Sudan: peace between two minorities?
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Until the recent publicity of the Janjaweed militia's pillage and murder and consequent humanitarian crisis in Darfur, media reportage on the Sudan focused almost entirely on the so-called North-South conflict. It was rare to find stories about Sudan's many other political conflicts and struggles. In a type of media reductionism the only conflict in Sudan has been given as that between 'the Muslim' North and 'the Christian and animist' South, between 'the Arab' North and 'the African' South. Even now, in the shift of focus to the western regions of the country some of these clichés are hard to sacrifice. The complexities of the country's colonial and post-colonial pasts are often also summed-up in similar shorthand.

Sudan's post-colonial history has seen multiple conflicts and civil wars very often simultaneously. This simple fact is often overlooked but is crucial to grasp and reiterate if any workable peace and democratic process is to develop in the whole of Sudan in the future. In the light of the mayhem in Darfur alone the peace between the SPLA and the government of Umar al-Bashir displays all its limitations. It is a "peace between two minorities", as one Sudanese intellectual has put it. Another holds, it would be a "peace without democracy" since all the other forces including democratic formations in the North have been excluded. But even those anti-establishment forces of the North, such as those in the exiled National Democratic Alliance, were all at one time or another part of the establishment. The work of powerful elites - minorities with capital, power, and connections to the outside world - from within the North but also the South have steered Sudanese politics for very long. In this type of politics signifiers such as "Islam", "Arab", "African", and "Southerner" and so on allow various players to make claims far larger than what their constituencies are and cover over their tremendous internal fissures. (This is not the place to enter the intricate politics of ethnicity and identity in the Sudan although it is central to the complexity of the country.)

The first civil war in the South began on the eve of independence but other regions soon afterward created their own vehicles to express discontent with the order of things which was characterised by the concentration of power and resources in the political centre of the country. The Darfur Development Front, for instance, was established in 1960 to challenge the neglect of the Fur region. The Beja Congress followed in the East, similarly the Nubians in the North established their own ethnic organizations, the Nuba their own. Since independence Darfur has witnessed repeated uprisings and rebellions against policies emanating from the centre, and so-called 'tribal' clashes between various groups straddling the Darfur-Chad border. Virtually every major incident was followed up with reconciliation conferences and resolutions that would last only until the next conflict.

Sudanese anti-colonial nationalism was a highly limited affair rooted among the educated elite and civil servants around the urban areas of Khartoum and to the North of it, what is conventionally referred to as the riverine Northern Sudan. Southerners were not part of it, but neither were the Fur (pronounced more like For), nor the Beja, nor the Nubians. Within the elites of the riverine North there have been further political divisions expressed through the major sufi orders and the political parties that were established to draw on their support. Thus in election campaigns the Umma

Party would draw on the mass support of the Ansar, while the DUP on the Khatmiyya. Large numbers of villages in a particular state would be the automatic source of supporters of either of these parties because of local sufi connections there. Fractiousness has been a significant feature of Northern Sudanese politics evident in the colonial period, and of course also fostered by the colonial rulers, as one colonial Civil Secretary, Sir James Robertson, put it in 1951: "They divide, we rule".

The Sudan Communist Party and the Muslim Brothers, which were both established in the immediate post-World War Two years have been the predominant political forces struggling to break Northern Sudanese politics out of its sectarianism. Hasan al-Turabi was one the Muslim Brothers' Sudanese founders and has been the charismatic mastermind in the emergence of Islamism in the public sphere through the late 1970s to its current position of political power. For the Brothers, only their modernist Islamic ideology, not the blind imitation of local sufi masters, could produce a modern, and of course Islamic, Sudan. But when the Brothers entered the public realm they would face stiff competition from an established Left in the struggle to win hearts and minds, especially among the educated sectors of urban Sudan. The Sudanese Communist Party grew into one of the continent's largest Communist parties and despite much repression since the 1970s have ensured that Sudanese politics continue to have influential Leftist voices, even if they are now mostly scattered in the Sudanese diaspora in the UK, Egypt and the Gulf states. But both spurned democratic competition and opted to support military rulers when they felt power to be within reach: the Communists in 1969 supported the coup of Ja'afar Nimeiri and the Brothers (in the form of the National Islamic Front) supported, in fact manipulated, the 1989 coup of al-Bashir, who still remains in power.

Suffering extraordinary neglect the people of the South of the country were bound to rise to the occasion when they were mobilised by southern spokesmen. Many of these champions for the periphery were however at one stage very close to the centre. Even the leader of the SPLA which was formed in 1983, John Garang, was a colonel in the Sudanese army based in Khartoum before he walked away and started his own liberation organization in the South. But southern politics has been as fissiparous as in its northern counterpart. The most drastic split in the recent past was the split within the SPLA in the 1990s when a group of its leaders under Riek Machar broke away and formed their own SPLA-Nasir and worked up a section of the Nuer people against what they represented as Garang's Dinka-biased SPLA. In the ensuing conflict in the South thousands were killed in a southern civil war with the regime taking full advantage of it, even housing Machar in Khartoum.

And so too the rebel movements in Darfur are not immune from the tendencies in Sudanese politics to split, divide and make short-term alliances. Thus the Sudan Liberation Movement is reportedly close to Garang's SPLA while the Justice and Equality Movement has the support of a faction of the Islamists guided by the now imprisoned Hasan al-Turabi.

While this tendency to fracture has been a feature of Sudanese post-colonial politics, Sudan's geographical setting was of significance during the Cold War with implications for the patterns of politics in Sudan and the region. Egypt's revolution under Gamal Abd al-Nasser in 1952 played a direct role in the British granting independence to the Sudan. With independence came the possibility to decide foreign

policy independently. Debates on foreign policy affected the way the military related to politics. Cold war geo-political competition for influence in the Horn of Africa would bring the US and USSR to pour huge amounts of resources into backing compliant parties. This saw the US shift from having Ethiopia as its key ally (after the rise of the Mengistu regime in 1974) with Sudan becoming the regional ally to cultivate as a replacement. Ja'afar Nimeiri (1969 - 1985) would go from being an Eastern bloc favourite to a US client in the mid-1970s and even when he allied with the Islamists and introduced his infamous September laws (i.e. Islamic punishments) in 1983 he was supported by the US until his overthrow while he was on a visit to Washington. Sudanese and Chadian oil are attracting western multinationals and states back to the region. Therefore, it is imperative to address the present crisis in Sudan and ensure the success of the North-South peace process.

A paradox of Sudanese politics is that it was an unpredictable military ruler in the shape of Nimeiri that could see through Sudan's longest period of post-independence peace between the North and the South. For it was under him that the Addis Abba Peace Accord of 1972 was signed which lasted to 1983. In addition to taking into account the multiple conflicts of the Sudan it is necessary to understand the problems of the 1972 Accord. Yet, the very fact that SPLA and the government appears to have made substantial progress in their talks is a positive sign. But until all the regional and political forces are brought into a peace process it may still be possible for a minority Islamist faction with an extremely limited ethnic base to peddle their delusions and decisively influence the national agenda.