

A complex web

Politics and conflict in Sudan

Atta el-Battahani

The last fifty years of Sudan's history have been marred by civil war. Protracted armed conflict in many parts of the country has killed, wounded and displaced millions of people. Education and health services have been disrupted, livelihoods destroyed. Much of Sudan's physical, human and social capital has been destroyed and development opportunities have been squandered. The costs of the economic distortions of military expenditure, political instability and the atmosphere of hatred and distrust cannot be counted in monetary terms.

The war between the government and southern armed groups (1955-1972 and 1983-2005) has received the most international attention, but a sense of marginalization has not just been a southern phenomenon. Elements of the Beja in the east, the Fur in Darfur, the Nuba in Kordofan among many others have been drawn into armed conflict with the Sudanese government or government-backed militias. Sudan's complex armed conflict has been characterized as a civil war of 'interlocking civil wars'. Equally, its causes are interwoven: economic, resource-based, ethnic, cultural, religious and international dimensions all play a role, some being more important in some parts of the country than others. All are underpinned politically by the state's crisis of legitimacy and its utility as a vehicle for economic exploitation, which drives political elites to compete to control its institutions.

Successive regimes have manipulated administrative structures to undermine the control of local people and authorities over resources. Identity and ideology, particularly Arab nationalism and political Islamism, have been used to mobilize support to compensate for the governance and development failings of state policies. Elites have mastered the divide-and-rule tactics inherited from the colonial era through their territorial organization of the modern Sudanese state. The result has been underdevelopment, exclusion and violent conflict.

State formation without consolidation

Sudan's problems are rooted in its formation as a state. Some degree of central authority and control over a territory is essential for the formation of an orderly and well-functioning state. While a territorial entity can be created by force, it can only be consolidated when political authority expresses itself in the capacity to collect taxes and deliver order and social development. In Sudan, however, political authority has long been exploitative.

Though nationalists in both north and south would claim that Sudan has existed for thousands of years, it only became recognizable as a colonial state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Before then it

Professor Atta el-Battahani teaches at the Department of Political Science at the University of Khartoum.



was home to enclaves of small, relatively unhierarchical political communities, developing into Sultanates and emerging as merchant kingdoms along the Nile. The Ottoman-Egyptian Turkiyya regime (established through conquest in 1820-21) amalgamated these entities, but was unable to consolidate control over the south and other peripheries. Instead, a pattern of economic exploitation was established, with the south subject to periodic raids (including slave-raids) by government-supported forces and excluded from the developing political community.

Britain and Egypt (from 1882-1922 a British protectorate) regained control of Sudan in 1898 following the Mahdist revolution of the early 1880s, but struggled to establish centralized authority. Darfur, which had reverted to being a Sultanate under the Mahdiyya, was only recovered by the Anglo-Egyptian condominium in 1916. Southern Sudan was 'pacified' in the 1920s, but following a southern rebellion in 1922 the British closed off the south from most northerners with the Closed District Ordinance. The following year a form of indirect rule known as Native Administration was created that worked through village sheikhs and tribal paramount chiefs.

For a long time it was assumed that the south's destiny would be continued British tutelage and protection or possibly separate administration as an East African colony. However, in 1947 it was decided that the south would remain part of Sudan. Education in the south had been neglected, northerners dominated the developing political class, and few southerners were in a position to fill vacant administrative posts under the 'Sudanization' schemes of the early 1950s. In support of Sudanese aspirations towards self-determination, and to head off any Egyptian claims of sovereignty over the Sudan, Britain granted independence in 1956 following a three-year

transition, handing over political power – control of the army and civil service and management of economic resources – to northern 'riverain' elites (mainly from today's Khartoum and Nile states).

Independence, war and development

Post-independence governments – ever since General Abboud took power in 1958 – have sought to modernize the state and economy and to create a Sudanese national identity on the basis of Arabic culture and Islam. Even before formal independence, the tactic of transferring southerners away from the south led to a 'mutiny' of southern troops at Torit in 1955. Most of the 'rebels' continued the fight from Uganda, and what has commonly been called the north-south civil war started to develop. The Anya Nya movement, as the southern insurgency became known, fought for southern independence but faced many internal differences until unified under Joseph Lagu's command in 1970. Abboud had been forced to step down in 1964, but the civilian governments that followed him were equally resistant to southern autonomy.

Jaafar Nimeiri's group of left-wing army officers seized power in 1969, fought off sectarian and Communist challenges and, with a significant support base in the south, signed a peace agreement with Lagu in Addis Ababa in 1972. The south was granted a large measure of regional autonomy and, in 1973, a secular state and presidential political system was established throughout Sudan.

Nimeiri's strategy was to undermine the power bases of traditional political groups who might threaten him, and he abolished the Native Administration system. The elected councils that replaced it came to be

dominated by elites, particularly the merchant capitalist class of the Nile valley. Economic development was also marginalizing many across Sudan. The abolition of traditional land tenure arrangements was among the chief causes of disaffection in the north, while plans to construct the Jonglei Canal to better exploit Nile waters provoked resentment in the south. The national economy was reoriented towards heavily capitalized export-oriented agriculture as Sudan strove to become the 'bread basket of the Middle East.' The state granted new leases for mechanized farms and access to cheap inputs to win political support. Later, the Islamic banks allied to the traditional religious-based (or 'sectarian') parties invested heavily in mechanized schemes, deepening the alignment of interests in maintaining a supply of cheap labour. The policy resulted in the forced relocation of peasant farmers and pastoralists to marginal lands, provoking violent incursions and reprisals.

For a while Nimeiri had offered some protection to the south, but seeking to divert the threat to his rule posed by Islamic fundamentalist interests and the sectarian parties he later turned more towards other sources of support. In the 'National Reconciliation' of 1977, he brought Umma leader as-Sadiq al-Mahdi and Hassan al-Turabi of the Muslim Brotherhood into his government, broadening his support base and increasing the Islamist nature of his rule. Progressive Islamization culminated in the 1983 'Islamic revolution' and an increasingly severe handling of opposition. Pressured by the other northern forces that distrusted his support base in the south, Nimeiri abrogated the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1983, dissolving its constitutional arrangements. Revenues from newly-discovered oil were now to accrue to central government.

Renewed war

Disaffection in the south, which had seen residual guerrilla fighting under the banner of Anya Nya-2 since the mid 1970s, reached a critical mass in 1983. Former army colonel John Garang de Mabior formed the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in Ethiopia and a second civil war broke out. Garang's professed aim was a unified, secular 'New Sudan' – a strategy designed to encompass grievances and constituencies outside the south, although most northern parties were resistant to such advances and many southerners remained committed to secession. Among the complaints in the SPLM/A manifesto were interference in selection of leadership of southern region, the unconstitutional dissolution of the regional assemblies and the redivision of the south into three regions.

Nimeiri's imploding regime was overthrown in 1985 and as-Sadiq al-Mahdi once again became prime minister in 1986. In the developing civil war, Khartoum increasingly

used tribal militias such as the Misseriyya and Rizeiqat murahaleen of Kordofan and Darfur to fight 'rebels,' with famine and forced migration among the intended or unintended consequences. The economically-marginalized Baqqara were easily turned against the Nuer and Dinka, offering the government a cheap means of quelling southern opposition. Created to protect land-owning and oil interests, these militias were offered immunity from prosecution and perpetrated massive human rights abuses.

Political competition was sowing the seed of renewed frictions between the Umma Party, DUP and al-Turabi's National Islamic Front (NIF), the political party of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. In 1988 Native Administration was reinstated in many regions in the country, including Darfur. Failing to secure a foothold and maintain a support base in Darfur largely because of Umma influence, the NIF attempted to undermine the unity of major ethnic and tribal groupings by calling people to transcend parochial loyalties and subscribe to Islam.

Islamist rule

The military coup led by General Omer al-Bashir in 1989, shortly before as-Sadiq al-Mahdi was due to meet Garang for peace talks in Addis Ababa, triggered an Islamist dictatorship strongly influenced by al-Turabi and the NIF. For the NIF government, fighting 'rebels' assumed the nature of jihad, and it pursued the war in the south to reverse the military advances the SPLA had made in 1989-90. The creation of the paramilitary Popular Defence Force in 1989 created a new round of violence, especially against the Nuba people.

Opposition to Khartoum was increasingly a national issue and not just a north-south affair. The policy of the Islamist regime in the early 1990s was one of systematic destruction of native rule and its replacement by new pro-regime allies: groups known for their hostility to the Umma Party in Darfur; ethnic and tribal groups who had grudges against the traditional parties; and tribal leaders and families who had lost power and wanted to exploit the new opportunity offered by the new regime. Their underlying coincidence of interests brought these elements to forge an unwritten accord with the Islamist rulers in Khartoum. This class of educated elite from the tribal population brought major changes in tribal politics, where both larger and smaller tribal formations are used as constituencies or pressure groups as a basis for competing for modern political and economic leadership. The regime also sought friends in the south: as the SPLM/A began to fracture from 1991, predominantly between Nuer and Dinka groups, the Khartoum government cultivated those southern factions who were willing to fight Garang's Bor-Dinka-dominated group.

From 2001 the international community renewed its efforts to support a major peace agreement between the government and the SPLM/A. However, the recognition this gave to the SPLM/A, and the framing of the IGAD talks as between a unified north and a unified south, alienated those who felt marginalized by their rulers and emboldened them to take up arms; these sentiments are a significant contributor to the outbreak of war in Darfur in early 2003.

The interweaving causes of conflict

Violent conflict has many causal factors, each one a strand in a complex web of causes that both individually and collectively precipitate, aggravate and prolong fighting. As individual factors, each functions within a multi-layered matrix of historic, economic and political dimensions, and is most acute where reinforced by other factors. Unequal access to resources or population pressures, for example, may not in themselves cause conflict, but may react with ethno-cultural prejudice or political manipulation to fuel fighting.

The economic development of the country's regions has been uneven since at least the colonial era, but successive national governments since independence have deepened existing regional disparities and marginalization by favouring northern regions when allocating development projects and investment opportunities. Foreign debt, capital flight and the deterioration of the prices of primary commodities have had economic, social and ecological implications. Unequal access to resources nationwide is also reflected at regional and local levels. All the armed groups in Sudan have stressed the importance of access to natural and social resources, expressed in terms of justice, fairness, and equitable resource-sharing and development.

With population growth, environmental degradation and drought, the scarcity of environmental resources such as cropland, fresh water, marine resources and forests is becoming more significant as a cause or catalyst of armed conflict. Environmental factors and scarcity do not lead inevitably to violent confrontation, yet in situations where the prevailing scarcity is aggravated by social and economic injustice and mismanagement, the confrontational aspect of environmental scarcity appears to predominate, as in the case of Darfur or Kordofan.

The popular assumption that violent conflicts in Africa emanate from ethnic, tribal, religious, or cultural differences is seriously flawed. Most ethnic dichotomies appear to be a consequence rather than a cause of violent conflicts. However, ethnic, religious and cultural dichotomies are potent in determining perceptions of violent conflicts by fighters on both sides, even if such factors are weak or non-existent as root causes of 'new'

conflicts. The longer a conflict persists, the more these ethnic, religious and cultural factors come into play as a principle of political solidarity and mobilization. In a long-standing conflict, even when the initial causes have petered out or died away, abstract, ideological ethnicity becomes an active material and social force. In Sudan, these ethnic and ideological identities have been deliberately encouraged and instrumentalized, stiffening resistance and serving as a catalyst to the internationalization of Sudan's wars.

Underpinning all these factors are a number of fundamental political problems. Sudan has not evolved an effective political answer to the problem of diversity and pluralism. What political scientists call an 'organic-statist' tendency (in which the state seeks to incorporate and control social groups) is reflected in a single-party structure combined with a fragile multi-partyism representing the interests of various groups. Tribal, sectarian, ethnic and regional interests and identifications are in effect preserved and manipulated by the political leadership, who, to consolidate their narrow social and political bases, master the logic of coalition-making and the art of managing patron-client relationships. Furthermore, short-term expediency, tactics of political support-building and self-enrichment undermine the state's already fragile authority, ingraining the conception of public office as a source of income or 'rents.' This 'rentier' nature of public office is fully utilized by politicians, administrators and groups with vested interests in mining Sudan's natural resources.

Conclusion

Despite the breakthrough achieved in the signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, it is too early to determine if it will be the basis of the transformation that Sudan demands. Peacemaking is a product of politics, and the CPA and interim constitution can be seen as a product of the government's need to bring a powerful rival into its coalition, while dealing with other rivals sequentially through further agreements. The post-CPA government and federal structure reflect many pre-CPA features. The Sudanese people are resilient, but unless the historical grievances of oppressed sections of the population are redressed, a new social contract is negotiated within a framework of political restructuring, and a conducive environment created for a just political system which accommodates the interests of all, the seeds of further conflict will continue to be sown.