

Sudan: Between Unity and Disintegration

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Like all African countries, Sudan as a nation state, is an imposition of the colonial imagination; a process that gathered diverse ethnic groups, often with little in common among themselves, under the banner of one unity. The diversity of Sudan's population is highlighted by the sheer number of languages, 160 or so, spoken within its national boundaries.

Diversity within a nation need not be a death sentence for its unity. After all, history is replete with countries whose very homogeneity failed to guarantee the unity of their people. Somalia and Rwanda are perfect examples of the illusion of the promise of homogeneity. Having said that, Sudanese people, or rather their leaders, must stop blaming the country's colonial history for its misfortunes. Since becoming independent in 1956, Sudanese leaders have had ample time to harness that diversity and turn it into a catalyst for enrichment and cultural harmony. Instead, successive governments - democratic, dictatorial, socialist and theocratic alike - did exactly the opposite, and in fact, competed to do so. In the process, they almost destroyed that diversity and entrenched the hegemony of a minority culture of the northern region over the rest of the country.

In as much as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in January, 2005 has put an end to civil war in the south of Sudan, it has also posed an imminent threat to the unity of the country. The CPA gave the south of Sudan the right of self determination, a gain which southerners will surely use for secession. As recently as December 2008, Vuni wrote:

"The Speaker of Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly (SSLA) James Wani Igga told a religious celebration in Juba that the Sudan People's Liberation Movement is committed to achieve an independent state in southern Sudan" (Vuni 2008).

There is nothing wrong with the right of self determination as such. It is a legitimate right for ill treated minorities. Nonetheless, self determination can be problematic in the sense that it often stifles the search for commonalities and the effort to end discrimination, thus leading people to contemplate secession. This is the trap in which Sudan finds itself.

Sudan had a brief moment of hope with the accession to power of the late John Garang as part of the CPA. His reception at Khartoum, which attracted no less than four million attendees, bolstered hope that his dream of New

Sudan, a Sudan that can accommodate all its diverse groups, was soon to be realised and under the leadership of none other than Garang himself. Some Sudanese who are steeped in traditional lore think that Sudan is a bewitched country and that nothing good will come its way. Well, Garang who was the only hope and author of New Sudan died in a tragic air crash soon after his inauguration. He left an agreement (the CPA) which only he could have kept afloat. Richard Williamson, George W. Bush's Special Envoy to Sudan described the CPA, to which his government acts as a major guarantor, as "a leaky boat" (Van Oudenaren 2008).

The CPA gave what I dare to describe as an illusory hope that it would put an end to the nation's endemic disease of marginalisation that underpins the hegemony of three tiny ethnic groups over the rest of the country. This is what I outline as the domination of a tripartite coalition of the Shaigyia, the Jaalyeen and the Danagla over the nation. In the language of the widely read Black Book of Sudan, this underscores the "five-ninety five" thesis; a situation whereby five per cent of Sudan's population are in control of the remaining ninety five percent at all levels: cultural, economic, political and military (see EI-Tom 2003, 2006 and 2008).

The Sudanese people were justified in their overall celebration of the signing of the CPA (January 2005). The agreement promised an end to marginalisation and a New Sudan that would accord equal opportunity to all, irrespective of ethnic, religious, regional or cultural origin; a dream that is cherished in every African country and beyond. Little did the Sudanese people know that the CPA is ill suited to deliver its promised New Sudan. Far from it, the CPA curbs excesses of the northern elite in the south but at the same time enables a life line for the continuing domination of the tri-partite coalition over the rest of the population. The tri-partite coalition operates under the Jallaba institution that enacts control over the whole of Sudan. The term Jallaba means procurers of slaves in Sudan's history, and later, legitimate traders after abolition of slavery. It is used across Sudan to describe traders from the northern region of Sudan who come to dominate the economy of the country, but equally, who orchestrate national government politics. The Jallaba metamorphosed into a system that defines everything in the country from style of dress to culture and political ideology (see EI-Tom 2006). Hence, it is legitimate to talk about the Jallaba as an institution rather than a simple network of traders.

Despite their undoubted goodwill, engineers of the CPA committed a grave error that later came to pose a continuous threat to the agreement. Throughout negotiation of the agreement, two major assumptions were taken for granted, bolstered by military prowess on either side of the divide as well. The Sudanese People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLM) were dominant in the Christian south of the Sudan while the National Congress Party, the ruling power of Khartoum took full charge of the other side. The corollary was simple, at least for those who did not bother to tax their minds. Sudan was taken to divide neatly into a predominantly Christian south represented by the SPLM, while the greater, northern part of the country was to be represented by the

NCP of Al-Bashir. Ironically, Al-Bashir's delegation to the negotiation became the guardians of the interests of all non-south Sudan, including Darfur.

As far as the Darfuris are concerned, their vindication took some time to materialise. The premature loss of Dr Garang pushed the CPA off course for a while, thus dampening but still allowing the CPA euphoria to continue until September 2005 when the so-called government of national unity (GNU) was formed. The composition of the GNU proved beyond doubt that the tripartite coalition is agreement proof (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Old habits die hard: Formation of the GNU- Sept 05

Region	No. of Positions	% population
Southern	16	16
Northern	20*	5.4
Kordofan	6	12
Darfur	6	20
Eastern	0	11
Central	0	26.5

**Shaigiya 3, Jaalyeen 12 and Danagla 5.*

The formation of the GNU has certainly proven that south Sudan has come of age. However, in so far as the hegemony of the northern region over other marginalised parts of the Sudan is concerned, the CPA is no more than a benign pussy cat that can easily be pushed aside when necessary.

Like religion, nationalism is an ideology that underpins important values but often stifles debate and suffocates thinking. Thus the composition of the GNU did not alert many of our fellow marginalised people about the power naively accorded to the CPA. Those who failed to board the CPA were simply discredited as separatist, tribalist, racist or simply agents for malicious foreign circles. But the addiction of the Jallaba institution to power and their unflinching belief in the divine right of the northern elite to rule Sudan exposed further cracks in the national CPA promise. While the CPA continues to deliver, though unsatisfactorily for the south, its national dimensions received another blow later on. CPA allies in non-southern regions were stunned by the

constitution of the re-election of the political bureau of the National Congress Party (NCP). As its name suggests, the NCP conjures an image of a modern party that draws its support, membership and leadership from all over the Sudan. In accordance with that profile, the NCP acted as a guardian of all non-southerners in the negotiations that produced the CPA. In January 2006, while the Darfur peace talks were going on, the NCP announced its new political bureau members, computed by the author as below.

Table 2.

How National is the National Congress Party? Political Bureau of the NCP, January 2006.

Region	No of members	% Population of region
Northern	14	5.4
Kordofan	4	12
Darfur	1	20
Central + Khartoum	6	26.5
Southern	2	16
Unknown	3	NA
Total	30	NA

As Table 2 shows, the composition is simply farcical when read in light of the NCP's claim to be a national party. Membership affirms that the NCP is no more than a Trojan horse for the northern region and its three elite ethnic groups. With membership of eight for the Jalyeen, seven for the Shaigya and two for the Danagla, the northern region, homeland of these ethnic groups is assured a blatant majority in Sudan's ruling party.

Throughout the recent history of the Sudan, wealth has been deliberately diverted to the otherwise economically impoverished northern region. As a result, the northern region is by far more developed than other parts of the Sudan. This is the marginalisation thesis well articulated in the Black Book (see the Black Book). But the diversion of Sudan's wealth to the northern region is not accidental. Rather it is a result of well planned and orchestrated actions of the NCP. In its party convention, September 2005, Hamdi,

economic guru and Al-Bashir's ex-Minister for Economy and Finance, advised that future investment and development in the Sudan should by-pass Darfur and focus on the northern Dongola-Sennar-Kordofan axis. Hamdi concluded that this triangle represents the hard-core of historic and future Arab-Islamic Sudan. Following segregation of the south, taken as given by Hamdi, this triangle guarantees power for the National congress party of Al-Bashir in future democratic Sudan. Darfur Arabs who took sides with Khartoum in the Darfur conflict have a lot to contemplate about their fateful alliance with the riverine people of Sudan. Hamdi conceded that the south will depart and form its own separate country and deprive the nation of 65% of public revenue and 25% of Gross National Product. To add insult to injury, new western investment accruing from the CPA is well guarded and cannot be transferred to the northern region:

".. these investment funds will be supervised by commissions which ensure that they go to the specified zone only [south and Nuba Mountains]. Due to these facts, foreign

investment will remain out of our hands and will not benefit the north much" (Hamdi 2005:12).

Graph 1

Hamdi's Dongola-Sennar- Kordofan Triangle:



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If Hamdi's revelation proves anything, it is the very fact that the CPA has failed to dismantle the Jallaba hegemony. Hamdi is right in concluding that the south will secede. It will take SPLM leaders a miracle to reverse that trend. Far from it, the statement of Mr Igga, the Speaker of Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly stands as testimony to that (Quoted earlier in the text). Similar statements have been uttered before by many SPLM top leaders.

Surprisingly, the majority of the SPLM leaders including Chairman Kiir claim to campaign for united Sudan. It is difficult not to conclude that these leaders are either out of touch with their grassroots' opinion or are simply being deceptive to their government coalition partners in their insistence of the unity of Sudan.

Hamdi's proposition that Darfur may also go for separation is simply not correct. Compared to the south of Sudan, Darfur is more integrated by far into the country. Huge pockets of Darfurians are living in Khartoum, the Gezira area, Gadarif and Port Sudan in Eastern Sudan and many other parts far away from Darfur. These populations make separation too painful to even contemplate.

While the south has given up the capital Khartoum mentally, the situation is different when it comes to Darfur. Frankly speaking, Darfur people will not leave the capital to the Riverine Sudanese and many of them believe that their stake in Khartoum is at least as strong as that of the Sudanese from the northern region who dominate the capital.

The Abuja talks that ended with the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) fiasco is also telling in this regard. During the talks, separation never entered upon the agenda of Darfur Movements. The Sudan Liberation of Darfur (SLM) unsuccessfully demanded the right to self determination for Darfur, but for tactical reasons. Self determination can also be used as a red card to precipitate a guarantee that full implementation of the agreement is reached. From its very name, the SLM is a national Movement and can never be reduced to a regional organisation.

As far as JEM is concerned with respect to representation, JEM is a national institution by any measure. That is clear from its well articulated philosophy in general and throughout its deliberations at the Abuja talks. Many senior JEM leaders are not from Darfur. At the moment, both the Legislative Assembly and General Congress of JEM are headed by personnel from outside Darfur.

Having said that, we must concede that Azrag, the head of a small JEM splinter group calls for self determination and the possible future separation of Darfur. But Azrag's proposition is hollow, lacking credibility and support in Darfur. Surprisingly, Azrag's separation idea came from me, the author of this article. In a general discussion between Ibrahim, the President of JEM, and myself, we wondered whether the brutal way the Darfur war was conducted by Khartoum government had diminished the faith of the Darfur people for a united Sudan. Due to our position, it was not possible for us to conduct a serious research investigation into this issue. Instead, I implemented a short questionnaire on the internet through a third party. The result was startling: 62% of those who responded favoured self-determination for Darfur. But don't hold your breath. Our investigation does not stand as a serious research project capable of ascertaining Darfur public opinion. The sample is very small, self selected, confined to internet users and with no guarantee that respondents are Darfurians. As such, we opted to discard the result but equally take note of it for future investigations.

At the time of the questionnaire, Azrag had just left JEM and was desperate for a separate agenda that distinguished him from the organisation he left behind. Our work provided him with one, and self determination became a catch phrase in the literature of his organisation. Despite this, we have to acknowledge that supporters of a united Sudan are now besieged, both in the south and to lesser extent in Darfur.

SPML and Darfur:

Despite similarities between the problems of the south and those of Darfur, the latter has remained low in SPLM priorities. To date, Mr Kiir has not been able to visit Darfur. This embarrassing flaw has been exposed elsewhere in an article aptly entitled "Alfashir is nearer than Kampala" (El-Tom 2007). Rather than seeing his seat as that of the First Vice President for the whole of Sudan, Kiir has remained firmly focussed only on the south. His peace mediation efforts have been squarely lodged in reconciling the Ugandan government with the notorious rebels, the Lord's Resistance Army. While Kiir's peace work in Uganda should be commended, his failure to pay similar attention to Darfur is deplorable.

Kiir's contribution to Darfur, or rather its lack of it, is further complicated by his botched effort to unify Darfur Movements. Instead of unifying Darfur Movements under one to two units, the attempt led to the initiation of many Movements, some of which are hatched by the Khartoum government at the expense of the SPLM. At the moment, the SPLM is facing another problem with the Darfur people. Siddiq Abdel Kareem/ Masaleet, a Chief Commander of SLM unity was assassinated while attending Kiir's unification mediation. Some members of the SLM are now implicating the SPLM in Commander Abdel Kareem's death. Both the SPLM and the SLM are conducting their investigation in the case which is a clear embarrassment for the government of southern Sudan.

Given the nature of the Darfur rebellion and the history of the SPLM, it is bewildering that the two organisations have not been able to enter into a strategic alliance against the Khartoum government. Indeed, such an alliance has always been a dream for JEM long before the tragic loss of Dr Garang. However, Kiir has consistently distanced himself from JEM while continuing to woo its rival Movement, the SLM. While this is difficult to explain, given the profile of JEM, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Kiir has fallen into the trap of Khartoum propaganda. In its effort to undermine JEM's international profile, Khartoum's media has laboured hard to stamp JEM as an Islamist Movement and a military wing of the (Islamist) Popular Congress Party of Turabi. Thus, in his visit to Cairo, February 2008, Kiir declared that JEM have an agenda "similar to those who want to implement Sharia Islamic law in Sudan" and that "other Darfur rebel Movements have different views from JEM and that they are (SPLM) trying to unify them". Kiir's unfortunate conclusion about JEM is perplexing to say the least and displays a flawed understanding of JEM. There can be no doubt that Dr Ibrahim, the president of JEM and many other JEM leaders were part of Turabi's party. It is also true that JEM enjoys within its ranks, many leaders who were active members of

other Sudanese parties, including the Communist party. By the same token, many SPLM's peace and government coalition partners were also part of Turabi's party. Both Al-Bashir and Taha, the darling of the west, were close confidants of Turabi. Kiir's take on this issue is indeed difficult to justify. The political scene in Sudan and across the world is replete with politicians who have changed and switched political parties and JEM is no exception in this regard.

JEM has declared many times that it is committed to a united Sudan. Much more than that, JEM is ready to work to remove all reasons that tempt the south to secede; for these are the same causes that made JEM raise arms against the government of Khartoum. But JEM also has to be realistic in its dreams. JEM, as well as all other stake holders, must realise that the departure of the south is only a matter of time and there is nothing much that can reverse that course of events. However, there is one thing that JEM and others can do. They can work to make that separation amicable and peaceful. The international community must move fast from now on and work to realise that objective. Unfortunately, indications are not encouraging. The government of both Khartoum and southern Sudan are preparing for war. In September 2008, we learnt that a ship pirated off the coast of Somalia which was loaded with army tanks, was destined for the government of south Sudan (GSS). Needless to say, that was against the CPA. A month later, Khartoum complained that an Ethiopian Antonov plane loaded with arms landed at Juba airport as part of that military build up.

Khartoum government has also been preparing for the imminent violent separation. In December, 2008, Khartoum deployed six army battalions in south Kordofan. The deployment came afoot of thousands of other members of a force stationed in and around the disputed oil rich zone of Abeyei. GOSS, which hailed this military build up as incompatible with the CPA, is not convinced that the deployment is undertaken to protect the oil installations against JEM. Either way, these signs are clear reminders that all partners have to start as early as today, working for the peaceful but regrettably unavoidable departure of the south.

Back to Darfur:

That the Darfur problem is political and so is its solution, is a dictum that JEM has repeated and pursued for many years. Barring political suicide, JEM can only sign into a peace deal that is fair and dignified. For years Khartoum has been able to out- manoeuvre the international community with its incessant addiction to what the eminent Darfur expert Eric Reeves described as "pusillanimous" Darfur initiatives that are hardly worth the ink in which they are written. In the same week (October 2008) in which Khartoum received with praise and boosted the Qatari mediation, Al-Bashir launched his own so-called Sudan People Initiative (SPI) presumably to work either in tandem or parallel to the Qatari initiative. The SPI was to be headed by a committee of five prominent figures of Al-Bashir, Nafie, Almahdi, Swar Eldahab and Kiir. Leaving Kiir aside - who had to be there in lieu of the CPA - the rest of the committee are carefully drawn from the northern region. The very composition

of the chairing board of the SPI indicates that the interests of the northern region weigh more than the entire population of Darfur. Surprisingly, neither Mini Minnawi, the sole signatory to the DPA, nor representatives of Non-DPA signatories were included in the headship of SPI. As usual, the SPI turned out to be worth nothing at all. It came out with a unilateral cease fire which Al-Bashir destroyed within 72 hours by attacking SLM in Muhagaria, JEM in Kulbus and a main IDP camp at Nertete in South Darfur.

The discovery of oil in Sudan was widely celebrated by the Sudanese people as ushering their way into development. Little did many of them know that under callous governments, such a discovery would be anything but a blessing to the nation. Ex-Darfur governor Sese has computed that in at least one year, Sudan spent 60% of its oil revenue on defence. Thus, oil has become a tool for further destruction and not as hoped, a catalyst for development. It took JEM a few years to learn the simple lesson that with the steady increase in the flow of oil, Al-Bashir can sustain a low intensity war for good. Darfur will soon end up with second generation IDPs and refugees just as is the case in the south of the country. The international community, particularly with US attention focussed on its legitimate war against terror, can only do so much. At least they have kept Darfur IDPs and refugees alive since the onset of the Darfur war. For those very reasons, JEM has decided that there is neither a point in fighting in the desert of Darfur, nor in expecting the international community to do any more in Darfur. There is a consensus in JEM leadership, that for better or for worse, the battle has to be moved to where the decision is made - and that is the capital, Khartoum.

In May 2008, JEM boldly invaded Khartoum under what was code-named Operation Long Arm (OLA). The aims of OLA were centred around four objectives: to forcibly depose Al-Bashir, reduce his hostile military capabilities, prove that he is incapable of defending Khartoum, let alone Darfur, and to engender life and momentum into the Darfur peace talks. It is obvious that JEM has failed to realise its first and prime objective and that is to dislodge the government of Khartoum. In so far as other objectives are concerned, JEM has been successful and has achieved further unintended gains. To begin with, Al-Bashir was forced to sideline the Sudan National Defence Forces (SNDF) and was reduced to reliance on an ethnic based militia to defend the capital. The daring operation catapulted JEM into a regional force and a mover and shaker within Sudan's political arena. Growth of membership of JEM has been on the increase ever since.

Conclusion:

Let me borrow a phrase from the Cramer and state that civil war is not necessarily “a stupid thing” particularly when it comes to securing seminal and fundamental rights such as those the Darfuris are fighting for (Cramer 2006). While we affirm that Sudan’s problem is political and that recourse to violence is an inferior way of tackling such an impasse, we also have to acknowledge the legitimacy of that road. History abounds with the likes of Mugabe, Idi Amin, Hitler and Al-Bashir, with whom political reasoning is simply futile. JEM is still hopeful that Al-Bashir, particularly in light of the International Criminal Court (ICC) threat, may come to his senses and heed the international appeal for a negotiated settlement of the Darfur problem. But JEM’s patience is not infinite.

As I argued earlier, the departure of the south is a forgone conclusion. The rest of the Sudan will however hold. Looking at the political map of the Sudan, all major parties are pro-unity. One may even optimistically add almost all of the top leaders of the SPLM to that. Leaving south Sudan aside, the threat to the unity does not come from Darfur. Rather, it dwells in the very fact that all marginalised parts of Sudan have genuine grievances which have to have to be tackled to deliver unity of the country.

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Note:

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