

Natsios and his heretical revelations about Sudan

By Abdullahi Osman El-Tom

September 2, 2012 — I read with tremendous outrage the Op-ed article published by Andrew Natsios, ex-US Envoy for Sudan, in the New York Times, August 24th, 2012. To say the least, the article is insulting to the intelligence of thousands of Sudanese who have been demonstrating over the last two months in Sudan, calling for the ousting of Al-Bashir, the apparent darling of Mr. Natsios and other US diplomats. Such a crass article must have found itself on the page of the reputable paper The New York Times purely because of Mr. Natsios' famous name and certainly not for what the submission could offer its readers. The article smacks of superficiality, inhumaneness and an utter absence of intellectual rigour, the last being a cherished principle in the world of academia, where Mr. Natsios is currently working. It is ironic that western media, the New York Times being no exception, can say anything at all about Third World people. They know that their 3rd World 'victims' do not count among their western consumers and thus they have no need to worry about their analysis even if it leads to carnage, death and misery.

In reading Natsios' analysis, one is struck by his desperate plea to keep Al-Bashir in power, an insane view given the records of Al-Bashir with genocidal massacres of two million in South Sudan and the Nuba Mountains, around half a million in Darfur, displacement of 2.5m, rape of tens of thousands of women and many other miseries visited on the beleaguered Sudanese people. Barring a need for urgent psychiatric attention, why would anybody on earth in his full faculties recommend keeping such an evil monster in power? Regrettably and I would not hesitate to say embarrassingly, that is precisely the message of Mr. Natsios is sending us with his incessant arguments. Keeping Al-Bashir in power is so important for Natsios that he felt obliged to repeat it at the beginning as well as at the conclusion of his submission. Thus he warned US policy makers and others that Sudanese opposition groups who are intent on "toppling Al-Bashir would soon be at odds with one another"; western allies were warned that changing the regime "would (only) set the stage for a new war" and; that with the ousting of Al-Bashir, "they should have no illusions about prospects for a democratic peaceful Sudan". Well, the expert has spoken and the US policy-makers have nothing to do but listen. Never mind that this prophecy is portraying an image of a country at peace with itself and its people but which would be turned into a living hell if its caring head, Al-Bashir were removed. The wars, ravaging in Darfur, Kordofan, Blue Nile and with South Sudan hardly register in this insidious logic.

Let me give Mr. Natsios some credit before I proceed. In as much as the article infuriated some Sudanese, it also pleased others in the country. Indeed the article reads like a miraculous work of one of Al-Bashir's advisors, although admittedly all of them are too intellectually-challenged to come up with such a forceful defense of their dictator. Nonetheless, the Khartoum establishment was so thrilled with the article that it featured it in its strongly-controlled media as well as its powerful paper Al-Intibaha, edited by Al-Bashir's uncle and racist demagogue, Al-Tayib Mustafa and to whom we owe credit for bringing this article to our attention. If Natsios wants to salvage his spectacular failure as an Envoy, this article is an ace right away and may even dissuade Al-Bashir from treating the USA with absolute contempt, causing him to disown his "USA under my shoes" speeches.

Perhaps I have been too harsh on Natsios and his apparent admiration for Al-Bashir amid deep mistrust of Sudanese opposition parties and utter hatred of JEM in particular. In his favour, his thesis is well in line with US policy in Sudan and to which he contributed during his term as an Envoy. In mid-2005, we, the Darfur rebels, were told in private that we were not ready to rule Sudan and that we ought to share power with Al-Bashir. That private policy has now become public and official as well. Princeton Lyman, the current US Envoy, has declared publicly that it is the policy of the United States "not to depose Al-Bashir but to reform him". Thus, Natsios can take pride in at least beating the bandwagon in Washington, and to the hell with the ideals of justice, democracy and human rights that the USA says it stands for.

Dwelling on Turabi's past in the article gives a good insight into the driving force behind Natsios' mindset regarding Sudan's politics. Turabi did play a formidable role in the Sudanese Islamic movement but his time has gone. He was ousted more than a decade ago and is unlikely to play any important role in Sudan's future. The problem of Natsios and his generation of diplomats or ex-diplomats is that they are stuck in that ugly era of human history. They see the world through the Islamic fanaticism of the 1990s, haunted by Bin Laden and his evil and tragic attacks of September 11th. Despite this, what is perplexing to me is that Natsios cajoles us into accepting Al-Bashir as a hero to take us out of that era. As he says, the US has succeeded in persuading Al Bashir "away from spreading radical Islam to Africa" while preserving his "Islamist ideology and institutions" in the country. Well, Natsios cannot be more wrong. Al-Bashir has changed very little. He is still involved in ferrying arms to Islamist radicals in Palestine, supporting Iran in its dubious Middle East gambles and supporting fanaticism in Somalia. Much more ominously, he is keeping his "Islamic ideology and institutions" in place, as Natsios himself admits.

In a strange revelation, Natsios claims that the anti-Bashir coalition includes several Islamic groups, one of which is the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), which is "inspired by Turabi's vision of Islamism". This finding is presented as a causal fact that requires no justification. But what is Turabi's vision that Natsios is talking about? The article did not specify this vision but we can abstract it from his review of early policies of the current regime when Turabi was in power: support for Al-Qaida and housing its operatives, exporting Islamist ideology in Africa and beyond, banishing women from the public sphere, application of sharia laws, establishment of separate Islamic courts, operation of Islamic banking, replacement of English with Arabic, etc. Now, I am familiar with all official literature of JEM, for I have either drafted, co-written, translated or participated in their discussion before their release. JEM official literature is clearly at odds with all of the above and does not support Mr. Natsios' thesis. His misinformed reading is a result of not doing his homework, ignorance and sheer disingenuous thinking.

But there is an odd passage in Natsios' critique of Turabi. He says in a critical tone that "Turabi wanted governors to be elected and for the parliament to be able to impeach the president". Regardless of Turabi's motive for introducing these powers in Sudan and given Natsios' citizenship in a land where these powers are taken for granted and practiced since independence, wouldn't you think he would give Turabi credit for this particular point? Apparently not and for the simple reason that such powers threaten the survival of Al-Bashir's presidency. This is simply bizarre coming from an ex-Envoy of the superpower that has rightfully and commendably championed democracy across the world.

In his narrative on the formation of the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF), Natsios states that JEM opposed the adoption of the proposed "central principal of a secular state". He then jumped to the conclusion that JEM supports "sharia law and the defining notion of Sudan as an Islamic state". The conclusion exposes Natsios' intellectual laziness and lack of seriousness for he had obviously never bothered to read the SRF agreement documents. These documents are riddled with passages at odds with the "support of sharia and Islamic state", such as civic state, removal of religion from politics, equality of all religions, separation of powers, freedom to worship all gods, etc.

Obsession with the term "secular" has been a rampant affair in the west and is not confined to Mr. Natsios. It is true the term is elastic and means different things to different people. One does not have to subscribe to post-modernism to state that words do not have meanings that are independent of their utterers. Even a first-year linguist would tell you people do not retrieve meaning from words; they attribute meanings to words. After all, the American Constitution allowed slavery in the past and moved on to outlaw it without any change in its original wording.

The term "secular" is besieged by problems that cannot be reduced to simple semantics. It has a different ring in the Muslim world and carries certain meanings that are not necessarily shared in Europe and North America. In Sudan as well as other Muslim countries, the term "secular" reflects an ideology that is hostile to biblical religions. With such understanding, the term becomes problematic, offensive to many and equally undemocratic in its spirit and connotation. I do not share the vision that "secularism" is anti-religion but accept prevalence of such erroneous understanding among the populace of Sudan. For this reason, the SRF reached a consensus to use the term "dowla madaniya", meaning "civic, civilian / non-theocratic state. Support of the sharia part of the debate is a figment of the imagination of Mr. Natsios and did not feature in the deliberations that led to the signing of the SRF.

It is clear in this response that Mr. Natsios has not kept pace with developments in Sudan over the last 30 years. He has a poor understanding of the consciousness that has taken place among the marginalized Sudanese including JEM. It is silly to assume that JEM is fighting to restore Turabi's

ideals. Indeed the JEM revolt is against all traditional parties and their visions including the Popular Congress Party of Turabi.

Finally, ignorance is no source of shame. What is shameful is not to face up to it and do something about it. Mr. Natsios needs to kick-start his learning about Sudan before resuming his pontification about it. If he has the humility to seek help in this regard, I will be ready to oblige.

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