



EVALUATING SUDAN'S HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIOPOLITICAL TRAJECTORY

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The reason for writing this paper is to analyse the most significant obstacles that are hindering the process of democratization in Sudan. I will also propose a set of policies that will be supportive of a democratic state. The policies will be aimed at addressing the aforementioned obstacles.

Methodology: The main methods used for the research were analyses of the policies of different democracy assistance organisations. The analyses will attempt to explain the extent to which they have or have not been successful.

Approach: Through summarizing the country's political history whilst looking into the current political scenario a clear picture of Sudan's process to democracy can be made.

Originality: The novelty of the paper lies in the set of democracy assistance policies that have been proposed to address obstacles that stand in the way of a full-fledged democratic Sudan. The set of democracy assistance policies have been formed through the analysis of current policies.

Value: Countries in Africa which have been struggling to attain a democracy can escape from the obstacles Sudan has been facing in order to attain a democratic state by taking note of what is going wrong and can contemplate on how the situation can be improved. As a result of this paper, the newly contrived democracy assistance policies presented in the paper should be taken into consideration to make strides to achieve democracy in Sudan.

Keywords: Democracy; Sociopolitics; Elections; Press; Government; Human rights; Independence; History; Reforms; Media

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The Democratic Republic of the Sudan is the second largest African country and is located in the north-east of the continent. Sudan plays a vital role in bridging the Arabian Islamic and the Sub-Saharan world. Ever since Sudan gained independence from Britain and Egypt in 1956, its political landscape has experienced seemingly endless socio-political and economic turmoil. This has been due to ethnic conflicts amongst the 570 different tribes, with diverse sets of faiths, social backgrounds and cultures and more so due to religious tensions and power politics between the dominant Arab-Islamic North and the repressed Christian South; this has consistently resulted in multiple bloody and protracted civil wars.

Since the 1989 military coup, Omar al-Bashir and his National Congress Party have taken over Sudan; since then presidential elections have mostly been plagued by irregularities. The biggest cause for concern has been the rampant human rights abuse in the desolate regions of the country carried out by the ruling Islamic party. Moreover, unequal representation of diverse faiths in the parliament has led to the centralisation of power and resources around the capital city, Khartoum. Limited freedom of press and media has kept a major part of the population away from information and education.

This paper will analyse the significant obstacles to Sudan's democratisation process, namely the consistent irregularities during national elections, rampant human rights abuse and crackdown on press and media. It will propose a set of democracy assistance policies to address the obstacles by listing the country's ongoing democracy assistance programmes, ways to examine and reform the electoral process, ways of strengthening and promoting a free and independent media and ways of monitoring and reporting various clashes between the country's different ethnic groups.

Sudan became a predominantly Muslim country with Arab Islamic migrations between the 13th and 15th centuries from both the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa, particularly Egypt. Interfaith marriages between Arabs and people from the local tribal communities became prevalent, which Islamicised large areas of northern Sudan, both in terms of religion and law.

From the year 1899 until 1955, Sudan was jointly ruled by Britain and Egypt. The British dominated the condominium and crushed many small-scale rebellions within the nation. Egyptian subsidies helped the country's railway, telegraph and steamer services grow. In 1902, the Gordon Memorial College was founded; which resulted in a newly educated Sudanese class from which Sudanese nationalism was born. However, they were not involved in the administration of their country, which angered them and ultimately triggered the independence movement for agitation of more power.

The first step towards politicising Sudanese ideological division between the North and South took place when the colonial regime governed both regions as separate entities. In the South, Christianity was encouraged, as the colonial regime perceived the South to be analogous to East African colonies. Arab or Muslim-related practices were encouraged in the North as it was perceived similar to Middle Eastern colonies.

Sudan finally gained full independence from the joint Anglo-Egyptian Condominium in 1956. At that time, Sudan was one-third the size of the United States(US) and hosted 600 ethnic groups that spoke over 400 languages. However, the new constitution of 1956 did not discourse whether Sudan should be an Islamist or a secular state. Southern politicians preferred a secular constitution in order to protect Southern provinces from being completely relegated by the dominant Northern central government. However, Northern politicians rejected the idea of secularism, seeing it as a first step toward secession. Sudan ultimately established itself as a parliamentary republic. The British decided to establish the new government in the Arabic and Islamic majority North where its colonial administration was previously situated.

Post-independence, the constituent assembly adopted a document called the 'Transitional Constitution'. This replaced the British Governor-general, Sir Robert Howe, with a five-member Supreme Commission elected by an indirectly elected Senate and a popularly elected House of Representatives. The Transitional Constitution granted executive power to the hands of the first Sudanese Prime Minister Ismail al-Azhari, who was nominated by the House of Representatives and later established in office by the Sudanese Supreme Commission. The first parliamentary elections were held in 1958, with the Umma Party, led by Abdullah Khalil, winning the majority of seats and defeating the Ismail al-Azhari led National Unionist Party.

This resulted in Sudan being a fully-fledged Islamist state, which was later seen by the South as the beginning of the colonisation by the North of the South. The colonisation period left a rigid and an individualistic style of governance. As a result, Sudan ended up completely in the hands of Arabian Muslim Northern rulers who did not possess the leadership qualities necessary to govern a modern state system or to keep the nation intact.

This led to the breaking out of the first Sudanese civil war that started in 1955 and ended in 1972 with the Addis Ababa peace accord. Whilst the transfer of power from the British to mostly Northern politicians was in process in 1955, i.e., before Sudan was officially independent, Southern rebels were planning to launch a separatist movement, led by the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SSLM/A). The SSLM/A began to torch villages and arrest and torture Northern administrators in the South; this was in accord with increased opposition by the General Government of Sudan (GGOS), the central government in the South. This was met with extremely brutal action by the GGOS, which further amplified the conflict. The war ended with the signing of the Addis Ababa Peace accord in 1972, which was aimed at pacifying SSLM/A administrators after the war proved costly to the GGOS. The SSLM/A was adamant on a secular structure of governance, which resulted in GGOS granting them autonomy comprising of three regions in the South – Equatoria, Bahr el Ghazal and Upper Nile.

However, in 1983, the agreement was called off by the then president Gaafar Nimeiry, who sought support from Islamic extremists to transform the entire nation into an Islamic Arab state by imposing Sharia law. This was the beginning of the second Sudanese civil war, which started as a continuation of the first civil war. Nimeiry saw the South's rich natural and manual resources as a prospect to develop the North and looked at the Southerners as merely a source of cheap manual labour. In 1985, he was overthrown by his defence minister, Suwar al-Dahab, through a series of mass protests, demonstrations and a general strike due to the country's spiralling food and fuel prices.

The 1989 *coup d'état* resulted in repudiation of the peace agreement and the successful overthrow of the democratically elected Prime Minister, Sadiq al-Mahdi, head of the Umma Party, and led to the takeover of the political Islam agenda established by General Omar al-Bashir's National Islamic Front. It was alleged that Sadiq al-Mahdi had called for the arrest of 50 civilians and 14 military officials who were suspected of planning a rebellion against the current regime by the means of a coup to restore former President Gaafar Nimeiry to power. The Second Civil War left two and a half million people dead and four million people displaced. Later, General Omar al-Bashir became the President, the Prime Minister, the Chief of State, Minister of Defence and the Chief of the armed forces of Sudan. As he took over, he suspended the Constitution, terminated the Parliament and imposed an emergency rule.

So far, Islamism as a national identity for Sudan has backfired tremendously for the ruling party as it has further deepened ethnic and religious tensions within the country. In 2005, a 'Comprehensive Peace Agreement' (CPA) was signed to end the ongoing civil war and to develop democratic governance across the nation. It was made to establish an agreement for power sharing and oil revenues with the South. An agenda was also established for a referendum for the secession of the Christian-majority South from the North. During the interim period between 2005 and 2011, South Sudan had a high degree of autonomy within a unified Sudan. Later in 2011, as per the CPA, South Sudan voted for independence in the referendum and became the world's newest country after the six-year interim period came to an end.

When the CPA period ended with South Sudan's independence in 2011, the interim constitution was superseded and, since that date, Sudan has needed an accountable governing document for its governance. The economy has been in a shambles due to loss of oil revenues from the South, fuel conflicts within the region, the struggle to produce a meaningful political reform and a major lack of a permanent governing document. This has weakened Sudan in developing solutions to sustainable peace.

In 2014, the opposition parties and civil societies, together with Umma Party, signed the national dialogue convention with the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel. The clear goal was a comprehensive peace settlement in the country and, in its absence, a rebellion to overthrow the ruling party. Later that year, General Bashir made a constitutional amendment that redirected all the political power to his hands. This means that Sudan is now a one-man system instead of a one-party system.

Sudan has had significant obstacles to further democratisation. According to the Corruption Perception Index published by Transparency International in 2014, Sudan is considered to be world's third most corrupt country. Government rule is highly centralised and the concentration of resources and power is in and around the capital Khartoum; distant regions are ignored and impoverished. The country's minority ethnic and religious groups face immense relegation on social, political and economic grounds by the members of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP), who have supreme authority over the amassed wealth of the nations that they use to buy political support. Moreover, the regimental suppression of the opposition forces by the ruling NCP is a cause for concern. Many of the registered political parties are denied official permission to organise political campaigns and hold public events. The misconduct of the election by NCP included reports of ballot stuffing, bribing, offering cash handouts to voters and manipulating the poll used to accumulate the electoral roll by exaggerating the population in core support areas and slashing votes from opposition regional strongholds.

In addition, there have been instances of rampant human rights abuse in the country. In 2009, an arrest warrant was issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Omar

al-Bashir on grounds of crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. These crimes were led by government-supported Arab mercenaries called 'Janjaweed', who had been accused of decimating local minority populations, targeted killings, torching of villages, bombing from the air and raping women and girls. This led to the displacement of at least two million civilians in the Darfur region in Western Sudan.

According to the 2009 Press and Publication Act, a Press Council appointed by the government has the ultimate authority to terminate publications and broadcasts, impose heavy fines and shut down newspapers for violating media regulation as imposed by the Act. Additionally, the council is suspected of shutting down Internet access to put an end to online anti-government protests. Other communications technology has also been deployed to observe the online activities of social activists and anti-government factions.

The pursuit of having a national dialogue has failed to achieve any results. As there is very little pressure that is exerted on the ruling party, there has been very little development to redraft the constitution after the secession of South Sudan in 2011. According to members of the opposition, NCP has been protracting the negotiations in order to disseminate the *status quo*. Due to internal conflicts and lack of an international political will, given the volatility challenges facing the surrounding neighbourhood countries, there has been no end in sight for war crimes in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile against minorities, or the formation of a credible national constitutional process and meaningful dialogue. Hence, it can be assumed that the priorities for the NCP are the elections and shunning of the opposition forces and the rebellion.

In 2011, the Arab Spring toppled various dictatorial regimes across North Africa and the Middle East. However, the Sudanese security forces quickly took charge of the situation and demolished various small-scale protests and campaigns with beatings and arrests. This meant that the demonstrations vanished in no time due to a massive heavy-handed backlash by the government.

The most popular revolt in the last 24 years under the ruling NCP was carried out in September 2013 against the sharp rise in basic commodity prices and a steady decline in public services. These protests were led by public school teachers, doctors and normal citizens to call attention to the neglect of public educational sector and privatisation and closure of the country's public hospitals. An important highlight of this event was the fact that protestors, with youth and school students leading the way, called for an outright change in the country's regime.

To address and reform these major socio-political issues in Sudan, various international fraternities that work toward establishing and promoting democracy throughout the world, have implemented several assistance programmes in Sudan that focus on resolving the country's ethnic conflicts and establishing a democratic state. For instance, the USAID works towards providing opportunities for civil societies to support democratic process more effectively and promotes national dialogue and agreement to represent different interests and motivations of the people through civic initiatives. Similarly, the American Bar Association (ABA) works towards the consolidation of access to human rights and justice for the Sudanese; this is to counter impunity for human rights violations by nurturing the capacity of human rights lawyers and independent bar associations to record violations and seek justice. Likewise, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) works to organise an informed public to assist as the foundation for democratic revolution in Sudan. This is being done by providing funding and technical support to civil society organisations to observe domestic political processes in the nation. The NDI

also runs programmes to deliver important civic education messages through civic and voter education in Sudan by educating over a million citizens on the voting process and their rights. The NDI also conducts research in the desolate regions of Sudan to help policymakers, civil society groups and the international community understand citizens' perspectives during this dynamic transitional period.

The method ABA uses to establish access to justice and human rights is by training Sudanese lawyers to develop strategies for engagement as they conduct advocacy activities (such as complaints of human rights violations to the African Commission for all elections since 1989 have mostly been plagued by irregularities and a consistent crackdown on opposition forces has resulted in a mass boycotting of elections, reinforcing the country's current regime's supremacy. The reforms that are already in place have so far been able to bring different perspectives together, but to revamp the nation a stronger policy to promote election participation and prevent irregularities is imperative. These programmes will only work in the long run if their end goal is to promote openness and justice in the country's elections.

If regime change has to take place, the democracy assistance programme should be designed to scrutinise the country's electoral process. All the programmes that are being run in the country are directly or indirectly related to the ruling party's state of affairs and socio-political involvement in the country. Therefore, we can only know that the programmes have been successful if the population's participation in elections increases, together with freeness, fairness and regularity. To bring about a change in the country's political scheme of things, the programmes should have an end goal of acting as a catalyst to significantly improve the promotion of democracy through the reformation of the country's electoral process.

There are other factors that hinder the implementation of free, fair and regular elections in major regions of the country, despite the implementation of numerous democratic assistance programmes. The Darfur region is still struggling to maintain minimum levels of basic living necessities for its close to 3 million refugees and internally displaced population. Additionally, the elections cannot be termed fully credible if they are called off in major regions of the country where a significant population lives.

First and foremost, democracy assistance should support the Sudanese electoral commission to have an operational structure in place before the upcoming elections. At this point, it has the funding and framework provided to them by international democracy assistance organisations. However, the necessary field infrastructure and capacity including trained staff, physical supplies and functional offices are not yet in place. For a meaningful participation in the election and a greater understanding of fundamental rights, the civic and voter education programme run by the NDI should be further encouraged as it educates over a million citizens in desolate regions of Sudan on the voting process and their rights.

According to the 2016 World Press Freedom Index, Sudan was ranked in the top 10 worst countries for freedom of press and information. Thus, this opportunity should be utilised to revise redundant national laws, such as the governing of the press, in order to strengthen an independent press to report on the country's ongoing social, political and economic events. This will make the elections more accountable in the eye of the public. As the print media in Sudan is heavily regulated by the party in power, the NED works toward producing an online newspaper that covers under-reported human rights issues from the country's conflict zones.

In addition, to prevent Sudan from entering another major civil war, international fraternity for democracy assistance should administer coordinated and consistent support for all political parties to partake in the elections and provide an opportunity for all citizens to freely exercise their right to vote and run for office.

Moreover, national elections in Sudan could trigger further conflict and destabilise the already decimated regions of Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Therefore, programmes should be implemented to resolve emerging conflicts that might arise during the electoral process where multiple ethnic groups might collide to stamp social and political authority in the country. There should be monitoring and reporting of instances of clashes between various ethnic groups in the remote areas of the country to prevent another major conflict from taking place that might affect the electoral process.

In conclusion, Sudan has been fighting a protracted war for equal representation of the country's various ethnic groups; this has been dominated so far by the current ruling regime. The consistent irregularities during national elections, rampant human rights abuse and crackdown on press and media have only reinforced the authority of the ruling party since 1989. Multiple peace agreements between the ruling party and the opposition have failed to achieve any significant results regarding the political state of the nation.

To address and reform these major socio-political issues in Sudan, various international fraternities that work toward establishing and promoting democracy all over the world have implemented several assistance programmes in Sudan that focus on resolving the country's ethnic conflicts and establishing a democratic state. The reforms that are already in place have, so far, been able to bring different perspectives together, but to revamp the nation a stronger policy to promote election participation and prevent irregularities is a must. If regime change has to take place, the democracy assistance programmes should be designed to scrutinise the country's electoral process. This could be done by supporting the Sudanese electoral commission to have an operational structure in place before the upcoming elections. A free and independent media should be promoted and strengthened by providing opportunities for local journalists to produce an online newspaper that can reach a wider audience throughout the world that covers under-reported human rights issues from the country's conflict zones.

To prevent another major civil war in the country, there should be monitoring and reporting of instances of clashes between various ethnic groups in remote areas that might affect the electoral process and socio-political state of affairs.

Finally, to be able to stand a chance of revolutionising the nation's socio-political state, the assistance programmes that are currently being run in Sudan should have a primary goal of empowering the local population for an equal representation of the wide variety of the country's ethnic groups.

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BIOGRAPHY

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