

The Legacy of Khalil Ibrahim, the Founder of JEM, Sudan by Abdullahi Osman El-Tom

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Khalil Ibrahim

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Depending on which calendar you care to use, it is just over a year since Dr. Khalil Ibrahim was murdered. We do not take this occasion to mourn his loss, for heroes do not die. Their legacy outlives their physical existence and the heritage they leave behind remains a shining path for generations to come. These words are, therefore, meant to celebrate the achievements of Dr. Khalil and honour the ultimate sacrifice he gave for a better Sudan; A Sudan that is fit to live in, inclusive and accommodative for all.

Dr. Khalil was killed by a precision jet fighter while on his asleep, December 23rd, 2011. The successful strike exhibited sophisticated planning and execution, hailed by many as way beyond capabilities of the Khartoum Government. JEM as well as many analysts were quick to point to a finger to involvement of other countries. At the time of writing these notes, GoS is enmeshed into what Sudan's media termed the "war of memos" in which several thousand Islamists and around 700 top army officers offered separate petitions to the government calling for immediately reform and a prompt handling of numerous pressing issues.

The memo offered by the army officers indicates that assassination of Dr. Khalil was not the work of the SAF. Thus, the seventh point of the memo reads:

"SAF is waging war against internal rebellion. Nonetheless, it remains ignorant of movements of execution of military operations inside the Sudan such as assassination of Dr. Khalil Ibrahim. The SAF has no knowledge of who was involved in the operation and the exact role the authority had in it"

The government itself added to confusion regarding assassination with the Minister for Defence and the SAF official Spokesperson giving contradictory account about the incident. Subsequently, the government discarded its early theory that Khalil was killed during military clashes and settled for a surgical air strike operation as confirmed by JEM.

The heroic sacrifice of Dr. Khalil was an apocalyptic moment in the history of Sudan. The pain of Dr. Khalil's assassination was probably matched by premature loss of only two iconic figures in the recent history of the nation. The first was Mohamed Ahmed Al-Mahdi who died barely five months after the fall of Khartoum in 1885. Tragic to his followers as it was, his early loss was however different and was certainly received in a profoundly unique way. The Mahdists saw their leader as a Messiah and who was, by all means, immune do death. His departure was, so to speak, lateral and to a better place which everybody yearned with incredible envy to get to. It was a different time, governed by different logic.

The second loss, almost to a biblical proportion was that of Dr., John Garang in 2005. Like the Mahdi, Garang was seen as a saviour of the country from the abyss its leaders allowed it to sink in. He was seen as the only hope to keep the country united after revamping it under his popular vision of New Sudan. Dr. Garang inspired a whole generation of young leaders, among whom was Khalil who lived the dream of New Sudan up to his death.

Dr. Khalil's death came at a different time; an era in which globalisation has reduced the world to a tiny global village. No Sudanese leader ever received such a global mourning as Dr. Khalil. From Sidney to New York, Zurich to Cape Town, public halls were hired to receive condolences, read chapters of the Koran in the Sudanese way and say payers for the deceased. At the time of writing these notes, the internet is jammed with invitations for the 40s day anniversary of his loss. Hundreds of public venues across the globe will again meet to celebrate Khalil's and chant blessing chapters from the Quran in line with Sudanese traditions and in tandem with what Khalil's people would do the in town of Tina, North Darfur.

Obviously, not every body was saddened by Dr. Khalil's loss. Visionary heroes cultivate enemies and Khalil was no exception. The ruling junta and their supporters celebrated Khalil's death with characteristic mesmerisation. Their women joined with the usual ululation. Government security forces even broke rank with the usual Sudanese traditions and attacked mourners in Khalil' family home with batons, tear gas and prevention of access to the house.

Indeed the response of the NCP to Khalil's death points to a worrying cleavage between Sudan's politicians. By assassinating Dr. Khalil, the ruling junta had effectively closed the door on any possibility of reconciling their difference with JEM as well as the rebels of Darfur. In some ways, the NCP leaders have once again proved that they are bad history students. Visionary heroes do not die. Their vision remains

entrenched among their support and become emboldened in future generations. History is replete with such examples: Martin Luther King of the USA killed 1968, Steve Biko of South Africa killed in 1977, Mahatma Ghandi of India 1948 Fred Rwigema of Rwanda, 1990 and many others. Among all of those murdered leaders, Rwigema represents a chilling history lesson for the NCP leaders. Rwigema was killed days after the Rwandan Patriotic Front against the Hutu based Genocidaires of Rwanda. Rwigema was not only a military commander. He was equally a visionary leader who inspired his own people with a dream of a new Rwanda where all could live and coexist with dignity, honour and equal opportunity. Naturally, members of the RPF were devastated and while listening to their enemies were chanting their obituary. The rest is history. Like phoenix, the RPF rose from the ashes and completed Rwigema's project.

Several key officials in the Khartoum government gave an insight into the way they welcomed the tragic loss of Dr. Khalil and the same was set by the President himself. Like all dictators, Al-Bashir and in a self-delusionary way, saw himself so righteous as to be deserving of godly and heavenly assistance to the detriment of his foes. He therefore described Dr. Khalil's death as "divine intervention" in retribution for standing against a system that "heightened the words of Allah" in the region. His Minister for defence, Abdel Rahim Husain, Military Spokesperson Al-Sawarmi and Minister for Information Ali Masar followed. Their original narratives indicted that the SAF killed Dr. Khalil with dozens of his commanders in an open battle in Kordofan. Days later, the battle theory was discarded in favour of a lone air strike which was supported by a statement from JEM. Despite the confusion and contradictory statement of Khartoum's top officials, the gist of their message was clear. Namely, that JEM was collapsing following decapitation of its head and that the rebellion was disintegrating.

The assassination of Dr. Khalil posed a formidable challenge for JEM, testing its maturity as an institution and capability to survive a loss of such magnitude. Difficult as it was, JEM seems to have passed the test. Gibriel Bilal, the official Spokesperson issued a statement, December 25th confirming the assassination, two days after the incident. The delay was deliberate, considering the immensity of the event. JEM troops were scattered over a wide territory across several regions and many of them had little access to media outlet. In order to contain demoralisation and anger and pre-empt unwarranted reprisals, the troops had to be briefed on loss of their leader in a sensitive manner. The eloquent Presidential Assistant of JEM, Mr. Ahmed Husain Adam also deployed skills in confronting hostile Sudanese and Arab Media led by Al-Jazeera cartel.

Despite its shock, the tragic loss of Dr. Khalil also brought the best in JEM. During all my years in JEM, I had never seen its members and particularly the Executive Board so united behind a cause. In line with JEM constitution, Dr. Tahir El-Faki, Head of Legislative Assembly, immediately took over as President of the organisation. The constitution stipulates that a replacement is to be chosen by the General Congress of JEM in no more than 60 days. As it is well known now, Al-Faki was able to steer JEM through its most difficult days with spectacular skill. With members of JEM scattered around the world as well as the war zone in Sudan, it was a daunting challenge to bring them all together for a General Congress.

The convention finally took place 24-25 of January 2012, exactly a month following assassination of JEM leader. The General assembly convened at Hideyat, South Kordofan and under unprecedented security arrangement. The slogan "Together we will accomplish the Martyr's project" and under which General Congress was held, was befitting to the immense task at hand. It was true the Congress debated several issues and reached several important resolutions; all these were eclipsed by election of a new president for JEM and this remains my focus in section of the work.

According to the constitution of JEM, the selection of the new president is entrusted to the General Assembly and not the Legislative Council. As such, Dr. Al-Faki who was the Acting President by virtue of his headship of the Legislative Council had to step aside for the Head of the General Congress, Abu Bakr Al-Qadi, to preside over the convention. Unfortunately, Al-Qadi, the Head of the JEM General Congress, had to report back to work in the Gulf countries a day or two prior to commencement of the convention. His deputy, Professor Mahmoud Abbaker Suleiman presided over the meeting. It was indeed an extra-ordinary meeting and with breathtaking sophistication and so much at stake. The convention brought in 109 attendees in addition to participation of delegates the Cowda group, better known as the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF). But that was not all. In addition to those present at the convention, there were 13 other General Congress constituencies locked in tandem meetings, including JEM troops in three other locations as well as IDPs and refugees in other areas.

Four nominations for the presidency were presented in the Convention:

Suleiman Jamous, the Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs of JEM. Jamous was a veteran Zaghawa leader and rebel who moved into JEM from the SLM.

Lt. General Ahmed Adam Bakheit, Secretary for Darfur and Deputy President of JEM. He comes from the Berti ethnic group of Umkeddada, North Darfur (see complete profile in the book).

General Mohamed Al-Bilal Zaid of Hamar ethnic group of Kordofan. He is JEM Secretary for North Darfur and Deputy President of JEM.

Dr. Gibriel Ibrahim Mohamed, Secretary for Foreign Affairs of JEM and brother of Dr. Khalil.

It must be noted that other names were flagged earlier but could not survive the race. While every single one of the nominees is experienced enough to lead JEM, none of them could match profile of Dr. Khalil, his charisma and iconic stature. But history is replete with successors who have grown into the job and eclipsed predecessors who were deemed irreplaceable. Commander Rwigema of the Patriotic Front of Rwanda was killed days after they launching his assault to rescue his country from an impending genocide. His loss was so devastating to the extent that many predicted total collapse of the RPF. His successor, Paul Kagame stepped and later succeeded in restoring peace and co-existence following the worst genocide in recent history of Africa.

During the Irish war of Independence, 1919-1921, Michael Collins was regarded as a giant of a leader and an indisputable future

president of the Ireland. His statute was augmented by his formidable roles as Commander in-Chief and president of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He did not survive to witness independence of his country as he was assassinated in 1920. His rival de Valera rose in prominence and not without some controversy, though controversial, dominated Irish politics for five decades. But let us get back to JEM convention.

According to professor Suleiman, the meeting could not have progressed any better. Nominations were made in an orderly manner and each one was seconded in line with the order of the business. "Solemn" was perhaps a better word to describe the process for everybody knew very well the exact momentousness of the outcome of the meeting; for JEM, the marginalised people of Sudan and the entire geopolitical region, at large. To make matters worse, the tension was further exacerbated by intermittent, low but nonetheless audible noise from a distance. That was the noise of Antonov planes of the Khartoum government doing their daily choirs of dropping bombs on innocent civilians in the vicinity. No doubt Khartoum intelligence knew the meeting was taking place somewhere in Hedayat locality of South Kordofan and were hoping to strike it rich by wiping out the entire JEM leadership in one go. For the participants in the Convention, the Antonov bombers were of no direct threat to them but there were nonetheless a nuisance.


Apprehensive as they were, convention delegates didn't know they were in for a delightful surprise. The first three nominees, Bakheit, Jamous and Zaid requested time to address the convention. One after another, they withdrew their nominations and asserted their backing of Dr. Gibriel for presidency of JEM. Amid rowdy applause and ululation, Professor Suleiman, the chair, rose to commend the spirit shown in the meeting by the nominees. He, however, had to cut the celebration short, declaring it premature, for the new President was yet to be endorsed by other constituencies of the Congress of JEM who were not present in the meeting. Few hours passed before full ratification of election of the new President was secured by phone.

Like most people of Darfur people of his generation, Dr. Gibriel has no exact birth date. He was probably borne around 1956 and that makes him two to three years older than his late brother Khalil. Following his graduation at the University of Khartoum in 1980, Dr Gibriel travelled to Japan for further studies where he later obtained a Ph.D. Degree in Economics, from the University of Tokyo.

Dr. Gibriel was relatively new to party politics. Like the rest to us, he was actually forced into it by the onset of current hostilities in Darfur and beyond. Prior to that, Dr. Gibriel was known as an ex-university professor and businessman.

This article is adapted from a new book by the author "Study war no more; Military tactics of a Sudanese rebel movement. The case of JEM". Published by RSP, USA 2013. An Arabic version translated by Salah Shuaib will appear early in 2013.

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