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USA Administration and its JEM Phobia

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In a recent Washington Post article, April 18th 07, Michael Abramowitz and Glenn Kessler wrote:

“The [US] administration has also been planning to subject three individuals to personal financial sanctions for their alleged role in the violence [in Darfur]— one junior government minister, one military official and, in an effort to show balance, senior rebel leader Khalil Ibrahim”.

The authors later added: **“Ibrahim has not been blamed for atrocities, but he has adamantly rejected the Darfur Peace Agreement promoted by the administration”.** Bewildering as it may be, the quotation points to a worrying level of impoverishment in the international politics of the current US Administration. Dr. Ibrahim who is the President of JEM is to be added to the list of sanctioned personalities for the mere sake of balanced punishment rather than for crimes committed. This is hilariously and conspicuously odd but the real motive behind the thinking lies somewhere else. As a matter of fact, Ibrahim's addition to the list is driven by the US' desperation to answer its critiques regarding its notorious absence of balance in its foreign affairs, and which often deviates from what US democracy stands for. The evidence for that is readily available and needs no sophisticated analysis to prove. Lack of balance and lopsidedness of US foreign policies is crystal clear - in lack of respect for human rights in Guantanamo, support of dictatorship in Pakistan and an uneven approach to the Palestinian-Israeli issue. These are painful reminders for admirers of US democracy including this writer. Moreover, the admirable stand the US has so far shown in Darfur is tainted by certain actions that are difficult to comprehend. For example, the US Administration has rightly opted for declaring Darfur atrocities as amounting to genocide. At the same time, it has failed to follow its reading to its logical conclusion. In the name of its War against Terror, the US continued to thwart its cherished principles, namely, of acting for global justice. Mr. Salah Gosh, the Sudanese Chief of Intelligence, who is clearly a genocidaire in US official lexicon, is continuously flown in private jets to Washington in order to liaise with his CIA counter partners. The US here acts to empower the very culprits that it had so loudly denounced, for reasons only Niccolò dei Machiavelli and the CIA can jointly explain.

If the rejection of the so-called Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) amounts to a crime worthy of US or even UN sanctions, the President of JEM will not be alone in the list. Indeed the list will be too long as to make it difficult to identify Dr. Ibrahim in it. If Dr. Ibrahim is to look for any cause for pride in the DPA fiasco, he can find that in his rejection of the DPA rather than otherwise. It is too obvious that a sign of a good leader is indivisible of his or her ability to identify and articulate the aspirations of his or her constituency. In that, Dr. Ibrahim should get a full mark as his rejection of the DPA is impeccably correct. Writing about the DPA fiasco elsewhere, I described it as "a product of bullying, intimidation and diplomatic terrorism" orchestrated and led by nobody other than Mr. Robert Zollick, the US Deputy Secretary of State. That the DPA is a flawed project was perceptively described by the then UN Envoy to Darfur Jan Pronk as "does not resonate with Darfur people". The flaw of the DPA was further exposed in a tragic experience of Mr. Egeland, the UN Chief of Humanitarian Operations. His interpreter was tragically lynched in his presence by Darfur IDPs who mistook him for a DPA promoter. That the DPA is no good is clear to all but not so to some in the US Administration. If the rejection of the DPA is a sufficient crime warranting US-UN sanctions, then Plan B of the Bush Administration should also include a substantial majority of Darfur people with whom the "DPA does not resonate". And if the list is limited to leaders, the Plan needs further amendments if it is to make sense at all. Needless speaking, Dr. Ibrahim was not the only leader who has rejected the DPA. Numerous SLM leaders, many tribal and IDP leaders in Darfur and several heads of Darfur civic organizations have also committed the same heinous crime of rejecting the DPA. But let us face it; singling out JEM President for sanction lies somewhere else. Frankly speaking, it lies in what I prefer to call the Jemophobia of the US administration, and which has so far crippled the US government and prevented it from taking a meaningful course of action in the Darfur peace process. We in JEM have spent substantial time avoiding this issue but it is now time to confront it head on. After all, we are so to speak rebels and rebels should waste no time in futile diplomacy. Here is my thesis in this regard:

Since the tragic incidence of September 11, the US Administration has been driven into an intense state of paranoia regarding anything that is even remotely connected with Islam. It is this complex which the Khartoum government has intelligently cultivated in its Darfur war propaganda. The strategy of demonization of opponents is a common tactic across all conflicts and has been stunningly exploited by the Sudanese government. In its north-south war in the Sudan, Khartoum government regularly accused SPLM leader John Garang of being a communist stooge. That totally unfounded propaganda claim robbed the south of valuable western sympathy which the embittered southerners so much needed at the time. Indeed the SPLM/A only recovered from the stigma after the demise of the Eastern Block and the subsequent changes in the geopolitical stage.

In Darfur war, the Khartoum government simply flipped the coin and continued playing the same game against JEM. At the beginning of Darfur conflict, JEM was simply taken for granted as a military wing of the Islamic movement of Hassan Al Turabi. Khartoum war propaganda was so successful in this regard that as a result it, many reputable political analysts repeatedly described JEM as an Islamist Movement without a hint of any reflection. In its War against Terror, the US also fell foul to this fallacy, particularly after practically promoting Khartoum from a haven for international terrorism to a faithful US ally. Despite US rhetoric against the government of Sudan, Khartoum Chief of Security, Salah Gosh became a CIA confidant and a trusted source of information for the US Administration. I am sure he is also seen and used as a good source of information about JEM.

The alleged connection between JEM and Turabi's Islamic party was a contentious issue during the Abuja Peace Talks. Collaboration between JEM and the US representatives at the Talks was severely stifled by this misunderstanding and its negative impact on the peace Talks was felt by both sides. Eventually, and after intense debate, two senior US representatives declared in a meeting with JEM "that the US Administration no longer maintains that JEM has any connection with Turabi". But don't hold your breath; old habits die hard. A senior US staff in Abuja intimated to the author that "many staff in Washington still cling to the alleged connection of JEM with Turabi.

The allegation of JEM-Turabi connection smacks of embarrassingly poor knowledge of Sudanese politics. There can be no doubt that Turabi was a formidable power broker in Sudanese politics. Nonetheless, the geopolitical dynamics has fundamentally changed, sweeping away Turabi and many other Islamist leaders with it. Turabi certainly had a formidable past but little to show for in present and future Sudanese politics. In a sharp contrast to that, JEM is undoubtedly the mover and shaker of current Sudanese politics. Turabi will be flattered to hear that he controls JEM. Indeed a pertinent question should not have been whether JEM is part of Turabi's Party or not. Rather, the question should have focused on whether Turabi himself is a part of JEM or not. The notion that Darfurians cannot form political movements without being sponsored by the likes of Turabi has its own racist twist and is very demeaning to Darfurians.

That connecting JEM with Sudanese Islamic parties makes poor analysis is further exposed by the very formation of Darfur Movements. The Black Book which rose to become the bible of Darfur Movements explores this issue in very clear terms. According to the Black Book, all the northern-based parties have colluded to marginalize Darfur and invariably connived to entrench the hegemony of River Nile Sudan over the rest of the country. The list of failed political parties includes the Islamists, the Umma Party, the Democratic Unionist Party and the Communist Party. Surprisingly, the Black Book was harder on the Turabi's Front than on the Umma Party, for example. In the national representation of Darfur, the latter, under the leadership of Sadiq Al Mahdi, fared better than all other successive governments of Sudan including Turabi-Albashir junta. As JEM

was a prime author of the Black Book, it makes little sense for it to proceed and operate under the banner of the same Islamists that it has summarily debunked.

There is no denial that Dr. Ibrahim of JEM was a member of the Islamic Front of Turabi but so were Albashir, Othman Taha, Salah Gosh and many others. It takes more than intellectual laziness to assume that Dr. Ibrahim cannot review his political performance in the same way others have done. Indeed JEM has inherited many personnel who have learnt their ABCs of politics in the Islamic movements. At the same time, many members of JEM had other party connections that span across the political spectrum in Sudan. For that, I need to go no further than my humble self, the author of this article. I was a member of Sudanese Communist Party and had never in my political life entertained even the remotest connection with the Islamists.

By some dubious logic, some commentators conflate Ibrahim's past biography with the current status of JEM. In other sense, Ibrahim's past is seen as a mirror image of today's JEM. Nothing could be further from the truth. JEM is an institution and cannot, with due respect, be reduced to any individual, be that in the guise of Ibrahim or any other member of the organization. There is no doubt Ibrahim played an influential role in the establishment of JEM. Nonetheless, Ibrahim does not own JEM and has to accept that many others were also part of bringing JEM to existence. Those who know the history of JEM have another fact to ponder with. Unlike many other institutions, JEM was formed first, followed by a search for someone to act as its president. Surprisingly, Ibrahim was not the first person to be approached as a leader for JEM. In fact, he was the third and was only asked to take over as a president of JEM after the first two nominees failed to take over the offer. It is perhaps interesting to note that the second nominee was a Nuba from Kordofan, thus reflecting the national ethos of JEM. The readers might be bewildered to know that the first nominee was no body other than Amin Banani Neo and who has recently rose to fame as a Janjaweed political leader. As for Ibrahim, and according to the Constitution of JEM, he remains as President of JEM for no more than two Terms. Here again JEM distinguishes itself from other Sudanese traditional parties where the leader effectively owns the party and can only be removed from office by death. I have no interest here in demonizing other parties. Rather, my intention here is to look at JEM as an institutionalized entity that cannot be reduced to personal biographies.

Whether we like it or not, we have to acknowledge that the USA is the only remaining superpower, and that it has a formidable role to play in bringing peace to Darfur. Indeed it would be foolish to exclude the USA in the search for peace in Darfur as some short sighted African leaders are now contemplating. Nonetheless, US leaders must rise to the challenge. They must move above knee-jerk reaction to September 11 atrocities and must equally avoid viewing the whole world through their War against Terror lenses. If the US is willing to play a constructive role in Darfur, it must be prepared to rid itself of its current Jemophobic syndrome.

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