of a fertility rate of 2.8 children per woman)

In this Table, combining data on fertility rate and median age, the black squares on the left are Sub-Saharan African countries: as we see, virtually all (except Mauritius[24] and Tunisia[25]) are in the pre-demographic window phase.[26] The lighter squares on the right are lower on all four indicators and find themselves in the 'democratic phase'. As I noted, a common measure for this are usually the scores of a country on the annual Freedom House index. This phase usually opens *when the median age of a population is 26-27 years* and when the population under 14 is *below* 30% and that of over 65 *not higher than* 15%. Most African

[24] Fertility rate 1.44.
[25] Fertility rate 2.14.
[26] All data come from the Worldometers website, which combines statistics from the UN Population Division, World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank.

countries are far *above* a dependency ratio of c. 1.2 (of ca. 40-50% dependents vs. working age people) that is usually correlated with more political stability and the onset of economic take-off and durable, equitable growth in employment and productivity.[27] In addition, the data show that nearly all countries that reached the demographic window (without the assistance of migration) *declined below* a total fertility rate of 2.8 children per woman.[28] Although fertility decline *is* slowly setting in in Africa, most countries, except in North Africa and a few island states, are *not* soon going to reach the window, and this has political (and economic) consequences.[29] In such demographic conditions, the *trigger* to revolt is usually that of (perceptions) of the state elite's political corruption and power abuse. In the analyses of this AST 'school' (Goldstone, Sciubba, Cincotta, Urdal, a.o. – see list of references), *Tunisia* is often mentioned as a confirming example of ongoing demographic balancing and political liberalization, and indeed the statistics seem to bear this out. The data indicate that in Tunisia's political development over 35 years, 1980 to 2015, its rating on the civil liberties and democratic freedom scale (of Freedom House) increased notably as median age dropped and 'age-structural maturity' advanced, and in 2015 its political system consolidated qualitative change.[30] These days the country is the only functioning democracy in the North Africa region, although vulnerable.[31]

Then our two countries: how do they fare? They share much in common in demographic profile, although Ethiopia has almost three times the population number of Sudan (Source: Worldometers website).

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[27] To compare: The Netherlands has a median age of 43,3 years, a fertility rate of 1.66, and an above-65 population of 31.2%, which makes the dependency ratio too high, although not skewed towards youth as in Africa but towards the elderly. The Netherlands is, hence, past the demographic window and is under pressure. The USA is still doing well, being in the closing phase of the 'demographic window': with a median age of 38.3, a fertility rate of 1.8 and increasing dependency ratio: 53.9 % are dependents (those below 14 and above 65). Immigration has slowed its advancing into a Japanese or European 'post-maturity' phase.

[28] Cincotta 2017a.

[29] See https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/10794.pdf.

[30] This result is likely also related to the strong investments in *education*, for males and females, started under former President Habib Bourguiba (d. 1987).

[31] Seeing events in Algeria today (2019-20), this country may soon follow, as was predicted eight years ago. Cp. Yahia H. Zoubir, Can Algeria overcome its long-lasting political crisis? (https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/15/can-algeria-overcome-its-long-lasting-political-crisis/)

*Ethiopia's* population in early 2020 was c. 113 mln (In 1900 it was an estimated 11 mln; in 1960, the year of the African independence moment: 22,1 mln people).
The median age today is: 19.5 years. As we saw, the lower the median age, the more skewed the population structure. The prediction of Ethiopia's median age in 2030 is 23 years.
Ethiopia's population growth annually is 2.6% (although the rate is slowly declining: 3.3 % in 1990, 3% in 2000).[32] This means almost a doubling every 25 years. The fertility rate in 2020 was 4.3, i.e., high. Ethiopia's dependency ratio % is: 76.8%
According to political demographer Richard Cincotta's analyses and case studies, the 'demographic window' in general opens up when the median age of a nation's population is about 26-27, leading to more stabilization. Ethiopia will reach this only in c. 2045.

*Sudan*'s population in early 2020 was 43.3 mln. (In 1960, the year of African independence, it had 7,5 mln people). The median age in Sudan in 2019 was 19.7 years (but projections for the median age are: in 2030: 21.6, in 2040: 23.3, in 2050: 25.1).
Its annual population growth is 2.42%: high but down from 1992, which was the top: 3.85% (in 1990: 3.32%, in 2000: 2.44%, so also a bit declining.)
The fertility rate in Sudan in 2020 is 4.43, and is projected to be constant in the coming decades (UN figures). The dependency ratio today is 76,9%. Also very high.
So Sudan has basically the same dependency ratio as Ethiopia, indicating similar underlying problems. Also for Sudan, a median age of 26-27 years is still far away (as in Ethiopia, a generation from now), and the dependency ratio is equally problematic in view of the large young population and high annual population growth likely outstripping economic absorptive capacity in the coming decades.
In general this also means that for both countries the *tax base* is (too) small. But in a country with a high number of youths, state investments in infrastructure, facilities, education, trade facilitation, public management, and technology, substantial public funds from taxes are precisely what is needed.
So the AST predicts that in the case of Sudan and Ethiopia, with these high indicators, pressure and changes in the manifest political domain will not durably enhance stability, democracy and civic freedoms or inclusive (broad-based) economic growth *before* these two

[32] 21.3% of the population is urban: ca. 24 mln. people.

countries' entry into the 'demographic window' (see Figure 1), which is expected to open after 2035-2040. *Unless* policies radically change and make a rapid transformative impact on society and the behavior of people. History shows us that such radical policy change is unlikely, despite that under the current leadership in both countries the chances/opportunities are greater than ever. So the 'demographic window' *will* arrive, but not as soon as people think.

Interestingly, opposition parties and protesters in Ethiopia (and to a lesser extent, Sudan) do hardly emphasize the need for massive transformative policies for the nation - they largely focus on perceived 'group interests' and short-term concerns in a mixture of ethnic canvassing and trying to secure jobs for their own groups and/or their self-appointed elites.

We have seen in the first part of this lecture presentation that as a result of resolute protests and reform efforts, fueled by youthful cohorts and reformist leaders, advances *were* indeed made in the sphere of political governance – there is more openness, transitional government, legal reforms, better economic policy, more civic and democratic freedoms, etc. and these are partly an achievement of voluntarist action, of agency.

But clearly, both Ethiopia and Sudan are not yet in an age-structural transition, and this is why political stability and broad growth are unlikely, perhaps cannot (yet) occur. The gains are precarious and reversible, due to the objective demographic characteristics..

Often the prediction of instability is made with reference to the big 'youth bulge'. But this itself is not a sufficient causal factor. Crucial for it to become relevant and 'explode' is *state capacity* and *government response*.

**The political dynamics as impacted by demography and structures**

Sudan's and Ethiopia's country profiles caution us and suggest it is unlikely that sustained democratization, institutionalized civic freedoms and system predictability will materialize in the coming 15-20 years. To repeat, both countries will, according to the AST theory, see more instability, youth contestation and frequent revolts – along with conditions of significant unemployment and economic uncertainty – *before* they reach the demographic window that would stabilize into such freedoms and more democratic-deliberative structures. All this *despite* these being the conscious aims of many of the protesting youths – who, by the way, may diverge in aims and social positioning.

But do Sudan and Ethiopia face the same trajectory? There are similarities but also differences *between* Sudan and Ethiopia. Against a canvas of similar demographic limiting conditions, there is a varying political dynamic. I mention 4 points.

1. In Sudan's protests *ethnicity* and its demographics did not play such a divisive role. When the al-Bashir regime last year tried to play out the demonstrators against each other, for example appealing to the youngsters of the Central Sudan 'riverain' populations and so-called 'warning them' for "being exploited by the Darfuri rebel fronts", the street response was "You arrogant racists, we are all Darfur!".[33] In Ethiopia, ethnic interests were not the only driving factor in the initial rural mass protests, and new alliances ware made across regions between loosely organized youth groups. Oromo youth groups voiced support for Amhara youths in 2017, and vice versa. Even in the choice of the strong reformist Abiy Ahmed as new EPRDF party chair and PM in March 2018 the Oromo part and the Amhara part of the old coalition collaborated in thwarting the dominant TPLF. However, almost two years after the government change, the 'ethnicization' of the protest agendas has become very problematic, and has entered the mainstream of (opposition) parties now jostling for the August 2020 elections.

2. In Sudan *young women*, organized and non-organized, were much more instrumental and visible in the demonstrations and in media activities; in Ethiopia they were a clear minority, also because most of the massive protests occurred in rural areas, not in the capital and other cities.

3. In Sudan, *professional organizations* – the SPA - and non-ethnic civil society groups led the protests and could refer to a long history of organized opposition going back to the 1960s. In Ethiopia, protests were more local, dispersed, among unemployed school leavers, the rural poor, disadvantaged young peasants, would-be ethnic elites, and several diaspora activists via social media, and also among small, marginalized ethnic minorities in the South and West.

4. The *narrative of national unity and joint destiny* re-emerged in Sudan, but only hesitantly so in Ethiopia, where, after initial feelings of shared grievances, ethnicized and aspiring regional elite groups came to fuel ethno-regional agendas during 2019, and they did hardly formulate clear civic rights and economic programs on the national level. Remarkably,

[33] Cited in Burridge 2019: 3.

many of them failed to tune in to the discourse of unity and the project of a joint future ahead that Ethiopian PM Abiy had powerfully outlined, with skill and persuasive rhetoric,[34] and in the name of which he had invited all opposition movements, social forces, the business sector and persons in- and outside the country back to join the national endeavour.[35] Thus, (ethnic) power struggles emerged.

**Conclusions**

I move to a concluding review.

The political changes generated by youthful protesters in both Sudan and Ethiopia mesmerized the world, and again gave the lie to a position, often seen among donor countries, that authoritarian regimes are 'stable' and that one should just work with them. But regimes were toppled and restructured, radical political change was announced and achieved, and a new style or spirit of politics emerged.

The engine behind this was a new, young *generational cohort* that grew up in the last 25-28 years since the previous regime changes in Sudan (1989) and Ethiopia (1991); it had come to maturity but saw itself stagnated, blocked, and with very limited future prospects. They were fed up, and acted on it. But this cohort pointed to a specific demographic problem situation – large numbers, low median age, high dependency ratios -, constituting a limiting factor that acts to restrain durable political breakthroughs and likely to perpetuate instability.

Indeed, as we saw, Sudan and Ethiopia share a similar political-demographic profile as to the *four key criteria* of high fertility, low median age, relatively high population growth, and high dependency ratio, as well as on the *timing* of the demographic window, to come after ca. 2035-40. So this combination has a direct correlation with political variables – even apart from economic ones, which I excluded from discussion today. I also excluded *environmental* factors, which may pose an even more serious long-term threat to broad and equitable development for the large numbers of people to come.[36]

[34] Cf. Azeb's analysis, 2018, op. cit.

[35] A fifth element perhaps was the different *geography of revolt*: more rural in Ethiopia, more urban in Sudan.

[36] Cf. Abbink 2018; UNEP 2019.

The political-demographic obstacles need not be a cause for despair, because as we have seen, and as was recently admitted by proponents of the AST, factors in the realm of politics and governance *can* decisively impinge on the trajectory. Nonetheless, this requires decisive and interventionist government policies affecting the choices/preferences of people as well as improving educational levels[37] for both men and women – and societal and institutional conditions promoting gender equality - policies which have often lacked. In addition, to repeat, the demographic profile of youthfulness and high dependency severely limits the domestic *tax base* from which state investments ideally should come to bring the 'demographic window' closer.[38]

In general: rapid population growth usually does increase 'resource competition', but does not (directly) *cause* big conflicts; the relationship between population change and political conflict is *always mediated by state capacity* and *state response.*[39] Although initially, *local* conflicts often occur in such conditions. What we see today in the Sahel – the youngest region in Africa and the most conflict-ridden - is large-scale conflict due to a rather spectacular failure of state institutions and governance. Essential to study and assess the 'youthfulness' of a country in its tendency to enhance conflicts is, however, to look at their *nature*: as Cincotta noted (2018), "….three key factors complicate the relationship between age structure and intra-state conflict": conflict *type* (is it civil or territorial), conflict *history* in a country, and conflict '*spill-over'* (cross-border spread from problematic neighbouring countries)[40]…

If we compare Sudan and Ethiopia, we have reason to be a bit more optimistic about Sudan than about Ethiopia in moving towards institutionalized democratic governance and inclusive politics in ca. 15-20 years. One reason is the more encompassing, more gender-sensitive, and non-ethnic agenda of revolt in Sudan, echoing the uprisings of 1964 and 1985. In Ethiopia, the longevity and durability of ethno-ideological structures which have been pressed upon the generation born after 1991, knowing nothing else than politicized-

[37] See W. Lutz, J. Crespo Cuaresma & N. Gailey 2019, 'The demographic dividend is driven by education, not changes in age structure', at: http://www.niussp.org/article/the-demographic-dividend-is-driven-by-education/ (accessed 5-1-2020).

[38] The best example to show that reducing youthfulness indicators works is of course China's former one-child policy: it gave the decisive boost to its economic growth. But it also reinforced the pre-existing one-party dictatorial & surveillance power, limiting the expected tendency toward democratization.

[39] Cp. Goldstone 2012.

[40] For instance, for Ethiopia and Sudan: the persistent armed conflicts in Somalia and South Sudan.

territorialized ethnicity and victimology discourse along ethnic lines, are more impactful.[41] In addition, embodied ethno-regional diversity itself may be more deep-rooted in Ethiopia. Come what may, the ordinary people of both countries have shown their agency and their capacity to press for change and have impacted on the political structure of their countries. The generation that grew up knowing only one party or one leader had had enough and rose. While much of that change, forged in painful sacrifice and with high costs, is vulnerable to being 'absorbed' or neutralized by structures and resistant elites, things will no more be the same in either country. Of course, institutions and political structures in Africa are often still too much tied up with specific persons or with particular interest groups ('neo-patrimonialist'), but this also makes them more amenable to sudden alternatives or changes of policy. Still, demographic facts are an objective limiting factor. This goes for Sudan and Ethiopia but also for Africa as a whole.

What I emphasize is that the political sociology of African governance and politics would do well to *recognize* that underlying population facts and numbers are tenacious, exert long-term influence, and cannot quickly be vanquished by voluntarist action and grievance-led protests only.

To conclude: we might say, *demography rules*. But still, demography is not entirely unaccountable. Decisive policies *can* impact on it, and that is where good leadership, inclusive civic action, and popular pressure remain essential. Agency when claimed and enacted in the public domain *can* enforce, at least initiate, the change of structures, and the movement towards the demographic window will reinforce it. Sudan and Ethiopia have shown hopeful openings for this and are making history.

[41] Although an important new think-tank initiative, 'Destiny Ethiopia', has been active in bridging differences across parties and ethnic partisan groups, developing 'scenario analysis'; cf. Awol Allo 2020. Its lasting effect has, however, yet to be demonstrated.

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