

Sudan: Weighing the Burden of History?

By

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The knowledge of a nation's history is crucial to the understanding of its socio-political evolution and dynamic as an actor in international affairs. An attempt to analyse the political events in Sudan in contemporary times in the light of its political history may thus help us gain useful insights. The paper argues that the present political dilemmas in Sudan are largely a product of its prolonged history of centralised, non-secular nature of administration by successive rulers. An attempt will be made to recount the critical junctures of Sudan's political history which have shaped the political-social fabric of the country. The emphasis would be on drawing a causal relationship between the trend of monopolised power in the hands of the Islamic Arabs in the past and the present political culture of unilateral power-wielding by the democratic rulers.

An understanding of the complex political history of Sudan reveals that its evolution as an independent nation has been far from linear. Sudan has experienced nearly all variants of political rule; it has been an empire of indigenous rulers (from around 8000 B.C), a kingdom of foreign invaders, an outpost of political influence of neighbouring Egypt, a colonial protectorate and an independent political unit in the 20th century. As power changed hands from the imperial rulers to the Sudanese leaders, the country aspired to establish an independent existence, embracing the virtues and principles of a democracy. About half a century later as the country prepares for the general elections in 2010, the predominant concern for observers is the continuing authoritarian approach of the current President Omar Al Bashir, which has pushed the country to political crossroads again.

Sudan has to choose between remaining a nominal democracy, and emerging as a real, consolidated one.

Sudan's Politics in Retrospect: Any narrative of Sudanese political history must begin with the recognition of the overwhelming influence of Egypt in the region. The geographical contiguity of Egypt and Sudan rendered their politics to be overlapped since early history.

The Sudanese region was then known to the Egyptians as '*Kush*'. From 8th century B.C, different rulers established empires, enveloping Egypt and Sudan, leading to thriving political, cultural and religious affinities. The political conjunction of Egypt and Kush continued during the dynastic rule established by the *Kushite King Kashta*, who conquered the Upper reaches of Egypt in 750 B.C. Thereafter, in 590 B.C. an Egyptian army invaded Napata, the capital city of the *Kushite* Empire, inducing a shift in the locale of power. The *Kushite* court moved to Meroe and subsequently, the Meroitic kingdom developed independently of Egypt, extending till Swaba, near the present day Khartoum. The Meroitic people lived in the area between the Atbara and Nile Rivers from 590 B.C.E. until 350 B.C.E., when the city of Meroe was ransacked by the Ethiopians. The Sudanese region came under the influence of Christianity at about this time with the establishment of **three Christian kingdoms**—*Nobatia*, *Makurra*, and *Alwa*. Byzantine influence over this region resulted in the active preaching of Christianity. However, the next phase of political rule in Sudan limited the religious influence of Christianity in the North.

Arab Influence: Sudan swayed under Arab influence since 641 A.D leading to the predominance of Islam. The Arab invaders signed treaties with the Christians to coexist in peace, but throughout the next seven centuries, Christianity gradually died out as more Arabs immigrated to the area and gained converts. Northern Sudan came to be increasingly inhabited by the Arabs and Nubians (Nuba is a region along the river Nile, spread over the south of Egypt and the north of Sudan). Islam progressed in the area over a long period of time through intermarriage and contacts with Arab merchants and

settlers. In 1093, a Muslim prince of Nubian royal blood ascended the throne of Dunqulah as king.

The Funj dynasty was established in 1504, initiating a rule that would last for nearly three centuries. The Funj state included a loose confederation of sultanates and dependent tribal chieftaincies drawn together under the suzerainty of Sennar's *mek* (sultan). By the mid-sixteenth century, Sennar controlled Al Jazirah and commanded the allegiance of vassal states and tribal districts north to the third cataract and south to the rainforests. The Funj stabilised the region and interposed a military bloc between the Arabs in the north, the Abyssinians in the east, and the non-Muslim blacks in the south. Significantly, the Funj rulers converted to Islam, and their dynasty saw the spread of the religion throughout the area.

Glimpse of Colonial History: In 1820 northern Sudan came to be politically united with Egypt, with the invasion by the Khedives of Egypt, who retained their autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. Political crisis in the early 1880s forced the *Khedives* to turn to the British for help. The spread of foreign influence in Sudan was curbed almost immediately with the rise of Muhammad Ahmad Ibn or the self-proclaimed *Mahdi* who was determined to purify Islam and end foreign domination. But the *Mahdiya* theocracy was short-lived as the British forces defeated the *Mahdi* men in the Battle of Omdurman in 1899.

Sudan became a British protectorate thereafter, ruled in the name of the Egyptian *Khedives* till 1956. The successive periods of the Sultanate, independent and dual domination by the rulers ascribing to the Islamic faith led to a degree of *Arabization* in the region. About 70% of the population in the country comprises of Muslims. This came to be politically superimposed on the religious beliefs and ascriptions of the indigenous population. The Nubians, who inhabited the north of Sudan, belonged to a different ethnic stock but gradually got into the fold of the Arabic culture. The people residing in the south of Sudan belonged to a completely different ethnic stock. They belonged to 597 different tribes, and spoke 400 different languages predominant of which were the

Dinkas. They were essentially Animists and Christians (around 30% of the demographic divide) and Arab influence did not penetrate in this part.

The religious divisions between the north and the south were emphasised under British influence with the policy of ruling the North and the South under separate administrations. From 1924, it was illegal for the people living above the 10th parallel to go further south and for the people below the 8th parallel to go further north. The law was ostensibly enacted to prevent the spread of malaria and other tropical diseases that had ravaged British troops, as well as to facilitate spreading Christianity among the predominantly Animist population, while stopping the Arabic Islamic influence from advancing south. The result was increased isolation between the already distinct north and south.

The Burden of history: The present crisis in Sudan may now be put in this historical perspective. The burden of history seems to be weighing on the country in dual ways. These maybe analysed individually:

- The political history of the country has not witnessed any process of '**nation-building**'. Sudan's independence was a result of the revolution in Egypt in 1952. Hence, it missed out on a phase of national consciousness which is crucial to the emergence of a nation and an imperative for the genesis of a democracy.

The existence of heterogeneous tribal identities, kinship groups, and indigenous power relations in pre-colonial Sudan had entrenched ethnic identity consciousness. These primordial allegiances were heightened by the British for administrative convenience by a carefully articulated strategy of 'divide and rule'. While one may argue that most colonial states of the Third World shared the history of complex socio-political dichotomies and fell prey to divisive strategies of the colonial masters, what makes Sudan an exception is that the development of a strong national movement to counter colonialism went amiss.

- The north has been the locale of political power in Sudan through the ages and barring a brief period, the regimes have been Islamic. Democratic Sudan of the

20th century has been unable to shake off this burden of history. Centralised political power in the hands of Arabs virtually embedded a policy of unilateral socio-political control of the Islamic north. The dominant political power in Sudan, the National Congress Party (NCP), draws its support from conservative Arab Muslims in the north. Northern opposition parties draw their support from different Sufi brotherhoods: the *Umma* Party is closely connected with Arab followers of the *Ansar* sect, and the Democratic Unionist Party with the *Khatmia* sect. Opposition parties typically include non-Arab Muslims from the north, east, and Darfur.

The north maintained a carefully articulated policy of dominance over the resource-rich, indigenous south. This was followed by a sustained policy of uneven distribution of government jobs between the north and the south. Moreover, during the rule of President Nimeri in 1983, Khartoum also tried to impose the *Sharia* law on the non-Muslim south. The pronounced sense of alienation in the south has spurred three intense civil wars in the past and a series of localized conflicts, lunging Sudan into perpetual turmoil and retrenching the urge of Khartoum to keep power centralised. The situations of internal conflicts and insurgencies were met with heavy military crackdown.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 accorded autonomy to the south and the *Sudanese People Liberation Army* was given majority control over the new government. The Government of National Unity was formed in Khartoum, comprising of the National Congress Party and the Sudan's People Liberation Movement. However, proxy-militias of the north still remain in the south. Even in the ongoing, infamous instance of insurgencies in Darfur and Kordofan, the use of Arab militias (*Janjaweed*) has virtually institutionalized the use of the securitisation policy of the government. Also, despite the pledges religious tolerance of the Government of National Unity in the north (*vis-à-vis* the Christians and indigenous people), media reports point out that it supports Islam by providing funds for mosque construction throughout the north. The

Government also exerts influence over the established Muslim hierarchy by retaining the right to appoint and dismiss imams in most mosques in the north.

The historical forces in Sudan have been grossly inimical to the pledges and processes of democratisation in the country. An enlightened leadership, which may emerge following the national election of February 2010, would be crucial in facilitating the evolution of a substantive democracy based on devolution of political power and social equality. This would be an imperative for Sudan to shed its burden of history.

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