Public Opinion and The Army: The Cases of Algeria and Sudan.[1]

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This article investigates the opinions of Sudanese and Algerian respondents on democracy as a model of government in their countries. It focuses on a group of questions: How much do Algerian and Sudanese citizens trust the army? Do citizens agree that 'democratic regimes are not good at preserving public order?' And what do they think of democracy as an overall system of governance?

Arab Public Opinion Arab Armies Algeria Sudan Democratic Transition Arab Uprisings

In the past few weeks, protests have erupted in Algeria and Sudan, challenging the legitimacy of ruling regimes. These protests have actually succeeded in gaining concessions from regime elements; both in Algeria and Sudan, the head executive has been removed from power by other elements of the regime, eager to offset further public anger. In both countries, protestors have entered into negotiations with the regime regarding future organization of government.

Similar to many countries around the world, the military establishment has played a key role in the aftermath of protests in both Algeria and Sudan. Militaries have long since been identified as a crucial player in the transition process. Whether or not the military establishment overturns the democratic process, or suppresses protests, can determine the success or failure of a protest movement.

Many scholars have examined the conditions under which the military makes the decision to "return to the barracks," rather than continue involvement in politics. Most scholars agree that when there are internal divisions in the military's leadership, this can push a certain segment to political negotiation rather than authoritarian crackdown. Militaries can also be convinced to negotiate with opposition forces if there is reason to believe the opposition, once in power, will not affect the army's interests. Finally, some argue that militaries are more likely to negotiate and attempt to stabilize the regime when they fear not doing so will only spark extreme protests and radical change.

In both Algeria and Sudan, it is important to understand public perception of the military establishment in order to explain the military's current role, and prospects for future negotiations. Is public perception of the military in both of these countries positive, which explains why the military intervened to acquiesce protesters and remove Bouteflika or Bashir from power? Is the Sudanese military's choice to use violence on June 3rd a function of an "under siege" mentality as a result of public pressure? Using the Arab Opinion Index, we can look at some basic data regarding public perception of the military, its performance, and its role in the government.

Algeria

In Algeria, reported trust in the military is consistently fairly high, though it does fluctuate. For instance, in 2012/2013, the Arab Opinion Index recorded the lowest level of trust in the Algerian military (at 56%). However this is quickly reversed in 2014, with a jump to 81%. We do not have the definitive data to prove why this jump occurred, but we can speculate that post Arab Spring conditions in many countries may have prompted Algerians to renew trust in a "stabilizing" institution such as the military, particularly as much of the region devolved into violence.

Interestingly, trust in government is consistently lower than trust in the military. Much like the trend in the previous graph, we see a jump in trust between 2012/2013 and 2014 (from 35% to 64%). Nevertheless, trust in the government remains lower than the military for most years. In the latest iteration of the Arab Opinion Index, 46% of Algerians had trust in the government compared to 76% that had trust in the military.

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Figure 1: Algerian Respondents' Confidence in the Army During the 2011-2016 Period

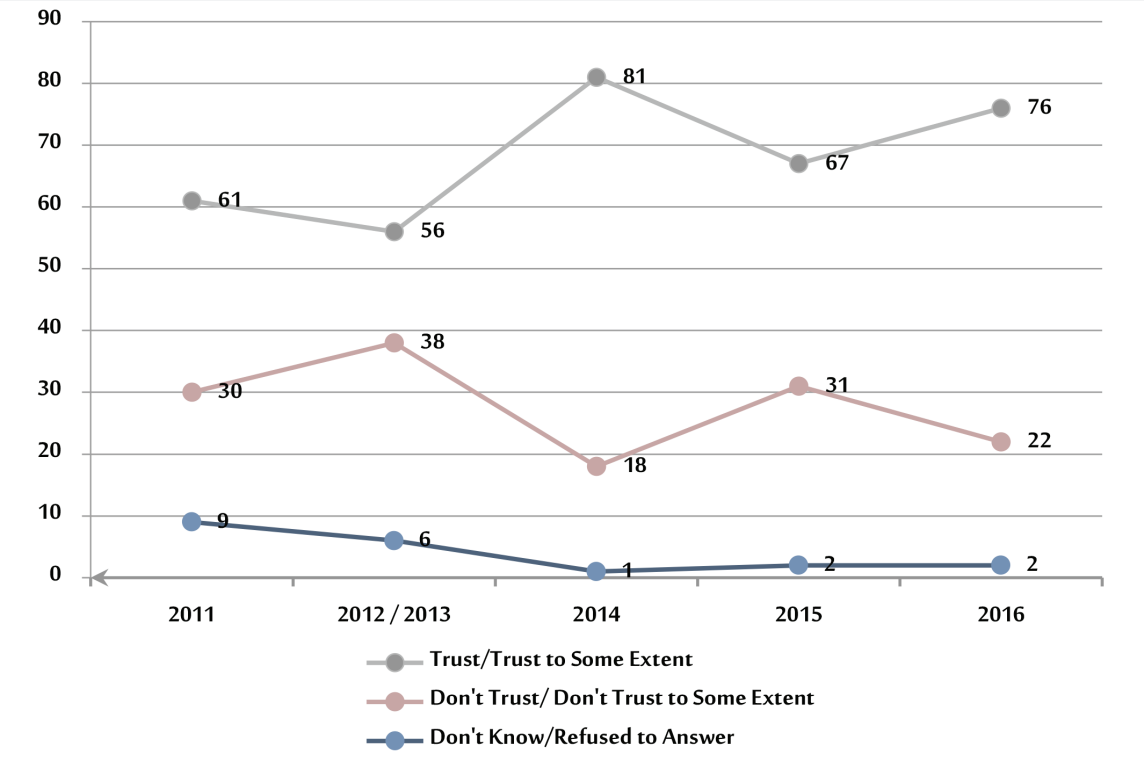
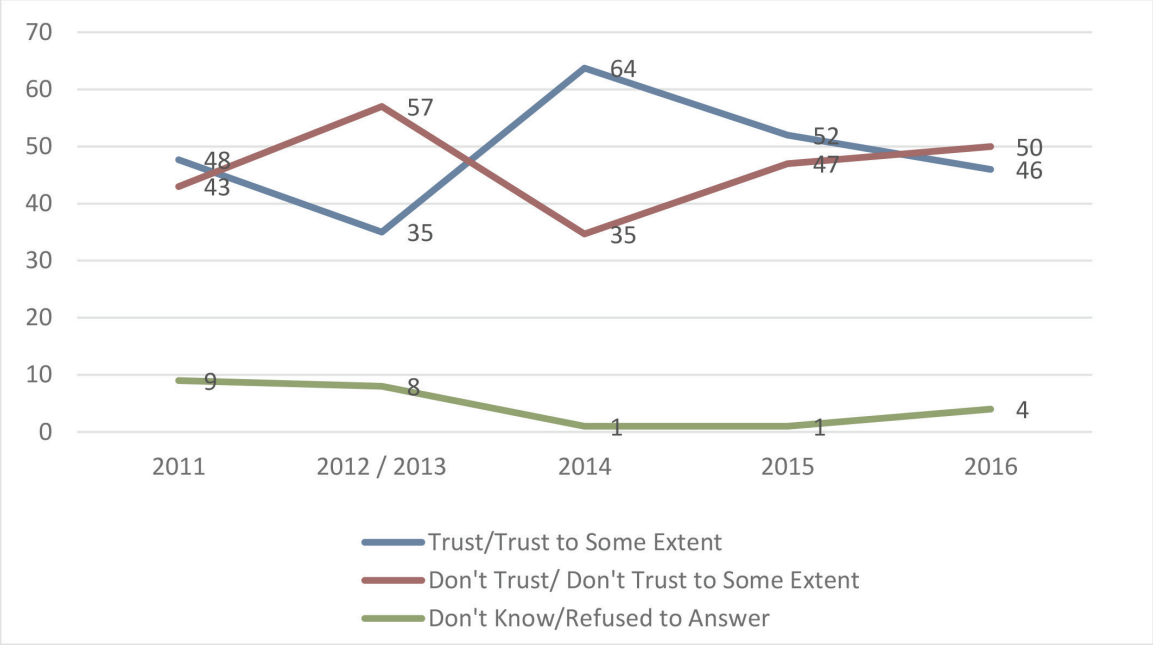


Figure 2: Algerian Respondents' Confidence in the Government During the 2011-2016 Period



Clearly, Algerians make a clear distinction between political leadership and the military, despite the military's outsized role in Algerian politics historically. We can only speculate as to the reason for this differentiation. One possible reason for the veneration of the military in Algeria could be the military's history in this particular case, and its role in decolonization. Another could be the military's role in providing stability, particularly for respondents who may recall the Algerian civil war.

Despite the strong support for the military in Algeria, presumably due to its history or its role in providing stability, respondents do not automatically link democratic systems with instability. Indeed, when asked whether they agree with the phrase "Democracies are not good at maintaining public order", 73% of respondents said they disagreed with this notion. This gives us the impression that support for the military may only be partially motivated by the idea that it provides stability, and that Algerian respondents do not have an overall fear of democracy for its supposedly destabilizing effects.

Moreover, when asked their level of agreement with the phrase "the democratic system may have its issues, but it is better than others", 55% of respondents agreed with the notion. The trend, however, is not linear over the years. Before the Arab Spring, 56% of respondents agreed with this notion. This rose to a high of 72% in 2014, before steadily declining back down to previous levels by 2016. It is safe to assume that the experience of the Arab Spring, and the lessons learned from the regional crises that arose, decreased support for democracy as a system. Indeed when asked about the Arab Spring directly, the majority of Algerian respondents have a negative impression. 61% believe the Arab Spring protests were negative to some extent or very negative. Finally, judging from the previous question regarding democracy and stability, Algerians do not necessarily lack support for democracy as a system because they believe it is inherently unstable; rather, there are other motivating factors that we cannot discern from this data alone.

Figure 3: Opinions of the Algerian respondents regarding the phrase "democracies are not good at maintaining public order" during the 2011-2016 period

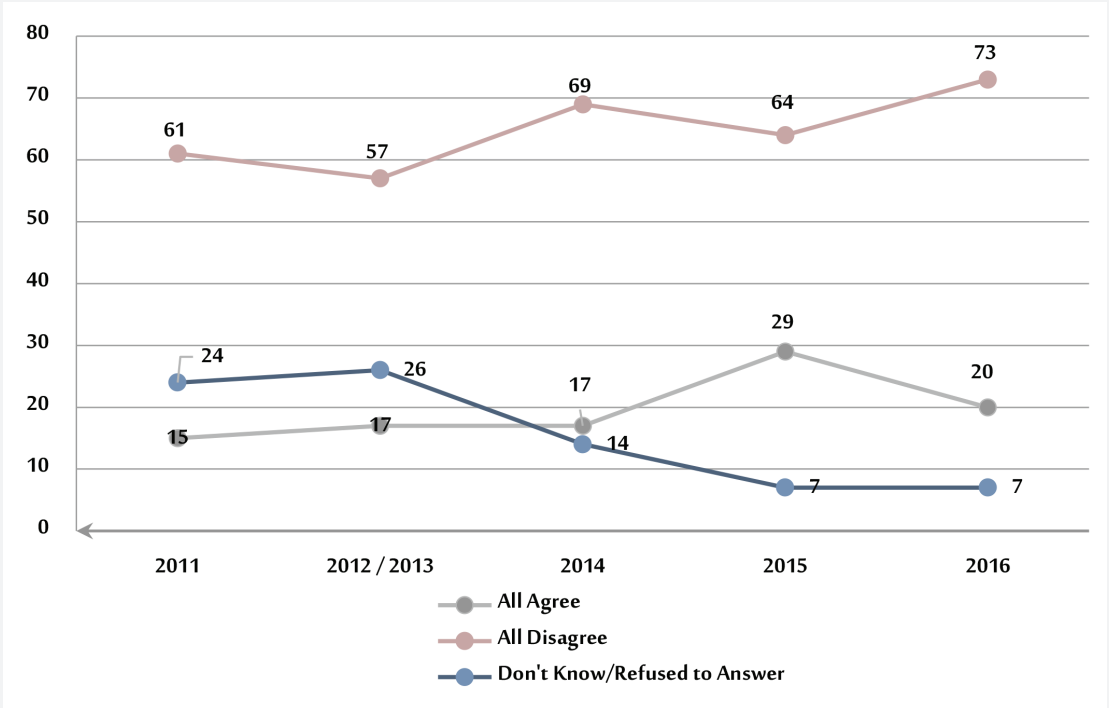
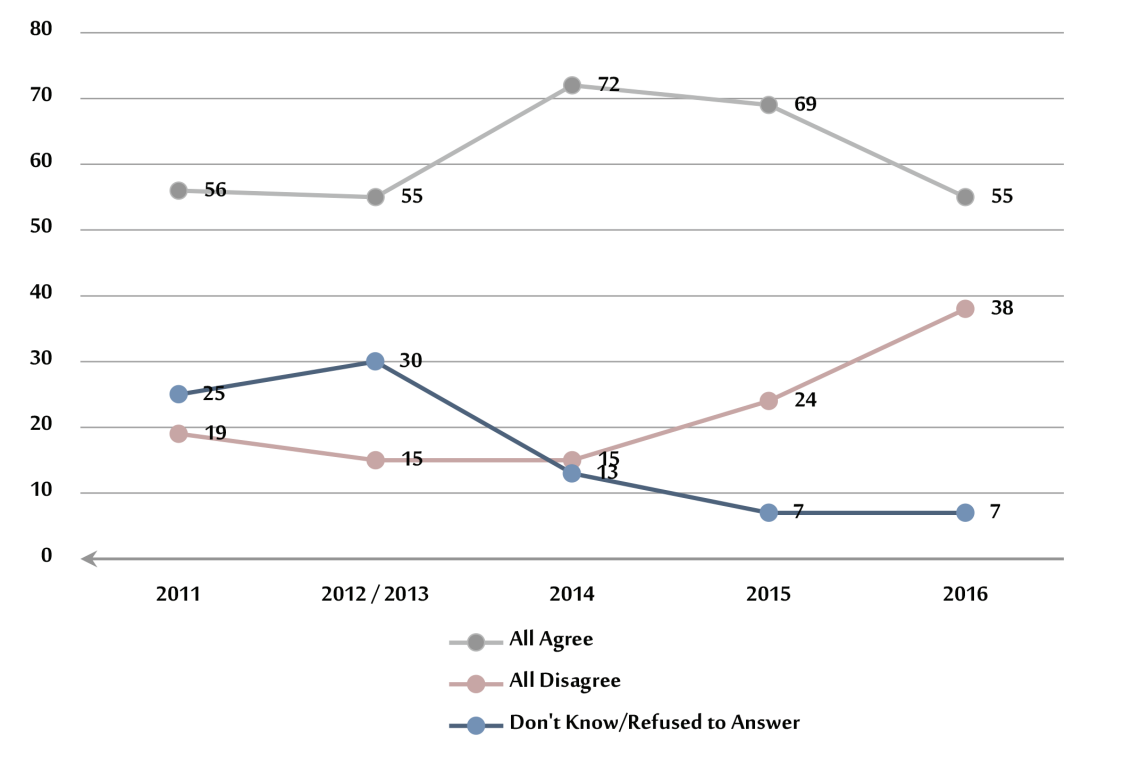


Figure 4: The opinions of the Algerian respondents regarding the phrase "the democratic system may have its issues, but it is better than others" during the period 2011-2016.



Sudan

In Sudan, similar to Algeria, reported trust in the military is high. From 2011 to 2017/2018, between 66% and 80% of Sudanese respondents report trust in the military. Unlike in Algeria, this did not see a sizeable shift at any point. Following the Arab Spring there was a steady decline, and then a slight increase. The question on trust in government shows a similar pattern. Algerian respondents had much larger shifts from year to year in terms of their trust in government, whereas in Sudan there has been a steady decline from 2011 to 2017/2018. In 2011, 55% of respondents reported trust in the government, and by 2017/2018 that had fallen to 40%. Overall, we could say Sudanese public opinion is more consistent year to year. However, by the latest iteration of the Arab Opinion Index (2017/2018 in Sudan, and 2016 in Algeria), there was a similar level of support in both countries for their militaries and their governments.

When Sudanese respondents were asked if they agreed with the notion that "democracies are not good at maintaining public order", 63% disagreed. The number of respondents who disagree with this notion has increased since 2011, from 52% to a high of 63%. This is similar to rends in Algeria as well. However, unlike Algeria, the percentage of respondents in Sudan who believe that "the democratic system may have its issues, but it is better than others" is high – at 75% (compared to 55% of Algerians). Again, this remains surprisingly consistent over the years, with no drastic jumps from year to year. Unlike in Algeria, where the percentage of respondents who disagree with this notion increased dramatically (from 19% in 2011 to 38% in 2016), the Sudanese sample shows different results: only 16% of Sudanese respondents disagreed with the idea that "the democratic system may have its issues, but it is better than others. " This is not much different from reported levels in 2011, prior to the Arab Spring (at 18%).

Figure 5: Sudanese Respondents' Confidence in the Army During the 2011-2018 Period

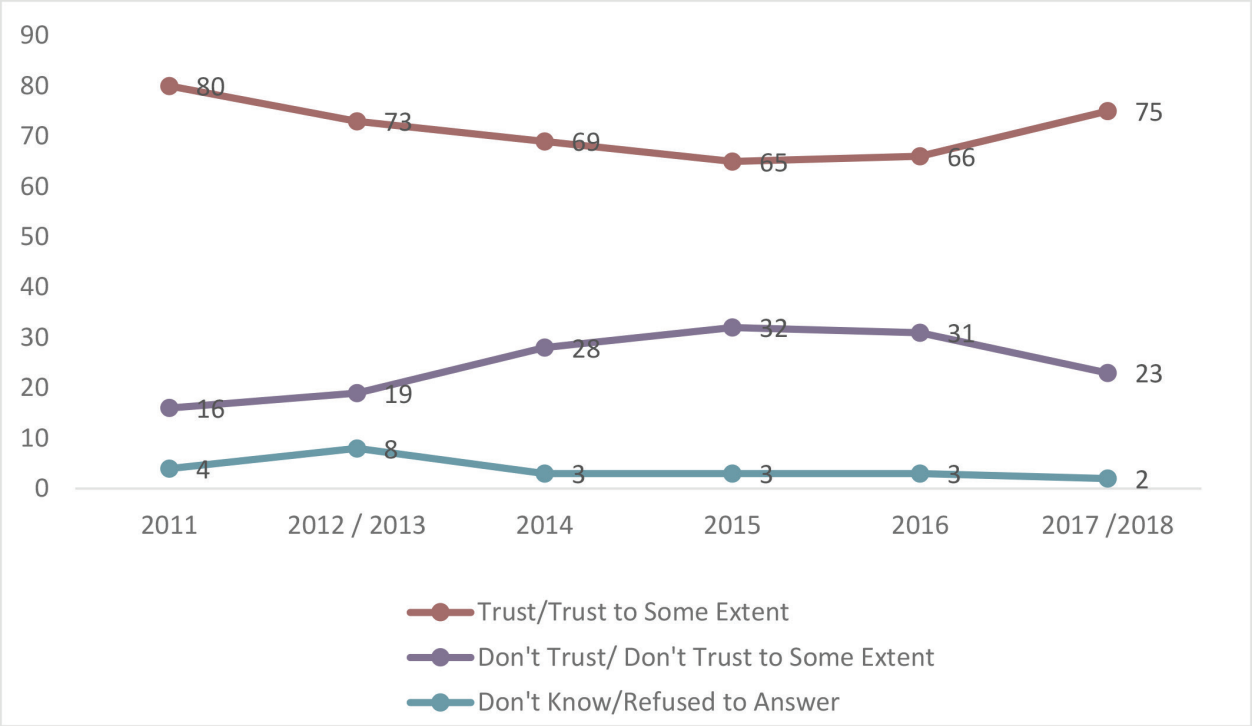


Figure 6: Sudanese Respondents' Confidence in the Government During the 2011-2016 Period

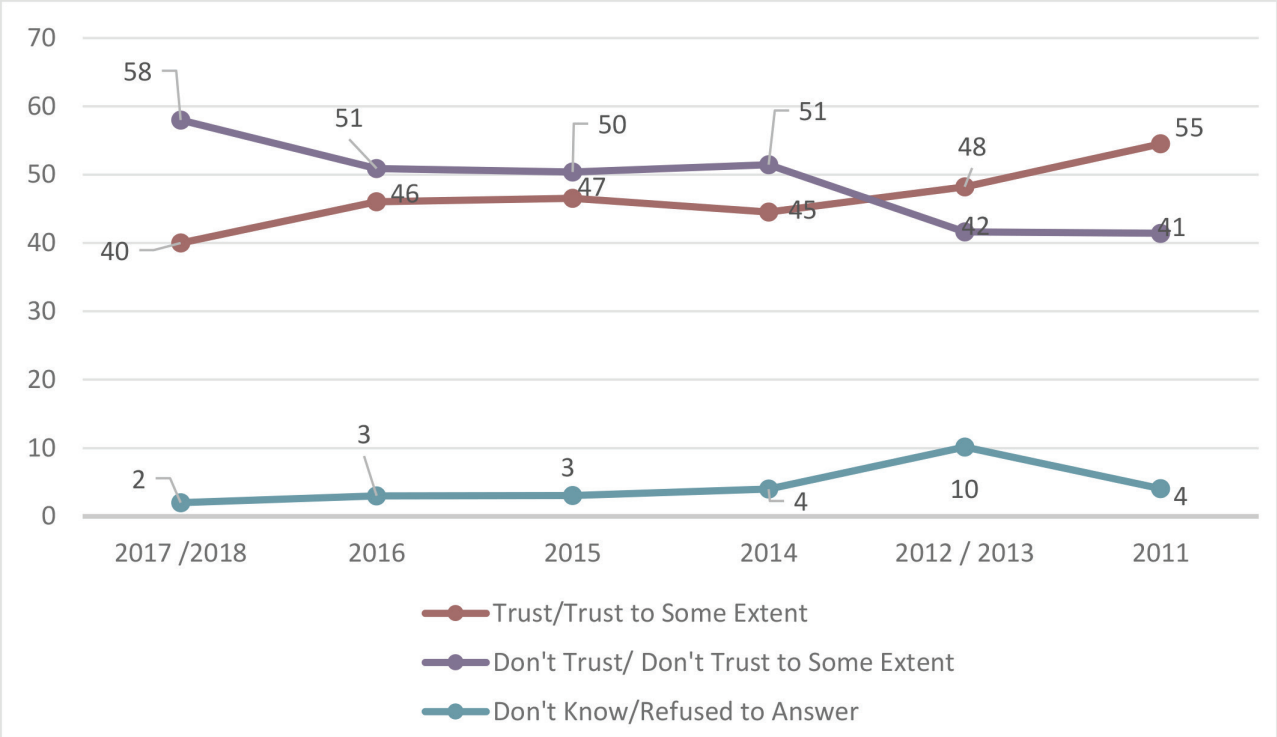


Figure 7: Opinions of Sudanese respondents regarding the phrase "democracies are not good at maintaining public order" during the 2011-2018 period

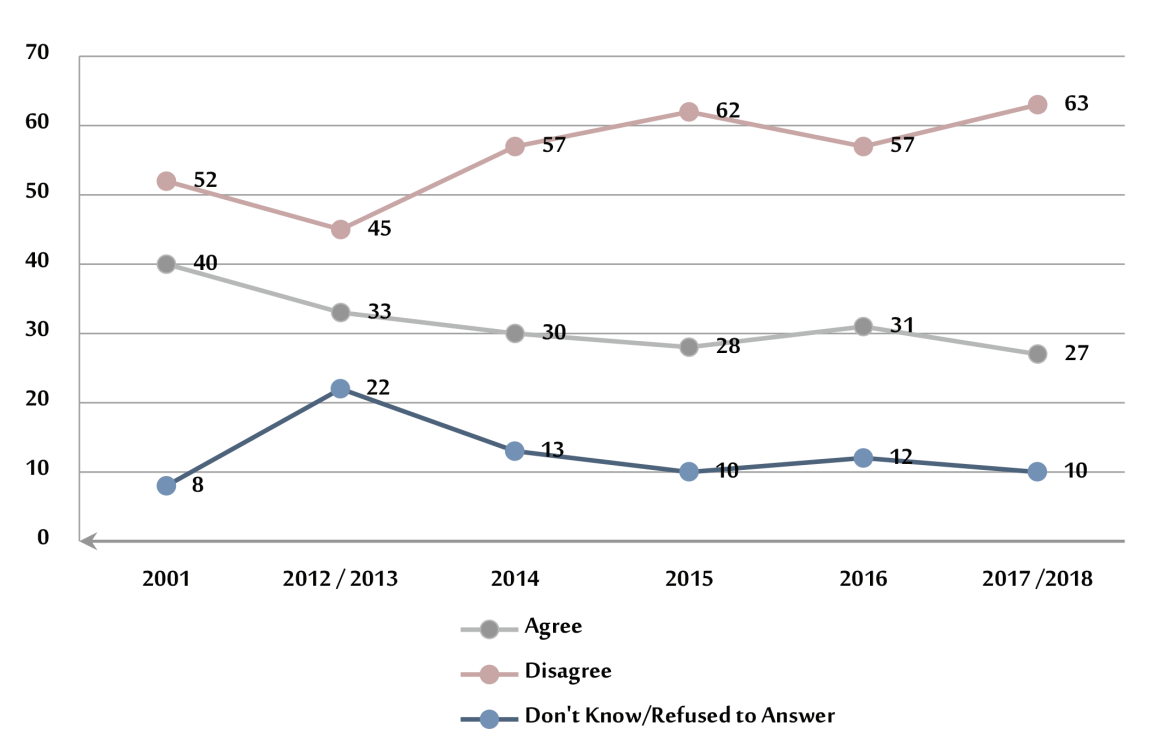
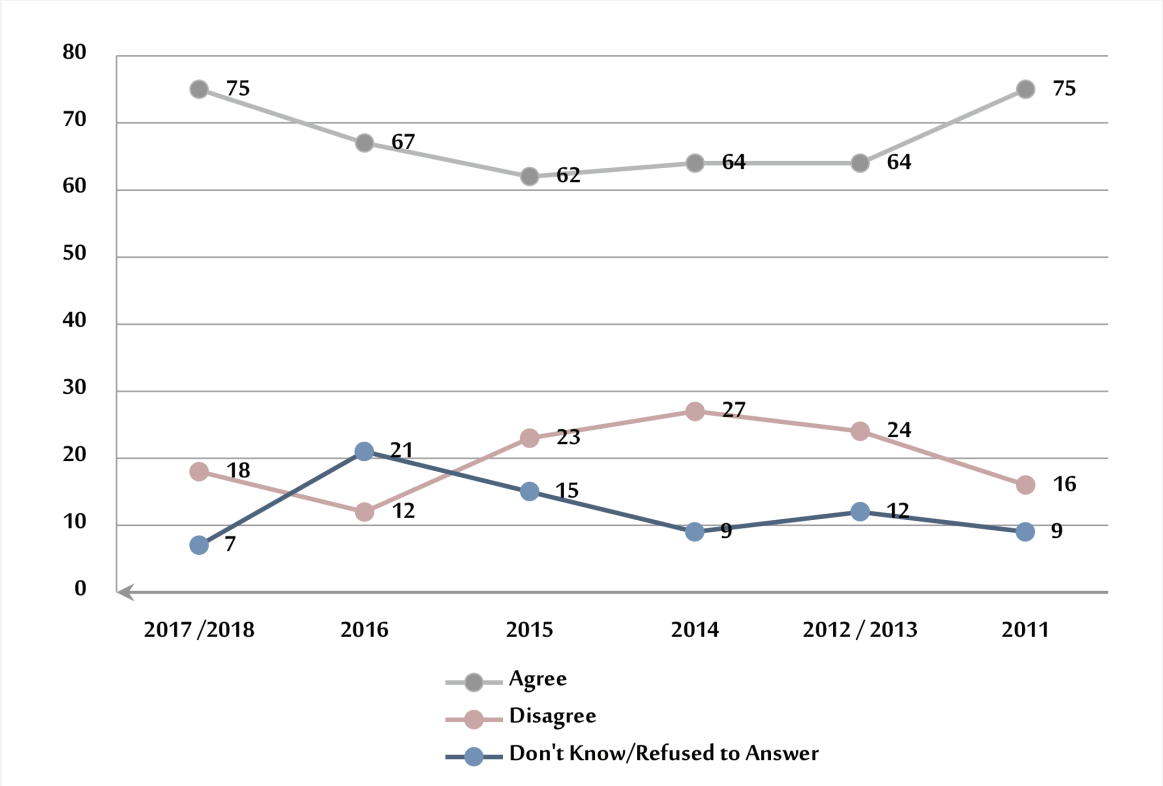
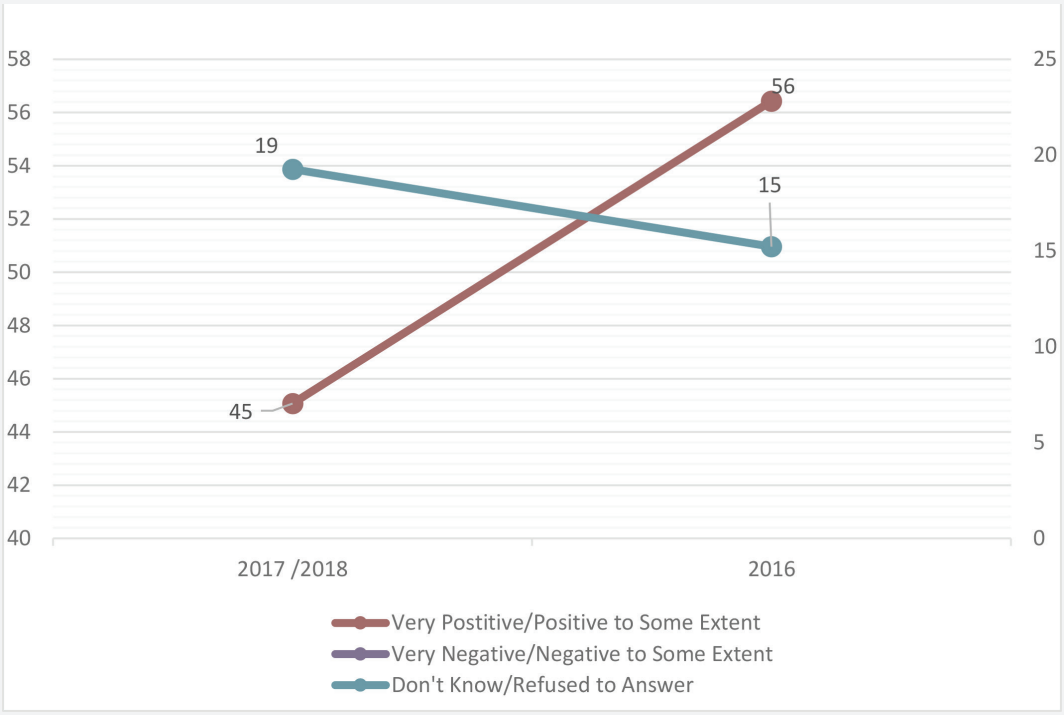


Figure 8: The opinions of Sudanese respondents regarding the phrase "the democratic system may have its issues, but it is better than others" during the period 2011-2016.



Indeed, support for the Arab Spring is higher in Sudan than in Algeria by quite a large margin. In 2016, when Sudanese respondents were asked on the Arab Spring, a majority at 56% believed the protests were 'positive to some extent/very positive". This faced a significant drop in 2017/2018, when only 45% of respondents believed the protests were "positive to some extent/very positive" Nevertheless, rates of support for the Arab Spring in Sudan are higher than in Algeria.

Figure 9: Sudan



Implications

This has interesting implications for the most recent protest waves we have seen erupt in both countries. Past impressions of democracy, its impact on stability, and the Arab Spring as a movement do not seem to be motivating factors in the most recent eruptions. For instance, in Sudan the impression of the Arab Spring differs from in Algeria, but both countries have had sustained mobilizations and a degree of success in gaining concessions from the government. Interested researchers might thus explore the motivation behind mobilization by delving into individual level data. In this way, they can shed light on question of whether protest motivation indeed has any bearing on protest success.