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## A TRADITION COOPTED: PARTICIPATORY DEVELOPMENT AND AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN SUDAN

Anne-Laure Mahé

**Abstract:** The concept of participation is a cornerstone of development and democracy discourses, but studies on participatory development rarely examine the political regimes those policies are embedded in. Yet, in authoritarian contexts, participation is ambiguous: potentially threatening – as it can be connected to democratic ideals – but also a resource – a tool for domination. Through an analysis of participatory development projects implemented in Sudan, I explore how power relations are renegotiated at the local level. Relying on data collected during fieldwork in Khartoum and the state of North Kordofan, where the projects are located, I highlight the disconnect between the discourse surrounding the participatory devices, which establishes an horizontal relationship between the citizens and the local government, and the actual practices that strengthen the latter’s power. In doing so, the article challenges a linear, top-down conception of authoritarian power, and reveals the tensions that exist between institutional levels.

## Introduction

The dominant stream in the current literature on authoritarian regimes focuses on the impact formal democratic institutions have on their resiliency. It explores the impact made by the introduction of legislatures, political pluralism, and elections to those regimes (for example, Brancati, 2014; Brownlee, 2007; Gandhi, 2008). However, it has scarcely investigated the participatory and popular side of those changes, focusing instead on their roles in intra-elite games on the macro level. This article intends to demonstrate the relevance of an analysis that goes beyond focus on elites to explore the relationships between citizens and state authorities in contexts where participatory devices are implemented. This implies a focus on the micro level, where the opening of participatory arenas necessarily creates opportunities for direct contact between local representatives of the state and citizens.

I explore those interactions through the case study of a participatory development initiative launched in 2013 in the federated state of North Kordofan, in Sudan. This article does not evaluate the efficiency of such an approach, but examines its nuts and bolts in order to identify the mechanisms through which power relationships are reproduced, but also negotiated and refined, on the micro level. This approach allows us to challenge the linear, top-down conception of authoritarian power<sup>i</sup>. Furthermore, while I focus on the relations between citizens and local authorities, my research reveals the tensions that exist between the latter and the central state.

After providing some background on the Sudanese political regime and the development program in North Kordofan (part 1), I will present the theoretical and methodological tenets of the demonstration. While a first wave of literature, bearing the influence of research on public policies in the global North, presented the concept of participation in development as inherently positive, more recent critical approaches, influenced by Foucauldian theories, have highlighted its shortcomings (part 2). In the wake of these critical approaches, I study first the discourse

surrounding the participatory initiative in North Kordofan, demonstrating how participation is framed through a reference to a tradition called *nafir*, which makes non-participation difficult, but at the same time challenges the cultural and ideological policies of the central state (part 3). I then turn to the implementation of participation, and identify a diverse set of practices presenting various degrees of coerciveness. On a higher level, participation is turned into taxation, becoming a tool to extend and deepen the federated state's control (part 4).

### **Sudan's authoritarianism: resiliency and troubles on the peripheries**

In 1989, a coup led by a coalition of Islamists from the National Islamic Front (NIF) and military officers seized power in Sudan, ending a brief period of democratic government (1986-1989). Omar al-Bashir was appointed head of the state, while Hassan al-Turabi, the NIF leader, governed from the shadows. The Arabization and Islamization policies implemented by the regime negated the diversity of this gigantic country, reinforcing a process of state formation that had been based on the marginalization of the peripheries, and domination by a small elite hailing from the riverine regions, since the colonial era. This marginalization was not only economic and political, it was cultural as well, since the elite identified itself as both Arab and Muslim, and had been a major motive for the rebellion of the southern parts of the country between 1955 and 1972. The civil war was reignited in 1983, during General Gafaar Nimeiri's dictatorship, following the implementation of the Shariah Laws. Combined with local disputes, those marginalizing policies later contributed to the outbreak of war in Darfur (2003-2006<sup>ii</sup>), to a "low-intensity conflict" in eastern Sudan (1994-2006), and to the ongoing conflict in South Kordofan that began in 2011. As it turns out, few areas in Sudan have been left untouched by civil war, and even in those places, relationships with the central government remain uneasy. For instance, in the Northern State, citizens

fought against the Merowe dam, a project that led to the displacement of thousands of people, many of whose were promised compensation but never received it. The government answered the protests with violence (Askouri, 2011).

Similarly, while the people of North Kordofan have not been in armed conflict with the central government, feelings of marginalization, and resentment towards elites who failed to redistribute oil rents, are strong (interview with Hilal, teacher, El Obeid). Located next to Darfur, the state –wilaya, in Arabic- of North Kordofan was similarly affected by drought and famine in the 1980s, which provoked a rural exodus to the capital of the state, El Obeid, and further east, to Khartoum. The main industry of the province, gum arabic, was severely affected. Though North Kordofan is not the most deprived state in Sudan, it is severely challenged by issues of poverty and food security (World Food Programme, 2013). In this context, the newly appointed governor of North Kordofan, Ahmed Haroun, launched an ambitious development initiative, the “Renaissance of North Kordofan”, in 2013. Presented as a drastic change from preceding development policies, the Renaissance encompasses projects as varied as renovating infrastructures and reforming institutions, with the aim of re-energizing the province to make it attractive to both Sudanese and foreign investors. Its originality lies in its emphasis on popular participation and mobilization. Officials use local tradition to translate those principles, referring to those aspects of the Renaissance as “nafir”, a Sudanese practice of communal work and mutual aid. The word literally means “call to mobilize” and is used in the Renaissance convention, where one of the chapters is titled “The necessity of the Nafir and of the Renaissance for the province (Renaissance convention, 2014)”. This is presented as an innovation by local officials, despite the fact that the regime has implemented participatory development before, to build universities and roads (Mann, 2011; Verhoog et al., 1993). The main question is, therefore, what role do participatory devices play in micro and macro level

power relationships: do they reproduce them, do they challenge them or do they simply transform them in various ways? In an authoritarian context, does participation become an authoritarian practice? On this question, the literature on participatory development offers two very contrasting views.

### **Participatory development and power: challenge or entrenchment?**

The incorporation of participation in development is nothing new. Just as it became a buzzword in the realm of politics, so it has been in the field of development since the 1980s. The popularity of the concept dates back to the publication of Chambers' book on rural development, in 1983. Attributing the failure of past development programs to their top-down approach, he argued for the inclusion of participatory devices in a more bottom-up perspective. As Salole states, "it has become virtually axiomatic that all 'good' projects are projects which *involve* the beneficiaries from the very start (Salole, 1991: 5)". The introduction of this concept in the field of development cannot be understood without taking into account the influence it had gained in developed countries during the preceding decade, in a context in which austerity measures, in accordance with the spread of neoliberal views on the necessity of a retreat of the state, limited state resources. This constriction of the welfare state was also a consequence of the growing popularity of New Public Management, a paradigm of public governance that emerged in the 1970s. Its proponents stated that the efficiency of the public sector could be improved by transferring practices from the private sector, and argued for increased citizen participation in defining and evaluating public policies. Citizens thus become both producers and consumers of public services and goods (Levine and Fisher, 1984: 846). New Public Management was therefore characterized by a conception of popular participation as a guarantee of efficiency and transparency, which connects it to a broader discourse on democracy.

In contrast to these positive views, critical evaluations of participatory development have shown that its political aspect was lost or severely muted when the concept was transferred to the global South by international organizations and development practitioners. Despite the regular use of the word “empowerment”— supposedly a desirable effect of the implementation of participatory devices— “precisely what empowerment involves is frequently unclear, and at the same time empowerment often becomes the objective of development rather than the means towards development (Henkel and Stirrat, 2001: 171)”. Who is empowered, and what it means for local communities remain contentious, since, as it turns out, participatory arenas are often appropriated by local elites, further excluding the already marginalized (Botes and Van Rensburg, 2000; Cooke and Kothari, 2001). Incidentally, similar mechanisms have been highlighted by the scholarship on direct democracy (Gourgues and al., 2013; Rocha, 2013). Inspired by Foucault’s approach, many authors in both literatures demonstrate that participatory arenas are sites where power relationships are reproduced and entrenched through control of the bodies and discourses of participants, with the establishment of norms defining prescribed behaviours in those spaces (Gourgues and al., 2013; Kothari and Uma, 2001). Those in charge of setting up participatory arenas, either development practitioners and/or officials representing the state, define the norms. Gourgues and al. (2013) argue that participation aims to reduce conflict and divert citizens’ attention away from their grievances. When citizens are kept busy with participation, they are prevented from contesting social exclusion (Jouve 2005; Palomares and Rabaud, 2006). For some authors of this Foucauldian critique, the discourse of empowerment, with its democratic undertones, is used to legitimize an approach that puts the poor in charge of their own development, absolving the state of its responsibility, and allowing for the implementation of projects at a lower cost, all in accordance with the neoliberal paradigm (Cornwall and Brock, 2005; Leal, 2007). In addition, development practitioners present participatory development as a technical solution to technical

issues (Parizet, 2011), which contributes to the broader practice of depoliticizing development and erasing the fact that it is a form of governmentality. Indeed, development policies implement services that are also tools used to govern people's lives (Blundo and Le Meur 2008 ; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014 ; Ferguson 1994).

The Foucauldian approach seems appropriate for the study of participatory development in an authoritarian context, especially as literature on authoritarian resiliency has demonstrated the capacity of autocrats to use participatory devices to reinforce their power (for instance, Brancati 2014; Brownlee 2007; Gandhi 2008). Yet, the Foucauldian perspective also emphasizes the necessity of empirical investigation, and the difficulty of labeling specific practices as autocratic or democratic *a priori*. Therefore, I argue that authoritarian domination is nuanced and negotiated rather than reproduced, and it is only through an empirical investigation on the micro level that those dimensions can be grasped. My approach combines an empirical focus with Foucault's insights on the inherent incompleteness of authoritarian domination, a consequence of the relational nature of power, in order to grasp those nuances (1982: 789). This enables the analysis to pay attention to power relationships involving multiple actors, here most notably the citizens, the wilaya, and the central government. Indeed, while I focus on the local level, a common thread runs through the analysis: the complexity of the relationships between the various levels of state authority.

Methodologically, the paper is based on data collected through interviews, observations, and official documentation during two fieldworks in Khartoum and North Kordofan, mostly in the capital city of El Obeid, between March and June 2015, and September and December 2015. Altogether, more than 40 semi-directed interviews were conducted with local officials, businessmen, and professors<sup>iii</sup>. Apart from one exception, all interviewees were men and most of them part of the local socio-economical elite. As such, voices of underprivileged and marginalized



groups are less observable in the data. Additional information is provided by casual conversations I reported in my journal. For documentation, I had access to three documents produced by officials in charge of the Renaissance: a summary of the governor's speech presenting the initiative and of the Renaissance convention; a document that addresses the water issue; and lastly, a report on the funds collected for the Renaissance for the year 2013/2014. These documents were translated from Arabic to French, and most interviews were conducted with a translator. This presents a limitation of the data, as the discourse with the interviewees was, in some ways, coproduced with the translator. Participants were asked for consent, and informed about the research beforehand. All data were anonymized for consistency and as a precautionary principle. Most participants were welcoming, and eager to talk about the development initiative, but I was made aware, both in Khartoum and El Obeid, of the overbearing presence of the security apparatus. This situation may have an impact on the reliability of the information provided. As well as using interview techniques designed to determine trustworthiness, I take care in the paper to indicate every time there are contradicting accounts or interpretations of a piece of information. While I believe the collected data provide a realistic portrayal of the Renaissance, some important caveats remain. First, I was unable to observe "participation in action", despite repeated requests. Interviewees' statements recounting events were thus treated carefully as they might be more reflexive of actors' intentions than of actual facts. Triangulation and the use of a theoretical approach that takes discourses seriously are also ways to overcome this issue. Second, I was also unable to meet with the main actor of the Renaissance, Ahmed Haroun, although he was informed of my research and apparently agreed to meet me. The remainder of the paper is dedicated to an empirical analysis of the data, looking first at the discourses of participation, and secondly, at its practices.

### **Participation in discourse: evening up power relationships**

The main characteristic of the discourse around the Renaissance is that officials talk about its participatory aspect through a reference to a local tradition, the *nafir*, which evokes specific relationships between members of a defined community. After presenting the tradition, I look into how this discursive device places reciprocity, but also identity, at the core of the Renaissance, making participation an inescapable duty, and the exercise of power, possible.

### *The framing of participation as nafir*

A *nafir* begins when an individual or household issues a call to their extended family, neighbours, and sometimes, the entire village, to join them to accomplish work they cannot do alone. It is commonly used to build houses or dig wells, to harvest crops and clean up fields in time for sowing. On the appointed day, people come to work together, while the hosts provide food and drinks. It is often the occasion for a celebration (interview with Asad, administrator of the University of Kordofan, El Obeid). Since the *nafir* is based on an exchange relationship, those who answer the call are not paid. Participants expect that hosts will answer their own calls in the future. The evolution of Sudanese society, especially urbanization and the movements of population linked to conflicts and droughts, have contributed to the transformation of this tradition. *Nafir* now exists in urban areas, and, for instance, many roads in Khartoum have been built through it, often in partnership with the government (interview with Ghazi, professor at the University of Khartoum, Khartoum). Other practices move away from the original meaning. For instance, the word was used to name a spontaneous initiative launched in 2013 by a group of youth to help people affected by massive flooding. They organized through social networks to bring supplies to the victims, and decided to call themselves *Nafir* because “It is a word that people know, they recognize it (interview with Alima, former volunteer, Khartoum)”. Hence, the meaning of the word has expanded to include any form of self-help or mutual aid, referring less to a precisely defined

set of practices than to a state of mind, reflecting Amselle's argument that traditions are the object of "constant recycling", and are concepts as well as practices (Amselle, 2008: 193).

By using the word *nafir*, officials present the Renaissance as following known principles, embedding it in the same kind of social contract. As Edelmann explains, for politicians, language, symbols, and rituals are important for mobilizing their audience; they are imbued with a "strategic function" (Edelman, 1988: 28). By depicting participation as *nafir*, Kordofani authorities aim to make their initiative intelligible, but also legitimate, to the population. Indeed, the reference to *nafir* is strategic:

So, every state design, every government project, according to money available by the central government, and money also generated there at the state, from its own resources. This is very ambitious, the plan, how are we going to finance it? And here we.... **Why don't we go back to our traditions and try to benefit from it?** (Interview with Kedar, former high-level official and volunteer for the Renaissance, Khartoum)

### *Reciprocity and the common good at the heart of participation*

Invoking this set of values, authorities implement a relationship of mutual dependency between the *wilaya* and the community that is distinct from the vertical, hierarchical relationship between state authorities and citizens. Reciprocity is at the heart of the *nafir*, a concept that refers to a "pattern of exchange which creates a self-sustaining interdependence" (Uehara, 1995: 485) as well as to an internalized moral norm whose nonobservance leads to sanctions from the other stakeholders of the exchange (Ostrom and Ahn, 2009). However, interdependence created through exchanges does not necessarily imply the disappearance of power differentials and hierarchical relations. Reciprocity does not necessarily mean equality. Nonetheless, as a moral norm, it prevents the powerful from taking advantage of the exchange

relationship (Uehara, 1995: 485). In the case of *nafir*, this notion is characteristically embodied in relationships that are construed and lived as perfectly horizontal, as *nafir* excludes any form of hierarchy and relationship of dominance. This is enabled by the inclusiveness of the tradition: “It is people from extended families and neighbours, regardless of ethnic groups, social classes...Merchants participate, they close their shops (interview with Asad, official at the University of Kordofan, El Obeid)”. Social cleavages disappear, creating communities in which every member is dependent upon one another. In development policies, language is used to define participation as a horizontal relationship in which the state and its citizens are true partners, interdependent and mutually accountable. Authorities’ discourse around their relationships with the business sector does claim this horizontality. During my second interview with Kedar, a former high-level official and a volunteer for the *Nafir*’s Committee in Khartoum, as I mentioned participation, he interrupted to ask, “Is it participation or partnership?”. He then explained, “The government does not have enough money, in such a big country, for infrastructure, basic services. But institutions, companies have the money. If you consider them as genuine partners it will make them happy, they will accept the idea (interview with Kedar, Khartoum)”. Beyond discourse, authorities have given tokens of their commitment to their relationship with the community through the implementation of so-called quick impact projects: small-scale projects intended to answer the most pressing needs. Their explicit objective is to build trust between the people and the government (interview with Karim, Khartoum; Convention of the Renaissance, 2014). Indeed, trust is the foundation of a working relationship of reciprocity (Ostrom and Ahn, 2009; Ostrom, 1994). Quick-impact projects have also made visible changes in the urban and rural landscape of North Kordofan, which motivates people, as they see the positive results of their participation. Moreover, by making the first step, authorities encourage citizens to enter the

relationship of reciprocity; once the government has kept its word, citizens can't refuse to participate in exchange, especially when it is framed as *nafir*.

The idea that the government and citizens can come together to implement development projects reflects the notion that the Renaissance is for the common good, an idea that is reinforced by the use of *nafir*. *Nafir* is, indeed, not only a social practice; it is also a tool to manage natural resources and collective infrastructure in a context where cooperation is a matter of survival. The *nafir* is therefore a means of maintaining collective welfare; since this communal work makes no distinction between a private good (building a house) and a public one (digging a well), collective welfare is closely associated with the welfare of individuals and the family. By analogy, Renaissance projects are showcased as contributing to the common good and the community's survival. This idea contributes to the legitimacy of the Renaissance, and encourages participation, which becomes ever more inevitable, as the discourse appeals to internalized and locally legitimate norms.

### *Mobilizing identities*

Framing participation as *nafir* fuels a form of "Kordofani pride" that makes participation rewarding in itself. The legitimacy conferred on *nafir* is reflected in the way participation is taken for granted and never questioned by the interviewees. As he talks about the involvement of the University of North Kordofan, Asad explains that "Being in the state, we [the university] should participate (interview, administrator at the University of Kordofan, El Obeid)". Abdul, a Kordofani livestock dealer in Khartoum, states that "It is for the country, we give everything for the country (interview, Khartoum)". These quotes demonstrate how legitimacy is related to identity: participation is described as a duty towards a specific community, here designated

through the word “state” or “country”, which, given the context, can be considered to refer to North Kordofan. However, reference to tradition does not simply mobilize a pre-existing community: it constructs it, building in-groups and out-groups. The evocation of *nafir* encourages a process by which individuals self-identify as members of the community. This is made possible by the fact that *nafir* is a practice located in a specific area. While mentions are made of similar traditions in other regions of Sudan (Pratten 1996), it is deeply rooted in the western provinces of Darfur and Kordofan (interview with Rabi, official at the Chamber of Commerce, El Obeid). It is especially used in the Nuba Mountains, a region of the broader area of Kordofan that is now part of the wilaya of South Kordofan (Davidson 1996; Ewald 1990). This is a region that had highly conflicting relationship with the regime since the 1990s, escalating into a civil war in 2011. In 1995 Nuba activists abroad actually launched a newsletter named NAFÎR<sup>iv</sup>. Furthermore, it was migrants hailing from Kordofan and Darfur who imported *nafir* to Khartoum in the 1980s. The idea that *nafir* is specifically Kordofani can be found in Asad’s testimony; he explains that *nafir* exists in the state of White Nile because many people went there from Kordofan at the end of the XIXth century, following the Mahdi in his revolt against British colonial power. Interestingly enough, the evocation of *nafir* is often incorporated into a broader discourse that mobilizes and promotes a specific historical and cultural legacy, one in which the figure of the Mahdi is key. Indeed, he is often evoked along with the *nafir* in order to establish a distinction between North Kordofan and the rest of the country. Speaking of the success of the Renaissance, Karim, a former state minister and leader of the Renaissance, explained that

The second reason [it has been successful] is that North Kordofan is specific; it is the center of Sudan, and it is diverse in terms of ethnicity. The social build-up is very strong; it is a very cohesive society, despite the fact that it is near states that

are affected by conflict. Because of the culture, because of the people...Historically, all revolutionary movement came from NK, even in singing, sports... It comes first from North Kordofan. The first to kick the British out of Sudan, al-Mahdi, in late 1889, was from the North, but started his movement in North Kordofan.

The idea of a close-knit society, managing its diversity peacefully, marks the difference between North Kordofan and the other provinces of Sudan. The Mahdi is a popular figure for many Sudanese, but claiming him and speaking of the revolutionary past is a way that Kordofanis answer the central government's contempt and marginalization. Their history is, after all, a history of insubordination in the face of illegitimate authority. The *nafir* itself can be subversive, as its use by the Nuba activists shows. Their reference to *nafir* illustrates how it can be a tool for claiming an identity distinct from that of the governmental elite, or the one the regime has tried to impose upon all Sudanese; it becomes a tool for claiming the tradition of a marginalized culture. In using the word *nafir* to frame participation in the Renaissance, the wilaya's rulers therefore legitimizes their actions by showing that they value a specific culture. This challenges the model of a linear power relation exercised from government to citizens, in which subnational authorities act only as transmitters. At the same time, it is an efficient way to gain the support of people who are conscious of their position as a dominated group. This discourse also presents participation as gratifying, as it reflects the Kordofani spirit of *vivre ensemble*. However, the mobilization of identity to encourage participation is not restricted to discursive strategies. Actions implemented to promote the Renaissance insist on the cultural importance of the province. For instance, Kedar explains that when he goes to Khartoum's markets to mobilize Kordofani expats, he asks singers from Kordofan to come and talk about the people and history of the province. By defining the community through values and legacies rather than spatial limits, authorities are able to extend their reach

beyond the borders of North Kordofan, even as far as the Gulf countries (interview with Kedar, Khartoum).

The processes of community construction and embodiment are the conditions for the possibility of exercise of power by the wilaya's leaders; they are the first steps in defining and prescribing identities and roles, and in normalizing specific behaviours. Yet, they also challenge established power relations on two levels: first, the nafir establishes a horizontal relationship of reciprocity between citizens and the authorities; second, it represents a form of implicit challenge to the cultural and political dominance of the central government. In this context, participation becomes a duty to the community, since it is connected to both its survival and its pride. Nonetheless, these two aspects remain defined first and foremost by the officials in charge of the Renaissance.

### **Participation in practice**

While the discourse on nafir conveys the idea of horizontal relationship, it also creates a space where the wilaya's rulers can use their power. Following critical approaches on participation, it is important to look at the actual practices of participation to identify the techniques through which power can be reproduced and challenged. In the case of the Renaissance, participation is implemented in various practices that present different degrees of coercion.

#### *Participation through consultation*

The Renaissance began with a meeting in Khartoum in the summer of 2013. Haroun and his close advisors invited Northern Kordofanis from all professions to discuss a development strategy: people in the private sector, in the government, from the universities, doctors, engineers, agriculturists, and so on. Calls for participation were published in the newspapers. According to



some interviewees, there was even a list of names. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of August, 2013, the meeting convened at the Friendship Hall in Khartoum. The exact number of participants remains unclear; one informant says 500, while another puts the number between 800 and 1000. After Haroun explained the initiative, participants formed a High-Level committee of more than 20 experts to write a convention, a document detailing the priorities, aims, and methods of the Renaissance. Once a draft was finished, it was presented to the Vice-President, and the governor “held a series of meetings with the official and popular community sectors and the political parties of the province (Convention, 2014)”. Following the meetings, the convention was modified, then finally officially presented in El Obeid, and handed to Al-Bashir, who endorsed the initiative and promised the central government’s support. Then, formal institutions were established to channel local participation. A High Nafir Council, heir to the High-Level committee, was established in the wilaya, with headquarters in El Obeid. Smaller nafir councils were established in each locality, in each administrative unit, and so on. Members were selected, rather than elected (interview with Yasin, civil servant, El Obeid), ensuring that there could be no confusion with pre-existing representative institutions<sup>v</sup>. The governor was in charge of the selection of the High Nafir Council, the commissioner chose the members at the level of the locality and so forth (interview with Yasin, El Obeid). The councils are designed to evaluate the projects brought by citizens and the state government, before they are presented to the state parliament; thus the councils become a space where a degree of expertise can be implemented (interview with Karim, Khartoum).

Participation is now conceptualized as a means to benefit from citizen knowledge that had been previously untapped. According to Kedar, for many people invited to the meeting in Khartoum, it was a welcome change: “Many, many of them, university professors, doctors, and others, they say this is the first time for us to be invited to such a meeting ”. Their participation in the elaboration of the Convention is an enactment of one of the main ideals of participatory

policies, that “the mobilization of an array of skills that officials do not have will improve public policy (Parizet, 2011: 3)”. Making use of citizen knowledge and skills contributes to the democratic quality of participation, as it can be interpreted as a challenge to centralized power. Yet, insistence on knowledge and expertise reveals a clear elitist bias. First, the government, taking a top-down perspective, decides who may share his/her knowledge; it acts as a gatekeeper to the participatory arenas, and imposes a high “entrance fee”, since those invited must have a high level of education, a successful business, and/or must be local authority figures such as traditional leaders. In short, only notables are allowed to participate. The voices of marginalized people, and those who do not belong to powerful social networks, are kept out of those spaces.

Furthermore, there is a great deal of uncertainty over the role of local *nafir* committees, and whether they are actually of any use. For instance, although it was intended to be the main institution for the implementation of the Renaissance, the High *Nafir* Council has been progressively sidelined, to the point of becoming an empty shell. I attempted to visit their headquarters in El Obeid many times, but it was always empty. According to two of my informants, this council has stopped operation, and everything goes through the governor’s office (interview with Fouad, civil servant, and Muhammad, former high-level official and politician, El Obeid). While some thought this could be explained by the personality of the governor (interview with Muhammad, El Obeid), who struggles to delegate to others, it could also be the consequence of the Council’s inefficiency. Karim explicitly stated that it was not functioning well, though he was reluctant to go into detail. In many ways, the various *nafir* councils appear first and foremost as further layers of bureaucracy between citizens and the *wilaya*, doubling up on existing institutions.

Since the first meeting in 2013, there have been few instances of broader appeal to citizen’s expertise. My informants sometimes talked about “meetings”, but only one example was depicted

in detail. After the Renaissance convention was ratified, Haroun asked that every commissioner develop a plan for his own locality using the same participatory method. He held a council of ministers in each locality, where commissioners were asked to present their plans, and the people were allowed to attend and express their opinions. In many places, the people rejected the plans; an indication that the process of drawing them up had not been participatory (interview with Karim, Khartoum). Officials from the town of Bara offered a somewhat different account; one of them explained it was “honorary citizens” who were invited, meaning local notables. Here, popular participation seems to be used primarily to pressure the commissioners, becoming a tool for the governor to make local administrators submit to his policy.

#### *Participation through donation*

I collected numerous anecdotes and stories that demonstrate that most Kordofanis are involved in another type of participation; a monetary one. According to Karim, people started donating money to the *nafir* spontaneously, and the first to do so were students, who gave up their breakfast money. He recalled that one day, when he was visiting the market with the governor, some taxi drivers came to talk to Haroun. They told him they wanted to contribute one pound each day. Hearing that, a *sitta chai*<sup>vi</sup> came forward. She said that taxi drivers were no better than them, and for every ten cups of tea they sold, they would give one cup for the Renaissance (interview with Karim, Khartoum). Voluntary donations involve a degree of agency, since citizens can choose whether or not to donate. Nonetheless, mechanisms of social pressure are important in tight-knit communities, and preserving reputations, and social and business relationships, may require conformity, especially in a context where participation is presented as *nafir*, therefore a moral duty and a question of identity. Furthermore, while donations are voluntary, this does not mean that the government does not actively seek them out, which blurs the line between spontaneous donation

and solicited donation. In Khartoum, committee volunteers go to markets where they know there is a Kordofani community to tell people about the Renaissance, and ask them to contribute. The receipts they hand to donors feature a picture of Omar el Bashir and Suwar al-Dahab waving the Renaissance convention. When I looked into this committee's work, I discovered tensions. At the Kandahar cattle market in Khartoum, where there is an important Kordofani community, livestock dealers told me the committee did not visit them. When I asked about it, one of the interviewees started laughing, telling me they would have nothing to do with them, that they preferred giving money directly, at home in North Kordofan, because the people in this committee only cared about money (interview with Abdul, cattle merchant, Khartoum).

Furthermore, donation is not necessarily a direct, individual act of participation. For instance, the governor invited members of the Chamber of Commerce of North Kordofan to a meeting where the needs of the education sector were presented. The businessmen promised to build 100 new classrooms; they then went to visit merchants, who had not been present at the meeting, asking each for a sum, which they gave voluntarily (interview with Yusni, local businessman, El Obeid). The organization also proceeded to make donations through each of its five chambers: commerce, industry, transport, craftwork, and agriculture. The leaders explained the goals of the Renaissance, and fixed a fee to be contributed by each one of them. While the leaders were in touch with the government, the donations - the amount, and how it should be given - were discussed within the organization. The report on donations collected by the Renaissance between October 2013 and April 2014 does not specify the amount donated by the Chamber, yet it shows the importance of intermediary bodies, as we can read, for instance, that the teacher's union gave 100 000 SDG, and the Woman's union, 60 000 SDG (Nafir's revenue, 2014).

Participation through donation involves a broader public than participation through consultation. While notables are asked to contribute qualitatively, with their knowledge, the rest

of the citizenry participates quantitatively, by giving monetary contributions. The modes of participation therefore reproduce the class structure, contradicting the basic principle of the nafir. The donation process reveals the administrative role played by the local nafir committees, since, for instance, in rural areas, people sometimes give their harvest to the nafir committee as a donation for the Renaissance. The committee then sells it, and brings the earnings to the mayor, who deposits it in the account dedicated to the Renaissance at the Bank of Sudan (Interview with Yunus, Masud and Imran, officials, Bara).

### *From participation to taxation*

Participation through donation allows individuals a degree of agency, despite the government's attempt to solicit all citizens. There is, however, a third participatory practice that presents a high degree of coercion: participation in the form of taxation. In the Renaissance, participation has been embedded into the most routine aspects of citizen's lives, multiplying the moments where they can contribute. Most characteristically, a fee is collected for administrative acts:

All deals in government offices: one pound, one pound, one pound. Driver's license: one pound. If you have penalty in the street: one pound. If you have to make the nationality: one pound. If you want to add a bill to any constitution: one pound. This is very little money, but is spread... (interview with Kedar, Khartoum)

Documents found on the official website of the initiative show it is a very efficient way to collect money<sup>viii</sup>: 23 152 598, 78 SDG was collected through administrative fees in 2013/2014 (Nafir's revenues 2014). This presents a challenge to the way many interviewees depicted the nafir: as a voluntary, often spontaneous, contribution. People also donate when they buy gas or bus

tickets; students, when they pay tuition fees; businessmen, when they import products from outside of North Kordofan; breeders, when they bring livestock to Khartoum (journal entry, 11 November, 2015). As one of the breeders in Khartoum said, “Even if you don’t want to participate, they can make you pay (interview with Hassan, Khartoum)”. In addition, officials, even those at the highest level, are taxed on their salaries: the governor gives 25% of his salary, his ministers, 20%, and so on (interview with Sharaf, engineer, Khartoum). Though there is no independent report to confirm those figures, it is illustrative of a strategy to strengthen trust by claiming a high degree of participation from high-level officials. As Yunus explains, it shows that “we” have principles and values directly inspired by the *nafir* tradition – and, therefore, inherently Kordofani. According to the interviewees, taxes are negotiated with the authorities, usually through professional groups, such as unions (interview with Abbud, administrator at the University of Kordofan, El Obeid; and Musa, cattle merchant, El Obeid). This raises the question of the independence of those institutions from the state. Little research has been done on Sudanese unions, but historically, professional unions were connected to the communist party, and Abbas (1991) relates that the National Islamic Front was never able to fully control them. Student unions, on the other hand, have been successfully captured by the regime, and are heavily politicized (Abbas, 1991). The capacity and willingness of these bodies to negotiate taxes seems, consequently, limited.

The similarities between these practices and taxation systems are obvious, and it is striking how the implementation of participation appeals to a very different social contract than its discourse. Indeed, taxation implies vertical and hierarchical power relations, with the State at the top extracting and distributing resources from/to the population. It is an inherently coercive practice, though it can be seen, just as *nafir* is, as a practice of solidarity between members of a community. Furthermore, some authors have argued that taxation is historically connected to the

development of representative democracy: “In order to raise revenue, rulers enter into a contract with citizens. Citizens agree to provide tax revenue in exchange for an enhanced role in governance (LeVan, 2016: 15)”. The implementation of the Renaissance recalls this historical process: the *nafir* has been implemented at a time when oil revenues are diminishing, and is paired with discourse about a transformed relationship between citizens and authorities. Whether this transformation consists of a reinforcement of the authorities’ accountability is debatable. On the one hand, the Renaissance creates new channels of communication between citizens and authorities, although inclusiveness is limited. However, in an authoritarian context, representatives that have not been elected in a free and fair way cannot be sanctioned. The governors themselves are not elected, but nominated by the President, since a 2014 reform. Lastly, by framing the *nafir* as a participatory mechanism, and not a taxation system, the government dilutes its own responsibility. Responsibility becomes collective, since projects are implemented with everyone’s help. Yunus clearly articulates it: “We are looking to arrive at a situation in which people will say, “we made it” and not “the government did this, it did not do that... In this case, when you criticize the projects, you are criticizing yourself!”. With blame for failure transferred from the authorities to the citizens, the wilaya’s rulers and the central government are now much less accountable, and their power entrenched.

### **Concluding remarks**

While salient political aspects of authoritarian regimes such as electoral processes have attracted much scholarly attention, going beyond such events and exploring the local level allows for a finer understanding of the mechanisms of domination and consent that underpin the everyday politics of such regimes.

First, the analysis demonstrates the continued relevance of a cultural dimension of authoritarian politics, as tradition is transformed and manipulated by the authorities, becoming a symbol of Kordofani values and turned into a taxation system that has been imbued with legitimacy. Kordofanis themselves are not unaware of this, as Hilal's annoyance about the fact that it has become impossible to differentiate between what is *nafir*, and what is not, attests (journal entry, 25 November, 2015). Participation in the context of the Renaissance may be presented as an innovative transformation of power relationships, yet it mostly reinforces state domination, and operates as a form of governmentality. Domination by the state is made acceptable by its agreement to concessions to its authority, which are made through appeals to a tradition that locates it in a relation of interdependence with citizens.

Second, there are complex dynamics of differentiation taking place at the local level as authorities construct for themselves an identity distinct yet not completely foreign to the central government and the rest of Sudan. Indeed, through the *nafir* local authorities establish a common identity with the citizens upon whom they exercise power. This differentiation from the central state is made even clearer with the bypassing of institutions such as the Popular Committees. Implemented by the central government in every subnational administrative level, those were designed to mobilize the population and implement a degree of participation. The governor and his team chose to create their own institutions, revealing tensions in the relationship between the *wilaya* and the central state. Yet, the *wilaya*'s leaders have always sought the support of the central state. It has obtained its symbolic and financial backing, with al-Bashir coming to El Obeid to receive the convention, and promising to give four pounds for each pound collected by the *nafir*. Local authorities thus engineer their own survival strategies, attempting to preserve good relationships with the citizens they are materially close to and with a center they still depend on.

In this context, the reinforcement of the extractive capacities of the *wilaya* can be seen in



at least two ways. On the one hand, it is a reinforcement of the power of the central state, if we consider power in authoritarian systems as being exerted linearly, from the regime to the citizens, with subnational institutions as transmission channels. On the other hand, if we consider the wilaya an independent actor pursuing its own interests, then it is a mean to renegotiate the central state domination of the periphery. The nafir forces the central state to enter into an exchange relationship with subnational authorities, a relationship it has long evaded. Citizens then give up part of their agency, and agree to the wilaya's domination, in exchange for an attenuation of the province's marginalization. Yet, this means that both citizens and subnational authorities renounce their right to criticize and question the overall governance system of the regime. In both situations, the central regime is further entrenched, an interpretation that also fits with Haroun's history as a regime insider. The ICC actually issued an arrest warrant against him in 2007 in relation with his role in the Darfur conflict, where he has been accused of organizing the Janjaweed when he was Minister of the Interior from April 2003 to September 2005. In the end, it does not seem that in the Renaissance, "Everything is smooth, and all the people are happy (interview with Kedar, Khartoum)".

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<sup>i</sup> This is despite a rich literature on consent to domination and the people's capacity to retain a degree of agency (see, for instance, Lisa Wedeen and James C. Scott's work).

<sup>ii</sup> The Darfur Peace Agreement was signed in 2006, but fighting continues in Darfur.

<sup>iii</sup> A list of the interviews quoted in the article is provided in the Appendix.

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<sup>iv</sup> This is both a reference to the tradition, and an acronym for Nuba Action for an International Rescue

<sup>v</sup> However, this seemed to be an issue. When I suggested that the structure of the nafir councils paralleled that of state institutions, Karim reacted strongly, saying, “This is what the MPs said, the political parties. But it is not a parallel structure!”.

<sup>vi</sup> The name “sitta chai” refers to the women who make tea and coffee in the streets.

<sup>vii</sup> It is nonetheless difficult to assess the degree of accuracy and reliability of those documents, especially as there might be vested interests in inflating those numbers to make the Renaissance appear more successful than it actually is. Yet, given the amount of red tape in Sudan and the casual accounts of many people about the many times they donated, such a high number is not unrealistic.

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# Appendix: Interviews Inventory

Interviews that involved a translator are marked with an asterisk.

NAME	FUNCTION	DATE	PLACE
Ghazi	Professor	13/05/2015	Khartoum
Sharaf	Engineer	13/05/2015	Khartoum
Alima	Volunteer for Nafir and Shariah al Hawadith	17/05/2015	Khartoum
Kedar	Volunteer for the nafir committee in Khartoum and former high-level official	19/05/2015	Khartoum
Kedar	Volunteer for the nafir committee in Khartoum and former high-level official	05/10/2015	Khartoum
Karim	Former high-level official for the wilaya of North Kordofan	05/10/2015	Khartoum
Abdul	Cattle merchant	20/10/2015	Khartoum
Hassan	Cattle merchant	20/10/2015	Khartoum
Hilal	Teacher	07/11/2015	El Obeid
Fouad*	Civil servant	08/11/2015	El Obeid
Yasin	Civil servant	10/11/2015	El Obeid
Rabi*	Official, Chamber of Commerce	11/11/2015	El Obeid
Yunus*	Official, city of Bara	14/11/2015	Bara
Masud	Architect	14/11/2015	Bara
Imran	Teacher	14/11/2015	Bara

Hilal	Teacher	15/11/2015	El Obeid
Yusni*	Local businessman	25/11/2015	El Obeid
Muhammad*	Former high-level official, North Kordofan	28/11/2015	El Obeid
Asad	Administrator, University of North Kordofan	29/11/2015	El Obeid
Abbud	Administrator, University of North Kordofan	01/12/2015	El Obeid