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Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5tp673m1

Journal
Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 22(1-2)

ISSN
0041-5715

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Publication Date
1994

DOI
10.5070/F7221-2016721

Peer reviewed

INDEPENDENT AFRICA AND ETHNO-REGIONAL CONFLICTS: THE CASE OF SUDAN

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The '50s and '60s of this century were celebrated as the decades of liberty, freedom and independence in Africa. Ironically, however, they were also the years of ethnic tensions, regional conflicts, and civil wars for many of the African countries, in which joy turned into despair and the fear of disintegration came on the heels of independence. Only a few years into independence ethno-regional conflicts, which had remained latent during the colonial period, emerged with sporadic outbursts, at first, but later turning, in quite a few cases, into full-fledged civil wars, some of which have now been raging for decades.

Why and how did these things happen?

Using the Sudan as a case in point, we will try to explain the forces behind ethno-regional conflicts in Africa.

Sudan is the largest country in Africa with an area of 967,491 square miles, bounded by Egypt and Libya in the north, Ethiopia in the east, Kenya, Uganda and Zaire in the south, and Central Africa and Chad in the west. Northern Sudan is part of the Sahara and Sahelian zone with very little rain, increasing as one goes south, through the stepps and the savannah as far as the rainy equatorial zone in the deep south. The Nile crosses the country from south to north and sustains life along its banks. Because of this natural proviso the south was considered as a resource reservoir for the nation-state dominated by the north.

The population of Sudan is about 20 million[1], and is composed of diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups. The 1955 population census listed 56 separate ethnic groups, subdivided into 597 subgroups. About 115 languages are spoken, with Arabic as the lingua franca. The main ethnic groups are the Arabized Nubians, Nubians, and Arabs in north and central Sudan, the Beja in the east, the Fur in the eest, and the Nilotic and Central Sudanic people in the south.[2].

About 70% of the Sudanese are Muslims, living mainly in north-central areas; about 10% are Christian, and another 20% who live mainly in the south subscribe to traditional African religions. Agriculture comprises the largest economic sector, with infant industry and service sectors accounting for a very small fraction.

Regional variations, however, manifest themselves in the different modes of production and differing availability of infra-structure

and services. The center-north part of the Sudan hosts large cash-crop economy—mainly the cultivation of cotton—sustained by irrigation schemes and supported by relatively good infra-structure and services. The rest of the country is left in archaic modes of production, as a labor reservoir, with weak infra-structure and poor services. Through the process of cash crop production the economy is integrated in the international market, giving rise to a local "northern" bourgeoisie (commercial as well as bureaucratic).

Early History

There have been states within the territory that is now Sudan since early times, but the attempts at creating nations did not go very far because of foreign interventions from the time of Pharaonic Egypt up to the British-Egyptian invasion in 1898. It was during the premier period (sixteenth century and after) that two sultanates, Darfur and Funj, were established based on long distance trade with Egypt and the East[3]. Those sultanates which extended to most of the territory constituting northern Sudan today, and ruled by the blacks, gave modern Sudan its languages, cultures, ethnic composition—in short, its identity. The sultanates were invaded by the Turko-Egyptian Khedive Mohamedali whose goal was to loot the country of gold, slaves, and ivory, and to export these in order to intensify the industrialization of Egypt.

The Turks ruled the country as a united territory; but their extensive involvement in, and the institutionalization of, the slave trade,—mainly focussing on the west and the south, with some northerners participating as soldiers—laid deep in the country's soil the roots of mistrust between the different ethnic groups, but particularly between the north and the south. The ethnic conflict was to explode more than a century later.

The name "Sudan" is not a recent label. The name "Bilad al-Sudan" ("the land of the blacks") was given by medieval Muslim geographers to the belt of African territory to the south of the Sahara Desert extending from the Atlantic up to the Red Sea. But the name Sudan today is given to the state created out of the sultanates and minor kingdoms and states of the eastern end of the region. In 1823 The Defterdar Muhammed Bey Khusraw was entitled "commander-in-chief of the Sudan and of Kordofan." Ten years later, Ali Khurshid was given the title of "governor of the provinces of the Sudan." It was the first official usage of the term, much the same way it is used today. Officially, the south was contained in the Sudan, but the state influence was weak and often challenged by the slave traders. Northerners traded in slaves, but they were not the major dealers. The Europeans,

Egyptians, Syrians, and Southern chiefs were amongst the dealers[4].
During this epoch the state was rapidly developing, but nation formation
was very slow.

The Mahdiya state (1886-1898) ended the Turkish rule.
Although it was a national movement, national integration was not
accelerated because of the chronic state of war, the weak "state" infra-
structure, and the institutionalized barbarism adopted later on as a quasi-
official policy.

The Mahdiya was not a northerners' revolution only. Some of
the southern tribes and peoples joined the struggle against the Turco-
Egyptian colonization[5]. But, although they revolted simultaneously, the
Mahdist state was never able to establish authority in the south.
Though, at this time private slave trade was prohibited officially; it did
not stop completely[6].

The Mahdiya state was defeated by the British and Egyptian
armies. A condominium rule was established to rule the "imperial" state
in 1898. It was imperialism in the sense that it was artificial, since its
goal was to create a state in terms of machinery of government,[7] but the
creation of a nation-state was not sought since the sovereignty was
assumed by the conquering nations.

Dividing the Country: the Southern Policy

About 1902 the colonial government decided to treat the three southern
provinces as a separate problem. Furthermore, they divided the south
between the different Christian missionaries, and the education of the
population in English was entrusted to them. In the following years the
"Southern Policy" was inaugurated. Fear of Islam as a revolutionary
ideology, particularly as a Mahdist type revolutionary ideology, led the
British—who were the virtual rulers of both Egypt and Sudan—to try to
exclude Muslim influence from the southern provinces. Efforts were
made to discourage the learning and the usage of Arabic—he lingua-
franca in the north—and to prohibit the wearing of "Arab" dress. To
halt the spread of Islam resulting from the presence of northern troops
and "jellaba," the Equatorial Corps, recruited locally, was established in
the south in 1907[8]. Other territorial companies were soon added and the
northern troops were gradually removed[9]. The tendency towards a
separate policy was based on a consuming fear of Islam as a threat to
government control.[10]

By far more influential, the religious leaders—the son of the
Mahdi among them—accumulated the most prestige and popular
support. Moreover, in the educational institutions created to train
clerks, accountants, army officers, another set of "modern" leadership

was created. But the educated elite were conceived of as unloyal to the colonial powers, and they turned, predictably, to revolt against the British who had become the sole colonizers by 1924. Union with Egypt became an important 'national' goal for the revolters. Hence, the government decided to implement a system of indirect rule, similar to the Nigerian one, except for some modifications. Accordingly, they gave tax collection and administrative and some judiciary powers to local tribal leaders to counteract the preponderance of religious leaders and to minimize the numbers and influence of the educated urban class.

The adoption of the "indirect rule" had regressive effects on the development of a modern nation-state in Sudan. But it had even worse effects on the south. A policy of recreating tribes as well as a ethno-regional political culture was in effect[11]. Furthermore, under the provisions of the Passports and Permit Ordinance of 1922, the south was classified as a "closed district," resulting in the progressive exclusion of northern traders (*jellaba*) and the limitation of southerners travelling to the north to find work. From 1926 grants-in-aid were given to the missionary schools which were devoted the job of educating the southerners. Because education in the north was carried by the government, it did not play a unifying role as it normally might do. A language conference held at Rejaf in 1928 led to the selection of six languages to be employed in education. English was promoted as a lingua franca and a necessary skill for advancement in government service, thereby effectively discouraging the use of Arabic.

The combination of the closed district system, indirect rule, and education policy encouraged and increased the differentiation of north from south. By 1928 the process of creating a southern Sudan separate from the north had by various means progressed a long way[12]. During the 1930s the policy of north and south proceeded, irrespective of the difficulties it faced.

During the years 1942-45 the Southern Policy was coming under fire from different quarters, both official and nonofficial, particularly from the infant Sudanese national movement[13].

Following the end of World War II and because of the significant developments in the national movement, a decolonization process began in Sudan. Faithful to the 1920s nationalism, some of the emerging parties favored union with Egypt; they were thereafter called "Unionist." Another greater faction, the Umma Party, called for full independence. An advisory council for northern Sudan was established in 1945 as a step towards independence.

In what appeared to be a peculiar move, however, the government policy towards the south was changed, and the integration of the whole country was sought. The precipitant change was the result not only of nationalist pressures but also of a realization that there was

no feasible alternative. Tribalism was seen as an inadequate base for
future administration, and thus a return to direct rule was unavoidable.
Consequently, in 1946 the Civil Secretary announced that, in spite of
their differentiation, the Sudan government was in a position to forge
the north and the south into one country.[14]

In the trail of unification a conference was held in 1947 at Juba,
the administrative capital of the south. The participants were southern
chiefs and some of the clerks and the teachers—who later on became the
political leaders of the region—and northern politicians and senior
officials in the south, and it was headed by the civil secretary. The
conference recommended that the south should be integrated with the
north and be represented in the proposed assembly.[15]

During the Conference, the British officials reminded the
southerners of slave trade conducted by the northerners in the region.
The southern chiefs advocated unity with the north, while the educated
southerners were against any connection with the north.The southerners
emphasized their backwardness, and there was manifestation of mistrust
and fear of northern intentions among the southern members, and also
great determinations not to be dictated by the north. Because of that,
safeguards were sought for the south.

The areas of concern for which the safeguards were required
included:

   a) respect for the preservation of southern culture;
   b) reconciliation and commitment to equality of citizens in
      a future Sudan;
   c) racial equality;
   d) promotion of education and economic development; and
   e) involvement of southerners in the adminstration of the
      country at the national level, coupled with self-rule in
      southern Sudan.[16]

The British administrators in the south were nearly unanimous
on the need for such safeguards for the area. For the first time the idea
was put forward that the south should, in the future, have regional
autonomy or be federated with the north.[17]

In 1948 the Legislative Assembly was established as another
significant step towards independence. The establishment of the
Legislative Assembly for the whole of the Sudan, with thirteen Southern
members to be included, marked the beginning of political unity
between the north and the south.[18] Arabic was suggested as a medium
of instruction. Jobs were created for the southerners, development
schemes were financed, and terms of services were brought much
nearer to those of the north.

At the same time, independence process was proceeding on under the impetus of nationalist movement developed mostly in the north. In 1953 Sudan was given a measure of self-rule. But the national leaders of the north, who were representing the country through negotiations with the ruling powers, made many mistakes with regard to the south. Political events were progressing quickly, and the politicians were so pre-occupied with the ends they wanted to achieve that they tended to minimize the complexity of the southern problem.[19] No single southerner was invited to attend the historic discussion which took place in Cairo between the Sudanese political parties and the Egyptian government shortly before the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian agreement on February 12, 1953, and this was seen as a desire to belittle the south, and ignore its demands. The fears of the southerners were being realized.

In the preparation for elections which followed the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1953, the south was submerged with political propaganda from Egypt and from different northern political parties. Some parties from the north reminded the southerners that their opponents were the descendants of the slave-traders!

Moreover, in the independence process, a Sudanization committee was established in February 1954 with the aim of completing the transfer of administration to Sudanese hands as soon as possible. When the results of the committee were announced in October 1954, Southern suspicions, nurtured over fifty years, turned into hostility. Jobs were allocated in accordance with seniority, experience and qualifications. Out of 800 jobs, southerners received only 4 junior positions. This was not only disappointing to the educated southerners, but it was also looked upon as the changing of one master for another and a new colonization by the north.[20] Nonetheless, as was found by the commission of enquiry, some northern officials, who assumed the positions of the British civil servant in the south, did not act with wisdom and prudence. The southern educated class was thus alienated, and even the illiterate, average southerners were becoming hostile to the government authority and to the presence of the northern administration.

Southern political consciousness had been awakened during this period. A political committee was founded in Juba in 1952 to direct political work. Shortly after that the Liberal party was formed in 1954, seeing the attitudes of the northern politicians and their orientations towards the union with Egypt and greater association with the Arab world, the southerners became convinced that regional interests were of greater value than the larger association with the Sudan as a whole.[21] Suggestions of federation forwarded by southern politicians were rejected by the central government, and the minimal safeguards which

the southerners requested were not incorporated into Sudan's constitution.

In July 1955 police and army troops opened fire on workers at the Zande scheme who demonstrated against their sudden dismissal.[22] This crisis added to the mounting tension in the south. There were rumors that southern troops were going to mutiny, in response to which northern troops were flown to the Juba and suggestions were made to send the Southern Corps to the north. Rumors among the southern troops said they were going to be flown to the north to be killed there. The army leadership then decided in favor of the plan to send the southern troops to the north, and also to punish the troops severely if they refused to obey orders. But the Second Corps in Torit disobeyed the orders to be transferred to Khartoum and mutinied, killing their northern officers. The uprising reached the entire Southern Corps, and the mutiny quickly developed into riots and killing of northern officers, administrators, government employees, and traders and their families in the whole south. More northern troops were flown to the south, and by October 1955 the uprising has been brought under control. Rumors of government retribution circulated, leading to the flight of many people to the bush to launch the longest civil war in Africa history.

The direct stimulus for the mutiny is still debated. Some assume that the mutiny was triggered by the Egyptian government to delay the move toward independence on the grounds of instability in the country. Others assume that the Umma Party, which was leading the opposition to the government, did it to prevent the proposed unity with Egypt. But it is clear now, after forty years of struggle for independence, that the attitudes of the northern nationalist leaders laid the groundwork for the subsequent explosions which engulfed the whole region.

In 1956 Sudan became an independent country. Independence came as a result of agreement between the north and the south, based on a firm pledge on the part of the north to work out a federal relationship as a safeguard against cultural assimilation and the monopoly of policy making, jobs, social services and economic development plans, and, also. to eliminate the southerners' suspicion of the north, as expressed at the 1947 Juba Conference.[23] But one could hardly say that the south had given its full consent and support to the birth of the Sudanese nation-state.[24] The south, although formally united with the north and represented in the same political institutions, remained aloof and hardly integrated.[25]

A 46-man Constitution Committee was set up in December 1956 to write the proposals for the permanent constitution of the Sudan. But since the south was allotted only three seats, the idea of federation, dear to the southerners, was rejected. In the elections of 1958 the South was given 46 seats out of a total of 173; forty of them formed the Southern

Block, a well co-ordinated group dedicated to federation. However, this peaceful struggle stopped when the military took over in 1958.

With the abolition of the 1958 parliament, the Southerners' hope of furthering their demands by legitimate means vanished. It also ended the only period in which the south has had reasonably full and competent representation in a Sudanese Parliament[26]. The military government of Ibrahim Abboud sought an armed solution and tried to force Arabization and Islamization in the south, but it could not suppress or overcome the guerrilla fight the southerners had already launched. The military government brought the already precarious relationship between the north and the south to a disaster.

Conclusion

Many factors were behind these "bloody" beginnings of independence and the explosion of ethno-regional conflicts. Ssome of the main factors can be identified:

1. Ironically, the forces of amalgamation and centralization for administrative reasons were mitigated by the disintegrating policies of divide and rule of the colonial powers. "By its very structure colonialism is separatist and regionalist, it does not simply state the existence of tribes, but also reinforces and separates them."[27]

2. The decolonization process is to blame. The haste with which the independence process was carried was suspect; it was perceived only as a prop for aborting genuine efforts for real independence. The successors were chosen from co-opted indigenous groups, whose interests were their own rather than "national" in the real sense. The shared fears of domination by certain ethnic groups was a logical development of the independence process, if not one directly triggered by it. Moreover, ethnic groups protected against outside influences tended to shy away from involvement in the anti-colonial movement, for special protection meant remaining loyal to the colonial power.[28]

3. The nation-formation process was poor and slow. In Europe the development of nationalism was an expression of the increasing emancipation of the bourgeoisie. Pre-national forms of association— clerical, tribal, and so forth—were dissolved into a new national social commitment which transcended regional and ethnic divisions. In Africa the nation-state was an imported phenomenon, highly associated with the European colonization in the 19th century. In many countries the state was a random amalgam of tribal, semi-feudal, and feudal,

communities. But the same colonial powers who transported the nation-state to Africa, hindered any kind of nation formation. They wanted these states as prepheries to the European nation-states.

Nationalism, as developed in Africa, did not indeed express the desire of the oppressed people for emancipation, nor did it mean creating national formation. It was argued that nationalism in such states, whose frontiers have been created by colonialism, is an administrative nationalism.[29] Hence, at best it was an anti-colonial movement and ideology, and at worst it was the ideology of the classes and/or ethnic groups who wanted to inherit the polity and earn benefits developed during colonization. Therefore, the creation of regional and ethnic organizations and parties represent an "organic" development, one based on sharp regional inequalities and weak national ideology.

4. The malformation of the economy, which took place under colonial rule, had often sought to develop single products, and thus created a dependence of the whole economy on one sector or product, and on revenues coming out of export-import activities. The countries were kept vulnerable to the maladies of the international market and the wills of the importers. Moreover economic sectors were in most cases unevenly distributed, favoring some regions over others. Accordingly the educated elite who worked for the colonial power, and afterwards fought for independence, were unevenly distributed, clustering in urban places—the capitals, producing centers, and exporting ports. So the fight for independence was by no means "national," at least in the demographic sense.

6. Because of all this, the local bourgeoisie, who should have been responsible for the nation formation process, was weak and impotent. As Freund observed in the case of Zaire:

> The immaturity of this class showed itself in two striking tendencies. First it was slow to create an ideology that could resolve its own ambitions into a general nationalist posture to win wider popular support. Secondly, by 1960, the throng of politicians trying to establish themselves in each provincial center of this vast country were unable to solder together through national political network.[30]

7. Army intervention accelerated deterioration. Army intervention, in the form of a mutiny, a repressive retaliation or, ultimately, a *coup*, only made things worse. Officers and troops divided along ethnic lines and ignited the conflict. Accusing civilians of corruption and the inability to maintain the nation-state, the army officers intervened in politics trying

an a non-political solution to a completely political problem. Military officers, represent the worst petty-bourgeoisie mentality—narrow-mindedness and selfishness. In each case the problems to be faced were very complicated, and military force emerged as the only possible way of preserving nation-states, yet it only helped things to fall apart. And that in turn led to serious repercussions in the social, political, and economic development of these countries. Real forces of integration—democracy and development—were rejected, and disintegrating "devils" were kept latent, nurturing social inequalities and weak infra-structure and poor social services.

Under the leadership of army officers, this country was turned into the most corrupt country in the world, with the population suffering poverty, frustration and destruction. Only the ethnic problem survived.

8. The divisive role played by the European missions in Southern Sudan. It later on gave the Islmic faction a reason to "religionize" the war, adding a new unneeded factor to the conflict. However, integration force were always present and forceful, and they may win in the end.

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