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Re-Engineering the State, Awakening the Nation: Dams, Islamist Modernity and Nationalist Politics in Sudan

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates how and why dam building has fulfilled a crucial role in hegemonic projects of elite consolidation and nation-building. By drawing on the case of Sudan's Dam Programme and the associated propaganda the Khartoum government has produced, we show how the dams have not just served to materially restructure the Sudanese political economy but have also been essential in the attempted rekindling of the identity of both the regime and the country. Massive investment in hydro-infrastructure dovetailed with the political rebalancing of an authoritarian system in crisis, turning dam-builders into nation-builders: the message of the dams as midwife to a pious, prosperous and revitalised Sudan allowed it to reconcile the nationalism of its military and security wing with the enduring ambitions for transformation of its Islamist base. Dam building in Sudan, as elsewhere, has thus meant a physical redrawing of the landscape and intensified rent creation and seeking but also embodies a high modernist narrative that matches the interests and worldviews of very different constituencies. This, we argue, helps explain its salience in earlier periods of state-building and nation-building, as well as contemporarily.

KEYWORDS: Hydropolitics, dams, nationalism, Islamism, nation-building, Sudan

The role of big dams and other hydro-infrastructure in the construction, consolidation and expansion of states is a subject that has received significant attention from scholars, drawing on evidence from a variety of case studies: the Soviet Union's obsession with how electricity generation would transform society's valuation of the emerging communist state (Josephson, 1995, 2002), Nehru's preoccupation with constructing the 'Temples of Modern India' (Sharma, 1989) and Franco's centralisation of power in Spain to weaken potentially subversive regions through the *Dirección General de Obras Hidráulicas* (Swyngedouw, 2007) are classic examples. Also numerous are the publications detailing the role of dam building and irrigation in restructuring local and regional political economies – from the American West to the Mekong (Worster, 1985; Biggs, 2012) – and as objects of contention and possible cooperation in transboundary waterscapes (Elhance, 1999). In recent years, several contributions have also examined the pivotal role played by bureaucratic actors – key ministries, specialised departments, donor agencies – as veritable 'hydrocracies' (Molle et al., 2009) in sustaining the momentum for 'hydraulic missions' (Molle 2009) in developed countries and post-colonial states alike. This scholarship underlines how the growing reach of administrative entities, the accruing of rents to select constituencies and the forging of local patronage networks and transnational alliances through dams has been vitally important to state-building in the modern era.

However, this vision of hydro-infrastructure modernisation has, in many cases, not just consisted of materially tying together the country and physically making the presence of an irresistible Leviathan felt (state-building), but has been accompanied by a top-down reworking of identities and the attempted

creation of a 'new' or 'revived' nation (nation-building). While state-building and nation-building should analytically be differentiated (despite the often mistaken assumption in American political science that they are *de facto* synonyms¹), big hydro-infrastructure has frequently attempted to marry the two objectives. If dams, canals and irrigation schemes materially rekindle how different economic and administrative components on the territory relate to one another, they are also often intended as both catalysts and metaphors for an emerging nation that affirms itself through transformative technological projects and changes its self-perception from dormancy to proudly self-awareness.

The crafting of a nexus between dams, political authority and ideology in the Nile Basin is instructive in this regard and forms the subject of this paper. For the last 200 years, the elite bargain underpinning the consolidation and projection of political and economic power in Egypt and Sudan has been infused with the belief that a centralised model of hydro-agricultural development could materially transform the state, build a new nation and simultaneously secure incumbents' long-term hegemony over society (Verhoeven, 2015a). The notion that there is no alternative to fulfilling the national destiny through big irrigated schemes, mega dams and electrification programmes has proven ubiquitous: nationalist, military, colonial and socialist regimes have all pursued a remarkably similar development model, premised on the nexus between water and political power. Despite the woeful historical track-record of this paradigm of 'Nile control' in addressing chronic challenges of food security (Woertz, 2013), water security (Waterbury, 2002), income security and inequality (Bush, 2007; Verme, 2014), its stranglehold over the imagination remains.

Hence when Sudan emerged as an exporter of oil in 1999, the military-Islamist Al-Ingaz (Salvation) regime – in power since 1989 – simultaneously launched a wildly ambitious dam programme. Billions of dollars were made available to the newly created Dam Implementation Unit to update existing hydro-infrastructure and launch new projects. From the start, Al-Ingaz leaders underscored that they saw these initiatives as not merely conventional economic modernisation but as a transformative effort that reconciled the old foes of Islamism and nationalism. The dams have intended to re-engineer how the state functions and to help construct a new citizenry, dissolving the deep societal divisions that had plagued Sudan since independence in 1956. The dam programme, which gathered pace around the time the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005, has been cast as not only in continuity with Sudanese history – and therefore an entirely natural, self-evident strategy – but also as a unique, unparalleled achievement of Khartoum's current military-Islamist rulers.

In this article, we dissect the political origins and content of discourses produced by Sudan's dam builders in their attempts at going beyond physical engineering: they seek to 'Islamically' awaken a supposedly sleeping Sudanese nation from a deep slumber – a classic nationalist myth (Gellner, 1983: 48; Greenfeld, 1992: 402). We devote less attention to the reception of these nationalist tropes by the Sudanese public and the material connections between Sudan's 'hydro-agricultural mission' and the building of a new Sudanese state: they form the subject of numerous publications by one of us elsewhere (Verhoeven, 2011, 2015a, 2015b, 2016). Instead, here we focus mostly on the substance and symbols of the Islamist nationalism that the dams and the so-called associated projects embody, often intentionally and sometimes implicitly. All too regularly Al-Ingaz discourse is readily dismissed as cynical hyperboles; while government bulletins are certainly prone to vast exaggeration and wishful thinking, we show how the hydro-agricultural mission and discursive representations of its infrastructure convey invaluable insights into how the regime sees itself and how it has been trying to remake both the Sudanese state and the Sudanese nation. As such, this case study provides a window on the salient themes of this special issue: how water, political rule and infrastructure intersect, not just physically but also as ideological constructs.

¹ For some of the classic works by prominent social scientists that led to the conflation, see Bendix, 1964 and Deutsch and Foltz, 1963.

ISLAMISM VERSUS NATIONALISM: DAMS AS THE SOLUTION?

In June 1989, ten years after the fall of the Shah and the triumphant return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran, Sudan launched the first Sunni Islamic revolution of the modern era. Kick-started by a military putsch that dissolved all democratic institutions and incarcerated Sudan's political class – leading Islamists included, to mask their involvement in the plot – the revolutionary order that emerged from the fog of the coup d'état began a fanatical assault on 'old Sudan'. Under the aegis of *Sheikh* Hassan Al-Turabi, the secretary-general of the movement known as *Al-Harakat Al-Islamiyyah* (HI), a new society was to be constructed: an Islamisation of all political institutions and a Sharia-compliant legal system; a salvation programme for the sinking economy; and a renewed offensive in the civil war in Central and Southern Sudan, restyled as jihad against local infidels and their foreign paymasters. Turabi and his fellow revolutionaries saw Sudan as a beacon of Islam in the wider world, spreading the call to the true faith through an 'Islamic' foreign policy, a reworked Sudanese identity and the provision of leadership to unify the transnational community of believers, the *Ummah*.

In the first ten years of the Al-Ingaz regime, the balancing act between representing Sudan's national interest as a sovereign government and preaching transnational Islamism was fraught with difficulties (De Waal, 2004). Turabi sought to export the revolution to neighbouring states and built an 'Islamist Internationale', hosting in Khartoum enemies of other Arab and African countries – most infamously Bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda network (Glickman and Rodman, 2008). Encouraging regime change in Chad, Ethiopia and Egypt catapulted Sudan high onto the international agenda but also ran directly counter to what other wings of the Al-Ingaz regime were trying to accomplish. The Economic Salvation Programme of Turabi's financial guru Abdelrahim Hamdi vitally depended on foreign investment to build large dams, renovate irrigation infrastructure and recapitalise the lagging agricultural sector. However, because military-Islamist Khartoum alienated its traditional partners in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and elsewhere on the Arabian Peninsula, it simply lacked the funds to pursue economic modernisation. Its ideological confrontation with the traditional clerical hierarchy in Mecca, Medina and Al-Azhar and its foreign policy challenge to those who had historically provided capital for development projects clashed frontally with its agenda for domestic transformation (Verhoeven, 2015a: 101-109).

This collision between nationalist exigencies of generating resources for state-building and Islamist tendencies advocating transnational solidarity was hardly surprising; both Western sociologists like Ernest Gellner and Islamist voices have long maintained that they are irreconcilable ideologies (Tibi, 2002). Nationalism is concerned with the construction of a nation-state, an explicitly territorial and often secular logic; Islamism, by contrast, appeals to a higher loyalty and portrays the state as a midway station to the Caliphate – one's ethnicity or nationality is of no importance, only one's commitment to serving Allah, an unbreakable chain of solidarity between all Muslims that trumps any allegiance to the nation.² If for Islamists the Muslim world's problem remains as much a spiritual crisis as a political impasse, nationalists posited that it was exactly the unconditional attachment to Islam that was to blame for the great divergence with the West and the decades of humiliation inflicted on the Arab world by colonialism and neo-colonialism. For decades, an intense competition between nationalists and Islamists has played out,³ with the former usually triumphing: incumbents have systematically presented themselves as bulwarks of reason and tolerance to domestic audiences and the outside world alike when compared to the zealots preaching transnational revolution (Sivon, 1997; Waterbury, 1994).

² To quote the father of 20th century militant Islamism, Sayyid Qutb, during the trial that led to his 1966 execution: "I believe that the bonds of ideology and belief are more sturdy than those of patriotism based upon region and that this false distinction among Muslims on a regional basis is but one consequence of crusading and Zionist imperialism which must be eradicated". Cited in Mortimer, 1982: 371.

³ On transnational challenges to the state: Halliday, 2005: 229-260.

The case of post-2000 Sudan provides an intriguing counter-example to the allegedly irreconcilable tensions between Islamism and nationalism – and it was up to a significant extent through dam-building that a synthesis between the old ideological foes was achieved. To understand how this happened, we must go back to the origins of the Al-Harakat Al-Islamiyyah and understand how a fixation on political economy helped it become the ascendant force in Sudanese politics (and has since then remained foremost on the minds of its leaders). The rise of Turabi's HI happened in tandem with the emergence of a new middle class of Sudanese professionals in the 1970s and 1980s – some of them based in Khartoum, others in Gulf states – who believed that their commercial success and personal piety were mutually reinforcing (Stiansen, 2004). Sudan's Islamists were not only a product of a changing domestic and regional political economy (Gallab, 2008) but also a factor in creating those new conditions; their participation in Sudanese governments between 1977 and 1988 and the shrewd instrumentalisation of financial networks gave them momentum, even before the 1989 coup (El Affendi, 1991). Thus when the Al-Ingaz Revolution was launched, the Islamist leadership envisaged the construction of a (hydro)political economy to buttress its long-term hegemony, strategically promoting new constituencies that would owe their wealth and social mobility to the HI. The masterminds of this gambit, Minister of Finance Abdelrahim Hamdi and Sudanese Vice-President Ali Osman Taha, initially struggled to implement these plans because of the pullout of almost all foreign investment and overseas development assistance after 1991 due to Khartoum's international isolation, but in the late 1990s the contradictions between the competing priorities of Al-Ingaz became enmeshed with a personalised power struggle at the apex of the revolution. Hassan Al-Turabi lost his position as regime godfather in December 1999 and was forced to cede control to a duopoly, consisting of President Omar Al-Bashir and his deputy Ali Osman Taha.

The Sudanese army and security hawks had joined the regime in 1989 as junior partners but, as cautious conservatives, felt uneasy about Turabi's revolutionary expansionism and his abrasive leadership style.⁴ Many of Turabi's fellow Islamists felt similarly repelled by the Sheikh's arrogance and were, despite their ideological reveries, realist enough to understand that a poor African state like Sudan could not afford to take on the world; the 1998 U.S. bombing of the Al-Shifa complex had been a grave warning and the coalescing of a regional anti-Ingaz front risked bringing regime change to Khartoum (Nmoma, 2006: 53-55). Bashir, as the representative of the army and security services, and Taha, as the voice of the Islamist wing of the regime, wanted to reform Al-Ingaz and align it more solidly with Sudan's national interests, but not to ditch it altogether. Thus, through the Bashir-Taha partnership, generals and Islamists settled on a reinvented Al-Ingaz which would abandon its revisionist foreign policy and instead concentrate on national economic salvation, another old Islamist objective but one that could more easily be aligned with the interests of the security services. The reprioritisation of the domestic political economy offered a regime that hitherto had mainly been associated with jihad and terrorism a chance to revamp itself without taking its eye off the all-important task of internal power consolidation. Moreover, a growth agenda would dramatically increase resource flows, of which a significant chunk could accrue to the army and security services, solidifying the military-Islamist alliance.

The operationalisation of these plans came in the form of Al-Ingaz' 'hydro-agricultural mission', spearheaded by the Dam Programme and an Agricultural Revival. The multibillion dollar plans to build a giant dam at Merowe, to heighten the 1966 Roseires Dam and to construct further hydro-infrastructure for electricity generations at the second (Dal), third (Kajbar) and fifth cataract of the Nile (Shreiq) and on the Upper Atbara arose partly as a function of the Al-Ingaz regime reinventing itself. However, as analysed elsewhere in detail, it was also a product of historically rooted ways of imagining how water, development and political power intersect (Verhoeven, 2015a: chapters 2 and 4). The Islamists had

⁴ For more on the split, see Roessler, 2016.

risen to political prominence during the 'Breadbasket' years of the 1970s and 1980s, when Sudan tried to export unprecedented amounts of commodities to the Arab world and President Ja'afar Nimeiri used foreign capital to penetrate the rural peripheries in an attempt at breaking the political networks of his rivals. The roots of Al-Ingaz' embrace of a model of capital-intensive agriculture and hydro-infrastructure development can thus be traced to an earlier attempt at state-building through the instrumentalisation of water and land.

To pay for the dam programme and the Agricultural Revival as ways of reasserting the Sudanese state and rekindling state-society relations, two sources would be solicited. On the one hand, Sudan had fortuitously become an oil exporter in 1999 (Patey, 2010), the year Turabi was ousted, and Bashir and Taha could hence smoothen Al-Ingaz' reinvention by expanding patronage networks and buying off Turabi supporters with petrodollars. On the other hand, the shelving of Khartoum's confrontationist foreign policy opened the door for rapprochement with Egypt and the Gulf states, who could pour loans and investment into Sudan, particularly in the hydro-agricultural sector, and finance the envisaged political-economic expansion. The regime was eager to underscore its awareness of the dangers of an oil-induced resource curse and underlined that Sudan needed a second driver, one connected to the real economy: the hydro-agricultural mission. The combination of new dams and an 'Agricultural Revival' – conceptualised as high-growth, capital-intensive irrigated agriculture by the Nile producing for global markets – was cast as the engine of a restructured political economy, heralding a new period of state-building. The so-called associated projects, which convoyed the unprecedented wave of dam building and often cost as much as the dams themselves, underlined the fact that the intended transformation went far beyond water control: Al-Ingaz would pull remote regions into modernity through electricity connections, irrigated agriculture, paved roads, new hospitals and recently empowered local government structures (Verhoeven, 2015a: 116-150).

This renewed concentration on economic salvation – a de facto domestication of the Al-Ingaz revolution – did not just represent a salvaging of Islamist priorities and their alliance with the military, which was eager to cash in on the forthcoming bonanza; it also nudged the regime towards nationalism, an orientation that sat more comfortably with the conservative circles around President Bashir whose outlook had always been much more parochial than that of Turabi and his cosmopolitan lieutenants. As part of rallying support for Al-Ingaz 2.0, Bashir and Taha thus unequivocally donned themselves in nationalist garbs: in a Sudanese version of 'nation building begins at home', they expelled foreign dissidents and appealed to patriotism as a way of reaching out to domestic constituencies alienated by the jihadist rhetoric and persuading Sudanese diaspora to pump money into the Agricultural Revival and other modernisation schemes. As we discuss next, ecological metaphors were central to this nationalism: just as the new dams were supposed to magically resuscitate the economy and 'finally' fulfil the national destiny of greening the desert, so the hydro-agricultural mission also hoped to nurture a new Sudanese nation, awoken from a long coma but revived and transformed by the lifeblood provided through Al-Ingaz projects.

THE REVIVAL OF SUDAN: HIGH MODERNISM AND NATIONALISM

So what kind of transformation of the Sudanese did the military-Islamist nation-builders have in mind as they recalibrated their social engineering initiatives? The metamorphosis from transnational revolution to dam-building nationalism has generated large amounts of documents and images produced by various regime institutions, though the central coordination and diffusion has been the prerogative of the Dam Implementation Unit (DIU; later renamed several times and, in its latest incarnation (2016), turned into the Ministry for Water Resources, Irrigation and Electricity). This is striking as the Sudanese state has historically shown itself to be a rather minimalist communicator, rarely bothering to disseminate propaganda among its citizens and limiting costly expenses associated with top-down nation-building through television, radio, print media or other strategic media. Nonetheless, to explain

and laud the patriotic hydro-agricultural mission and to push forward a particular definition of who belongs to that nation and in what ways, Al-Ingaz has organised a communications blitz. Through a variety of channels, several key messages are strategically posited as mutually reinforcing:

- Islamism and modernity are not opposites, but logical extensions of one another.
- the Islamist mission is not merely concerned with religion but also with bread and butter issues.
- the construction of the dams and the associated projects represent a leap into the 21st century for an impoverished Sudan.
- the new hydro-infrastructure not only improves people's quality of life but also allows a new moral order to emerge, bedrock of the resuscitated nation.
- material progress is inextricably linked to personal piety, obedience and sense of duty as both catalysts and outcomes of the Al-Ingaz revolution and its dam programme.
- the new Sudanese citizen is acutely aware of his place in history, as the DIU stimulates archaeological research into the lands where the dams are built.
- this historical consciousness means that the flooding of ancestral lands is not experienced as a socio-cultural degeneration, but rather as the inevitable price to pay for taking the next step in Sudanese history.

The connections crafted in the Al-Ingaz discourse between the hydro-agricultural mission, Islamism and the emergence of a radically new yet historically rooted identity draw strongly on a set of high-modernist assumptions – an important parallel with many other cases of hydro-infrastructure driven development (e.g. see Rupprecht, 2011). High modernism is an ideology that prioritises the virtues of techno-scientific innovation and the centralisation of authority and knowledge; this worldview is expressed through politics (e.g. government-led social engineering) and culture (e.g. abstract, symmetrical, 'awe inspiring' architecture; Scott, 1998: 4). Imbued by a deep teleology, it claims to embody universalist rationality and assumes that progress is predicated on the ability of societies to create a blank slate on which to graft new realities, inevitably labelled as 'progress': *tabula rasa*. This process of transformation is spearheaded by an enlightened elite that uses its supreme knowledge to craft a 'new' society, in the process not just qualitatively altering its infrastructure base but reorienting the ways in which its members relate to each other so as to produce a political-economic and moral order superior to the entropy of yesteryear. High modernism's functionality for ruling elites has always been situated in its ability to give the extension of the writ of centralised authority an aura of spreading the fruits of scientific modernity: the projection of power legitimated by science.

High modernism characterises the DIU's worldview and permeates the discourse it has zealously disseminated. The primary mechanism to set out its agenda for the educated middle classes and lettered professionals – seen as the crucial constituencies to target – is a glossy magazine, printed on prime quality paper with high-resolution photos, entitled *Sad Merowe* (the Merowe Dam), which adopted the (rather misleading) subtitle 'Monthly Scientific Magazine'. It was first published in 2002 and recently celebrated its 14th anniversary; every month, readers – government employees, university students, foreign diplomats, retired engineers,... – are treated to dozens of pages of huge photos and sprawling articles, 85% of which are in Arabic and 15% in English (with a different tone and content than the Arabic pieces). While the dams take centre stage, *Sad Merowe* does far more than provide its audience a monthly update on construction: it is the regime's main vehicle for explaining its economic policies in its own words and illuminating its state-building and nation-building efforts. A typical edition features a few interviews with engineers involved in dam construction and devotes extensive attention to the 'associated projects' of the Dam Programme – the building of a new airport, expanded irrigation schemes, new schools for Sudan's youngsters adjacent to a dam – and to diplomatic visits by foreign (usually Gulf Arab or Ethiopian) dignitaries to the DIU. The stories are resoundingly upbeat, though they

never fail to underline in earnest tones that the nation cannot waiver in its commitment and sacrifice for *Nahda Al-Sudan* (the Revival of Sudan). The engineers, bureaucrats and politicians guiding this renaissance are systematically described as 'Sudan's soldiers' who honour the call to serve in the face of malicious external and internal opposition.

Figure 1. *Sad Merowe* editions of January 2013 and January 2016.



No issue of *Sad Merowe* is complete without three features: English language articles that showcase the dazzling technocratic expertise of DIU staff in completing yet another part of a dam; a series of Arabic language pieces that highlight how Al-Ingaz initiatives are both building on past greatness and allowing Sudanese people to appreciate their proud history; and a final set of articles that showcase grateful ordinary Sudanese citizens who have seen their lives transformed by the dams and the associated projects. The latter might include middle-aged veiled teachers describing the improvements made by their students since moving to a DIU commissioned school; traditional farmers walking around recently greened fields thanks to irrigation; or citizens from a small town lauding the life-changing experience of 24/7 (electricity). To give but one concrete example of how Al-Ingaz portrays itself as a modernising, paternalistic vanguard connecting with the 'real' aspirations of its citizens: in the April 2010 issue of *Sad Merowe*, an illustration shows a Sudanese man in traditional garb standing in front of a banner which shows two big electricity towers and a slogan: "The motto of the Merowe dam is: *you dream, we make it happen*" (our italics).⁵ In another illustration, an urbanite approaches a villager from the dam area, inviting him to watch the FIFA World Cup with him in Khartoum. The villager duly replies that he can now watch the football in his village: "the days when I had to go to Khartoum to watch a game are long gone!"

⁵ *Sad Merowe*, April 2010, pp.4-5.

Equally irreplaceable are the featured photos and discussion pages in which the DIU's – supposedly internationally lauded – approach to resettlement and compensation of those displaced by the Merowe or Roseires Dam is showcased. In the previously mentioned April 2010 issue of *Sad Merowe* (launched at the time of presidential elections in Sudan in which Omar Al-Bashir explicitly ran a campaign based on Al-Ingaz' track-record of economic salvation, with the Merowe Dam as its prime example), an illustration shows a poor urban man seeing a wealthy villager who has been compensated and resettled by the DIU. Full of envy and admiration, the city-dweller wishes that he too had been displaced by the Merowe Dam and would therefore have received a similar boost in living standards. Such cartoons are accompanied by long photo reportages. Two page wide pictures of the new villages are dominated by houses built in straight lines (see Figure 2), equidistant from one another, connected by clean roads and with brand new Gulf-style mosques and waterholes as the only stand-out features amidst the rows of residences. Abdelrahim Hamdi, two-time Minister of Finance and one of the regime's key strategists, once said that such resettlement marked a transition for illiterate farmers from "*stone age conditions to modern accommodation*".⁶ This is the bottom line preached over and over again. This is not Al-Ingaz as a government with an abstract, distant ideology, but as a paternalistic father that intervenes everywhere and anywhere in rural Sudan through the Dam Programme to produce a tangible, material difference in the lives of those historically left behind by the Sudanese state. *Sad Merowe's* September 2015 edition headlined that "*the Roseires Dam is an example of how to defeat poverty*" – no need for complicated explanations. The DIU famously described the Kajbar Dam and associated resettlement as "*the mission of rebuilding civilisation*" (Dam Implementation Unit, 2008).

It is important for the DIU to underline that the hydro-agricultural mission is fundamentally a Sudanese enterprise – foreigners in *Sad Merowe* and other outlets are typically displayed in a supporting role or as admirers of an extraordinary feat accomplished by Al-Ingaz and the Sudanese nation it leads; particularly in the case that these are Chinese individuals [cf. the close partnership between Beijing and Khartoum (Large and Patey, 2011)], they are typically not at the centre of photos but somewhat towards the back and difficult to recognise. The publications do of course acknowledge the financial assistance provided by outsiders (mostly Gulf Arab sources) but typically fail to mention what percentage of total expenditure on the dams is funded by foreigners and how much is paid for by the Sudanese government. This shrewd 'oversight' allows the DIU to keep the exact cost of the dam programme opaque (thereby facilitating rent seeking) but this also means that, despite the fact that Gulf funding in cases like the heightening of the Roseires Dam (e.g. Table 1) essentially covers the cost of *all* dam-related operations, it can still claim that the dams are 'made in Sudan' – a vital component of the new nationalism. The January 2013 issue of *Sad Merowe* (see Figure 3) further underscores this by showing Bashir in a grey business suit and DIU cap waving his trademark stick in front of Roseires with the slogan "today we can proclaim our independence": foreign help is welcome, but Sudan needs nobody else to thrive.

⁶ Interview, February 2011.

Figure 2: 'Model villages' for those displaced by the heightening of the Roseires Dam.

Table 1. Funding for the heightening of the Roseires Dam.⁷

Name of the funder	Amount contributed
The Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development	US\$203 million
The Islamic Development Bank	US\$91 million
The Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development	US\$52,5 million
OPEC Fund	US\$30 million
Abu Dhabi Development Fund	US\$25 million
The Saudi Fund	US\$44 million
Total	US\$441.5 million

⁷ Table compiled from data found in *Sad Merowe*, January 2013, p.34. Note that the total cost of the dam heightening was much higher – probably more than double – but the origins of the extra money were never publicly revealed.

Figure 3. Dam-induced patriotism: "Today we can proclaim our independence".



As part of the nation-building efforts, DIU publications are at pains to counter an old criticism that has been levelled at successive Sudanese regimes, including Al-Ingaz. The scholarly literature is replete with charges that colonial and post-colonial governments have failed to institutionally recognise Sudan's astonishing cultural diversity and that the concentration of wealth, power and representation in the public space in the hands of privileged ethno-regional groups has engendered extraordinary levels of violence (Deng, 1995; Johnson, 2003; Sharkey, 2008; Idris, 2013). More specifically, Al-Ingaz stands accused of promoting an exclusively Arab-Islamic identity; thus civil society voices protesting against the Merowe Dam have long maintained that the dams represent a frontal assault on the history of the Sudanese heartland, an effort to stamp out Nubian culture (Hashim, 2010). To counter such narratives, *Sad Merowe* depicts a wide range of Sudanese people of divergent backgrounds with strikingly different features and offers generic comments that emphasise the number of tribes in Sudan and the number of languages spoken in the country. Sentences like "on the shores of the river at Roseires, diverse tribes, different colours of faces and dress"⁸ are ubiquitous. At the inauguration of the Merowe Dam in March 2009, the DIU organised folklore dances, cultural songs and poetry, stressing how the people of this land with its troubled history are able to unite through the opportunities offered by dam-induced modernisation: "In different dialects they came to sing for the Merowe Dam. The Merowe Dam project is a source of pride for all Sudanese".⁹ Similarly, according to Sudan's dam builders, the Upper Atbara and Siteit dams have actually positively transformed relations between communities that previously did not interact much (they were living on opposite sides of the river), as the resettlement of up to 30,000 people in model villages has woven them together in a new and much tighter social fabric, which will help secure the unity of the Sudanese nation in the future.¹⁰

⁸ 'Multiple tribes and different colours of faces and dress' [in Arabic], *Sad Merowe*, January 2013, p.70.

⁹ DIU, 'The Merowe Dam... A Trip with Creativity' [in Arabic], *Sad Merowe*, April 2010, p.94.

¹⁰ Dam Implementation Unit, 'Upper Atbara and Siteit... Beautiful Harmony' [in Arabic], *Sad Merowe*, September 2015, p.26.

As part of this theme of the dams as unifying the nation and helping to heal old cleavages, one government official appears in an unusually large number of photos: Tabitha Boutros, a Christian Nuba and female politician from South Kordofan who defected from the ranks of Al-Ingaz' nemesis, the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), and went on to work with Usama Abdallah, the immensely powerful head of the DIU until 2013. Al-Ingaz has since its inception rejected the label of 'fundamentalist' stuck on to it by its (inter)national opponents and given that Boutros is a non-Arab, non-Muslim and non-male she is the anti-thesis of what many have associated with the Islamist idea of the New Sudanese Man (Hale, 1997: 185-225). Boutros may only rarely be cited by DIU writers in articles, her frequent appearances (sometimes in a supporting role on the front cover of *Sad Merowe* like in June 2013) as an unveiled woman are clearly intended to both suggest a resolute openness and tolerance of diversity on the part of the government and yet another example of how the dams succeed in bringing even the most unlikely of partners together. Such images reinforce the message that the dams do not merely materially alter how the economy functions, but also catalyse changes in traditionalist attitudes.

IMAGINING THE DAMS AS BRIDGEHEADS BETWEEN THE GLORIOUS PAST AND THE BRAVE NEW FUTURE

Carefully articulating – if necessary inventing (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) – tradition and modernity is a challenge for any nation-building project; striking the right balance in the relationship between them is essential to situate the achievements of the nation in a long and glorious trajectory of which the best part is what the nation-builders are currently accomplishing. Forging this connection is precisely what the DIU aims to do in its carefully choreographed communications. Photos of archaeological 'rescue' digs on the back cover of the January 2013 edition of *Sad Merowe* are accompanied by captions such as "from the heart of ancient civilization... The Roseires Dam is the key to a new one". Similarly, Omar Al-Bashir seldom, if ever, appears in DIU publications in his otherwise characteristic military fatigues, but rather sports one of two outfits: a can-do business suit that portrays him as the enthusiastic 'CEO' of Sudan Inc. or Dams Corp.; or a traditional snow-white Sudanese jellabia and ammama that shows him as a modern-day Emir who maintains a deep spiritual connection with his people and the land.

Sad Merowe sings the praises of ancient civilisations by the Nile and features article after article lauding DIU-funded archaeological excavations near the dam sites, but also portrays Sudan's modern history as a desert-like wasteland which is being brought back to life by Nahda Al-Sudan, in the form of the dams and irrigated agricultural projects. Proof of this transformation can be found in images of the Khartoum skyline at night (to showcase the bright lights on the new towers, courtesy of the power generated by Merowe Dam) and photo-shopped pictures of a new airport buzzing with planes or a new highway crossing the Nile with unusually green shores. The message is that the pure values of traditional, rural Sudan [embodied in elderly villagers modestly looking away from the camera and bowing their head when meeting DIU supremos Usama Abdallah (1999-2013) or Mutaz Musa (2013-current)] are being maintained, but that the economic backwardness of that same countryside must be exorcised through the instrument of dam-induced modernisation. The genius of Al-Ingaz, dixit the DIU, lies in its unique ability to connect with the hearts of Sudanese people and develop the environment for them, so they can serve the nation with greater efficiency.

This message is reiterated in various forms to different audiences, but never loses its punchline. It is evident in DIU-backed television commercials or jingles for the Shirouq TV station that feature the shining Merowe Dam, an unidentified (fictitious?) huge irrigation scheme by the Nile, north of the capital, and the booming centre of Khartoum towering above its surroundings. It is also powerfully on display in a comic magazine called "Children of the Dam and Future Generations" (Arabic: *Atfal al-sad wa jeel al-ghad*), published by the DIU. In the inaugural issue of December 2012, entitled "The Road to Education. Wonder of the Heightening", the (then still being heightened) Roseires Dam takes central

stage. The volume opens with a contest in which children need to guess the chronology of the journey facing local communities, who must go from being uprooted to being resettled by the DIU; the task is to place different stages of their interaction with the DIU – for which citizens show deep appreciation – in the correct order. The comic's main story highlights that the heightening of the dam is an old dream of the Sudanese nation, which is now bringing development to Sudan, courtesy of president Bashir; the magazine accomplishes this by telling the tale of a boy who gets up at 5 am but nevertheless arrives late for school as he is forced to walk past two villages before getting to class. Thanks to the dam and the resettlement process however, the child's life changes and in his modern new settlement he lives minutes away from a much nicer new school. He radiates happiness in the concluding drawings. That same bottom-line appears in the second (shorter) story in which an urban child and his father have a discussion in front of a laptop screen which displays the Roseires Dam. The father tells his son about the benefits of the dam heightening, including that poor farmers will get electricity, will be able to farm more often, will live in better homes and will have plenty of fish. The inaugural issue of the comic also features a section where children can colour in the Roseires Dam.

If DIU publications make an effort to reach even primary school children and to socialise them into dam supporting citizens and loyal pro-Ingaz patriots, they also operate at the other end of the educational spectrum. The DIU has commissioned a dozen or so studies by University of Khartoum professors, individuals with high status in society and experts in sub-fields who, through sponsored monographs, address various aspects of dam-building in Sudan. Most of these are deliberately written in dry, formal language and address questions of resettlement and compensation, praising the DIU for utmost care paid to displaced citizens (Abdusalam, 2012). These publications claim to be impartial studies carried out by the country's leading academics, providing a scientific analysis of the new settlements and the interaction between villagers and the state. Such studies are in turn accompanied by other material compiled in Sudanese universities. The faculty and students of the College of Fine Arts were asked to complete scores of paintings of the heightening of the Roseires Dam, with most artworks focusing on traditional life in the impoverished villages of the Blue Nile region and a handful of pieces portraying the dam in all its majesty (Darmah, 2013). Professor Omar Haj Al Zaki authored a monograph, printed by a special DIU press, on the ancient Merowe Kingdom prior to the rise of Christianity and Islam, highlighting its great prosperity and achievements as a civilisation by the Nile (Al Zaki, 2008). And the DIU has also disseminated the 1967 classic text 'The Arabs and the Sudan' – reprinted by sesame, sorghum and gum Arabic trading company SUDATEK (which has little or no publishing track-record) – again underlining its commitment to a national consciousness and showcasing the proud history of largely riverine civilisations and peoples (Hasan, 2005).

This very particular historiography stands at the service of the entrenchment of an explicitly Muslim identity. The nationalism promoted by Al-Ingaz since 2000 retains an emphasis on the idea that the new moral order that is to be worked towards and lived by Sudanese citizens is 'Islamic', a central objective and key message that Turabi and his "Civilisation Project" (Mashru Al-Hadhari) also pursued (De Waal, 2004: 89-97). But the reinvented Al-Ingaz must walk a fine line between the allure of continuing to justify its policies at home by instrumentalising Islamic symbols and traditions and the inherently transnational message of Islamism, which for foreign policy reasons had to be downscaled. The regime is dependent on extraversion to pay for its hegemonic strategy (the dams included) and must tread cautiously, ensuring it does not unsettle Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait that were so uncomfortable with its revolutionary Islamism in the 1990s (Verhoeven, 2016).

The compromise solution lies in a discourse that remains clearly inspired by Islamist ideology in the form of the economic salvation agenda (part and parcel of the Al-Ingaz project since 1989), but that contains no extra-territorial ambitions and instead prioritises a religiously sanctioned national revival of agriculture and water control. Hence Islamic references in DIU communications are omnipresent – photos of Bashir and Usama Abdallah supplicating with farmers, veiled Sudanese women working diligently with their sisters, endless public statements that show gratitude to Allah – but there is rarely

anything that can be tied back to controversial Islamic scholars or transnational activism. DIU material and the speeches of Al-Ingaz officials focus on what happens in one country (Sudan) and often begin and end with a selection of well-known Quranic surahs; these are either related to the sacrifices made by the prophets or to water, the splendid creation and the bounty of the land. They seek to persuade the reader or listener that the transformation of Sudan is both Islamically sanctioned and blessed but not threatening, in any way, to external actors. The systematic deployment of Islamic invocations in DIU publications is meant to impart that Al-Ingaz state- and nation-building is not a secular endeavour, but part of a pious mission, perhaps even of God's masterplan.¹¹

The complex balancing act between Islamism and nationalism is exemplified by the strategic use of 'Al-Nahda', a concept with deep Islamic resonance best translated as 'Revival' or 'Renaissance'. Emerging straight out of the Prophetic tradition, warnings about a weakening of Sharia in Dar al-Islam (the lands/abode of Muslims) have throughout the centuries led to calls for *tajdid*, or religious renewal, in order to cleanse the ummah of its accumulated sins and bad habits: a process of purification internal to the religion. From the early 19th century on however, these calls for a revival took on a more overtly political character, arguing that the confrontation between the Islamic world and (Western) modernity required not just a religious renewal but a wholesale restructuring in intellectual life and different forms of political organisation and representation (Dallal, 1993). This is the core thought underpinning Al-Nahda: to create a synthesis between tradition and modernity that enables Islam to once again be the beating heart of society and that allows Islamists to, on the one hand, be rooted firmly in history and the eternal tradition and, on the other, to pivot towards the future and to participate politically in contemporary society.

The Al-Ingaz regime has since its Turabi days eagerly deployed the term Al-Nahda in its public communication, though under the Sheikh it mostly referred to a transnational awakening of Sunni Muslims with military-Islamist Khartoum as the lighthouse to follow.¹² After 2000, 'Al-Nahda' became more formalised and less of a casually used term in sermons: it is the concept uniting the material and immaterial dimensions of the Al-Ingaz state-building project and has taken on a more nationalist meaning. If the hydro-agricultural mission is constituted by the dam programme and *Al-Nahda Al-Zira'ayah* (the Agricultural Revival), then *Nahda Al-Sudan* refers to the (re)awakening of the Sudanese nation. Its constant deployment makes it possible for Al-Ingaz to squarely place itself in a tradition of forward-looking Islamism that began in the 19th century with the likes of Rifa'a Rafi' El-Tahtawi and Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani – a politico-historical tendency that rejects Salafi obscurantism¹³ and a misguided nostalgia for the Rashidun Caliphate (which cannot be revived) and instead seeks to develop an Islamic modernity. The story of the Sudanese dams as producing both economic growth *and* moral order in that sense dovetails with the Islamist obsession to be both religiously and politically successful, to be modern and yet traditional at the same time.

¹¹ This is linked to the religious determinism that dominates much of Islamist thought and practice- for an excellent discussion in the context of Egypt: Kandil, 2015.

¹² Note that Turabi and many other Sudanese Islamists were particularly keen on the term Al-Nahda because it suggested a revival not driven by the traditional clergy (ulema, who usually spearheaded *tajdid*) but by religiously inspired politicians like themselves. The Sudanese Islamic Revolution, unlike say the Iranian, did not aim to install a rule by jurists, but rather have politicians use Sharia to transform Sudan.

¹³ For a good discussion of the differences between Al-Ingaz style Islamism and Salafism, see Meijer, 2009.

Figure 4. "All praise be to Allah for supporting us in achieving the Nahda Al-Sudan", cover of Sad Merowe in April 2010.



The use of Islamic symbols and traditions also sheds light on the ways in which the militarist identity of Al-Ingaz is visible in dam-building and nation-building narratives. The DIU stresses that the emergence of the new Sudanese nation through the dams, agricultural projects, transmission lines and roads is crucial to the pacification of violent old cleavages, but it simultaneously casts its mission as a conflict between the light and darkness (cf. metaphors involving electricity and illumination). As mentioned earlier, the DIU elite spearheading the hydro-agricultural mission is often referred to as 'Sudan's soldiers', who are honourably answering the call to serve and to lead. This civilising sacrifice should serve as an example to the young generation (Figure 5) which is depicted in military style school uniforms solemnly honouring the nation's efforts and rejoicing in newly created prosperity. Thus, the work of Sudan's dam builders, it is suggested in DIU publications, resembles that of holy warriors who are often misunderstood in the here and now. Tellingly, a study on the resettlement of people displaced by the Merowe Dam (Ajwa, 2009) begins with a Quranic ayah about martyrdom from surah Al-Zumar (The Troops – 39: 69): "And the earth will shine with the light of its Lord, and the record [of deeds] will be placed, and the prophets and the martyrs/witnesses will be brought, and it will be judged

between them in truth, and they will not be wronged (our translation)." The author dedicated the publication to his 'martyred' nephew, an army lieutenant, who along with other soldiers gave his life for Al-Ingaz and the nation – a reminder how even after Turabi's departure, the regime continues to frame its domestic wars in jihadist terms, with its casualties celebrated as martyrs at mosques, on roadside billboards and even in publications on dams.

Figure 5. "Education, Achievement and Prosperity" – Al-Ingaz discourse surrounding the dams fuses images of modernity, religion, militarism and material progress.



This mixture of religion, militarism and Al-Ingaz developmentalism manifests itself frequently. Thus it should come as no surprise that DIU editors reacted to the strikes by the rebels of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) in North Kordofan in 2013 at Umm Rawabah and Abu Kershola by portraying them as "as deliberately targeting the nation", the antithesis of their own mission; if the DIU and its collaborators are Sudan's soldiers – a pious, honourable vanguard – then JEM's actions were explicitly anti-developmental and anti-religious. The DIU went so far as to, incorrectly, claim that the *main* aim of

the brief occupation of Umm Rawabah and Abu Kershola had been to destroy electricity plants and transmission lines and to kill 'soldiers' (i.e. DIU technicians).¹⁴ Not only did such a framing help to delegitimise JEM's attacks and its wider platform of criticising the exclusionary political economy that Al-Ingaz has consolidated; it also offered another opportunity for the DIU to highlight its alignment with both the material needs of the Sudanese nation and with its powerful allies in the military. That same discursive reinforcement of the alliance between the 'technocratic' Islamists and 'patriotic' security wing of Al-Ingaz is evident too in the way DIU publications regularly commemorate those who did jihad for the regime, dying as martyrs, whether at Abu Kershola in 2013, in Omdurman in 2008 (during another JEM raid) or in Central and Southern Sudan in the 1990s.

CONCLUSION: DAMS AND ILLIBERAL STATE-BUILDING IN SUDAN IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

This paper set out to investigate the links between water, political rule and infrastructure, drawing on the case study of dam-building in military-Islamist Sudan to explore how and why dams have fulfilled such a pivotal function in projects of nation-building. As our discussion of the entwining of militarism, Islamism, nationalism and modernism in Sudan shows, the hydro-agricultural mission has not merely enabled an authoritarian, belligerent regime in crisis to politically rebalance itself but has also allowed it to develop and propagate its rekindled identity and worldview. High modernism and nationalism have underpinned the dam programme and the Agricultural Revival; this reflects the (evolving) sociology of Al-Ingaz but has also enabled it to manage differences in interests and worldviews between regime factions. With the Dam Programme as the spearhead of their economic salvation agenda, Al-Ingaz leaders Bashir and Taha resealed the alliance between generals and Islamists, who both stood to benefit from this turn to big project economics and nationalist politics. This challenges the notion of Islamism and nationalism as inherent antipodes; as the Sudanese experience shows [a lesson that is echoed in Iran and Turkey (Insel, 2013)], Islamists, after consolidating power, have proven adept reconcilers of Islamist ideology and flag-waving patriotism, rooting their state-building projects in the idea that the Islamisation of society and the revival of the nation mutually reinforce each other. The vision of dam-driven economic development has been essential in brokering that compromise.

Political theorists have long observed that nationalism is an empty vessel, waiting to be defined by the ideological preferences and symbolic choices of a new generation (Anderson, 1983; Herb and Kaplan, 2008). This indeterminate, malleable character has allowed it across time and space to become the glue which binds together groups that differ substantially from one another. As we demonstrated with our case study, the DIU has enthusiastically filled the receptacle of Sudanese nationalism with the evolving self-image of Al-Ingaz' dominant constituencies. This has meant emphasising that Islamism is not merely concerned with religion and law *sensu stricto* or with transnational proselytising but is a profoundly modernist and materialist political project that generates tangible improvements in the lives of ordinary Sudanese people. The new nation of Al-Ingaz emerges out of blood, sweat and tears through the sacrifices of a heroic vanguard of dam-building 'soldiers' whose achievements are narrated in martial metaphors. This vanguard embodies how the interplay between scientific expertise and personal piety elevates the people to a higher level of civilisation and a new moral order. This is in spite of resistance by outsiders and ignorant citizens – requiring an inevitable paternalism and ironclad determination on the part of the regime. The nation-builders situate their epic transformation of the landscape along an imagined (and teleological) trajectory of maturing national self-consciousness. In doing so, they reveal more about themselves and the Sudan that Al-Ingaz dreams of than about the actual environment, country and its people.

¹⁴ Sad Merowe, June 2013.

Dam building is thus a unique frame through which to understand the interaction between, on the one hand, political economy and ideology and, on the other, between institutions and sociology. We have demonstrated this for the case of Sudan, but it clearly applies elsewhere as well. The links with broader global changes are both striking and essential: it is to this bigger, comparative picture that the final pages of this paper are devoted.

Despite the set-backs faced by the dam industry in the 1980s and 1990s as civil society protests mounted against the developmental wastelands they were alleged to produce, dams have been staging a global comeback in the last decade or so. Scholarly attention has been devoted to the continued hyperactivity in traditional big hydropower states like China, India, Brazil and Turkey where dams are seen as crucial to national security, economic growth and the revival of impoverished peripheries (Scheumann and Hensengerth, 2014). But perhaps the most interesting dimension of the revival of dam building is that it has also been happening outside these 'usual suspects' – in places where state formation and state consolidation are still in full swing and where state-builders have identified hydro-infrastructure as a tremendously useful instrument. In Myanmar, the army-dominated state pursues a highly extractive model of natural resource development in which the peripheries, inhabited by ethno-linguistic minorities, are de facto internal colonies plundered of their ecological wealth; activism against the dams spearheading this penetration of remote parts of Myanmar should be understood as a much broader contestation of state-society relations (Simpson, 2013). In Ethiopia, the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is not merely a fundamental challenge to the hydropolitical status-quo in the Nile Basin and Egyptian hegemony, but also an integral part of the state-building project of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front which seeks to use electricity flows to alter how different federal entities interact with each other and the outside world (Verhoeven, 2013). And in Laos a government desperately short of foreign exchange is trying to revive the country's fortunes – and keep the ruling Communist Party firmly in the saddle – by becoming the 'battery of Southeast Asia' and exporting power generated by dams in rural areas to neighbouring countries (Cronin, 2013).

Intriguingly, what many of these new dam builders share is that simultaneously they are engaging in projects of state-building and in a redefinition of who constitutes the nation. Dams are seen as both a measure of how far these projects have progressed (i.e. the capacity of the state to fund and undertake such complex, expensive construction) and as transformative of the state and the nation in their own right. Underpinning these elite strategies is a view of politics, the economy and society that reveals a deep internalisation of the modernisation paradigm (Engerman et al., 2003) that prevailed throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Modernisation theory provided a widely adopted template for how to develop a poor nation in the immediate post-independence decades; however, as dams (and the state) came under heavy criticism in the 1980s and 1990s it was assumed that the modernisation paradigm would also wither as market forces took over and big infrastructure development went out of fashion. However, the rise of what one of us has termed 'illiberal state-builders' (Jones, Soares de Oliveira and Verhoeven, 2013), has given the modernisation paradigm a new lease of life: these are regimes from Angola (Soares de Oliveira, 2011) to Sri Lanka (Höglund and Orjuela, 2012) that explicitly reject the Washington Consensus and liberal democracy as End of History and, after having established durable political control over their societies, seek to ensure long-term hegemony by reorganising institutions and to extend the writ of the state where historically it has run thin. Such illiberal state-builders draw on ideas of stages of growth, 'big is beautiful'-projects and the centrality of the state in reconfiguring the political economy to realise their vision. They strongly advocate the notion of 'performance legitimacy'; as long as the ruling party delivers economic progress and guarantees stability its monopoly on political power should in theory and in practice remain incontestable. Dams and other hydro-infrastructure are seen as vital in ensuring this continued success.

As evident from this paper, the category of illiberal state-builders very much includes the Al-Ingaz regime of Sudan. The economic salvation agenda and the hydro-agricultural mission are particularly instructive. The Islamist obsession with progress and order underlines how the once seemingly

discredited modernisation paradigm has found new bedfellows, moving beyond its historical relationship with Keynesianism and socialism. Sudan's Islamists have long perceived the paradigm's top-down, centralising disposition as attractive, including the notions of taming nature and material transformations generating changes in sociological consciousness. For those familiar with Sudanese political history, this alignment of Islamist modernism and socialist thought about development and political power is not altogether that surprising given that Islamists and leftists in Sudan have hailed from similar social backgrounds, read similar canonical texts and produced stinging critiques of Sudan's traditional forces that overlapped in many instances (Verhoeven, 2015a: 87-91).

A key influence in the Al-Ingaz experiment has been the role played by China, whose own trajectory in recent decades is the most illustrious contemporary exponent of the modernisation paradigm. It was Beijing that helped Sudan develop an oil industry in the 1990s and that, through its veto right in the UN Security Council, helped shield Khartoum from even harsher international sanctions and possible intervention, notably in the Darfur dossier. Most pertinently perhaps, the Chinese Communist Party's extraordinary success as the world's leading illiberal state-builder has inspired regimes like Al-Ingaz: there is not just the economic miracle that its policies have produced since 1978, but above all is the fact that the Party has been in power since 1949. Its combination of selective economic liberalisation and of efficient authoritarianism through formidable political organisation exerts a significant influence on the course charted by illiberal state-builders elsewhere – and the CCP's International Department has quietly but effectively encouraged this trend (Shambaugh, 2007). Moreover, the fact that dams played a vital part in the Chinese strategy to revitalise agricultural areas and to power its spectacular industrialisation drive (Mertha, 2008) has reinforced historically rooted enthusiasm for dam-building in places like Sudan and Ethiopia. The dominance of Chinese firms of the global market in dams and their involvement in dozens of hydro-infrastructure projects outside the People's Republic only further strengthen the renewed momentum for water control among ambitious elites across the developing world (Bosshard, 2009).

The hope shared by illiberal state-builders, whether Chinese, Sudanese or other, is ultimately that dams do not only reassert the authority of the state and its leaders but usher in a political order in which the destabilizing contradictions of old are eradicated or crushed under the sheer weight of the political-economic recalibration. The completion of megaprojects like China's Three Gorges Dam or Sudan's Merowe presented obvious occasions to boast about national pride, but the ambitions of the illiberal state and dam builders go far beyond a day of applause for the president: the dam programmes are imagined to lead to a rejuvenation of the country and ensure that the different peoples of the country relate differently to one another, as 'development' dissolves some of the deep identity cleavages between them. One senior DIU official once compared the dams to the heart in the human body: just as the heart pumps blood around the body and supplies all body parts with oxygen and nutrients, so the dams bring prosperity in the form of electricity and water to long-neglected regions of the country.¹⁵

The illiberal state-builders' dream of hydro-infrastructure spawning a new nation, devoid of the contradictions that bedevilled the efforts of previous generations, holds obvious appeal to authoritarian elites, from Khartoum to Beijing. Yet in the Sudanese case, this gambit has generated a major paradox of its own. The very core ingredients of the illiberal recipe – the exclusionary nature of the state, the, in actual fact, questionable competence of institutions like the DIU and the prioritisation of rent seeking over economic and ecological rationales – ensure that realising this goal will remain elusive. If Al-Ingaz' illiberal state-building project has so far shown itself to be successful in its primary objective – helping to ensure the survival of those at the helm – it has certainly not escaped many of the historical pathologies associated with the modernisation paradigm or with calamitous past experiences of state-

¹⁵ Interview with DIU Director of Information, Khaled Othman, in Khartoum, June 2013.

building in Sudan. As discussed at length elsewhere (Verhoeven, 2015a: 191-248), the dam programme has failed to stave off a deep recession after the 2011 secession of South Sudan and has generated considerably less electricity than announced. Al-Nahda Al-Zira'ayah has turned out to be a mirage in the desert, with agricultural productivity barely budging. The bureaucratic capacity of the state has deteriorated dramatically. And the new nationalism has proven to be shallow, parochial and oppressive – excluding pastoralists, non-riverine populations and those ungrateful for the blessings of the hydro-agricultural mission like displaced populations resisting the dams in Nubia and Blue Nile. At the time of writing, seven out of 18 of Sudan's provinces are mired in civil conflict – and have been so for years: it is hard to think of a more damning verdict of a nation-building project. Pun intended.

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