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Islamic Politics in a Plural Society: The Sudanese Experience

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On 1 January 1996 the Republic of Sudan marked forty years of independence. After six decades of colonial rule as an Anglo-Egyptian condominium, Sudan – the largest state in Africa and the second most populous in the Arab world (after its Nile Valley neighbour, Egypt) – began life as an independent state with a Westminster-style parliamentary democracy. Yet, like in most post-colonial states, the attempt at adopting Western liberal democratic institutions soon fell victim to a succession of authoritarian experiments – military regimes of both the right and left, followed by one-party Nasserist Arab socialism. In June 1989 a third chaotic interregnum of multi-party parliamentary government ended with a military coup that brought to power the first radical Islamist government in the Arab world. Under it Sudan seems well on course to joining Baathist Iraq and Colonel Qaddafi's Libya as a pariah state in the post-Cold War order, stigmatized in the United Nations for alleged human rights violations and suspected involvement in international terrorism.

In asserting that capitalist liberal democracy marks the end state of the historical process, Francis Fukuyama uses the analogy – appropriately derived from the nineteenth-century colonization of the western United States – of 'a long wagon train strung out along a road' to describe the political evolution of the contemporary world: 'Some wagons will be pulling into town sharply and crisply, while others will be bivouacked back in the desert, or else stuck in ruts in the final pass over the mountains.'[1] Viewed from such a perspective, countries like Sudan must be seen as having, for the time being, lost their way in the desert.

But while in Sudan's case the metamorphosis from putative parliamentary democracy to putative neo-Islamic state has been striking, the mixture of hope and disillusion that has accompanied the Sudanese quest to draw together an uncomfortable present with an often unhelpful past mirrors the experience of many other non-Western states in the twentieth century. If these experiences are to be regarded merely as representing temporary historical aberrations, it begs the question as to why the seeds of capitalist liberal democracy, having apparently fallen on

such stony ground, should yet confidently be expected to eventually sprout forth in these countries. Whilst conceptions of a universal history no doubt have their uses, to make sense of the political in any context it is necessary to consider the particular histories, cultures, vocabularies, beliefs, and sources of identity that go into making that polity.

I. Sudan's Past and the Ambiguity of National Identity

Africa's largest state – three-quarters the size of India but with only a thirtieth of its population – Sudan straddles Arab north and sub-Saharan black Africa. The term Bilad al-Sudan, 'the land of the Blacks', was first coined by early Arab geographers to describe the whole area that lay immediately south of the Sahara, and held no political or national overtones until the nineteenth century Turco-Egyptian conquest.

Apart from Lebanon, with its large and politically influential Christian sects, presentday Sudan is unusual in that it is the only country in the Arab world with sizeable non-Muslim, un-Arabized ethnic minorities (only about 70 per cent of Sudanese are Muslims and not much more than half the population speak Arabic as their native tongue). Particularly concentrated in the southern sub-Saharan tenth of the country, these minorities have proved much more difficult to accommodate than, for example, the small, ancient, and historically more compliant, communities of Orthodox Christians found in Egypt, Syria and Iraq, or the non-Arab but Muslim Berbers of the Maghreb.

The first significant incursion into northern Sudan by Muslim Arabs moving down from Upper Egypt took place as early as 651-2 A.D., less than twenty years after the death of the prophet Muhammad. But, unlike the dramatic and rapid conquests made by Arab Muslim armies in north Africa, the Christian Nile kingdoms of Nubia 'succumbed to gradual eros-ion and infiltration rather than to organized military invasion'.[2] But by the beginning of the sixteenth century Islam had supplanted Christianity all along the Nile from Upper Egypt down to the confluence of the Blue and White Niles.

Between the 1500s and the Turco-Egyptian conquest of 1820-21 the Islamized Funj sultanate exercised at least nominal authority over the greater part of central and northern Sudan. While the immigration of Arab tribes via Upper Egypt and the Red Sea continued, the gradual Islamization of the inhabitants of these lands was largely the product of the activity of religious teachers or holy men known locally as *fakis* (from the Arabic *faqih* or jurist), some of whom became the heads of Sufi orders

(*tariqas*). These *tariqas* were central to the development and spread of Islam both within the Funj sultanate and the western sultanate of Darfur, the holy families providing their leadership being described as 'the true scaffolding of Sudanese society' in contrast to the 'frail and unstable dynasties of the rulers'.[3]

The overarching cultural features shared by significant sections of the inhabitants of northern Sudan (most notably the ruling groups) by the time of the Turco-Egyptian conquest – Islam, the Arabic language and, often, at least the claim of Arab descent – were, in the main, absent south of a latitude roughly ten degrees north of the Equator. This area, which under Turco-Egyptian rule became constituted into the provinces of Upper Nile, Bahr al-Ghazal and Equatoria, was populated by a multiplicity of tribes speaking a variety of Nilotic, Nilo-Hamitic, Sudanic and other languages. The predatory activity of Arab ivory and slave traders in the nineteenth century was followed in the twentieth by efforts by the British colonial authorities to 'pacify' the South and, thereafter, to facilitate the promotion of Christianity and English while excluding Northerners and blocking the spread of Islam and Arab influence (the so-called 'Southern Policy'). The result was that at independence in 1956 hardly any among the mainly Christian nascent Southern political representatives even spoke Arabic while many Southern soldiers had fled to the bush in the wake of a mutiny.

II. 'Modern' Sudanese, Sudanese Islam and Sudanese Nationalism

The successful revolt led by Muhammad Ahmad ibn 'Abdallah (c. 1840-85), a follower of the Sammaniyya *tariqa* who in 1881 declared himself the *Mahdi* ('the divinely guided one' who would restore justice and equity at the end of time), marked the end of the Turco-Egyptian regime and the establishment of a state that lasted from 1885 to 1898. While Sudanese nationalist historians have been disposed to regard the Mahdia as representing a 'peculiar type of Sudanese nationalism',[4] it would probably be more accurate to characterize it as the outcome of a combination of factors (militant pietism, indecisive administration, the grievances harboured by particular groups) of which the 'alien' nature of the Turco-Egyptian regime scarcely loomed largest.

In fact, as elsewhere in Africa, modern Sudanese nationalism was a twentieth century creation. The reconquest of Sudan was followed in 1899 by the inauguration of an Anglo-Egyptian Condominium under which the country was effectively ruled by the British. Over the next half

a century the evolution of political life in the north of the country was shaped by the dynamic encounter between the aspirations of the emerging Western-educated intelligentsia in the towns, the concerns and ambitions of the leaders of the main Islamic sects, and the policies of the British and Egyptian governments.

In 1902 Gordon Memorial College, named after the imperial hero General Charles Gordon who had been killed by the Mahdists in 1885, was opened; initially a secondary school, by 1951 it had developed into a University College affiliated to the University of London, and achieved University status just after independence. In 1918, when the Sudan Schools Graduates Club was inaugurated, there were 315 College graduates, but by 1928 when the more ambitious Graduates General Congress was established 'To promote the general welfare of the country and the graduates',[5] almost four times as many attended the founding session.

The members of these associations shared a common education and, in most cases, a common employer – the colonial administration. However, they were divided in their political attitudes which often tended to correspond to their sectarian loyalties, most notably to either the Khatmiyya, the largest of the Sufi *tariqas*, or the rival Mahdist *Ansar* (orig. 'Helpers' of the prophet Muhammad). The *Ashiqqa* ('full brothers') Party, dominant in the Congress, developed into the National Unionist Party that stood for the cause of unity with Egypt.

The Unionists represented an uneasy alliance between a relatively small nucleus of townspeople and the Khatmiyya, which provided it with the bulk of its support in the countryside. This alliance was consolidated in response to the formation in 1945 of the anti-unionist *Umma* (meaning both 'nation' and the community of Islam) Party by supporters of Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman, the Mahdi's son, whose motto of 'Sudan for the Sudanese' was regarded by opponents as merely disguising ambitions to set up a Mahdist monarchy.

Colonial policies played an important part in politicizing sectarian loyalties. The Mirghani family, hereditary leaders of the Khatmiyya, enjoyed official favour under the Turco-Egyptian regime and then the British until the 1920s. The *tariqa*, founded by Muhammad Osman al-Mirghani (1793-1853), thus received crucial assistance in consolidating its hold on the groups most susceptible to external administrative and economic influences – the riverine tribes in the north and east and the trading classes of the towns.

The economic element in the revival of the Ansar after their defeat in

1898 was even more patent. Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman buttressed his political ambitions by developing, with the tacit approval of the British (who had come to see him as a useful counterweight to pro-Egyptian elements), extensive agricultural enterprises along the banks of the White Nile south of Khartoum. Whilst providing employment for thousands of Ansar immigrants from the west, the profits also enabled him to increase his following by patronizing local *shaykhs* and a section of the educated class.

Though the Islamic sects and their allies among the educated elite were the central players in Sudanese politics in the decades immediately before and after independence, other currents also emerged during this period. These included various strands of Islamic reform, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood, and communism.

The Brotherhood was founded by a young Egyptian school-teacher, Hassan al-Banna (1906-49), in 1928 and by the late 1940s, when it was at the height of its popularity in Egypt, some Sudanese students there and within Sudan came under its influence. They were attracted by its claim to posit a distinctly Islamic response to modernity, one that was based on *ijtihad* – the use of authoritative Islamic sources to derive rules and concepts appropriate to the contemporary world – and not the adoption of Western ideas and institutions. Spurning traditional sectarian loyalties and critical of the perceived heterodoxy of the Sufi *tariqas*, many of them came together to form the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood in 1954,[6] ironically only months before it was suppressed in Egypt by the revolutionary Arab nationalist regime of Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser.

Communism too arrived in Sudan via Egypt. In 1945 the Sudanese National Liberation Movement was established by Sudanese students in Cairo and sympathisers within the Sudanese higher education system. Initially nurtured by an Egyptian parent organization founded by a Jewish communist,[7] from the late 1940s its members provided leadership to the militant trade union activity that gathered strength among railwaymen and cotton-growing tenants in the fertile Gezira, south of Khartoum. At about the same time communists and Islamists also began their long-running struggle for the allegiance of students at the new University College of Khartoum.

III. Independent Sudan – the Politics of Disillusion

The National Unionists, who won the 1953 parliamentary elections and formed the first Sudanese government in January 1954, subsequently

abandoned the idea of union with Egypt and opted for independence. With the impending end of colonial rule, the dramatic changes in Egypt that followed the Free Officers' overthrow of King Farouk in 1952, and the implacable opposition of the Mahdist Ansar, the concept was seen as having outlived its usefulness. It was only the first of a succession of ideals to be tried and found wanting during the first quarter of a century of independent Sudan's existence – liberal democracy, Arabism, socialism.

Independent Sudan's first government fell after just six months, being replaced by a coalition of the Umma Party and the People's Democratic Party, a breakaway from the Unionists backed by the religious leader of the Khatmiyya. This blatant alliance of convenience, approved by the leaders of the major rival Islamic sects and directed against the more secular-minded elements among the Unionists, soon proved untenable and in November 1958 the government was overthrown in a military coup led by the army commander. The pattern of relatively brief periods of unstable rule by civilian politicians being succeeded by longer phases of military rule was thus established.

The demise of multi-party democratic politics hardly came as a surprise. Sudanese democracy was, even by the standards of post-colonial Africa, of very recent vintage. The advisory councils set up in the provinces, and for Northern Sudan as a whole, in 1944 were mainly made up of nominated and indirectly elected members and the position did not change substantially with the introduction of a Legislative Council in 1948. The 1953 general election was therefore the first in which the majority of those returned were directly elected on the basis of the universal male suffrage.

The superficially liberal democratic form of post-independence Sudanese government was also vitiated by the rampant sectarianism that characterized its politics from the outset. Unlike the experience of India, the inspiration for many of the young Sudanese who had formed the Graduates Congress in 1938,[8] democratic institutions were afforded little opportunity to acquire an endogenous character, being hastily superimposed rather than given time to graft onto Sudanese society.

The 1960s and 1970s were marked by a search for alternatives. The paternalistic conservative military administration that ruled Sudan after 1958 never succeeded in becoming more than a stopgap. A policy of aggressive Arabization and Islamization culminated in the outbreak of full-blown guerrilla war in the South in 1963. A year later, confronted by a wave of strikes and demonstrations in the north spearheaded by a secular Professionals' Front and backed by the banned political parties, the regime collapsed.

There followed another attempt at liberal multi-party democracy. But even though the franchise was extended to women, and 18 to 21 year-olds, the results of elections to the Constituent Assembly held in 1965 and 1968 were, at first glance, not very different to those of 1953 and 1958. Again the Unionist (the Democratic Unionist Party after 1967) and Umma parties, whether united or split into rival factions, won over three-quarters of the seats. However, there were signs of a greater readiness, especially among the better educated, to opt for alternatives to the old sectarian parties.

In 1965 the Sudanese Communist Party won eleven of the fifteen seats for which only graduates from secondary schools and higher education institutions were entitled to vote and, together with other left-wing groupings, claimed five per cent of the total vote. At the other end of the political spectrum, the new Islamic Charter Front launched by the Sudanese Muslim Brothers and led by a Sorbonne-educated law professor, Hassan Abdullah al-Turabi, won five seats (al-Turabi topped the poll in the Graduates' Constituencies) and also took five per cent of the vote.[9]

The contradictory shifts in educated opinion, towards leftwing and radical Islamic alternatives to the mainstream parties, reflected growing dissatisfaction with the medley of superficial liberalism and traditionalist sectarianism proferred by the established Unionist and Umma politicians. The tendency among the latter to favour the concentration of scarce economic resources in the already more developed riverine regions of northern Sudan also fostered resentment among marginalized non-Arab ethnic groups in eastern and western Sudan. In the 1965 elections candidates representing the Beja of the Red Sea Hills and the people of the Nuba Mountains of south Kordofan made a significant impact, winning eighteen of the 173 seats.

As in the 1950s, the civilian politicians found their attempt at government in the 1960s overcome by sectarian and personal rivalries and in May 1969 another military coup took place, this time led by middle-ranking 'Free Officers' taking their inspiration from Egypt's President Nasser. The leader of the coup-makers, Colonel Jaafar Nimeiri, harboured broadly secular Arab nationalist and socialist sympathies and the first years of his rule reflected these biases.

IV. The Nimeiri Years – From Socialism to Islam

In December 1969 Sudan, renamed the 'Democratic Republic of the Sudan', undertook to co-ordinate its foreign policy with that of Egypt and Libya with a view towards eventual federation. Four months later the

Mahdist Ansar were brutally suppressed and their religious leader killed. This was followed on the first anniversary of the 'May Revolution' by the nationalization of many foreign and privately owned commercial and industrial establishments. Then, in May 1971, plans were announced for the Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU), a new sole ruling party modelled on Nasser's Arab Socialist Union.

Yet the initial impression that Sudan was embarking on a new radical Arab nationalist and socialist course was soon belied. An unsuccessful coup attempt by pro-communist military officers in July 1971 was followed by a ruthless purge of communists. On the economic front, by 1973 many nationalized enterprises were being reprivatized. In foreign affairs, ambitious schemes for Arab unity were set aside in order to consolidate a 1972 peace accord with the Southern rebels that conceded substantial autonomy to the region and marked the beginning of a decade of peace in the South. In the north a process of 'national reconciliation' that followed a bloody attempt to overthrow Nimeiri in 1976, allowed the return from exile and absorption into the SSU leadership of some prominent politicians belonging to the old political parties, among them Sadiq al-Mahdi, a former Umma prime minister and grandson of Sayyid 'Abd al-Rahman, and Hassan al-Turabi of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The vicissitudes of Nimeiri's sixteen years of rule reflected the shallow, often opportunist, nature of the political experimentation he engaged in. He followed up his short-lived attempt to construct a political system based on Nasserist Arab socialism with a move towards a one-party state that was pro-Western in its external orientation and favoured a more open economy and limited administrative decentralization at home. (In many respects this resembled the course taken in Egypt after Nasser's death in 1970 by Nimeiri's friend and political ally, Anwar el-Sadat).

However, in the wake of his 'national reconciliation' initiative in the late 1970s, Nimeiri began to veer towards an increasingly idiosyncratic Islamism, culminating in September 1983 in decrees promulgating a new penal code based on a rigorous interpretation of Islamic *Shari'a* law. This entailed the enforcement of harsh penalties, such as the public flogging, amputation of limbs and execution of people for a wide variety of offences specified in the Koran (*hudud*). These included theft, adultery, the possession or consumption of liquor, murder and apostasy (renouncing Islam). Subsequently, the levying of interest (*riba*) was abolished and *zakat* (alms-giving) substituted for income tax. In June 1984 Nimeiri even sought to emulate the Mahdi a century earlier in ordering government officials and military officers to swear allegiance

(*bay'a*) to him personally as the *Imam* (leader of the faithful) of the Sudanese *umma*.[10]

The Islamization programme, and Nimeiri's unilateral June 1983 decision to divide the Southern Region that had been created by the 1972 Addis Ababa peace agreement into three separate provinces, fostered renewed disaffection in the South. Colonel John Garang, a Southern army officer, formed a Sudan People's Liberation Army following a mutiny in May 1983. Unlike the separatist Southern guerrilla fighters of the 1960s, the SPLA's main declared objectives did not include separation from the north but rather regional autonomy, a secular constitution, and a fairer distribution of political power and economic resources at the national level. This reflected an attempt to address the dominant features of Sudan's political economy since independence: the concentration of power in the hands of traders and professionals from the riverine towns and cities of the north, and the underdevelopment of not only the South but other peripheral regions in the west and east.

However, these central issues were not effectively tackled after Nimeiri was forced from power in April 1985, in the wake of economic collapse and famine, by an explosion of popular discontent in Khartoum and other northern towns and cities. A Transitional Military Council oversaw elections to yet another Constituent Assembly in April 1986. Unlike the polls in the 1950s and 1960s, this time there emerged a powerful third force to challenge the dominance of the old sectarian parties. While Umma and the Unionists still claimed over two-thirds of the popular vote and more than three-fifths of the seats, a National Islamic Front (NIF) launched by the erstwhile Muslim Brothers took 51 of the 260 seats filled (including nearly half of those in the capital, Khartoum) with close to a fifth of the popular vote (38 per cent in the Graduates Constituencies of which they won 23 of 28). The once influential Sudanese Communist Party was reduced to winning only two seats and under two per cent of the vote.[11]

Given such an outcome, it was no suprise that the constitutional debate continued to be dominated by the nature of the primacy to be accorded to Islam. All the northern parties (except the Communists and small Nuba and Beja-based ethnic parties) agreed that the constitution should be 'Islamic', an insuperable stumbling block when it came to negotiating an end to the civil war in the South. However, they were unable to agree on the details of such a constitution and the last of five weak coalition governments headed by the Umma Party's Sadiq al-Mahdi

was overthrown in a coup by pro-Islamist military officers led by Brigadier Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir on 30 June 1989. It was a depressing repetition of Sudan's previous trials with civilian multi-party democratic government, both of which had lasted rather longer (58 months and 55 months respectively as compared to 37 months this time).

V. 'Islamizing' the State in a Plural Society

The coup in 1989, like Nimeiri's two decades earlier, was not just another interruption of a flawed and incomplete civilian political process but the beginning of an attempt at developing a political system based on different principles from the Western-style liberal democracy that in 33 years had failed to come up with even a replacement for Sudan's provisional independence constitution. This time it was not Arabism and socialism that provided the inspiration for an alternative, rather it was borne out of a conviction that, in the words of the ideologue of the new regime, Hassan al-Turabi, 'once a single fully-fledged Islamic state is established, the model would radiate throughout the Muslim world'.[12] The problem was that Sudan, given its religiously and ethnically plural character, hardly provided the ideal conditions for the establishment of such a state.

Nevertheless, the attempt was made as the National Islamic Front wielded power behind the scenes after 1989.[13] Potential opponents were purged and replaced by Islamists in the army, the civil service and educational institutions, and a militia – the Popular Defence Forces – was set up. Front supporters also tightened their already strong grip on economic life (Sudan had been a trailblazer in establishing Islamic banking institutions during the final Islamic phase of the Nimeiri regime) and independent press organs were suppressed.

The controversial September 1983 laws, brought in with al-Turabi's assistance, had been suspended after Nimeiri's overthrow but in March 1991 a new penal code based on the *Shari'a* was reimposed in northern Sudan. Applied to the several million non-Muslims living in the north, it was almost identical to a draft that had been proposed by al-Turabi as Attorney-General in 1988 and included *hudud* punishments. Measures were also taken to forcibly disperse and relocate un-Arabized ethnic minorities like the million Nuba of south Kordofan, as well as hundreds of thousands of impoverished squatters, many of them non-Muslims, living in the Khartoum area.[14]

Political reform followed up some of the suggestions contained in the

Sudan Charter, a 1987 NIF constitutional working paper that had rejected secularism as the product of a 'peculiar European experience', asserting that 'The Sudanese are one nation united by common religious and human values'. But institutional changes such as the introduction of a new federal system in 1991, the appointment of a Transitional National Assembly in 1992, and the disbandment of the military Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation in 1993 were essentially cosmetic; real power continued to be exercised by the NIF and its military allies.

However, after six years in power there were few signs that the Islamist regime was any more successful than its predecessors in gaining institutional legitimacy. The turn-out in elections to new state (i.e. provincial) assemblies in early 1995 was very low (e.g. 29,000 out of a potential one and a half million voters in Khartoum).[15] And despite the widespread use of extrajudicial detentions and torture, strong public antipathy to the regime persisted (as was demonstrated by a week of violent street protests led by university students in Khartoum and other northern towns and cities in September 1995).

The regime's efforts to propagate its Islamist message to a wider Muslim public abroad had mixed results. The establishment in 1991 of an international Popular Arab and Islamic Conference, headquartered in Khartoum, made Sudan the unlikely focus for militant Islamist groups, many of them illegal in their home countries. In an interview in June 1995 al-Turabi, the Secretary-General of the Conference, extravagantly proclaimed: 'Sudan is leading the Islamic world and is definitely going to be the centre of influence in the world order'.[16]

But Sudan's Islamist activism brought it notoriety and attracted suspicion and hostility from Western powers and the governments of neighbouring states. In 1993 the United States added Sudan to its list of states sponsoring terrorism and in January 1996 the United Nations' Security Council, acting on an Ethiopian complaint, called on Sudan to extradite three men alleged to have been involved in the attempted assassination of Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa in June 1995. By the end of 1995, Egypt had forcibly occupied a disputed border area, and two other neighbouring states – Eritrea and Uganda – had broken off diplomatic relations with Khartoum.

VI. Contested Nation, Disintegrating State – The Politics of Dissolution?

The predicament of modern Sudan reflects the dilemma faced by many

post-colonial countries, albeit in extremis. Initially, Western-educated leaders and elites sought to operate liberal democratic institutions and looked to ideologies of, more or less, secular nationalism and socialism to integrate their often heterogeneous societies. With the institutional crisis and ideological vacuum that followed the failure of these efforts, there followed a discernible shift towards a political rhetoric that was self-consciously non-Western, even anti-Western. However, Sudan went further than most in attempting to create an alternative form of polity.

Even the independence generation of Sudanese politicians had recognized the limited nature of the appeal of secular nationalism, forming alliances with traditional Islamic leaders that resulted in the emergence of Umma and the Unionists as sectarian-based parties. Three decades later, after Jaafar Nimeiri's shallow attempts at coming up with a sustainable state ideology – and the thrice repeated collapse of Western-style multi-party democracy – the political trend in northern Sudan distinctly favoured Islamic options.

Influenced by the global salience of Islam in the wake of the Iranian revolution of 1979, and the rise of Muslim militancy in other Middle Eastern countries, especially Egypt (where President Anwar el-Sadat was assassinated in 1981), the Oxford-educated Umma leader Sadiq al-Mahdi summed up the position in these terms:

> The masses have always regarded Islam as the basis of their identity, the source of their morality and the unchallenged inspiration for their past, present and future. Many sections of the elite fell prey to foreign acculturation not only in the positive sense of modernization but also in the negative sense of subservience. Elites hoped to effect a total blood transfusion, rejecting their heritage in favor of this or that imported 'ism'. They promised to transform their societies to become modern, independent and prosperous but did not deliver those goods. That disillusionment turned the eyes of many elites away from their foreign inspiration and confirmed the insight of the masses.[17]

While al-Mahdi proposed instead a synthesis which was 'both Islamic and modern', his Sorbonne-educated brother-in-law and political rival, Hassan al-Turabi, rejected the notion of a synthesis, seeking rather the Islamization of modernity. In a lecture in 1992, he bluntly declared: 'Today if you want to assert indigenous values, originality and independence against the West then Islam is the only doctrine that has become the national doctrine'.[18]

Unfortunately for Sudan, if Islam was seen as indispensable to forging a modern identity, it was also an ideology of exclusion when viewed from the perspective of non-Muslim Sudanese. Even al-Turabi, in considering the position of non-Muslims in an Islamic state, admitted that 'there may

be a certain feeling of alienation because the public law generally will be Islamic law'.[19] While he very generously went on to add that '*even* a non-Muslim may appreciate its wisdom and fairness' [my italics], it was the persistent attempt to constitutionally enshrine the primacy of Islamic *Shari'a* that prevented agreement on a democratic constitution for three and a half decades and proved the main obstacle to a peaceful resolution of the renewed civil war.

One of the salient aspects of the history of northern Sudan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is how successive Islamic movements emerged in response to social and political change. The Khatmiyya established themselves in the wake of the advent of the Turco-Egyptian regime and the Mahdia arose as that regime declined. The rise of the Muslim Brothers and the National Islamic Front can be viewed in similar light – as representing a pertinent religious reaction to the latest (post-indepedence) phase of change.

The crucial difference is that the contemporary neo-Islamists operate in the context of a political state in which significant sections of the public are antipathetic to the predominantly Islamic orientation of northern Sudanese politics. Most obviously, the emphasis upon Sudan's Islamic and Arab heritage serve to preserve and enhance a distinctly non-Muslim 'Southern' identity. Radical neo-Islam thus appears not as a solution to the dilemma of reconciling statehood with an 'authentic' national identity but as an insuperable obstable to the evolution of a viable pluralistic society.

This was acknowledged in June 1995 when all significant political forces in Sudan opposed to the National Islamic Front regime, including Umma, the Unionists and the SPLA, signed a declaration in the Eritrean capital, Asmara, supporting a 'democratic system of governance based on pluralism'. It outlawed political parties established on a religious basis and guaranteed citizens equality under the law 'without discrimination on grounds of religion, race, gender or culture'.[20] However, by granting primacy to the right of self-determination and independent statehood to all the areas of the country affected by the civil war, the Declaration recognized that the post-colonial state in Sudan might well be beyond redemption in the wake of the twelve-year conflict that had already left up to a million dead and three million more displaced. In a region, the Horn of Africa, where two states – Ethiopia and Somalia – have already formally disintegrated in the past few years, Sudan could well be the next. It could again prove easier to dissolve a state than to create a viable polity.

NOTES

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6. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, *Turabi's Revolution, Islam and Power in Sudan* (London: Grey Seal, 1991), p. 52.

7. Gilles Perrault (transl. by Bob Cumming), *A Man Apart, The Life of Henri Curiel* (London: Zed, 1987), p. 133; Beshir, op. cit., p. 187.

8. Abu Hasabu, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

9. Peter K. Bechtold, *Politics in the Sudan, Parliamentary and Military Rule in an Emerging African Nation* (New York: Praeger, 1976), pp. 237-8.

10. Gabriel R. Warburg, 'The *Sharia* in Sudan: Implementation and Repercussions, 1983-1989', in *Middle East Journal,* Vol. 44, No. 4, Autumn 1990, p. 624.

11. James Chiriyankandath, 'The 1986 elections: tradition, ideology and ethnicity', in Peter Woodward (ed.), *Sudan after Nimeiri* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 80-7.

12. Hasan al-Turabi, 'Islam as a Pan-National Movement and Nation-States', in *Sudanow* (Khartoum), May 1992, p. 12.

13. Unless otherwise indicated the rest of this section is substantially based on Chiriyankandath, 'The Politics of Religious Identity: A Comparison of Hindu Nationalism and Sudanese Islamism', in *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics.* Vol. 32, No.1, March 1994, pp. 44-5.

14. An informative summary of the actions taken by the Islamist regime is found in Human Rights Watch/Africa, *Sudan: 'In the Name of God', Repression Continues in Northern Sudan* (New York, November 1994).

15. *Middle East International* (London), 21 July 1995, p. 12.

16. Jane Kokan, 'Islamic lantern of revolution shines green in Sudan', *The Guardian* (London), 10 June 1995.

17. Sadiq al-Mahdi, 'Islam – Society and Change', in John Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 231-32.

18. Quoted in Warburg, 'Turabi of the Sudan: Soft-Spoken Revolutionary', in *Middle Eastern Lectures,* No.1, 1995, p. 95.

19. Hassan al-Turabi, 'The Islamic State', in *Esposito, op.cit.*, p. 250.

20. Text in *Sudan Democratic Gazette* (Oxford), No. 63, August 1995, p. 4.