

Sudan: The crisis of cohesion?

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The history of ‘*Bilad us Sudan*’ or the ‘land of the blacks’, as the country was termed by medieval geographers, shares a familiar trajectory to that of other African states created without regard for existing forms of authority and ‘administration’ in the creation of colonial satellite states. Although the European conferences that saw the carving up Africa into colonies and spheres of influence may have receded into a scarcely remembered past, their impact continues to reverberate as a core challenge to stability on the continent.

That said, when it comes to post-colonial narratives of Africa, it is difficult to equate the crisis of cohesion experienced in Sudan to that of any of its continental counterparts. As seasoned analysts of the region will explain, anyone who considers himself an expert on Sudanese affairs should be regarded with caution. This is particularly because the

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multiple causality involved in the regional and national conflicts in Sudan requires us to constantly adjust our macro-level frameworks of analysis to accommodate changing alliances and loyalties at the level of micro-polities.

As the largest country on the continent, bordering some seven other conflict-prone states, Sudan demonstrates most acutely the challenge of building a state in the absence of a 'nation'. Indeed, it may also be argued that the crisis of identity as manifested in the return to, or creation of, ethnic, tribal and religious affiliations is a significant consequence of economic exclusion and powerlessness that resonate at community, regional and national levels. The influence of neighbourhood discontent in the region has been both a source of diversion for the central government and a tangible contributor to the protraction of Sudan's internal tensions. The influence of the Darfurian conflict on Chad, as well as the Eritrean connection to Sudan's eastern region, clearly illustrates this point. Much of the recent literature on Sudan has focused on the ongoing violence in the western state of Darfur, which has often been explained using the Arab-African dichotomy. One of the major weaknesses of this narrative is the effect it has on solidifying identities that historically speaking have been fluid and are thus inadequate to explain the preoccupations of the principal role players. By confining themselves to such narrow dichotomies, observers find themselves unable to accommodate or understand the changing political landscape as events unfold.

In addition, the most recent events, from the increasing divisions in the ranks of the Darfur rebels to the rejection of a UN force, also highlight the problems inherent in deadline-driven diplomacy as currently pursued by the international community

Sudan has provided an active historical context for competing narratives on the question of 'identity' and 'nationhood'. It is virtually impossible to identify a single immutable 'root cause', as any conflict rarely remains stagnant, since the dynamics of war involves a constant shift in motives and ends – including the creation of war economies, for example – which may help exacerbate and prolong hostilities.

Nevertheless, it is useful to appreciate the influence of three major narratives that have informed the identification of underlying reasons for Sudan's multiple wars. These refer to the analysis of Sudanese history from the perspective of, first, the impact of British colonialism on the creation of Khartoum elites; second, the rise of Islamism in reaction to elite driven politics and the eventual manipulation of religious ideology for self-interest; and, third, the rise of a southern based resistance movement as a response to marginalisation by the centre.

As each of these narratives resonates across the changing landscape of African political development, they speak also to the ongoing experiment with nation-building and its corollary, symbolic solidarity. The evolution of both the rebel movements of Sudan and the

Khartoum government in their ideological visions attests to this, with the southern-based Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) moving from a socialist underpinning in response to the south's marginalisation from socio-economic development, to a gradual identity based politics sympathetic to East African or 'Africanist' solidarity. Equally, the reins of power in Khartoum have been inflected by a variety of ideological positions each drawing upon the relevant trends in the global geo-political theatre. Jafaar An-Nimeiri came to power through the support of the Communist Party in the 1969 coup, which was heavily influenced by Nasser's Free Officers' Movement in Egypt. Later, however, he moved to institutionalising Islamic Shariah law and placed more emphasis on pan-Arabism in the face of diminishing support for his rule. He was, in turn, overthrown by a military coup in 1985.

In a similar manner, the current National Congress Party (NCP), which holds the majority share within the national government, has appropriated Islamism to legitimise its hegemony over the centre. But with the challenge to the 'Islamist' regime by fellow Muslims in Darfur (and the east) who, like the Justice and Equality Movement, use Islam as a rallying cause against socio-economic injustice, the NCP's Islamist claim is now increasingly contentious. The relevance of this tension to the broader Sudanese – and indeed African – debate is that it once more underlines the problem of reifying ideology over the substance of political configurations. What are the *Realpolitik* interests in the country's oil and security sector that motivate its key actors, for example? If the majority of Sudanese feel disempowered by elite politics, how is the current NCP-SPLM arrangement affecting these sentiments? These questions take on a greater urgency if we consider that national elections should be held in just less than five years. How far will the political landscape have changed by 2008? Will the SPLM and the NCP still be seen as the monolithic entities they are today? These questions are more likely to open a nuanced dialogue on what it means to be Sudanese in this fragile interim period, and far more than an exclusive focus on tribal or religious affiliation.