
The unpopular military government of Omar Bashir is engaged in a campaign “designed to methodically transform the very fabric of Sudanese society, molding it into an increasingly militarized and ideological police state in the Iranian style.” Meanwhile, an estimated 500,000 Sudanese have died as a result of war and drought, and 1.5 million more may be on the brink of starvation.

Sudan's Human and Political Crisis

BY KHALID MEDANI

A prominent Sudanese scholar once wrote that “there are no religious differences in Africa and . . . any conflicts that . . . arise are purely secular in nature”—a controversial declaration, but one that provokes a relatively uncharted course allowing for discovery. Nowhere is such an exploration more needed than in attempts to understand the tragedy that has befallen Sudan.

In Sudan as in Somalia, war rather than any natural catastrophe is the chief culprit behind the humanitarian crisis. Sudanese history over the last four decades has been characterized by systematic human rights abuses, particularly in the south, stemming from an intermittent civil war. Successive governments, including the civilian precursor to the present regime, have brutalized civilians in the south suspected of sympathizing with the guerrillas of the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA). But under strongman Omar Bashir this policy has been followed with a zeal and ferocity that warrant international condemnation.

Together with drought, desertification, and other ecological calamities, Bashir's military campaigns in the south and fighting between insurgent groups there have resulted in a war-induced famine. Over the last decade these factors have been responsible for the deaths of an estimated 500,000 Sudanese (250,000 in 1988 alone). More than 4 million have been displaced—one-third the entire population of the south. Among these, the United States Agency for International Development estimates that almost 3 million people require emergency food assistance and more than half of these may be on the brink of starvation. In some areas all the children under the age of five have died. Throughout the south, thousands are afflicted by epidemics of a host of diseases. Acute food shortages have aggravated traditional ethnic enmities, which—

combined with the influx of automatic weapons—has led to wholesale massacres.

The humanitarian crisis has been further compounded by spiraling factionalism in the southern insurgency, which in recent years has wrought as much havoc on the civilian population in the south as the war waged by the government (which has encouraged the factionalism). On August 28, 1989, a faction of the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army led by Commanders Riek Mashar and Lam Akol (known as the Nasir faction) split from the mainstream rebel movement headed by John Garang's Torit faction—ostensibly over allegations of human rights violations and the latter's reluctance to consider the issue of separation for the south, but also over control of relief supplies. That leaders of the Nasir faction seemed to derive the bulk of their support from the Nuer ethnic group, whereas Garang commands the allegiance of his own Dinka tribe, indicates the injection of an ethnic factor into the dispute.

Within this context of a fractured southern opposition and a south increasingly plagued by internecine strife, Sudanese armed forces launched what proved to be a relatively successful dry-season offensive in March 1992. They were aided by the SPLA's loss of its strategic bases in Ethiopia following the fall of the Mengistu regime in May 1990, but most of all by an inflow to the Bashir regime of Iranian-financed Chinese arms worth an estimated \$300 million. By the end of last year Garang's fortunes, already badly damaged, took a turn for the worse as Khartoum managed to lift the siege of the southern capital of Juba and also to capture the key southern towns of Bor, Kapoeta, and Garang's home base of Torit near the Ugandan border. Contributing to rebel woes, in September the already divided SPLA fractured further, when Garang's deputy and longtime ally, Commander William Nuyon Bany, defected and formed another rebel group.

The offensive achieved for Khartoum the additional objective of obstructing relief supplies to those civilians

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it considered sympathetic to the rebels. The UN's much beleaguered Operation Lifeline Sudan finally came to a halt as the security situation deteriorated. In August government forces summarily executed two Sudanese employees of the Agency for International Development in Juba for "collaborating" with the SPLA. By the end of November the majority of international organizations in the country had evacuated their personnel following the murder of a Norwegian journalist and three relief workers, allegedly by forces loyal to Garang. Recently, after a tentative agreement between the government and representatives of the major insurgencies, UN and other relief agencies have trickled back to the south, but they continue to be hampered by the conflict.

AN INEQUITABLE HISTORY

Western analysts and journalists have more often than not portrayed the war in Sudan as stemming from a cleavage between a monolithic Muslim Arab north increasingly energized by the ideology of Islamic revivalism and a southern Sudanese population distinguished only generally as "black" African, Christian or animist, and of a secular political outlook. This view is actively encouraged by apologists of the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Khartoum, whose interests lie in subverting the diversity of the various communities in Sudan (most notably within the Muslim community itself). In thinly disguised schemes, the apologists manufacture the illusion that the people of the predominantly Muslim north are unequivocally committed to the local fundamentalists' particular version of political Islam.

The reality is that Islamic fundamentalism is a relatively modern phenomenon in Sudan, and the roots of the present conflict are not only more structural in nature but date to the colonial era. Far from being a benign occupation, British rule in Sudan between 1899 and 1956 was formative in establishing the obstacles that were to eventually render north-south reconciliation a truly arduous task. Under the British, development efforts were almost exclusively concentrated in the northern portion of the country—primarily in the fertile lands between the Blue Nile and the White Nile south of Khartoum, but also in central Kordofan to the west and Kassala province in the east.

Colonial authorities advanced what they called their "separate development" policy by promulgating legislation in the south that effectively prevented any economic, political or cultural ties with the north. No doubt conscious that they could not possibly control all Sudan's vast territory and a population comprising as many as 500 ethnic groups, the British pursued a

divide-and-rule policy. Only a year after the conquest of Sudan, Lord Kitchener, the first governor-general, carefully instructed his regional governors in the proper running of Sudanese political affairs: the "task before us all," he told them, "is [to be] thoroughly in touch with the better class of native, through whom we may hope gradually to influence the whole population."

This "better class of native" eventually emerged along traditional sectarian lines and under the banner of the most powerful of the Muslim sects that had dominated the political, social, and economic life of northern Sudan since the fourteenth century. Considerable British patronage, combined with the manner in which Britain negotiated the independence bargain with northern elites, boosted the political fortunes of two parties that were to determine much of the civilian politics of Sudan after independence: the Umma party, affiliated with the Ansar sect, and what is now the Democratic Unionist party, linked to the Khatmiyya sect. This facilitated the consolidation of an Arabic and Islamic identity in the north, as distinct from a south influenced by Christian missionaries who under British sponsorship provided educational and social as well as religious services to the population. These contrasting political identities, in combination with uneven economic development, have driven the Sudanese conflict since it first erupted in 1955, following a short-lived mutiny by a group of southern officers that was put down by the British. Yet in the words of John Garang, it was the latter—"the differential development between northern and southern Sudan"—that played the more important role in triggering the first phase of the civil war, which was to last 17 years.¹

In Khartoum sectarian factionalism helped produce a procession of impotent coalition governments unable or unwilling to act on the nation's problems—a pattern to be repeated with every democratically elected government to come. Eventually the leadership of the Umma party took the unusual step of inviting General Ibrahim Abboud to topple its own government in a military coup. In 1958, a mere two years after independence, Abboud took power, and immediately proceeded to carry out a brutal policy of forced Arabization and Islamization in the south that exaggerated the deep cleavages between the country's two halves. Trumpeting the cause of independence for the south, the Anya Nya guerrilla movement (the military affiliate of the Southern Sudanese Liberation Movement) coalesced in the early 1960s to wage war against the regime.

The government voted into power following Abboud's ouster in a 1964 popular uprising was once again dominated by the political parties affiliated with the Khatmiyya and Ansar sects, with the Communist party and the Islamic Charter Front acting as influential spoilers. Predictably no genuine progress was made during this period in relations with the south.

¹John Garang, "Identifying, Selecting, and Implementing Rural Development Strategies in Southern Region, Sudan" (Ph.D. diss., Iowa State University, 1981), pp.42-43.

This changed in May 1969, when Gaafar Nimeiri assumed power in a bloodless military coup. Nimeiri's initial popularity aided a process that led to the March 1972 Addis Ababa accords, which created an autonomous southern regional government within a national unity government; Nimeiri was thus able to promise the south protection of its distinct political and cultural identity. The accords secured a degree of peace between north and south; paradoxically, they also opened a Pandora's box of interethnic disputes in the south as elites there, effectively deprived of full participation in the central government, vied for power, thereby weakening their bargaining position with Khartoum. Without a common enemy in the north, many groups of southerners began to perceive other southern groups as threats. While many saw the Addis Ababa agreement as a miracle of negotiation, it was clear from the outset that despite its many positive elements, the pact was not a permanent solution, but had only laid the groundwork for one.

THE ECONOMIC CATALYST

OPEC's oil price hikes—one year after the Addis Ababa peace accords—played an important role not only in the ultimate resumption of civil conflict in the 1980s but also in the ascent of the Sudanese Islamic fundamentalists. As the Arab oil-producing states accumulated enormous profits, they became extremely interested in overcoming their reliance on the outside world for food, and targeted Sudan as the potential breadbasket of the Arab world.

Far from improving Sudan's economy, however, the flurry of development in the mid- and late 1970s led to deepening woes and exacerbated regional disparities and grievances. Deficient planning, a rising import bill resulting from escalating fuel costs, and pervasive government corruption trapped Sudan in a vicious circle of increasing debt and declining production. Between 1978 and 1982 foreign debt rose from \$3 billion to \$5.2 billion, and was almost double that three years later when Nimeiri was ousted. Even more ominously, regional inequalities were now dangerously exacerbated. Between 1971 and 1980, more than 80 percent of all government expenditure was centered in Khartoum and Blue Nile and Kassala provinces, with little distributed in other northern regions and almost none going to the south.

With the formal economy in shambles, productive activity came to be concentrated almost exclusively in the "hidden economy," fed by remittances from the hundreds of thousands of Sudanese who, beginning in the mid-1970s, had for economic reasons migrated to the Arab Gulf countries. In 1985 formal remittances represented more than 70 percent of the value of Sudan's exports and 35 percent of all imports. Most of these assets, estimated at close to \$3 billion, were channeled through black market transactions that

quickly came to be monopolized by the Islamic fundamentalists.

Another development in the late 1970s that significantly promoted the fundamentalists' political clout was Nimeiri's encouragement of Islamic banks in hopes of attracting ever more capital from the Gulf while simultaneously cultivating the allegiance of the Muslim Brothers. The financial power of the Brothers gave them economic leverage that they first used in cultivating a well-organized, albeit numerically small, constituency among the urban middle class, students, and elements of the military establishment. Later, they pressed for the full application of Islamic law (Sharia).

The active support of the Muslim Brothers helped turn Nimeiri into a ruthless dictator who would pitch the country back into civil war. By the early 1980s he had become desperate, with the economy crippled by an \$8-billion debt and his political base ever narrower. In June 1983, under the pretext of granting more power to the marginalized groups in the south but primarily to secure revenues after the discovery of oil in the southern town of Bentiu, Nimeiri unilaterally decreed the south's division into three regions—effectively abrogating the Addis Ababa agreement and the peace between north and south it had brought. In September Nimeiri imposed the Sharia, with a view to undermining sectarian parties and appeasing fundamentalists. The September Laws, as they came to be known, introduced archaic and inhuman criminal penalties that included flogging and the amputation of limbs for offenses such as petty theft and the consumption of alcohol. More ominously, they made religion one of the leading divisive factors in the Sudanese conflict.

Garang's formation of the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement in July 1983, a full three months before Nimeiri's implementation of Sharia, was in response to a central government not only increasingly set against the south, but one that had become extremely unpopular in the north as well. Garang rejected secessionism, calling instead for a "national revolution" that would restructure the country's economy to correct its regional and social inequities and fashion a new, united Sudan that transcended all barriers of religion, race, culture, and even gender.

It was less clear, however, whether many of his movement's rank and file shared Garang's vision of a united Sudan, or whether they fought for the more limited objective of liberating their homelands from a government they considered alien. Garang's success on the battlefield throughout the 1980s, however, meant that he was able to effectively silence those southern voices calling for separation. His was an ambitious goal, but one whose realization seemed possible following Nimeiri's ouster by an intifada (popular uprising) on April 5, 1985, triggered by a government attempt to implement an International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity program.

A FLEETING VICTORY FOR THE DEMOCRATS

While the history of Sudan after independence has been dominated by two military regimes, both were brought down not by military might but by a coalition of "Modern Forces" (*al-quwah al-haditha*) consisting of federations of professionals, civil servants, tenant unions, and artisans sharing a markedly secular political orientation. Without precedent in Africa, these forces took to the streets in mainly peaceful protests, and were largely responsible for the fall of the two military governments. On each occasion the call for a lasting resolution of the civil war was at the top of the agenda; after Nimeiri's departure in 1985 the Modern Forces diligently pressed the democratically elected government to realize this objective.

Reminiscent of previous bouts of parliamentary government, Sudan's most recent experiment with democracy saw as many as five different coalition governments in three years before the last was overthrown by a military coup in 1989. Yet in the midst of these crises, significant efforts were made toward negotiating a viable settlement to the southern conflict. This time peace seemed imminent precisely because a cross-section of Sudanese, comprising intellectuals and members of the professional and trade unions, took to the streets in December 1988. In a strongly worded memorandum supported by a broad segment of the military, these opponents of the regime effectively presented Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi with an ultimatum: resolve the civil war and repeal the September Laws. A reluctant Mahdi was forced to move toward implementing a 1988 agreement between Garang and the Democratic Unionist party leader, Sayed Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani, involving an immediate cease-fire, a freeze on the September Laws until a constitutional conference could be convened to deliberate on them, and abrogation of defense pacts with countries the SPLA viewed as hostile to its interests. For its part, the Islamic Front found these terms so threatening to its Islamist political agenda that it withdrew from the governing coalition. The front's leadership was particularly distressed by Mahdi's decision to incorporate into the new government members of the professional and trade unions whose secular outlook and democratic inclinations were well known.

On June 30, 1989, only 24 hours before representatives of the SPLA and the major political parties were to meet to review the final draft of the peace agreement, a coup led by Omar Bashir ousted the Mahdi government, aborting the fragile—but nonetheless promising—democratic experiment. The timing of the coup and the regime's actions that followed made it abun-

dantly clear that Bashir and the other members of the Revolutionary Command Council were linked to the Islamists.

Following the council's dissolution of all political parties, trade unions, and civil associations and the repeal of all freedoms of speech and assembly, extrajudicial detentions, torture, and summary executions were carried out across the country. The group with the greatest number of victims among its members was the Modern Forces. Any doubts as to the close link between the regime and the Islamic Front were quickly dispelled as the instigators of the June coup forcibly retired hundreds of military officers and replaced hundreds of civil servants with front members. This ongoing campaign is designed to transform the very fabric of Sudanese society, molding it into an increasingly militarized and ideological police state in the Iranian style. It soon became evident, however, that the Islamic Front's unpopularity in Sudan, and the bankrupt economy, would make this task difficult, particularly as the front become increasingly isolated internationally.

IRAN: SPREADING FUNDAMENTALISM?

Khartoum's abysmal human rights record and its fateful decision to support Saddam Hussein during the 1991 Persian Gulf war cemented its regional and international isolation, and left the regime little choice but to turn to the Islamic Republic of Iran for political and economic salvation. The alliance between Iran and Sudan, closely nurtured in the period following President Ali Hashimi Rafsanjani's visit to Khartoum in December 1992, sent shudders through the Arab world and beyond, sparking concern that Iran might attempt to use Sudan as a springboard to promote political Islam in Egypt and across North Africa.²

In reality the Khartoum-Teheran venture was induced by pragmatism rather than ideological affinity. Denied financial assistance from their old benefactors in the Gulf and repeatedly spurned by the IMF on requests for fresh loans, the Sudanese fundamentalists hoped to gain commercial and military support by consolidating relations with Iran. Teheran, on the other hand, wanted to use Sudan not so much to encourage Islamic governments in sub-Saharan Africa but to pursue its well-known regional ambitions and politically outmaneuver its key adversaries in the region, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

So far, however, Iran's chief contribution has been to assist in establishing a ubiquitous security apparatus in Sudan, made up of the Popular Defense Forces, the security police, and the clandestine Security of the Front (which is linked to the National Islamic Front), whose operations have led to the worsening humanitarian crisis in the country. Iranian military assistance and technical training have enabled the government to purchase the Chinese weaponry that it has used to

²Indeed, by March 1993 Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, troubled by the increasing Islamist threat within his own borders, warned Sudan that Egypt would attack any Iranian naval ships allowed access to Sudan's Red Sea coast.

devastating effect against the south, as well as in violent suppressions of rebellions in northern urban areas sparked by an inflation rate of 120 percent and in the "pacification" of the western province of Darfur. In the central portion of the country, it has enabled Khartoum to carry out against the Muslims of the Nuba Mountains what Amnesty International has termed an "ethnic cleansing," involving widespread arrests, killings, and the forced relocation of hundreds of thousands from their fertile—and much coveted—ancestral lands.

The spreading of Islamic fundamentalism has been hampered by the relatively limited financial transfers from Iran (approximating \$86 million). Recent overtures by the Bashir regime to Teheran for more credit transfers have not gained more than an agreement to expand air and sea transportation routes between the two nations. Nevertheless, millions of dollars derived from Iran and from fundamentalist supporters elsewhere have been diverted to fundamentalist groups in Egypt and North Africa through the Popular Arab and Islamic Conference (PAIC), headed by National Islamic Front leader Hassan Turabi. An umbrella group for several Islamic fundamentalist organizations, the PAIC is ostensibly concerned with no more than "sending forth [the Islamic] idea."

DEMOCRACY AS CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Any efforts at finding a lasting resolution to the Sudanese crisis should take full account of the country's history, looking beyond reductive notions of the north-south dichotomy. Khartoum's links with the wider world of political Islam, and the factionalism in the southern rebel groups, require a more ambitious agenda.

Alleviating the humanitarian crisis in the south must be the first priority. In this respect it is difficult to see a peace agreement resolving the civil conflict, particularly when one considers the factors contributing to the ascendancy of the Sudanese fundamentalists and their calculated abortion of the democratic experiment. A series of negotiations between the Bashir regime and the SPLA culminating in the Sudanese Peace Conference convened in Abuja, Nigeria, last May yielded little progress beyond a nebulous agreement on a federal structure for the nation. Moreover, Iranian military support of Khartoum and divisions in the SPLA make an agreement unlikely.

The international community must contemplate restoring some semblance of well-being to the affected populations in Sudan. The appointment of a special human rights observer and the establishment of "safe havens" to allow for the secure delivery of relief supplies, while urgently needed, must be augmented

with a larger observer mission under UN auspices consisting of hundreds of local human rights observers not only in the south, but in the north, in Darfur province, and in the Nuba Mountains region. Their security should be guaranteed pending an agreement with the Sudanese government and the SPLA factions as well as the exiled democratic opposition.

Such an experiment, like the one now under way in Haiti, has a number of advantages. It establishes a permanent monitoring presence and promotes local participation and strengthens independent civil institutions, providing a viable alternative to the slew of government and rebel organizations that habitually have redirected or obstructed relief supplies to further their own political ends. In combination with intense diplomatic pressure and regional coordination, it could also set the stage for national reconciliation and the restoration of democracy.

Several developments indicate that there is some room—albeit still limited—to maneuver. Khartoum's isolation, particularly in the international financial arena, should be an important factor in policy considerations. In April 1992 the government instituted reforms that went beyond the IMF's policy recommendations, ending subsidies on goods from bread to gasoline and embarking on an ambitious privatization program. This scheme, whose chief contribution has been to impoverish large segments of the nation while benefiting Islamic Front supporters, is clearly designed to garner desperately needed funds from multilateral and bilateral donors.

A close review of Sudanese history shows no peaceful resolution to the conflict can be managed without including the country's resilient, secular, Modern Forces. Almost immediately after the Bashir coup, the Modern Forces, in conjunction with the old political parties and the SPLA, organized under the umbrella of the National Democratic Alliance. This group, while still fractured, should be given a hearing by the United States and the international community, and its work toward reestablishing democracy vigorously encouraged. Moreover, the Democratic Alliance's present lack of coherent policy on the central issues of peace, power sharing, and Islamic law could potentially be resolved with international prodding.

Insistence on democracy as the ultimate tool of conflict resolution should not be viewed as an attempt to subvert Sudan's sovereignty, but rather as a demonstration of confidence in the genuine democratic aspirations of the Sudanese people, unencumbered by dreams of conquest or rallying gestures at fortress walls. ■