Between Grievances and State Violence: Sudan's Youth Movement and Islamist Activism Beyond the "Arab Spring"

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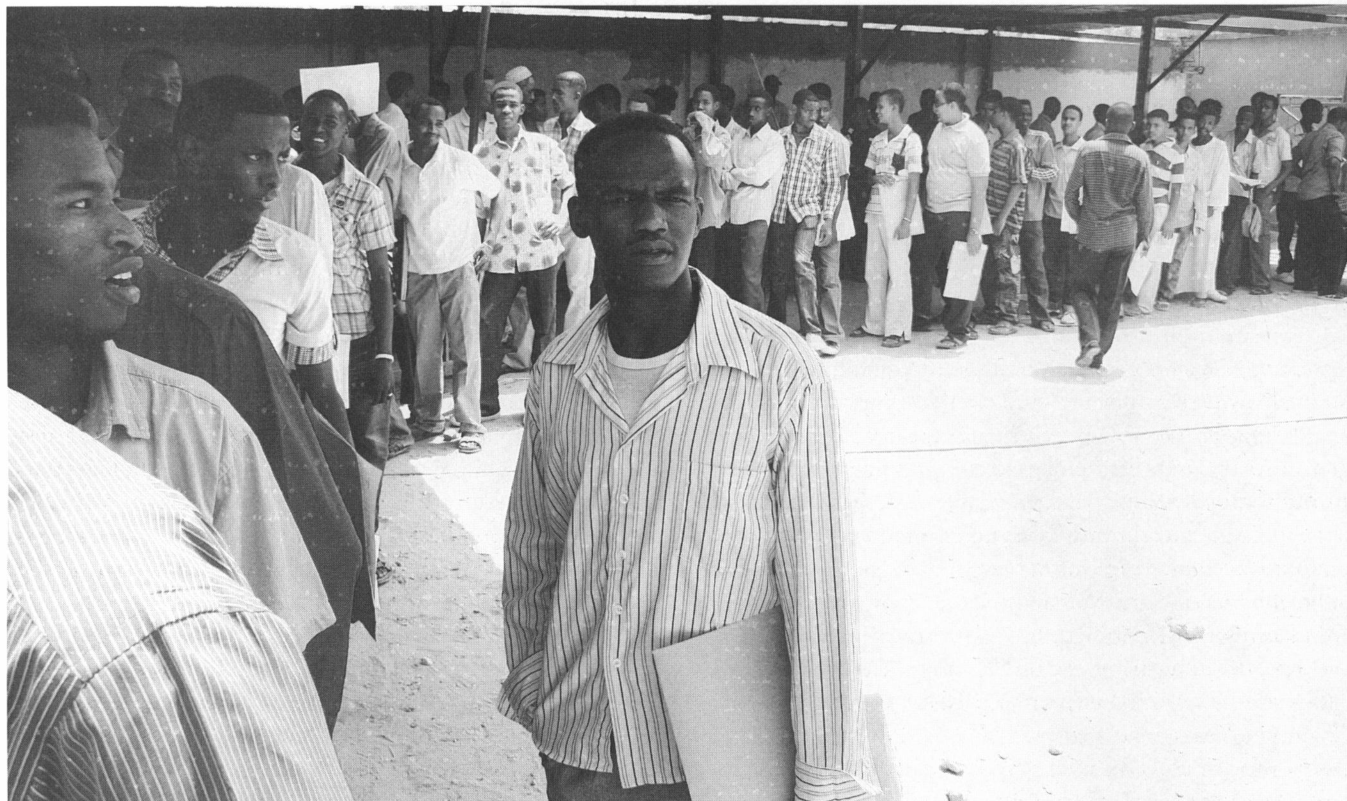

Students apply for places at the University of Khartoum. AP PHOTO/ABD RAOUF

Between Grievances and State Violence

Sudan's Youth Movement and Islamist Activism Beyond the "Arab Spring"

Khalid Mustafa Medani

On June 16, 2012, female students at the University of Khartoum mounted a demonstration that released a wave of protest on campuses and major towns across Sudan. The young women exited the university gates chanting "Freedom, freedom," demanding the "liberation" of their campus from the grip of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS) and the reversal of a 35 percent hike in bus and train fares announced earlier by the government. The spirit of defiance spread outward from the capital city, and the political agenda broadened, until, by mid-July, thousands of Sudanese were in the streets echoing the famous slogan from Tunisia and Egypt, "The people want the fall of the regime."[1] Security forces eventually quashed the demonstrations, but not before the state was forced to reinstate subsidies on key commodities, notably fuel, and to delay the implementation of wide-ranging neoliberal economic reforms.

Like the Arab uprisings of 2011, the summer-long surge of dissent in Sudan was led by youth—men and women in their late teens, twenties and thirties, some of whom are students, and others of whom are jobless or underemployed. The grassroots protest organizations Girifna (We Are Fed Up) and Sudan Change Now are composed heavily of middle-class young people. As in other Arab countries, the Sudanese youths have adeptly used social media and other high-tech communications tools to voice their grievances against the regime, as well as their criticisms of the older generation of politicians and increasingly marked ethnic and racial divisions in society.

For years prior to the Arab uprisings, there was talk of the "youth bulge"—the high proportion of the population between the ages of 15 and 24. As Ted Swedenburg has noted, the concept of youth is more usefully understood as a "socially and culturally determined category" than as a narrow age range.[2] In the Arab world, people well into their thirties may find themselves in the life stage defined as "youth," usually meaning that they are unmarried (and not by choice), marginally employed and in a position of some dependence on parents or other elders. Scholars seeking to explain the uprisings have often focused on the "youth bulge," with some positing that the growing frustration of young people with the lack of jobs

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"awakened" them into revolt. Others have argued that the driver of youth mobilization was not long-standing grievances, but the opportunity afforded by the increasing interconnectedness of the Arab world and the outside world made possible by social media and new information technology.

Sudan too has a "youth bulge"—17 percent of the population was between 15–24 in 2012—but its youth movement is motivated by both grievance and opportunity. The grievances, on the one hand, can be found in the social and political challenges resulting from economic austerity and the absence of democracy. The opportunity, on the other hand, comes from evolving dynamics of state repression and the erosion of the regime's monopoly on the legitimate means of coercion. As in other Arab countries, Sudan's youth movement is distinctly averse to the promotion of a particular ideology and includes young people from across the political spectrum. But in contrast to many Arab countries,[3] in Sudan there is little indication that the youth are more supportive of political Islam and *shari'a* law than their parents' generation, perhaps because Sudanese have lived under an Islamist-backed regime since 1989. Indeed, as one youth organizer noted, Girifna and Sudan Change Now are composed of older activists, primarily in their late twenties and thirties, who have grown up almost entirely under the Islamists. These activists have experienced not only shrinking employment but also increasing repression by the state, including tightened surveillance, extrajudicial detention, sexual assault of male and female leaders, and torture.[4] Indeed, what the case of Sudan demonstrates is that youth activism in the region is crucially shaped by its dynamic and contingent relationship to the state security forces, youth leaders' interaction with Islamists, and variations in the capacity of Arab youth to coordinate protest. It is these factors that determine the youth movements' distinct, and often variable, political trajectories and their prospects for effecting political change.

Student Activism and the NIF

Youth activism has long played a key role in Sudanese politics. Students at the University of Khartoum helped to topple the military dictatorships of Ibrahim 'Abboud in 1964 and Ja'far al-Numayri in 1985. In the 1970s and 1980s, partly at Numayri's behest, university campuses became hotbeds of Islamist political activity. Numayri, like Anwar al-Sadat in Egypt, was seeking to smash the campus left, and he succeeded, but the young Muslim Brothers, organized as the National Islamic Front (NIF), turned on their patron and became pillars of the coalition that unseated him.

Immediately upon seizing power in 1989, the NIF-backed army officers, led by influential Muslim Brothers, targeted the university system. The regime placed Islamists in top jobs in the Ministry of Education and abolished the campus-based protocol for electing university administrators; President Omar al-Bashir began personally appointing the members of the National Council for Higher Education and Scientific Research, the body that oversees higher education in the country. The NIF further implemented the "Arabization" and "Islamization" of the university curriculum, making Arabic the medium of instruction even for students who spoke another native language, created a host of private universities and exerted control over the recruitment and training of teaching staff.[5] Finally, the regime forced students to report to the forbidding camps of its Popular Defense Forces militia before taking up their studies.[6] This unprecedented restructuring of the educational system was designed to repress student activism as a way of consolidating power. Nonetheless, the moves sparked resistance: In 1990, Islamist candidates lost elections to the University of Khartoum student union, a body they had dominated for almost a decade. In the succeeding decade, there were periodic clashes on campus between students sympathetic to the NIF, backed by the security forces, and a coalition of student organizations opposed to Bashir's rule.

In the 2000s, three important trends combined to revitalize and alter the nature of the student and youth movement: demographic change, economic austerity and intensified state repression. Sudan's labor market is heavily dependent on the underdeveloped agricultural and informal sectors. These facts, along with Sudan's high birth rate, mean that young people of working age have a hard time finding decent-paying jobs. An entire generation of middle-class Sudanese cannot find regular employment and thus cannot afford to marry. As of 2012, the labor force participation and unemployment rates among the young stood at 32.9 percent and 22 percent, respectively, compared to 43 percent and 11 percent for adults.[7] More significantly, the youngest age group, 15–24, men and women, suffers from the highest unemployment rate at 20 percent. Consequently, as one scholar has noted, youth is no longer a transitory phase between childhood and adulthood but an "extended generational stage that presents both new opportunities and a different set of challenges and responsibilities to young people and the society at large."[8]

Against this backdrop, the Bashir regime, now under the banner of the National Congress Party (NCP), has introduced policies of economic austerity in accordance with what they promote as a form of "Islamic" free-market capitalism. In measures that hit students particularly hard, the regime cut subsidies of food, dormitory lodging and public transportation. The quality of student life deteriorated dramatically.

Students interviewed at the University of Khartoum emphasized that this decline is most evident in dormitory living. In previous decades, they noted, the state-run National Fund for Student Aid ran the dormitories. But in 1995 the regime sold off this asset to a private investor with close ties to the NCP. Consequently, the previous system of independently administered colleges became centralized. Since that time, students continued, the Fund has offered no subsidized meals on campus and no bursary for students in financial need. Meanwhile, the number of students on campus expanded from 16,000 in the late 1990s to 25,000 in 2013, resulting in severe

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overcrowding in classrooms and dormitories, where rooms that used to house three students on average now accommodate eight or more. Taken together, these developments have led to malnutrition and the spread of infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, on campus.

In 1998, conflict between student activists and the security forces began in earnest. The National Fund for Student Aid literally confiscated lights and furniture from the dormitories and sold these materials on the open market. In response, the Student Housing Committee called for a protest, and on September 27 of that year, security forces came on campus and beat the protesters. ʿAmmar Bashari, a highly respected student leader, was killed. Bashari's death was a spark igniting the student movement. First, he is considered the students' first "martyr" under NCP rule. Second, and more important, he was a well-known Islamist. His death caused the first break between the NCP Islamists and their former loyalists on campus, and it also, for the first time, united Islamists with leftist and secular students against the security forces. Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, the grievances over Bashari's death, housing and tuition came to a head, with students referring to the Fund as "the Looting of Students Fund" (*sunduq nahb al-tullab*) to depict the excesses of privatization at the largest public university in Sudan.[9]

Demography and austerity have brought protest from several opposition political parties and civil society groups. What distinguishes the case of students and youth from other centers of dissent in Sudanese society is the nature and degree of state violence and repression deployed against the youth movements. The generational rift oft noted by scholars is really a byproduct of the tense relationship between youth and the state and its coercive apparatus.

State Violence and Islamist Militancy

The new student movement and its strategic outlook were born of the heightened confrontations between students and the NISS, regular police and state-sponsored militias. In late 2010, following another round of protests over rising tuition and poor accommodations, students at the University of Khartoum confronted campus NCP loyalists, who eventually retreated. In retaliation, the NISS and police entered the university grounds and severely beat protesters, scores of whom were injured. Numerous women were assaulted. The security forces' primary objective was to strengthen the resolve of their Islamist recruits on campus in the face of anti-government student protests and what many students refer to as the widening "recruitment vacuum."[10]

These pivotal events united the students and opposition parties around a shared agenda in favor of police accountability and against excessive force. The attacks on women, in particular, were regarded as attacks on the "dignity" of the overall population.[11] The student union, newly refashioned, made common cause with students belonging to the Umma Party, the left-of-center Democratic Front and the Popular Congress Party (PCP) led by Hasan al-Turabi. Turabi had dominated the Sudanese Islamist movement since the 1960s, and backed the 1989 coup, but by the late 1990s he was at loggerheads with Bashir. In 1998, Turabi, then speaker of Parliament and NCP secretary-general, attempted to strip Bashir of his executive powers and take over the state himself. A year later, Bashir retaliated by declaring a state of emergency, dissolving Parliament and removing Turabi as head of the NCP. Their subsequent feud split the Islamist movement into two camps—the rump of the NCP and the PCP.

According to students at the University of Khartoum, the student union's alliance with the PCP and other parties was the beginning of a regime crackdown, embodied in the promotion of *salafis*, or aggressively puritanical Islamists, drawn primarily from the private Sudanese African University. More ominously, the NCP began to support individuals who identified themselves as belonging to al-Qaeda. Students related that the NCP afforded these men a *rukn*, or speaker's corner, on campus to disseminate their message. The regime is also accused of providing funds and social services to those who joined the al-Qaeda affiliates.[12] In addition, students involved in the protests in the summer of 2012 said that they witnessed al-Qaeda supporters being transported by the NCP to locations of demonstrations in order to quell them. That much is acknowledged as well by al-Tayyib Mustafa, editor of the NCP-supporting newspaper *al-Intibaha* and uncle of President Bashir. Other respondents reported that al-Qaeda members were being trained as fighters by the regime in the area of Dinder. The NCP's dalliance with *salafis* has already come back to bite the Bashir regime. In February 2012, a *salafi* coalition called the Islamic Constitution Front pressed the regime to adopt stricter versions of *shariʿa* law. That September, the Front's chairman, al-Sadiq ʿAbd al-Majid, excoriated Bashir for dragging his feet, accusing him of pandering to foreign powers and threatening "jihad" if the Front's demands remained unmet.[13]

The *salafi* current in Islamist politics is a new one at the university and in the city of Khartoum. It is made up of an older generation of militants, and a new generation signed up in government-run mosques that are known to preach *takfir*, or the right of one Muslim to declare another a non-believer, a notion previously absent from Sudanese society. This new, more militant organization split in 2007 from the old-guard *salafi* Ansar al-Sunna founded in 1936. Both strands promote the concept of *al-tasfiya wa al-tazkiya*, or the purification and elimination of "false" hadiths (sayings of the Prophet). But while the parent organization limits its activities to non-political proselytization, the younger militants have taken decidedly political stances against other parties and more moderate Islamist groups, and unabashedly embrace *takfir*. *Salafis* remain a minority in Sudan, even among self-described Islamists. Most Sudanese adhere to Sufi forms of religiosity, with a swath of the educated middle class supportive of the Islamist modernism of the Muslim Brothers, from whose ranks the NIF came. Nevertheless, the *salafis*, whose rank and file (albeit not leaders) hail from poorer and less educated strata than the Muslim Brothers, appear to

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be well funded. They have established several mosques and Islamic centers, and promulgated their ideas through cassette recordings in many parts of Khartoum. 'Abd al-Hajj Yusuf is one *salafi* cleric who runs a popular Islamic center in the Sahafa neighborhood, and another notable *takfiri salafi*, Muhammad 'Abd al-Karim, has a significant following in poorer neighborhoods on the outskirts of the capital. The activist *takfiri* notion of *nahy 'an al-munkar* (forbidding what is evil) has resulted in violent conflict. In January, during the *mulid* (the celebration of the Prophet's birthday, which *salafis* abhor as saint worship), *salafis* attacked Sufis in Omdurman, causing serious injuries. In their attempts to enforce the *niqab*, or full face veil, members of *salafi* organizations have been known to flog "inappropriately dressed" women of all ages in public and on the spot. Many women thus victimized have reported that police who were present simply refused to intervene.[14]

These new clients of the state's security apparatus, ironically enough, have managed to extend the influence and alter the very character of the student and youth movement. In the early 2000s, the student movement was working to unite the student body on decidedly local issues such as tuition, dormitory living conditions and the academic curriculum. By 2010, however, as a result of increasing clashes with security forces, formal and informal, the student movement had adopted a self-consciously national and radical political agenda. Indeed, just as the organization of the movement occurred in stages, so did the evolution of its program. In 2009, the majority of youth leaders favored a peaceful and gradual transition to democratic rule. Students and organizations such as Girifna used this period to discuss and debate, to begin the task of coordinating protests outside of Khartoum, and vigorously to support the candidacy of Yasir Arman in the April 2010 presidential election. An ex-communist, Arman represented the northern wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the party most associated with the recurrent rebellions in the south that culminated in the independence of South Sudan in 2011. His eventual withdrawal from the race disillusioned many youth, who began to organize independently around Girifna and the newly formed Sudan Change Now. According to leaders of Sudan Change Now, the fraud in the 2010 election was the spark that lit the fuse of radicalization of students and youth—even more than the Arab uprisings.[15] It was clear then, in the opinion of youth activists, that the Bashir regime was not interested in liberalizing the political system or expanding civil and political liberties. So, as early as mid-2010, the youth began to prepare the call for the NCP's downfall.

The rise of Girifna is rooted in student activism. The pro-democracy movement was founded in October 2009 by three leftist, middle-class students from the University of Khartoum who met in Omdurman. It quickly established branches on other campuses in Khartoum, as well as in central, eastern and western Sudan. Both Girifna and Sudan Change Now maintain strong links with the University of Khartoum, though the movement leaders are careful to operate clandestinely on campus, to avoid bringing more security pressure on students. Regime claims about armed revolt to the contrary, Girifina and Sudan Change Now are committed to a strategy of peaceful civil disobedience to bring about the end of NCP rule and the advent of democracy in the country.

"Recruitment Vacuum"

The conflict on campuses parallels the surprising decline of mainstream NCP-identified Islamists in civil society and politics. By November 2011, it was clear that these Islamists had lost the base that had brought them to power in 1989 and sustained the regime for almost two decades: middle-class students at the universities. Afraid they would lose, NCP students violently disrupted the student union elections that month. The contests were canceled. There were also clashes at the University of Sudan, after the Islamists closed the doors to the polling station and simply ended the voting by fiat. These two events quickly led to a wave of protests against Islamists at the Universities of Nilayn, Imam al-Hadi, Jazira, Dunqula and Sinnar, the last institution located in the hometown of President Bashir. These rallies prefigured the 2012 protests in that they were facilitated by what students said was "easy communication" by cellular phone and Facebook, which, for the first time, forged links among campuses throughout northern and central Sudan.

Already by the mid-2000s, students report, regime recruitment of young Islamists on campus was based on material inducements rather than ideology. The only students conscripted were those who "joined the NCP for money," while many more defected to Turabi's opposition PCP or the militant *salafi* groups. At present, the "proportion of university students leaving the NCP organization is far greater than those joining."[16]

Another reason for the weakening of the NCP is the war in Darfur. Prior to the war, which began in 2003, the ruling party was very successful at recruiting Darfurians into the mainstream Islamist organization on campus because it was a route to social mobility. By 2006, however, the regime was resorting to crude and racist discourse to discredit the Darfurian rebels—denigrating them as *zurga* (blacks)—and students from Darfur took umbrage. During the period 2006–2008, the NCP launched an energetic campus enrollment campaign based on appeals to tribal and clan loyalties. The regime focused its efforts on the Sha'iqiyya and Ja'aliyya tribes and, in particular, clans from those tribes residing in the towns of Hajar al-Tayr and Hajar al-'Asal, near Shendi on the Nile northeast of Khartoum. This mode of recruitment was based on individual or small-group training rather than the camps under the auspices of the Popular Defense Forces.

The NCP retrenched in this manner because as early as 2006 they were aware that their support was eroding among middle-class students and people from outside greater Khartoum. Moreover, as the students put it, "the NCP no longer trusted their own former loyalists and informants on campus, which in itself meant that they relied increasingly on harsher forms

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of violence, repression and even torture," rather than surveillance.[17] Not surprisingly, the height of the war in Darfur in 2006 saw harsh crackdowns on campus protest. Students were arrested and many were taken in secret to mosques run by the security forces to be tortured.

Islamism in Fragments

According to student union members at the University of Khartoum, divisions among Islamists on campus corresponded to fissures within the NCP. Vice President 'Ali 'Uthman Taha has been financing his own clients on campus, as has his well-known antagonist, Nafi' 'Ali Nafi', a presidential adviser who takes a hard line on the country's internal wars. So clear was the rivalry that students loyal to the two would lecture on alternating days at the speaker's corner on campus. Echoing their patron, Nafi' supporters projected a vision of "strength, repression and jihad," while Taha backers spread a message of "compromise, reform and constitutionalism." By most accounts, the Taha faction long had a far larger following, since Taha was himself a Muslim Brother student leader in Khartoum. By 2011, however, it was clear from the level of militant Islamist violence that the partisans of Nafi' had sidelined their adversaries on campus, as they have in the regime's inner circles.

The strong link between Taha and Islamist students has broken down. One clear indication came as early as 2006, when Muhammad 'Uthman, secretary-general of the Islamists at the University of Khartoum and Taha's personal appointee, resigned his post and joined the largely leftist and secular student union. Scores of others soon followed, helping to usher in a new trend that came to be known as the *sa'ihun*, or wanderers.

The *sa'ihun* are those Islamists disenchanted with the regime, whether because of its corruption, its departure from proselytization (*da'wa*), the "loss" of South Sudan or the constant squabbling inside the NCP. No united front, the *sa'ihun* are composed of three fragments of the Islamist movement: old Turabi supporters who have returned to his fold in the form of the PCP; hardline former Popular Defense Forces fighters in the "jihadi" wars in the south and Nuba Mountains in the 1990s; and a younger generation who view themselves as moderate, democratically inclined reformers. The last are the newest trend and have the greatest legitimacy in Sudanese society. They are led by Ghazi Salih al-Din, an NCP member estranged from the upper echelons of the regime and his former patron, Taha. These self-proclaimed reformers have attracted many younger Islamists by acknowledging "mistakes" the movement has made in the past and calling for reinvigorated *da'wa*, an end to corruption and a "peaceful" transition to democracy.

There is fragmentation, as well, within the security forces. The roots of the disarray can be found in the breach between Bashir and Salah Gosh, the architect and former head of the NISS. It was Gosh who, in the 1990s, extended the reach of the security forces into the social and cultural spheres, as well as the political. Following his demotion by Bashir in 2009, and his imprisonment in connection with a coup attempt in November 2012, there has been a climate of mistrust among the NCP leadership. According to youth activists who have been detained, "No one knows how the structure works or where the money comes from. No one can afford to trust anyone else."[18]

The result is the rise of militias answering to individual NCP actors. In 2010, for example, Nafi' 'Ali Nafi' formed a paramilitary group popularly known as Amn Awlad Nafi', "security boys" enlisted to outflank his rival 'Ali 'Uthman Taha. The militiamen, like the new cohort of NCP campus loyalists, are chosen from among the Ja'aliyya tribe from which Nafi' hails—and particularly from the towns of Hajar al-Tayr and Hajar al-'Asal. They are paid from a separate budget that Nafi' administers personally, trained in small groups (often abroad), charged with specific tasks and placed in civilian jobs such as at banks. They are akin to a reserve army that can be called up at any time.

Other high-ranking NCP stalwarts have emulated this dangerous model. A notable example is Amn Awlad 'Awad al-Jaz, a militia recruited, funded and held in reserve by the minister of energy. Youth protesters describe these groups as "mafias" because they beat up, intimidate and detain citizens on the orders of a boss trying to outgun other bosses within the state. The regular police, who tend to come from poor families, have watched their authority diminish next to the clout of militias enjoying the largesse of an NCP patron.

Youth activists note that the NISS remains the strongest security institution. But following the Gosh coup attempt, and the increased competition among NCP leaders, the NISS is also weak in some respects. Recruitment of NISS officers, for example, increasingly follows tribal lines, leading to problems of command and control. As one activist detainee put it: "When [NISS officers] interrogate you, they do not know who you are; they don't have access to intelligence information from other sources and they are clearly not in communication with other departments of their own organization."[19]

The Vision of Youth for a New Sudan

It is this context of economic crisis and confrontation with the coercive state apparatus that underpins the divide between youth activists and the older generation that dominates the leadership of the traditional political parties, civil society and even the armed insurgents organized under the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). In the view of the student and youth activists, for example, there is "nothing new" in the New Dawn Charter signed in July 2012 by the opposition political parties and various rebels fighting to overthrow the Khartoum regime. (Girifna and Sudan Change Now initialed the Charter, too, but quickly had a change of

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Thorny theoretical questions are explicit in early chapters by J. R. McNeill, Richard Bulliet and Sam White, which take a *longue durée* approach. McNeill observes that all regional environments have distinctive features that shape trajectories of economic, political and social change. In the Middle East and North Africa, these "eccentricities" include the interpenetration of land and sea, the resulting island-like pattern of settlement, the predominance of semi-arid grasslands, the lack of coal, and the abundance of animal labor and, of course, oil and natural gas. Bulliet seeks to explain some of the divergence between the Middle East and Europe with the relative costs of animal energy and water-driven mills. In Europe, he argues, the cost of animal power steadily increased after the twelfth century as human population growth meant that farmers earned greater returns from food crops than fodder for livestock. Costly grazing prompted the widespread adoption of water mills, and the rise of an entrepreneurial class of millers, both important elements of early industrialization. In the Middle East, by contrast, donkeys, camels, horses and oxen remained cheap and plentiful workers, since grazing rights were free. White similarly argues that the long "decline" of the Ottoman Empire vis-à-vis rival states can only be understood in the context of severe climatic changes that contributed to famine, disease and rebellion. He focuses on the long-term impact of repeated droughts and cold weather during the Little Ice Age from the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, which devastated crops, herds and human settlements in many Ottoman provinces.

Alan Mikhail's comprehensive, well-annotated opening chapter points to how non-human actors can shape historical processes. In this vein, authors in the collection bring fresh interpretations to well-trodden subject areas. Nancy Reynolds revisits the construction of the Aswan High Dam through the prism of physical manipulation of rock by different communities over time and political uses of geographic expertise. Mikhail highlights the conjuncture of natural disaster and human-animal interaction in the spread of terrible disease, such as the 1791 plague in Cairo, where torrential rains and flash floods forced rats and humans into proximity and destroyed arable land and warehoused food stocks, resulting in famine and weakened bodily resistance. As suggested by Bulliet, however, domesticated animals are the most significant non-human actors in Middle Eastern history. Arash Khazeni shows how the tough, fleet horses bred by Turkmen tribes enabled them to conduct slave raids and unsettle imperial efforts at projecting power onto the steppes. There was a literary genre dedicated to horses and horsemanship under the Mughal, Safavid and Qajar dynasties.

Chapters on modern periods demonstrate that colonial and post-colonial state resource management was central to the consolidation of bureaucratic power and the attendant exclusion and dispossession. In North Africa, Diana Davis writes, French authorities enclosed large tracts of land in national parks, justifying the displacement of the locals on the grounds that their sheep and goats contributed to "deforestation" and "overgrazing." Such assertions continue to underpin land use policies in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, though local ecologies are in fact long adapted to transhumant animal foraging. Toby Jones identifies control over water (and not just oil) as central to the success of the Saudi royal family and their American advisers in consolidating power on the peninsula. Jessica Barnes traces how expert debates around a land reclamation project in Egypt reflected conflicting bureaucratic and political imperatives. The resulting "compromises" in project design could not compensate for the physical lack of water. Karim Makdisi provocatively argues that the marginalization of the Lebanese Shi'a was environmental as well as political and economic, and thus reinterprets their social mobilization as an "environmentalism of the poor" comparable to that documented elsewhere in the developing world.

In sum, this collection is richly rewarding for students, specialists and general readers interested in understanding the Middle East and North Africa in comparative and historical perspective. ■

—*Jeannie Sowers*

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heart.) From the perspective of the youth, these groups are all factions pursuing particularistic political interests. On the one hand, youth leaders maintain that the SPLM-N is using the Charter to put pressure on Khartoum to sign a separate agreement with them. On the other hand, they note that the Charter, which in any case has since dissolved, does not reflect a strategic vision for national reconciliation and radical regime transformation. As for the traditional parties, such as Umma, the youth feel they have lost support because they are preoccupied with the mechanics of political change and the distribution of power among the elite.

The leaders of the youth movement do not believe that the SPLM-N is capable of military victory. Their preference is to force the regime to relinquish power by means of a popular uprising or *intifada*. Mindful of the weaknesses of the traditional political parties, youth representatives self-consciously view themselves as a "coordinating mechanism."[20] The movement is concentrating on raising political awareness and harnessing shared grievances about state repression and socio-economic crisis. Despite claims to the contrary, youth leaders insist that they have support among a wide spectrum of Sudanese.

Perhaps more importantly, given how ethnic divisions have impeded collective action in Sudan, youth activists have worked to bridge the gap between Arabized tribes and Darfurians resident in central Sudan. In December 2012, students at the University of Jazira protested the dean's decision to compel payment of fees, even by students from Darfur, who had previously been exempted due to the war. During

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two days of strikes, the NISS detained student leaders and killed four students from Darfur, tossing the corpses into shallow water. What followed was a rally of thousands—chanting the selfsame "Freedom, freedom" and "The people want the fall of the regime"—that forced the police and NISS to withdraw from campus. The same month, larger protests took place on Khartoum campuses in solidarity with the Darfur Student Association. It was a pointed rejection of the state's incendiary race baiting and hence quite a breakthrough.

Sudanese youth activists have distinguished themselves from the traditional political parties in two important ways: by eschewing ideology or sectarian affiliation, and by focusing on local grievances before linking these basic demands to calls for regime change and democracy. Nonetheless, student and youth leaders acknowledge that support born out of shared grievances rather than ideology is deeply vulnerable, not only to the coercive apparatus, but also to deep-seated problems of public awareness and coordination. Youth in the provinces are not as savvy with social media and communications as those in Khartoum. As the information officer of Sudan Change Now put it: "What we really need is not money but more mobile phones, that we can distribute to our brother and sisters in the provinces and teach them how to use."[21]

Indeed, according to youth leaders, it is not the ideological Islamist-secular divide that poses the greatest challenge to the youth movement in Sudan, but the deep class and regional divides. Despite its left-leaning origins, one youth leader noted, Girifna "quickly accommodated youth from most political backgrounds, including Islamists opposed to the NCP." As for Sudan Change Now, it "is struggling to gain the loyalty of the remote lower classes, and from outlying regions such as Gedaref that are often suspicious of elites in Khartoum of any ideology."[22]

The study of Arab youth movements tends to elide the dynamic relationship between the movements and the political and coercive state institutions that seek to contain and control them. The case of Sudan demonstrates that it is precisely that interplay that determines the objectives and methods of youth organizations. In Sudan, changes in the coercive apparatus have tracked with the trajectory of the Islamist movement as well. The youth activists have exploited the breakup of the Islamists and carefully elaborated grievances that have begun to chip away at the ideological edifice of the state. The youth movement in Sudan shows that survey evidence of political Islam's pull may be misleading: Once in power, Islamists are rarely able to maintain their popularity or ideological sway as youth growing up under their rule emerge as central actors in recasting what Islamic politics means. ■

Endnotes

1 For more on the protests, see Khalid Mustafa Medani, "Understanding the Prospects and Challenges for Another Popular Intifada in Sudan," *Jadaliyya*, June 27, 2012.

2 Ted Swedenburg, "Imagined Youths," *Middle East Report* 245 (Winter 2007), p. 4.

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5 Linda Bishai, *Sudanese Universities as Sites of Social Transformation* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, February 2008).

6 Ali Abdalla Abbas, "The National Islamic Front and the Politics of Education," *Middle East Report* 1[illegible]2 (September-October 1991).

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8 Marwan Bishara, *The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolutions* (New York: Nation Books, 2012), p. 65.

9 Notes on group discussion among student union members, University of Khartoum, founding members of Girifna, and members of Sudan Change Now, Khartoum, February 2, 2013.

10 Interviews with University of Khartoum students.

11 Ibid.

12 Notes on group discussion among student union members, University of Khartoum, founding members of Girifna, and members of Sudan Change Now, Khartoum, February 2, 2013.

13 *Sudan Tribune*, September 25, 2012.

14 Interviews with Amna Sadiq, university professor, and female students, Omdurman, January 28, 2013.

15 Interviews with leaders of Sudan Change Now, Khartoum, February 4, 2013.

16 Interviews with student union leaders University of Khartoum, February 6, 2013.

17 Ibid.

18 Interviews with Girifna and Sudan Change Now members, Khartoum, February 8, 2013.

19 Interview with Sudan Change Now member, Khartoum, January 4, 2013.

20 Interview with Sudan Change Now information officer, Khartoum, January 28, 2013.

21 Ibid.

22 Interview with Girifna member, Washington, April 14, 2013.

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