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Towards a Sudan without a government army

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May 1, 2008 — In this article, I would like to challenge my fellow country men and women to join me in contemplating a future Sudan without a government army. If that amounts to the unthinkable, it is only so because we have all inculcated a political culture that takes official army as an indivisible component of any sovereign state, and without which the country will simply be gobbled up by its neighbours. This assumption is flawed and I urge the reader to bear with me in order to justify my point. I am perfectly aware that nearly every country on earth has a government army but that in itself is not a sufficient reason to have one in the Sudan.

Let us leap-frog history and come to modern times in which it is assumed that a state must have an army whose prime function is to protect borders from external threat and a police force that guarantees maintenance of law and order within the country. Let me leave the police aside and focus on my interest, the army.

Sudan now has one of the biggest armies in Africa, estimated to house around 150,000 personnel. In addition to this, the country also maintains other armed forces under different names, clandestine or otherwise, active or in waiting. Regretfully, Sudan's name is almost synonymous with poverty, starvation, famine and dependency on international food aid. Yet, and since its independence, Sudan has been acquiring every conceivable military arsenal and from every corner of the globe: the USA, Russia, Germany, UK, Iran, South Africa and now China. Rather than detailing his achievement in what benefits his own people, Sudan's President Al Bashir has the audacity to celebrate his newly established Military Industry Corporation which has the military self-sufficient in conventional weapons such as ammunition, machine guns, mortars, artillery, rocket and armoured vehicles and tanks. Unfortunately, many of us, Sudanese, have gone along with him rejoicing this callous and destructive achievement.

Given the poverty of Sudan, the cost of keeping an official army is colossal to say the least. In 2001, Sudan increased its military spending by 39.6%, amounting to 60% of oil revenue. That reckless expenditure dwarfed the meagre expenditure of 4.4% on education, 1.6% on health and a mere 0.3% on water. For the year 2007, Sudan is estimated to have spent \$3 billion on the upkeep of the Sudanese army, enough to take the country along way in tackling its illiteracy problem. Sudan's army also deprives the population of making good use of oil revenue; a revenue that has kept increasing but in tandem with the increase in poverty of national citizens (World Bank 2003; Eltigani Seise 2007).

But the cost of our official army to us is much more than that. It is estimated that since 1983 alone, the war against the SPLM has led to over 2 million fatalities. On top of this, one may add the current death toll of 200,000 to 500,000 in Darfur. I concede that some of those fatalities did not come as a direct result of the activities of the official army. Nonetheless, the number of those who died at the hands of the official army should make us think again. But let us see what our army has achieved so far.

To begin with, the main and only legitimate duty of an army is to protect the country's territory against foreign military intrusion. In its performance of that function, Sudan's army score is a grand ZERO. Here is a list of arguably Sudanese territories under foreign rule: the Turkana Triangle currently under Kenyan rule, Halayib Zone and the Halfaween River Nile Hump currently under Egyptian rule, a triangle extending into Libyan domination and a disputed territory with Ethiopia. In all of these cases, Sudan's mighty army stood idle with no chance to retrieve these lands by force. Franking speaking, I do not call for waging war against our neighbours. The world has changed and these disputes can easily be referred to international arbitration and with a firm commitment on all parties to abide by decisions of international mediation.

But what has the army has been doing then given all the so-called martyrs after martyrs it claims to have offered? One myth in Sudan's political culture is that the army can protect the national constitution. For a start, any constitution that needs an army to protect it is not worthy of survival. Such a constitution is lacking in consensus and ownership and that is why its stakeholders cherish its demise. What is more farcical is that rather than protect the constitution, Sudan's army has been one of its biggest threats. All three democracies that Sudan had, had been cut short by the army. Indeed our first step in doing away with the army is to move it as far away as possible from Khartoum, the seat of the government. Presence of the army in Khartoum does not only pose danger to the constitution but to the entire democratic transformation of the country. This view has already been sponsored by the Sudanese Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

Sudan's army has indeed spearheaded fending off civilian and armed uprisings, first in the south, then in Darfur and later in the East of the country. In all of these, the army has failed miserably, not to mention the human cost that accompanied that failure. So spectacular was the failure of the army that it has to commission so many other proxy armies ranging from the Popular Defence Force, to local militias and now Janjaweed. These uprisings referred to above have their political causes and hence they have no military solution. Not surprisingly, it is not the military but political negotiations that brought the war with the SPLM to end. The war of the East too was halted similarly. As for the so-called Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), it was aborted by international bullying which prevented its upgrade to a level that would have made it acceptable to its major stakeholders. The DPA fiasco is no longer a subject of dispute as the non-signatories are fully vindicated by subsequent turn of events.

There is at least one stunningly good model for Sudan to emulate in dismantling its official army, or rather armies. That model does not come from the west with its different settings. Instead, it is a product of an environment Sudan is familiar with. Half a century ago (1948), President Figueres of Costa Rica did the "unthinkable". He courageously and perceptively announced abolition of Costa Rica's State Army. Of course the decision was controversial but sense prevailed and Costa Rica's territory was not devoured by its neighbours. The abolition of the army in Costa Rica released needed funds for meeting genuine developmental needs. Surrounded by poverty stricken countries, Costa Rica is now the envy of other Latin American countries. It is stable, prosperous and 3 to 5 times wealthier than its neighbours. Furthermore, Costa Rica now enjoys 93% literacy rate, 80% homeownership and a life expectancy of 76 years. With US literacy rate of 77, the mighty super power barely escapes being shamed by -Third World - Costa Rica.

Sudan should gather its courage and become the first African country to abolish its army. JEM should be in the lead in this regard. Undoubtedly, serious home work has to be done prior to that. Conclusion of agreements on national territorial disputes is necessary along the lines suggested above. Internally, Sudan must proceed to opt for a consensual political system that is fair, equitable and inclusive in all fields: economic, political, cultural, ethnic and religious. Ample wisdom for solutions exists worldwide and Sudan does not need to reinvent the wheel. Delightfully, Sudan has enough expertise within its boundaries to do just that.

As for the army itself, its personnel do not have to lose their pay unnecessarily. With apt training, soldiers and army generals alike can be transferred to do something useful and there is no shortage of work to be done. A newly trained police can keep internal civic order while a police border unit can keep hostile foreign intruders at bay.

At the moment, JEM boasts a formidable army that is third only to the Khartoum and SPLM armies. As such, some readers might opt to conceive the spirit of this article as somewhat hypocritical. There is nothing I can do except to appeal to them to think again. JEM maintains that the current Darfur or indeed Sudan's crisis is essentially political. JEM will continue fighting it out, and up to the Capital if necessary but only because the political

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course has been blocked by Khartoum junta. Once an acceptable and dignified peace is reached, JEM's need for an army becomes as redundant as that of the whole of Sudan. Thus, my thesis remains intact although it is contingent to removal of the hitherto unnecessary reasons for war.

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