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The power of non-violence: *Silmiya* & the Sudanese Revolution

Reem Awad

International Development, London School of Economics & Political Science, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This research explores the 2018 revolution in Sudan to assess the extent to which the adoption of non-violence led to a more successful revolution and set Sudan on a path of democratic governance. It investigates the revolution's main slogan, *Silmiya*, coming from the Arabic word *Salam* meaning 'peace'. Thus, the nature and function of non-violence as well as what motivates people to resort to non-violence will be considered. The research acts as a point of departure from Fanon's theory of violence arguing that violence is revolutionary and liberating. Ultimately, the research challenges normative frameworks on the necessity of violence for social movements to succeed as Fanon theorises, sheds light on the power of non-violence, and highlights the importance of re-examining characteristics historically associated with non-violence, such as passivity or weakness.

KEYWORDS

Non-violence; violence;
Sudan; social movements;
revolutions; democratisation

Introduction

Revolutions are not foreign to Sudan or Sudanese people. Revolutions constitute a permanent part of Sudanese identity: from protesting for independence from the British in 1956 to revolutions that overthrew rulers in 1964 and 1985, to failed attempts in 2013, and finally to ending the 30-year reign of Omer Al-Bashir in 2019. The most recent Sudanese revolution began on 13 December 2018. The 2018 revolution ruptures from the past, in that it was not localised in Khartoum but united Sudanese people from all walks of life, transcending the colonial cartographies of ethnicity, tribe and race, as well as age and socio-economic status, all while maintaining the ethos of non-violence.

Instead of force, protesters resorted to non-violent methods, demanded the end of Bashir's rule and called for democratic governance of the country. Therefore, the Sudanese case will be used to investigate the following question: 'To what extent does a non-violent framework facilitate the achievement of revolutionary goals and ease the transition to democratic governance?'

This paper begins by establishing a theoretical framework, exploring theories of violence and non-violence. It lays out conditions for non-violence that allow for its success or failure during movements. Subsequently, it provides context regarding Sudan's socio-economic and political status prior to the revolution. Finally, it delves into the role of non-violence in the revolution through the slogan, *Silmiya*, meaning peaceful and non-violent coming from the Arabic word *Salam* meaning 'peace'.

The paper concludes by exploring how the success of the revolution thus far can be measured. Success itself is difficult to measure considering the ongoing nature of the revolution. Most importantly, it is vital to highlight that these conclusions are purely speculative as the revolution is far from over. Thus, this research focuses on the period between December 2018 and September 2019 with brief insights beyond this scope to include key moments in Sudan's revolutionary history including the 25 October 2021 military-led coup, Hamdok's reinstatement in November and his subsequent resignation in January 2022. The question of success cannot be understood without factoring in these events and as such will be discussed briefly.

Methods

Using the case of the Sudanese Revolution, the methodology involved key informant semi-structured interviews from people that took part in the revolution (protesting and online activism). A total of 15 interviews were carried out, with participants aged between 18 and 50, encompassing different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds within Sudan including Khartoum (Khartoum proper, Khartoum North, and Omdurman), Dongola, Sinar, and Kordofan. A large percentage of the interviewees live in Khartoum, as Khartoum was home to the largest sit-in of the revolution. This diversity in the interviewee make-up is important as it reflects the overall diversity in the participation of the revolution. This mixed sample of informants was chosen as it provided a prevailing consensus on the nature of the revolution. These interviews were carried out between 2 July 2020 and 26 July 2020. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, the interviews were carried out online.

Secondly, research using secondary data such as theories of violence and non-violence was explored. A large part of the theoretical framework is based on the nature and definition of non-violence as there is little consensus on what non-violence is and, in turn, the relationship between violence and revolutions. It is important to note that any published material on the Sudanese Revolution was also analysed. However, due to the recency of the revolution, there is limited published material. Therefore, this research will also aim to fill the literature gap in modern research on Sudan and contribute to the developing research on the Sudanese Revolution.

Theoretical framework

Violence and revolutions

The subject of violence itself is a complex phenomenon that cannot be neatly described without reducing it. In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon glorifies violence, believing that it is revolutionary and a unifying, purifying force.¹ He argues that revolutionary violence frees man's consciousness and creates a new man and that solidarity can only be built through violence.² Fanon sees violence and epistemic emancipation as intertwined, in that the violent toppling of a colonial regime or system of knowledge leads to the emancipation of the colonised. Violence here is twofold: it is physical, corporeal, and yet it is discursive as well. This emancipation of consciousness or epistemic liberation can only be achieved through violence alone; violence organised and committed by the

people as without that, Fanon believed that non-violence is similar to inaction, as ‘nothing but a fancy-dress parade and the blare of the trumpets’.³ Fanon suggests that in confronting power, violence is necessary.

Fanon argued that ‘the practice of violence binds them [the people] together’, the ‘armed struggle mobilises the people [...] it throws them in one way and in one direction’.⁴ However, the Sudanese case reveals that unity is possible without violence or armed struggle. Rather, the Sudanese case mirrors the national consciousness with the practice of non-violence as it allowed people to understand the grievances of historically marginalised people and channel them into action.

Unlike Fanon, various theorists have highlighted the dangers of using violence as a form of resistance. Sara Ahmed notes that almost always, ‘the violence of revolting “repeats” the violence which is its cause’.⁵ Thus, Ahmed argues that there is no situation where the use of violence prohibits the reproduction of violence. Therefore, ‘the figure of the raging revolutionary or angry activist teaches us something: those who fight for alternative futures are seen as committing acts of senseless violence, which stops any hearing of the ways in which revolution makes sense’.⁶ Continuing this vein of thinking, the figure of raging revolutionaries or angry activists reveals the intimate relationship between the politics of visibility and power in that those who fight against a system of oppression and for alternative futures are immediately construed as mobilising irrational and senseless motifs, preventing said acts from being entertained as rational.

In this case, the use of violence runs contrary to the ideals of the revolution and can easily result in a social movement or revolution being reduced to nothing but violent due to the machinations of power and salience of resistance movements in political spaces. Ahmed echoes this when they say: ‘the revolutionaries expose violence, but the violence they expose is not recognised as violence’.⁷ A regime or a military can easily mobilise the rhetoric that the violence they exercise is to defend a country and falls within the conventional acceptance of Weberian state violence over its people. Whereas, the violence exercised by protesters is deemed as firstly, chaotic – as it bears overtures of destabilising the status quo, secondly, rebellious – due to a non-state actor mobilising violence – and, thirdly, illegitimate – as the state isn’t mobilising power, taking away the power of the revolution. However, in the case of Sudan, the protesters believed that ‘any violent response from authorities would have been unjustifiably disproportionate’, and therefore choosing non-violence would ultimately aid in legitimising the revolution.⁸ It would shed light on both the Sudanese regime’s overzealous use of violence to quell peaceful protests and break the cycle of violence which Ahmed alludes to above.

Therefore, considering both understandings of violence as put forward by Fanon and Ahmed, the relationship between violence and revolutions provides an entry-point into non-violence because ‘why study violence, after all, unless more peaceful relations among people are to be imagined?’⁹

What is non-violence?

For the purpose of this research, Erica Chenoweth’s definition of non-violence and non-violent resistance will be used. Chenoweth defines non-violent resistance as ‘a method of active conflict where people are confronting oppression or oppressive regimes by using

unarmed techniques like strikes, boycotts, protests, go-slows, other forms of economic, social and political non-cooperation, and a variety of other coordinated methods to achieve an outcome, they are doing it without threatening or causing physical harm to people'.¹⁰

Chenoweth builds on the above definition to highlight the huge misconceptions regarding non-violence: 'An easy misperception [...] is that non-violence means not fighting back or it means passively accepting some form of violence against oneself, [...] we are talking about people taking their future into their own hands but doing so without resorting to arms'.¹¹ Put simply, as an interviewee told me, '*Silmiya* was our joker card, it was our weapon'.¹²

Gene Sharp's *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* provides a guide to overthrowing a dictatorship by non-violent means, listing 198 specific methods, including sit-ins, popular non-obedience, strikes and walkouts. He outlines the strengths and weaknesses of dictatorships, noting that dictators almost always have superiority in 'military hardware, ammunition and the size of military forces' making violent uprisings difficult as they have rarely achieved freedom.¹³ Thus, 'by placing confidence in violent means, one has chosen the very type of struggle with which the oppressors nearly always have superiority'.¹⁴ He argues that non-violence can be more successful as 'liberation from dictatorships ultimately depends on the people's ability to liberate themselves', and through the success of non-violent struggle, the means of populations liberating themselves becomes possible.¹⁵ Sharp's work highly influenced the actions on the ground, with interviewees quoting passages and directions from it, highlighting the powerful nature of non-violence theory. His work is not only important to consider theoretically but understanding the use of his theories to organise the protests within the Sudanese Revolution will be key to understanding the powerful nature of non-violence.

In an attempt to understand the nature of non-violence, Judith Butler's, *The Force of Non-violence: The Ethical in the Political*, delves into the need to re-examine characteristics historically associated with non-violence such as passive, weak or moral. She stresses that non-violence is 'cultivating aggression into forms of conduct that can be effective without being destructive'.¹⁶ Thus, we must assume that aggression does not always mean violence and that non-violence can be aggressively pursued. Non-violence in Butler's view is not a moral position, but a social and political practice. Butler's work invites readers to break-down understandings of weakness and strength. Strength is often equated with the exercise of violence or the indication of a willingness to use violence, but we must imagine strength differently.¹⁷ Strength should be the power of restraint from violence and the resistance without violence. In this case, we should not just consider non-violence as the absence of violence but as 'a practice of resistance that becomes possible, if not mandatory, precisely at the moment when doing violence seems more justified and obvious'.¹⁸ As Khalid, an interviewee stated, recalling a moment of weakness, 'there was a breaking point, we wanted to go out and kill but then we realised we'd be more powerful if we stuck with *Silmiya*'.¹⁹ This moment of reflection, when violence seems most obvious, highlights the way of 'rerouting aggression for the purposes of affirming ideals of equality and freedom'.²⁰

What brings together Butler, Chenoweth and Sharp's work is an analysis of non-violence as psychological, pure, and calculated. Walter Benjamin details the notion of 'pure means' which he referred to as non-violent action, a form of resistance to 'endemic forms of state and capitalist violence'.²¹ He argues that the struggle between violence and non-violence is

a permanent one because there will never be a moment when violence will be completely absent.²² Rather, we must look for opportunities to maximise non-violent practices to reach a point where it is violence that is occasionally and intermittently practiced and wherein non-violence is the dominant and common practice.²³ Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* reinterprets the nature of non-violence, as he argues that non-violence does not guarantee or even demand that those who act non-violently will never turn to physical means to defend themselves or refrain from attacking those who hold the means of violence.²⁴ Thus, a Benjaminian analysis of non-violence in the Sudanese case may defend moments of weakness regarding a commitment to *Silmiya*; for example, when an interviewee described throwing tear gas back to the police as a form of self-defence.²⁵

Conditions for non-violence

To understand the practice of non-violence, one must consider the conditions that make non-violence possible, specifically through using Charles Tilly's framework of 'WUNC' and Chenoweth's framework. Tilly's acronym WUNC describes the need for *Worthiness, Unity, Numbers and Commitment* for non-violent social movements to succeed and create impact.²⁶ His concept is simple: the higher the turnout (numbers), who gather and are unified (unity) into a crowd that is eloquent and disciplined (worthiness), and care about the issue (commitment), the higher the chances of success.²⁷ Notably, he associates worthiness with the ability of movements to present themselves as groups of deserving citizens, which helps a movement to gain recognition.²⁸ This is done by showing restraint and controlling one's emotions and anger.²⁹

Chenoweth uses similar conditions highlighting the need for (I) size and diversity of the movement, (II) resilience, (III) flexibility of tactics, and (IV) loyalty shifts.³⁰ Chenoweth argues that firstly, large scale participation that is representative of diverse segments of society plays a vital role in the success of non-violence.³¹ Secondly, maintaining non-violent resilience in the face of resistance is key.³² Thirdly, movements that rely on just protests tend to be less successful than movements that combine protests and street demonstrations with other forms of non-violence.³³ Fourthly, the critical role of loyalty shifts within the pillars of support where every opponent state, cooperation, and system has different people on which that system depends on their cooperation to maintain the status quo. When people are engaging in non-violent resistance you try and pull those pillars away.³⁴

The focus on unity and diversity is important for the Sudanese context as the relationship between them and non-violence is reciprocal. The adoption of *Silmiya* united people from all over Sudan, who exhibited racial, ethnic, socio-economic and geographical diversity, legitimised and empowered the movement.

Comparative applications of non-violence

The adoption of a non-violent approach is not new nor isolated to the Sudanese context. Therefore, there is a need to examine previous experiences of non-violent revolutions to determine the application of non-violent methods as a tool to achieve long-term peace and to act as a point of comparison to the Sudanese case.

The People Power Revolution in the Philippines in 1986 is an early example of non-violent resistance. In an attempt to overthrow the Marcos government, Benigno Aquino's widow, Corazon Aquino ran against Marcos and introduced a seven-part programme of non-violent resistance.³⁵ She urged people to 'experiment with non-violent forms of protest' and dip into the 'arsenal of non-violence and escalate [their] non-violent struggle'.³⁶ These methods included a one-day work strike and a boycott of Marcos-controlled banks, stores, and newspapers.³⁷ After four days of protest, Marcos was removed from power after he fled to the US, and not a single shot had been fired during the four-day revolution.³⁸

Even before 1986, churches played a huge role in facilitating non-violent trainings that set the path for the 1986 revolution. In 1984, the Little Sisters of Jesus, a community of Catholic women initiated non-violent resistance workshops with the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, which were attended by Benigno Aquino and his family.³⁹ The workshops shared the philosophy of 'active non-violence' which Butler would describe as aggression that is not pursued violently.⁴⁰

The long-term education of non-violent tactics as well as the broad demographic of people involved, points to the ability of non-violence to attract varying groups of society. The People Power movement attracted two million people at its height.⁴¹ According to Chenoweth, non-violent revolutions are more likely to succeed because they can recruit people from all walks of life stating that non-violent campaigns attract as many as 200,000 average participants versus 50,000 for violent campaigns.⁴²

Non-violence has also been attempted and succeeded in the short term but failed to develop long-term peace. The Kefaya movement in Egypt is a good example of attempts at following a non-violent approach and trajectory. The Kefaya movement began in 2004 with Kefaya translating to the Arabic word for 'enough', expressing the sentiment in its demand for President Hosni Mubarak to step down.⁴³ The movement was the first to encourage people to openly critique the government and while anti-Mubarak sentiments were common, Kefaya's anti-Mubarak protests were the first in Egypt.⁴⁴

The initial success of Kefaya was based on two factors (I) its ability to unite diverse groups of all social backgrounds and (II) its use of social media and telecommunication to publicise rallies and protests.⁴⁵ Importantly, the movement included Muslims and Christians and in a country where inter-religious tensions remain high, cooperation between different groups was vital.⁴⁶ In fact, Kefaya was 'widely diverse uniting communist, nationalist, and Islamist members' and at its peak, the movement was present in 24 out of 26 provinces across Egypt.⁴⁷

Non-violence was pursued through holding peaceful protests, candlelight vigils, and labour strikes – key tactics Sharp and Chenoweth detail as methods of civil disobedience. However, while the movement had strength in numbers and united people across different social backgrounds, its decline was primarily due to state intimidation and the power of state-controlled media. Unlike the Sudanese case, the Egyptian military support base remained strong and those around Mubarak remained loyal. Using Chenoweth's conditions for non-violence, Kefaya met almost all conditions but lacked loyalty shifts and saw Mubarak's military pillars of support stay in place and eventually make a comeback following Mohamed Morsi's brief presidency.

These two examples point to the need to investigate how one can determine success and open up questions regarding if non-violence is best suited to certain circumstances and contexts.

Context

Political context of Sudan from 1989-2019: the reign of Bashir

Omer Al-Bashir came to power in a military coup in 1989 in the midst of an economic crisis. He established a military junta centred on the joint partnership between the Revolutionary Command for National Salvation Council (RCC-NS) and the National Islamic Front (NIF), an Islamic party with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁸ In 1996, Bashir and members of the now-former NIF, founded the National Congress Party (NCP). The party that would remain in power until the fall of Bashir in 2019.⁴⁹ Bashir introduced aggressive policies of austerity, and the privatisation of public enterprises and continued the Islamisation of Sudan which began under Jafaar Nimeiri in 1983.⁵⁰

During his three-decade rule, Bashir has been accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and was the first sitting head of state to be issued with an arrest warrant, for war crimes, by the International Criminal Court (ICC).⁵¹ His policies and corrupt nature of ruling heightened racial and religious violence in Sudan by enforcing ethnic hierarchies and furthering the divide between the centre and peripheries. It is important to consider the extent to which ethnic, regional, and racial divides were heightened under Bashir as it sheds light on the context that led to the revolution as well as the choice to adopt *Silmiya*.

Race, religion & violence

Sudan has become synonymous, by outsiders, with violent relationships between ethnic and regional groups, thereby characterising the country as one perpetually on the verge of disintegration. This disintegration is a direct consequence of the ways in which the fluid, multi-varied nature of Sudanese race, ethnicity, and more generally, identity continue to be violently contested by the discursive pull of the colonial cartographies and categorisation of the Sudanese peoples.⁵² It is also important to recognise these categorisations are a result of failed and fragile state discourses which box Sudan into these continuums of state-fragility and state-failure.

Historically, the state is largely controlled by groups that self-identify as Arabs and adhere to Islam. The nature of the Arab-majority government meant that Arab interests were considered over others creating further tension between those in the north and other parts of Sudan, engendering narratives of difference.⁵³ The government instrumentalised these narratives to transform the previous diverse ideas on Sudanese identity into the infamously colonial Arab-Afro binary, subsequently formulating two poles of identity in the Sudanese conscious, and entrenching further the idea of an Other *within* Sudan. This in turn removed any possibility of a united Sudan that could threaten Bashir's authority. The clearest cases of racial and ethnic differences are the conflicts in Darfur and South Sudan that not only heightened the social tensions but contributed to the context that led to the revolution.

Chronicle of an uprising

The conditions that led to the start of the Sudanese Revolution in 2018 had been brewing for years but they were never sustained. Ultimately, there was widespread recognition of the problems of corruption, racism, rentierism, and macroeconomic imbalances in Sudan, a reckoning Bashir could not escape.

The revolution can be divided into two phases: the ‘resistance’ phase (from the first protests in December 2018 until the fall of President Omer Al-Bashir on 11 April 2019) and the ‘contestation’ phase (since 11 April 2019).⁵⁴ The first demonstration started on 13 December 2018 in Damazine and on 19 December 2018 in Atbara.⁵⁵ These demonstrations allowed for the Sudanese Revolution to gain momentum as protests in the capital, Khartoum, followed shortly after.

During the resistance phase, between December 2018 and April 2019, protests started becoming increasingly frequent all over Sudan with more people joining from all parts of society chanting: ‘*Al shaab yurid isqat an-nizam*’ (The people want the regime to fall) and ‘*Tasqut bes*’ (You fall, that’s all!).⁵⁶ Leadership was in the hands of the Sudan Professionals Association (SPA).⁵⁷ Established in 2016, the SPA was formed by a group of professionals and university professors, acting as a trade union alliance, to pursue the rights of the professionals in various sectors and push for economic reforms.⁵⁸ Alongside the SPA, the Forces of Freedom and Change Alliance (FFC) also played a huge leadership role and were responsible for the coordination of protest action. The FFC, created in January 2019, is a political coalition of civilian and rebel coalitions of Sudanese groups, including the SPA, and the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF), to name a few.⁵⁹ The FFC drafted a *Declaration for Freedom and Change* which called for the removal of President Bashir. In an attempt to suppress protests, Bashir imposed a nationwide state of emergency on 22 February 2019 but his attempt failed, and protests continued.⁶⁰

The revolution escalated on 6 April 2019, the anniversary date of the 1985 popular uprising that led to the fall of Nimeiri’s military regime.⁶¹ On this day, protesters called on Sudanese people to join in protest by participating in sit-ins. In Khartoum, the sit-in was located in front of the armed forces’ headquarters where protesters camped outside until 3 June 2019 for a total of 61 days. During this period, the military and security forces were divided on how to respond with a large number of army units eventually intervening to protect protesters. This signified the first success of non-violence; as Chenoweth argues there comes a point when loyalty shifts occur within a non-violent movement.⁶² Using the non-violent method of fraternisation, when protesters attempt to persuade troops to withdraw their loyalty from their commanders, and either stand aside or join the opposition.⁶³

On 11 April 2019, the military announced that Bashir had been deposed and arrested ending his three-decade reign. The military had ended up supporting the protesters making it easier to put pressure on Bashir. The contestation phase beginning after the fall of Bashir and his arrest witnessed a two-year Transitional Military Council (TMC) being proclaimed, directed by General Ahmed Awad Ibn Auf, vice-president of the fallen government and former Defence Minister.⁶⁴ The Sudanese protesters

¹In 1969, Jaafar Al-Nimeiri, a member of the military and a politician, overthrew the civilian government of Al-Azhari and remained at the head of Sudan for 15 years. He was overthrown by a coup on 6 April 1985 following a large-scale popular movement.

rejected the new self-proclaimed leadership and took to the streets again demanding the removal of Ibn Auf chanting: ‘*Tasqut Tani*’, (You fall, a second time). 24 hours later, he resigned and was replaced by Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, a senior army officer, assisted by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (nicknamed *Hemeti*), leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the successor organisation of the Janjaweed militia.⁶⁵ This refusal indicated that protesters were not going to settle with the removal of Bashir. With protesters still camped outside the armed forces’ headquarters, unhappy with the leadership of Burhan and *Hemeti*, the council invited protesters to form a civilian government (except for the Ministries of Defence and Interior) and a prime minister to lead the country.⁶⁶

However, on 3 June 2019 the TMC and the RSF murdered over 300 civilians and protesters, in an event now known as the Khartoum Massacre, which led to the dispersal of the sit-in.⁶⁷ On 11 June 2019, the FFC prepared a list of eight civilian members for a 15-member transitional governmental council to replace the TMC, including three women, in addition to Abdalla Hamdok, who would act as Prime Minister.⁶⁸ After three weeks of silence on the side of the protesters, they took to the streets again on 30 June 2019, demanded justice for the lives lost, and proclaimed the continuation of the revolution.

On 5 July 2019 the FFC and the TMC agreed on a Sudanese transition to democracy deal, including a sovereign council with mixed civilian-military members; an investigation into the Khartoum Massacre and related events; and a legal team to formalise the plan.⁶⁹ The new Sovereignty Council would be led by the military representatives for 21 months and by a civilian government for 18 months and ultimately dissolve the TMC.⁷⁰ On 17 August 2019 the TMC, represented by *Hemeti*, and the FFC, represented by Ahmed Rabee, signed the Draft Constitutional Declaration, which defined the transfer of power from the TMC to the Sovereignty Council.⁷¹ On 3 September 2019 Prime Minister Hamdok appointed 14 civilian ministers, including the first female foreign minister who is also Coptic Christian.⁷²

Results: *Silmiya* as non-violence

Concept of *Silmiya*

The revolution’s main slogan, *Silmiya*, derived from the Arabic word for ‘peace’, is both a simple but complex concept. *Silmiya* was not just a common word chanted, it was an ethos, the doctrine of the revolution. Mohamed K, a Sudanese filmmaker, described *Silmiya* best as ‘*Jaw al Houb*’ (atmosphere of love).⁷³ Describing a form of resistance as love speaks to how *Silmiya* was perceived and used. Another interviewee explained *Silmiya* as a ‘weapon in itself, a surprise’.⁷⁴ The description of *Silmiya* as a weapon was repeated in multiple interviews; Haroon, an active protestor, described it as a ‘peaceful gun’ and a process of having faith in something, i.e. ‘you raise this peaceful gun, you raise your voice, whereas, with violence, you have faith in something, you raise your gun’.⁷⁵ *Silmiya* was also described as playing a game of ‘hide and seek’, a tactic to exhaust your opponent.⁷⁶ It was incorporated in multiple chants and slogans such as ‘*Silmiya, silmiya, silmiya did al haramiya*’ translating to ‘non-violence, non-violence, non-violence against

the corrupt'. Therefore, what these definitions of *Silmiya* highlight is the multifaceted nature of a non-violent approach: it is a game, a weapon, a voice, all imbued within an atmosphere of love.

Theory & practice

It is one thing to proclaim that a movement will be non-violent, it is another to organise and convince people to commit to a non-violent approach. My interview with Mervat, an activist, active protestor and a key negotiator in the talks with the Forces of Freedom and Change Alliance (FFC), outlined how the attributes of *Silmiya* were organised.⁷⁷ Mervat mentioned the '3.5 per cent rule' – Chenoweth's theory that no government can withstand a challenge of 3.5 per cent of its population without either accommodating the movement or (in extreme cases) disaggregating it.⁷⁸ Mervat explained that as organisers, they had read Chenoweth and Sharp's work and held workshops on 'non-violence' and 'civil disobedience'.⁷⁹ These workshops had started months prior to the first protest on 18 December 2018 as Mervat explains how she and the other members of the SPA, 'knew change was coming'.⁸⁰

Of particular importance to the preparation was Sharp's *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A conceptual Framework for Liberation* that was used as a manual on how to organise a non-violent movement.⁸¹ The adoption of *Silmiya* in Sudan shows the practice of several methods of non-violent action according to Sharp's list of 198 possible methods.⁸² The Sudanese Revolution succeeds in adopting 71 methods, ranging from formal statements to honouring the dead.⁸³ As will be shown, the success of any non-violent movement is dependent on the combination of multiple forms of non-violence.

What is interesting is the use and adoption of such theories so directly that they became integral to the organisation of protests and protesters. Thus, this practical application of theory sheds light on the interplay of theory as practice and practice as theory, specifically the notion of praxis. In this case, praxis is a reflective process of taking action through the embodiment and enactment of theory, leading to transformative action.⁸⁴ Thus, in the case of Sudan, protesters reflected on theories of non-violence and the exploration of the sit-in provides an example of the manifestation of praxis, as will be explored below.

The sit-in ~ Time, place & space

The biggest practice of *Silmiya* within the Sudanese Revolution was the sit-in outside the military headquarters in Khartoum. While there were other sit-ins across the country, the one in Khartoum was by far the biggest. People from all over came to witness the sit-in that lasted 61 days before the massacre of over 300 people on 3 June 2019. Despite this clear presence of violence, the sit-in represented the non-violent nature of the revolution. Almost all interviewees, when asked about the sit-in, mentioned that it was the 'Sudan we had always wanted to see', a 'utopia' and the 'essence of *Silmiya*'.

In the sit-in, people camped and set up different stations. Awareness stations were established where people discussed issues in Darfur, Nuba Mountains, South Sudan with people from these regions explaining their grievances and their stories. Doctors set up stations for free medical care including access to medication, access that normally is

almost impossible to get. Similarly, artists and musicians formed groups and created a space where people could sing, dance, and draw. Notably, some set up movie screenings explaining the issues across Sudan that had been neglected by Bashir's government.⁸⁵ The sit-in facilitated strangers coming together and engaging with one another, hearing each other's stories and creating revolutionary art and music, critiquing the government and encouraging the revolution – activities that would have been punishable under Bashir.

Sit-ins are a key component in non-violent revolutions. Sharp outlines the use of sit-ins as a form of non-violent intervention, specifically as a form of physical intervention which is the interference caused by people's physical bodies in a place where they are not wanted or where they were not authorised to be, usually people enter the space and refuse to leave.⁸⁶ The purpose of the sit-in is to disrupt the normal pattern of activities in order to establish a new pattern or social order.⁸⁷ In the case of Sudan, the sit-in was in front of the military headquarters which symbolised the government of Bashir with protesters demanding his removal. Chenoweth builds on Sharp's analysis of the sit-in and highlights the several benefits. She states, sit-ins 'demonstrate a movements' resolve, shutdown access to key buildings, force the regime to make a move, and create a media-friendly disruption in the short term'.⁸⁸

It is also important to think of the sit-in as a space, a site of place-making and identity construction. Most importantly the sit-in became a site of social organisation and resistance.⁸⁹ It was a site where the Sudanese people were able to rework and transform local cultural forms and political processes.⁹⁰ An interviewee described it as a 'temporary settlement' that had grown and had become a 'microcosm of the society in which people wanted to live and in stark contrast to the exhausting, depressing and demoralising reality of life in Sudan'.⁹¹ On many occasions, interviewees described their desire to remain in the sit-in, Mohamed K stating: 'we thought it was a dream, it was so good we secretly didn't want it to end, even though for it to end would highlight some success'.⁹² Thus, considering the sit-in as a dream or utopia reflects its importance as a space to foster new social relations to the extent that the 'revolution became a culture'.⁹³

The sit-in was able to bring Sudanese people together from all over Sudan; it was a space where social relationships were formed, broken and reimagined. One interviewee, Al Sheikh, told me about an interaction he had with a man from Darfur who never came to Khartoum because he 'used to hate all Arabs'.⁹⁴ Al Sheikh explains that when the man got to the sit-in, he realised that people 'were treating him like a brother and that the hate between us was fuelled by the government, that they created wars for us. They made us hate each other for no reason'.⁹⁵ Reflecting on this, Al Sheikh realised that 'when you look at the root of the problem, they had every right to hate us'.⁹⁶ This awareness was very evident with constant conversation and discussion and the growing popularity of the slogan: '*Kul al Ballad Darfur*' (We are all Darfur) and the commitment forged within the sit-in to better understand the conflict in Darfur through protest. Therefore, the sit-in saw the break-down of a relationship between those in the centre (Khartoum) and those in the periphery (Darfur, Nuba Mountains, and South Sudan) and the reimagination of this relationship to unite against Bashir. It is evident that the sit-in as a form of non-violent resistance can target the foundational issues and sources of conflict.

However, as with any social movement or revolution, there are downfalls to the use of certain methods. As a place or space, the sit-in can also be a site where hegemony and surveillance take full force, namely the brutal massacre of protesters within the sit-in on 3 June 2019 which led to its dispersal. Chenoweth argues that sit-ins can make participants vulnerable to repression, endangering them, but ultimately undermine the legitimacy of the movement.⁹⁷ In this case, the sit-in transforms from being a site of utopia to a site of surveillance and hegemony. The exercise of power through spatial dimensions is an important variable as it highlights that the production of space is never a neutral social praxis, as it can be manipulated and appropriated for the specific goals of the implementation of power.⁹⁸ Thus, in the Sudanese case, the aim was to locate individuals, cripple the revolution's legitimacy, and ultimately use the sit-in as a space for economic/political ends.⁹⁹

However, the dispersal only boosted protestor morale and increased international support. The power of *Silmiya* became evident after the dispersal as protesters had to determine how to proceed with the revolution. Quite remarkably, on 30 June 2019, thousands of people took to the street, again peacefully to protest. During my interview with Aamin, he described the process of making the difficult decision to go out and protest. Aamin stressed that in the days leading up to the march on 30 June, he had lost faith in *Silmiya* stating: 'I wanted to satisfy my anger, I was prepared to take a gun because I was asking myself, was *Silmiya* the right thing to do after the massacre on 3 June?' he later decided that he 'had come to peace with the idea of death' and that maintaining *Silmiya* would be the only true viable option.¹⁰⁰

Moments of rupture

Aamin's reaction to the massacre prompted me to look into situations or instances when violence was pursued at some point and what the reaction was to any use of violence. Aamin mentioned internal moments of doubt regarding *Silmiya* and described instances where others attempted to use violence by picking up rocks and throwing them at security forces. Similarly, Khalid divulged his desire to go out and hurt government officials after the massacre but he later returned to the power of *Silmiya* stating: 'there was a breaking point, we wanted to go out and kill but then we realised we'd be more powerful if we stuck with *Silmiya*'.¹⁰¹ Thus, in most cases, protesters attempting to resort to violence refrained, despite the active provocation by security forces to prompt protesters to react violently.

Interestingly, both Aamin and Mohamed E, another active protestor, debated the use of violence in situations of self-defence. Aamin argued that in some cases throwing tear gas and stones back at security officers was not an act of violence but self-defence and was still a commitment to *Silmiya*, he states: 'I think throwing tear gas and stones back at the police who are firing live ammunition at you cannot be called violent'.¹⁰² Similarly, Mohamed E argues that it is a legal right to protect oneself and that at times he had to retaliate to help others or allow himself to escape.¹⁰³ What both interviewees believed is that it is not only because it is the protesters using these methods [throwing rocks or tear gas back] that make these methods non-violent. Rather, it is because when these protesters are 'bringing a stone to a gunfight, it does very little'.¹⁰⁴

Considering Aamin and Mohamed's views, the distinction between violence and non-violence proves very difficult and prompts us to think about variables that contribute to this distinction. As Butler asks readers 'what distinguishes the violence of the regime from the violence that seeks to take it down?' and considering the aggressive response triggered from the security forces to protesters using tear gas and stones, it is clear that violence cannot be 'restricted to the status of a tool, a means, without becoming an end itself'.¹⁰⁵ Thus, any instrumentalist defence of violence fails to consider that the use of violence only reproduces violence and that the distinction between who uses it becomes obsolete.

The power and purpose of *Silmiya*

Interestingly, a few interviewees mentioned the motivation to use non-violence came from wanting to retaliate against Bashir. In the past, Sudanese people have started protests only to stop as the momentum is lost. Bashir constantly addressed the nation stating, 'you don't want to protest, we don't want to end up like Syria or Libya, we don't want to destroy our country'.¹⁰⁶ Even protesters, when asked why non-violence was adopted, said, 'we don't want to end up like Syria'.¹⁰⁷ This form of action on Bashir's part can be associated with Hannah Arendt's concept of action as propaganda. Arendt argues that an authoritarian leader has enormous advantages by exploiting anxieties and creating a fiction that people want to believe.¹⁰⁸ She believes that propaganda is a form of psychological warfare where the lie becomes truth.¹⁰⁹ However, protesters saw through this; 'Bashir wanted to put fear in our hearts, we realised we cannot compare ourselves with Syria or Yemen, we had to do it our way, *Silmiya*'.¹¹⁰

Considering the motivations for adopting a non-violent approach, it is important to highlight the positive effects of adopting *Silmiya* to assess the degree to which it allows for the achievement of revolutionary goals. As discussed above, the sit-in as a form of *Silmiya* was able to unify Sudan through the notion of revolutionary consciousness. Thus, the adoption of *Silmiya* was a retaliation but also a rupture in the normal social categorisation of the Sudanese society.

The creation of a new Sudanese consciousness through non-violent means helped establish different terms on the conversation on Sudanese identity. This, in turn, created what Michel Foucault coined as a new episteme, which is when the possibilities of knowledge and what is known, obtain a new grammar.¹¹¹ Such a new episteme in a revolutionary non-violent spirit is in many respects pedagogical in that the 'consciousness of alienation involves both recognition of suffering and recognition of what produces that suffering. To become conscious of alienation is to become conscious of how one's being has been stolen'.¹¹² This awareness of the alienation and suffering of the Sudanese people in Darfur and the now-independent South Sudan was necessary to maintain the momentum of the revolution.

Both the retaliation against Bashir's action as propaganda and the adoption of a new consciousness allowed for *Silmiya* to achieve several revolutionary goals that would not have been possible if a violent approach was taken. Firstly, one interviewee, Azza, who was an active protestor who was arrested and beaten for protesting, said that non-violence was necessary because it gave people the opportunity to actually think about their rights and what they wanted their new Sudan to look like. Azza states: '*Silmiya* kept

people going. It created the rights we now claim, when you are peaceful, your mental state is stable, and you can reflect on what you want and what you want to ask for. Violence fuels anger and anger cannot fuel action. *Silmiya* was a strategic way of using the anger we all felt'.¹¹³ Thus, this recognition of rights, reclamation of self, and the ability to use anger creatively can all be attributed to *Silmiya*.

Secondly, various interviewees believed that *Silmiya* not only embarrassed and irritated the government but allowed for international recognition and support. Interviewees recounted moments when security forces tried to provoke protesters to resort to violence and their annoyance when *Silmiya* was referenced. Mustafa references the video of a security force tank tipping over and protesters running towards it. The security officer comes out and begs for his life and asks for the protesters to spare him. One protestor laughingly says: 'we are *Silmiya* my brother' and they let the security officer go. The security officer angrily runs away. Mohamed O reminisced on this stating: 'when you say *Silmiya* it makes them angry'.¹¹⁴ *Silmiya* exhausted the government and they had very little leverage to use violence with the growing international community's interest, 'no one wants to see a protestor with a poster shot with a gun'.¹¹⁵ As an interviewee Brian argued: 'unarmed peaceful resistance confused authorities who taunted and provoked demonstrators, expecting a reaction and breaking the spirit of non-violence'.¹¹⁶

Finally, and most importantly, the adoption of *Silmiya*, was able to reawaken a love for Sudan. *Silmiya* brought a return of old Sudanese songs and stories and the connection with the Sudanese flag. On the streets people chanted old songs such as Ibrahim-Al-Kashifi's 1958 classic, '*Ana Africi, Ana Sudani*' (I am African, I am Sudanese). Randa says the songs and the flag 'came back to us, like a newfound love'.¹¹⁷

Flash-forward: the revolution continues

Reflecting on the Sudanese revolution provides insight into the question of success. Sudan had begun the process of transitioning to democracy and made headway regarding its legal reforms. Notably, by cooperating with the ICC to prosecute Bashir. The government also repealed the public order law, which allowed police to beat women who wear trousers, banned the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), and reversed the 36-year-old law banning non-Muslims from consuming alcohol.¹¹⁸ There has also been a lot of progress made on the inclusion of Christian minorities, apostasy has been decriminalised and public flogging has been banned.¹¹⁹ Importantly, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok made gains in reintegrating Sudan into the international community, making visits to Brussels and Washington – the first Sudanese head of state to do so in decades.¹²⁰ His cooperation with the International Monetary Fund as well as normalising relations with Israel and ultimately removing Sudan from the State Sponsors for Terrorism list, opened Sudan up to an environment it had spent almost 30 years being shunned from.

However, in October 2021, the course of Sudan's transition to democracy was derailed. On 25 October, the military-led Sovereignty Council chairman Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan staged a coup against the transitional government of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. The military placed Hamdok under house arrest after he refused to support the coup. The military reinstated Hamdok on 21 November, after Burhan and his deputy *Hemeti* agreed to a 14-point plan, including the release of all political prisoners and democratic elections in 2023. However, the Forces for Freedom and

Change (FFC) and the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) rejected the deal, calling for protests against the military and Hamdok. Under mounting pressure from the public, Hamdok resigned on 2 January 2022 leaving Sudan under complete military control. Mass protests against the military rule are ongoing with frequent clashes between protesters and security forces. The military has periodically shut down internet services and blocked telephone connections to disrupt protester gatherings. Ultimately, Sudan is in a much different place in comparison to the initial progress made following the ousting of Bashir in 2019 and continues to face a myriad of obstacles that challenges the question of success.

Success?

Having laid out how *Silmiya* and non-violence were adopted and provided some understanding of Sudan's path since the revolution, it is important to assess if it can be said that the revolution was a success and if non-violence allows for revolutionary goals to be achieved, more so than a violent approach. Many alluded to the temporal nature of *Silmiya* and that the true success was the hope the revolution and the non-violent approach created. For instance, when asked, interviewees gave very varied responses to the question of the success of the Sudanese Revolution. Some gave percentages claiming that it was 50 per cent or 75 per cent successful or citing that it was a success to some extent, for removing Bashir, as this was one of the goals, but that any rule by the military undermined that success. Many answered that it was too early to know if it was successful in regard to a transition to democracy but that success itself can be defined differently. Chenoweth supports this assessment and argues that 'countries in which there were non-violent campaigns were about 10 times more likely to transition to democracies within a five-year period compared to countries in which there were violent campaigns – whether the campaigns succeeded or failed'.¹²¹

Therefore, while it might seem that the revolution was not successful, considering the October 2021 coup, it is important to note that success for a majority of the interviewees was the unity achieved and the awareness raised. Particularly, the conversations that have started surrounding racism, tribalism, and ethnicity in Sudan remain to be one of the biggest accomplishments of the revolution. Most importantly, the notion that the Sudanese people can always return to the streets and protest if necessary has been proven time and time again. It is important to note two key elements. Firstly, Sudanese people have continued to gather across the country with accompanying protests led by the diaspora across the world. Secondly, the reaction of the military following the coup (switching off internet and phone services) mirrors the initial reaction at the beginning of the revolution which to some extent highlights the success of the resistance in causing the military to take such action over fear of international support of the unrest and over the potential of this unrest in destabilising the military. The key difference, however, is that the military stood by the protesters in 2019 and are now fighting against them. With loyalty shifts no longer favouring the Sudanese people, as Chenoweth references, mass civil unrest may not be enough to ensure Sudan's transition to democracy.¹²² Despite

this, the strength of the popular resistance to the military takeover points to the success of the revolution initiated in 2018 that has allowed Sudanese people to come together and continue to do so.

As Mohamed K states: ‘the revolution was successful but success is not stationary, we achieved something but *Silmiya* is gradual, it is not an overnight tactic, as long as change is happening, that is success’.¹²³ Therefore, while Sudan faces a series of challenges: a military that does not want to step down, mass civil unrest, and worsening economic conditions, the strength of the people remains and the long-term question of success is yet to be determined.

Conclusion: the pursuit of a happy future

One of the aims of this research was to understand the association between non-violence and the success of a revolution based on the original demands and revolutionary goals from protesters. While one can create an empirical criterion for success, as Chenoweth and Stephan have done, the true success is what the people envision success to be.¹²⁴ Even the power to hope for a happy future is a sign of success. One can argue that this ‘revolutionary consciousness’, the consciousness of race, class and gendered forms of oppression witnessed throughout this revolution, is itself a form of recognition of the possibility of happiness and the pursuit of a happy future. Therefore, to ‘become revolutionary would seem to require a belief in the possibility of revolution’ and requires ‘a belief that a revolution is necessary’.¹²⁵ Political movements are about opening up possibilities; they imagine what is possible when possibility seems to have been negated or lost before it can be recognised; they involve ‘freedom dreams’ and that is exactly what Sudanese people have been able to achieve and will likely continue to achieve.¹²⁶

Ultimately, the Sudanese Revolution demonstrates how theory is grounded in practice and how non-violence as a constellation of practices is also a constellation of ideas about what practice entails and vice versa. Thus, non-violence must be understood not as a sign of weakness or passivity but of aggression, determination, and of power. Reimagining what non-violence is can help conceptualise these methods into peacebuilding strategies and literature regarding revolutionary violence.

Notes

1. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.
2. Jha, ‘Fanon’s Theory of Violence’, 361.
3. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 118.
4. see note 2 above.
5. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 170.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Interview Brian, 26 July 2020.
9. Boesten, ‘Judith Butler’, 137.
10. Chenoweth, ‘How to Topple Dictators and Transform Society’.
11. Ibid.
12. Interview Mustafa, 7 July 2020.

13. Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, 6–7.
14. *Ibid.*, 6.
15. *Ibid.*, 13.
16. Butler, ‘Judith Butler Wants us to Reshape Our Rage’.
17. Butler, *The Force of Non-violence*, 23.
18. *Ibid.*, 27.
19. Interview Khalid, 4 July 2020.
20. Butler, *The Force of Non-violence*, 27.
21. Martel, ‘Walter Benjamin’, 23.
22. *Ibid.*, 26.
23. *Ibid.*, 30.
24. Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’, 250.
25. Interview Mohamed E, 6 July 2020.
26. Wouters and Walgrave, ‘What Makes Protest Powerful?’, 3.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Tilly, ‘Social Movements as Historically Specific Clusters’, 13.
29. Wouters and Walgrave, ‘What Makes Protest Powerful?’, 5.
30. Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*.
31. see note 10 above.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. Butigan, ‘The Philippines People Power’.
36. Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*, 184.
37. *Ibid.*, 179.
38. *Ibid.*, 187.
39. Venida, ‘The nonviolent revolution’.
40. Butler, *The Force of Non-violence*, 21.
41. Robson, ‘The “3.5 per cent Rule”’
42. Nicholasen, ‘Nonviolent Resistance’.
43. Oweidat et al, ‘The Kefaya Movement’, 10.
44. *Ibid.*, 11.
45. *Ibid.*
46. see note 43 above.
47. *Ibid.*, 18.
48. Deshayes et al, ‘Down with the Government of Thieves’.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. Mooncraft, *Omar Al-Bashir and Africa’s Longest War*, 21.
52. Jok, *Sudan*, 2.
53. *Ibid.*, 126.
54. De Waal, ‘Sudan’, 20.
55. see note 48 above.
56. *Ibid.*
57. De Waal, ‘Sudan’, 21.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.*
61. see note 48 above.
62. see note 10 above.
63. Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, 99.
64. De Waal, ‘Sudan’, 22.
65. see note 48 above.
66. *Ibid.*

67. Fricke, 'Chaos and Fire'.
68. Vall, 'Sudan army, protesters to resume talks'.
69. Abdelaziz, 'Sudan's PM selects members of first cabinet'.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Interview Mohamed K, 2 July 2020.
74. Interview Mohamed O, 4 July 2020.
75. Interview Haroon, 2 July 2020.
76. see note 74 above.
77. Interview Mervat, 16 July 2020.
78. Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, *Why Civil Resistance Works*.
79. Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy*.
80. see note 77 above.
81. see note 79 above.
82. Ibid.
83. Sharp, *The Politics of Non-Violent Action*.
84. Freire, *The politics of education*.
85. see note 73 above.
86. see note 83 above.
87. Ibid.
88. Chenoweth, 'Why Sit-Ins Succeed – Or Fail'.
89. Gupta and Ferguson, *Culture, power, place*.
90. Ibid.
91. see note 8 above.
92. see note 73 above.
93. see note 74 above.
94. Interview Al Sheikh, 4 July 2020.
95. see note 94 above.
96. see note 94 above.
97. see note 88 above.
98. Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*.
99. Gribin, 'Foucault and Space', 308.
100. Interview Aamin, 13 July 2020.
101. see note 19 above.
102. see note 98 above.
103. see note 25 above.
104. see note 98 above.
105. Butler, *The Force of Non-violence*, 13.
106. Zain, 'We Want to Take Sudan'.
107. Ibid.
108. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 352.
109. Ibid.
110. see note 75 above.
111. Foucault, 'Politics and the Study of Discourse'.
112. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 167.
113. Interview Azza, 13 July 2020.
114. see note 74 above.
115. Interview Randa, 2 July 2020.
116. see note 8 above.
117. see note 113 above.
118. Human Rights Watch, 'Sudan'.
119. Ibid.
120. Khair, 'Sudan's democratic transition'.

- 121. see note 42 above.
- 122. see note 38 above.
- 123. see note 73 above.
- 124. see note 88 above.
- 125. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 160.
- 126. *Ibid.*, 172.

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Notes on contributor

Reem Awad works in the digital threat and geopolitical risk sector focusing primarily on the Middle East and North Africa as well as Sub Saharan Africa. She studied Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews and earned a MSc in International Development & Humanitarian Emergencies from the London School of Economics & Political Science.

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