Pan-Arabism v. Pan-Africanism in the Sudan: The Crisis of Divergent Ethnic Ideologies

Jonathan A. Majak
University of Wisconsin - La Crosse

This article examines the nature and the extent of political and cultural conflict between Northern and Southern Sudanese. It describes and analyzes various attempts by Arab dominated regimes in the Sudan, since independence from Britain, to achieve national intergration through Pan-Arabist policies that seek to Islamize and Arabize the African and largely Christian South. The current military regime dominated by Muslim fundamentalists is trying to turn the Sudan into an Islamic republic. Not only has this brought about a civil war, but it has also alienated other Muslims in the North who favor a secular government.

The Sudan is the largest country in Africa and the ninth largest in the world. It is larger than Texas and Alaska combined. It shares borders with nine African countries and with Saudi Arabia just across the Red Sea. The Sudan is often referred to as a microcosm of Africa in that it comprimises the Arab Muslim elements of North Africa and the Black African elements of sub-Sahara Africa. The Sudan is also characterized by certain dualisms and interesting dichotomies.[1] It was, in theory, ruled by two colonial powers, Britain and Egypt, and was thus known as a condominium—the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Britain did the actual administration of the country. Two great rivers, the White Nile and the Blue Nile, dominate the Sudan. Khartoum, its capital, is dominated by two world religions, Islam and Christianity. Administratively, the Sudan was divided into two main regions, north and south. The northern Sudan was governed along Arab/Muslim lines and the south on African lines.

The Sudan is currently in the throes of a civil war brought about by attempts of various Arab dominated regimes to bring about national intergration through policies that seek to Islamize and Arabize the non-Arab Southern Sudan. The current military junta in Khartoum has declared the Sudan an Islamic state with *Sharia* law being the law of the

land, a policy that has aroused opposition even among Muslims in the Northern Sudan. This article describes and analyzes the policies adopted by the various regimes in the Sudan to bring about national intergration. More specifically, it will provide a brief historical overview and analysis of the dynamics of ethnic self-identification that are at the root of the conflict.

A Historical Overview

In 1898, the Sudan was reconquered by Anglo-Egyptian forces under the command of Sir Herbert Kitchener. Although this reconquest was supposedly on behalf of Egypt, Britain, however, had its own reasons; its honor was tarnished somewhat by the death of General Charles "Chines" Gordon in 1885 at the hands of the Mahdists in Khartoum. The death of General Gordon had caused quite an outcry in Britain and there were demands made for an immediate reconquest of the Sudan. General Gordon was a popular national hero due to his military exploits during the Taiping Rebellion in China. Thus, when the news of the fall of Omdurman to Kitchener's Anglo-Egyptian forces reached London, the British public was gratified.

General Gordon had been dispatched to the Sudan to evacuate Egyptian garrisons from Khartoum before the advancing Mahdist forces could reach that city. The Mahdists annihilated Egyptian forces under the command of Colonel Hicks, a retired British officer who had served in India. They sealed off Khartoum, trapping General Gordon, who was subsequently killed.

Sir Herbert Kitchener, later Lord Kitchener, became the first Governor-General of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. The Sudan was divided into provinces that were administered by British governors with the help of Egyptian and, later, Sudanese junior officers, especially in the Northern Sudan. The Southern Sudan was still resisting foreign rule well into the second decade of the twentieth century. This is often cited as the reason for the Southern lag behind the North in socio-political development. It was partly due to this "lag" that the "infamous" Southern Policy was established.

Early in 1930, the Civil Secretary sent a memorandum to Southern governors, outlining the Southern Policy:

> The policy of the Government in the Southern Sudan is to build up a series of self contained racial or tribal units with structure and organization based, to whatever extent the requirements of equity and good government permit, upon indigenous customs, traditional usage and beliefs.[2]

As a result of this policy, Arab and Islamic influences were to be kept out of the Southern Sudan just like the Christian missionaries were not permitted to proselytize in the North except in the non-Arab districts. This latter point has not often been appreciated by Northern Sudanese critics of the Southern Policy.

Soon after the fall of Omdurman, Lord Cromer, then the chief British administrator based in Egypt, visited Muslim leaders in that city and assured them that he would uphold Islam. He was well aware of the almost fanatical zeal with which the Mahdists fought Kitchener's Anglo-Egyptian forces. It was in that light that he wrote to a colleague in 1900 when the missionaries were seeking permission to proselytize in the North:

> I have no objection to giving the missionaries a fair field amongst the black pagan population in the equatorial regions [i.e. the South], but to let them loose at present amongst the fanatical Muslims of the Northern Sudan would, in my opinion, be little short of insane.[3]

Due to this restriction, the missionaries were only allowed to open schools and hospitals, but not to engage in proselytism. However, when the teaching of Islam was permitted at the newly founded Gordon College in Khartoum, some missionaries were outraged. "This is a Christian college," wrote a furious Reverend C.R. Watson, "founded in the name of Christian martyr, through the contributions of Christian government."[4] Perhaps it was not quite clear to the Reverend that the Sudan was a condominium ruled jointly by the Christian British and the mostly Muslim Egyptians. The colonial government was obliged to maintain a measure of balance between the missionary demands and those of the Northern Sudanese. The net result of this policy was the effective containment of Christianity in most parts of the North and the corresponding rehabilitation of Islamic learning.

In the South there was no attempt made, at least initially, to either protect or understand the indigenous religions. Instead, the Christian missionaries were given free reign to proselytize in the South. But a certain kind of balance was struck by the colonial government between the missionaries themselves. The entire Southern Sudan was divided into Catholic and Protestant missionary spheres of influence in order to minimize, as it were, "poaching for converts over interconfessional frontiers."[5] Thus the spread of Islam and Arab culture was to be curbed.

In the mid 1930s, it was becoming clear that the ideals of the age of Lugard with its emphasis on native administration were inadequate. There was no provision in the philosophy of indirect rule for the position of the burgeoning western-educated elite. Like their counter parts in other parts of the British empire, it was this group that challenged the

colonial government, in general, and the basis of the Southern Policy in particular. This elite was almost exclusively from the Northern Sudan. In 1939, just a year after its founding, the Graduates Congress sent a note to Governor General with the following recommendation on educational policy:

> In numerous aspects of our life we have much in common with the Arab countries of Islamic Orient which is due to our akin descent. We therefore consider that education in this country should take an Islamic Oriental character and not a pagan African one, or in other words that Arabic language and Religious Instruction should receive the greatest possible care in all stages of education.[6]

The educational enterprise in the South was in the hands of the Christian missionaries and it was along what the Graduates Congress considered "pagan and African" lines. A certain group of languages were used for instruction as recommended by the Rejaf Language Conference of 1928. This vernacular instruction was at the primary level; beyond that, the medium of instruction was to be English. It was hoped that the English language would become the *lingua franca* of the South. Although it has not achieved that goal, it has nevertheless become a bona fide element of Southern identity.[7] After World War II, the outburst of nationalistic activism in many parts of the British empire engulfed the Sudan. The nationalist agitation for self-determination by the newly founded political parties in the North necessitated the reformulation of a more defensible Southern Policy. Towards the end of 1946, the Civil Secretary declared in a memorandum to adminstrators in the South that it was the purpose of the policy

> ...to act upon the facts that the people of the Southern Sudan are distinctively African and Negroid, but that geography and economics combine (so far as can be forseen at the present time) to render them inextricably bound for the future development to the middle-eastern and Arabicized Northern Sudan: and therefore to ensure that they shall, by educational and economic development, be equipped to stand up for themselves in the future as socially and economically the equals of their partners of the Northern Sudan in the Sudan of the future.[8]

Within ten years, since the enactment of the new Southern Policy, the Sudan gained its independence from Britain with Egyptian blessing.

Egypt had hoped to unite with the Sudan, but in vain: the Sudanese leaders opted for full independence from both colonial powers.

The policies pursued by the Northern-dominated government of the independent Sudan brought into open the inherent conflict between the Northern and Southern aspirations. Education and the civil service soon become centers of dispute. The Northerners wanted, for example, to pursue an educational policy that was essentially pan-Arabist in philosophy whereas the Southerners wanted education that reflected their African heritage. Missionary schools were taken over (Sudanized) and a department of religious affairs was created and charged with the promotion of Islamic education in the South. The Minister of Interior at the time had these words of praise for this new department:

> It is my government's concern to support religious education and that is clearly shown by the progress scored by the Religious Affairs Department and the development of the Mahads (Islamic religious schools) under its aegis.[9]

The missionaries were criticized for allegedly devoting too much time and effort to proselytization than to "good education." The Mahads, however, proved to be dismal failures. They succeeded largely in producing a crop of Arabized individuals with no credible skills, some of whom became bitter critics of pan-Arabism. Even the government Arabic medium schools were not any better.

After the take-over of the missionary schools in 1957, an indirect assault was mounted against the English language in the South. The romanized alphabet of the Southern languages was somehow associated in the Northern minds with the missionaries; and Christianity, in turn, was associated with the English language. A new orthography more favorable to Arabic and Islam was to be developed. The Minister of education announced that

> The Ministry has entrusted to a committee of masters led by an expert in languages the task of writing booklets in the different Southern dialects [sic] but in the Arabic alphabet as first step towards the teaching of Arabic.[10]

The conversion to Arabic alphabet necessitated the invention of characters for sounds not found in the Arabic language. However, with the propensity of Arabic orthography for characters with dots, writing and reading soon became a torturous exercise. Besides, the Semitic consonantal spelling was fundamentally unsuitable for the phonological African languages of the South. This policy did not last very long be-

cause the military, under the command of General Ibrahim Abboud, took over power in a bloodless *coup d'etat* in November, 1958. But while it lasted, it virtually destroyed the then existing romanized literature.

The military regime did not waste time pursuing indirect methods of the civilian governments; it chose a more direct approach. Certain elementary schools were earmarked for yet another program of Arabization. Instruction in all subjects was to be in Arabic while English language was to be introduced as a subject at the intermediate school level. More Islamic institutes were built in the main urban centers in the South. Mosques were built near mission stations, especially in the Equatoria province where frequent quasi-revivalist, political rallies were held. At these rallies a few long term Christians would publicly confess to being "closet" Muslims. Some of them claimed that becoming Christians was the only way they could obtain a good education. Civil servants were promised promotions if they passed Arabic language examinations.

In 1960, the military regime launched an intense campaign against the conduct of Christian religion in the South. First, it declared Sunday a working day, triggering widespread strikes by students opposed to the policy, many of whom fled the country. The military regime used to claim that these students had been incited by the missionaries– a claim that grossly underestimated genuine Southern Nationalism. Then, in 1962, it passed the Missionary Societies Act, restricting Christian religious activity, and finally the missionaries themselves were expelled from the Sudan early in 1964. Only those in the South were expelled from the country. The military regime collapsed later in that year and was succeeded by a care-taker government headed by Sir El-Khatim El-Khalifa, a former Assistant Director of Education in the South who was well regarded in the region.

The care-taker government organized a Round Table Conference early in 1965 in an unsuccessful attempt to solve the Southern problem. Later that year, general elections which were boycotted in the South were held and a government headed by Mohammed Ahmed Mahgoub succeeded the care-taker government. Meanwhile, a growing number of Southerners were taking up arms in response to Mahgoub's government military approach to the problem. Many people fled the country, creating an influx of Southern Sudanese refugees in the neighboring African countries. The security situation in the South deteriorated to such an extent that the military took over power in a *coup d'etat* in 1969 under General Nimeiry. It was during Nimeiry's regime that the Addis Ababa Agreement was signed in 1972. This agreement granted the South a regional autonomy within the framework of a united Sudan.

The Agreement ushered in a decade of peace. General Nimeiry even adopted a more pan-Africanist foreign policy. Although this policy solidified his support in the South, it led to more opposition in the North, particularly among the pan-Arabists. In an attempt to regain pan-Arabist

support, General Nimeiry not only abrogated the Addis Ababa Agreement, but also introduced *Sharia* law in 1983. Once again Southerners took to arms as General Nimeiry resorted to pre-agreement policy of using force. General Nimeiry was overthrown in a *coup d'etat* in 1985. The new military government promised to hand over power to the civilians after general elections. That civilian government headed by Sadiq al-Mahdi was subsequently overthrown by the current military government in 1989. This military junta, headed by General Bashir, has declared the Sudan an Islamic state. It has suppressed opposition in the North and is seeking a military solution in the South, fighting the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the largest resistance group in the South.

Pan-Arabism in the Sudan

Pan-Arabism is the energizing ideology of the Northern Sudanese nationalism. This means a commitment, on the one hand, to Arab affairs in the political realm and, on the other, to Arab culture, particularly in its linguistic and religious manifestations. The "racial" aspect of Arabism in the Sudan is a marginal one at best—especially because some of the self-identified Arabs are hardly distinguishable from Black Africans. As Ali Mazrui has observed, "the Arabs as a race...defy straight pigmentational classifications. They vary in color from white Arabs of Syria and Lebanon, brown Arabs of Hadramaut, to the black Arabs of the Sudan."[11]

The Arabic language, more than culture or religion, is the most important factor that has kept the Sudanese Arabs in the mainstream of Arabism and pan-Arabist politics. Elsewhere in Africa, for example, those Arab immigrants who did not keep their language have been significantly Africanized culturally. This is particularly so in East Africa, especially in the pre-revolutionary Zanzibar. However, the very core of Zanzibari oligarchy was still linguistically Arab although it was simultaneously acculturated into the wider Zanzibari Afro-Arab cultural synthesis. Elements of this core often referred to themselves as "Waarabu safi" (pure Arabs) and to non-Muslim and non-Christian Aficans as "Washenzi" (savages).

There is an Arab chauvinism in the Sudan, albeit one that is rather ambivalent on the question of racial purity. In 1965, at the Round Table Conference, the late Ismail el-Azhari said:

> I feel at this juncture obliged to declare that we are proud of our Arab orgin, of our Arabism and being Moslems. The Arabs came to this continent, as pioneers, to disseminate a genuine culture, and promote sound principles which have shed enlightenment and civilization throughout Africa at a time when Europe was plunged

into the abyss of darkness, ignorance and doctrinal and
scholarly backwardness.[12]

This seemingly confident declaration may be indicative of the dilemma
that the contemporary Arab society is facing. Westernization, particu-
larly in its secular aspects, is precipitating a crisis among Arab leaders
and intellectuals, some of whom have resorted to what Abdallah Laroui
has characterized as "...the exaggerated medievalization obtained
through quasi-magical identificaiton with the great period of classical
Arab culture."[13]

In the Northern Sudan, there is a strong desire among the edu-
cated, urban classes to promote a higher form of Arabism. For instance,
Sudanese popular songs, by contrast to Egyptian ones, are mostly in
classical Arabic. Urbanization has thus become more of a conservative
influence rather than a liberalizing one in many aspects of social devel-
opment in the North.

With regard to religion, the Muslims are a majority in the Sudan,
constituting over sixty percent of the population. However, this clearly
religious majority, which includes Southern Sudanese Muslims, is often
projected as an Arab majority. It is quite clear that being a Muslim is not
synonymous with being an Arab. Furthermore, the mere fact that an
Arab group is dominant politically does not mean that the entire nation is
Arab.

Pan-Africanism in the Sudan

During the same Round Table conference, the late Aggrey Jaden
responded to Azhari's declaration by asserting his own ethnicity saying:

> The people of the Southern Sudan on the other hand,
> belong to the African ethnic group of East Africa. They
> do not only differ from the hybrid Arab race in origin,
> arrangement and basic systems, but in all conceivable
> purposes—there is nothing in common between the
> various sections of the community; no body of shared
> belief, and above all the Sudan has failed to compose a
> single community.[14]

Pan-Africanism in the Southern Sudan really came of age as an
ideology in the 1960s, particularly during the repressive regime of Gen-
eral Abboud. This was also the time many African countries gained their
independence from European colonial powers. The major Southern
Sudanese party in exile used the word "African" in its title, the first time
any Sudanese political entity had done so. It was obviously inspired by
the East African parties. Thus, SANU (Sudan African National Union)

was a Southern Sudanese version of Kenya African National Union (KANU) or the Tanzania National Union (Tanu).

Unlike Pan-Arabism, which is confined to the North, Pan-Africanism has adherents in the North, where it has often been condemned as a racist ideology. It was this kind of hostility that led to the demise of *Kutla-as-Souda* (Black Bloc) founded by Dr. Ahdam in 1938, the same year the Graduates Congress was founded. Due to the opposition and pressure from members of the Congress, the British colonial officials refused to license *Kutla-as-Souda* as a political party. According to Reverend Philip Abbas: "the beoc started as a social organization. It expanded very rapidly attracting people from the Nuba and the Fur, as well as West Africans and former slaves."[15]

Political Pan-Africanism has received somewhat perfunctory endorsement from Northern Sudanese leaders, especially as it relates to non-Sudanese affairs. Commenting on Sudanese African diplomatic efforts of the previous regimes, a former Foreign Minister in General Nimeiry's government said:

> We participated in general conferences without basic interest...we signed resolutions without faith in any single article among then [sic]; we issued revolutionary declarations...without implementing any one of them...the Sudan, despite its presence in all groupings and gatherings whether regional or continental, and despite its formal acceptance of all that took place in those gatherings and groupings was the last country to be committed to them.[16]

The Sudan, which is a member of both the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Arab League, has never been in the forefront in either Arab or African affairs—a reflection of its marginality. But once in a while, exaggerated claims of Pan-Africanism are made by some Northerners. For example, Muddathir Abd Al-Rahim claims that "Arabism and Africanism have become so completely merged in the Northern provinces that it is impossible to distinguish the two, even from the most abstract view..."[17] However, it does not require any special intellectual capacity to discern the presence of African ethnic groups in the North. In any case, Africanism is not a source of cultural pride in the North, particularly among the Afro-Arabs.

Prospects for the Future

The current regime came to power via a *coup d'etat*, so it could similarly be removed. In fact, it has already survived several attempts so

far; it is just a matter of time, so to speak.

With respect to the status of the Sudan as an Islamic state, that, too, could go away with the regime. This regime has no credibility with the significant traditionally friendly Arab states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia; even Libya of the radical Gadhafi recoils from it. As a result, the regime went out of its way to ally itself with Iraq and Iran—an alliance that has earned it classification by the U.S. State Department as a state that sponsors terrorism.

The regime is supported mainly by the National Islamic Front (NIF), a fringe fundamentalist party that cannot gain power through legitimate democratic process. As a matter of fact its leader, Hassan al-Turabi, was soundly defeated when he ran for parliament in 1986 before advent of the current regime. The leading political parties in the North, the Umma and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), joined forces against al-Turabi. These parties are patronized by the principal Muslim sects in the Sudan. The Umma party has traditionally been backed by the Ansar (Mahdist) sect and the DUP by the Khatamiyya sect. These sects have no interest in the brand of Islamic fundamentalism being foisted on the nation by the regime and the NIF.

The real serious problem for the Sudan is the Southern problem and this problem is, at its core, a political one. The Southern Sudanese are not against Islam per se; indeed, Southern Sudanese Muslims are fighting against the regime with their kind of vision that had made the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement possible. When General Nimeiry talked openly about unity in diversity, he gained the support of Southerners and earned respect among African leaders. A Nigerian paper, for example, had these words of praise:

> The solution of the problem of Southern Sudan is one
> of the greatest things that have happened to the Sudan
> and Africa in recent months. It is notable that the con-
> flict has now been solved under the leadership of a true
> believer in African unity—President Nimeiry.[20]

The historic, Afro-Arab tension which is always just below the surface is one that is rooted in slavery and slave trade. It could easily be revived by what is going on in the Sudan.

NOTES

[1] I do not agree with Ali Mazrui's assertion that the Sudan is characterized by multiple marginalities. See Mazrui, "The Multiple Marginalities of the Sudan," *Violence and Thought* (London: Longman's, Green and Co. Ltd., 1969).

[2] See Mohamed Omer Beshir, *The Southern Sudan: Background to Conflict* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 115-18; Muddathir Abd Al-Rahim, *Imperialism in the Sudan* 1899-1956 (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 244-49; and Dunstan M. Wai, ed., *The Southern Sudan: The Problem of National Integration* (London: Frank Cass, 1973), 175-79.

[3] Cromer to Salisbury, 22 February 1900, P.R.O. FP/633/6. Quoted in Abd Al-Rahim, *Imperialism*, 72.

[4] Richard Hill, "Government and Christian Missionaries in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1899-1914." *Middle Eastern Studies* 1(January 1965): 125.

[5] Hill, 114.

[6] Beshir, *Educational Development in the Sudan 1898-1956* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 237.

[7] This fact was recognized in the Addis Ababa Agreement, Chapter III, Section 6.

[8] J.W. Robertson, Memorandum on Southern Policy, 16 December 1946, CS/SCR/I.C.I., in *Background to Conflict*, 120-1.

[9] Joseph Oduho and William Deng, *The Problem of the Southern Sudan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 38.

[10] Helen Kitchen, ed., *The Educated African* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 69.

[11] Mazrui, 167.

[12] Francis M. Deng, *Dynamics of Identification: A Basis for National Intergration* (Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1973), 74.

[13] Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*, trans. Diarmid Cammell (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976), 156.

[14] Wai, p. 146.

[15] Philip Abbas, "Growth of Black Political Consciousness in North Sudan," *Africa Today* 20 (Summer 1973): 266.

[16] Richard P. Stevens, "The 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement and the Sudan's Afro-Arab Policy," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 14 (June 1976): 252.

[17] Abd Al-Rahim, "Arabism, Africanism and Self Identification in the Sudan," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 8 (July 1970): 249.

[18] In August 1994, after capturing and handing over to the French authorities the notorious terrorist, Carlos the Jackal, the Sudanese officials appealed to the U.S. to take Sudan off the blacklist. So far, the U.S. government has not obliged. See *Time*, 29 August 1994, 54.

[19] Raymond Bonner, "Letter from the Sudan," *The New Yorker*, 13 July 1992, 73.

[20] Stevens, 266.