



# Sudan Studies

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Front cover photograph: *Coffee Pots in a song, Sudan* (Credit: Imogen Thurbon).

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## Sudanese Political Parties: The (Elusive) Quest for a National Project<sup>1</sup>

**Ali Abdelatif M. Hussein\***

There is little doubt about the human cost of this war. It is estimated that so far no fewer than 5.3 million people have been dispossessed because of the fighting: four million people have been displaced inside Sudan and about one million are now refugees or asylum seekers in neighbouring countries.

The sudden outbreak of the fighting and the fact that the theatre of conflict is centred in Khartoum, the capital city and the most densely populated area of the country, has amplified the suffering and human cost of this war. Whole areas of the city, and therefore families, have been cut off from services that were essential to their wellbeing for months.

Soon after the start of the fighting markets and shops were shut down. The most impactful and tragic consequence of the crisis has been the systematic disruption of health facilities, either because it is unsafe for staff to operate or



*Ali Abdelatif (right), Peter Woodward (centre) and Dr Abdelsalam Sidahmed (left) in discussion at the SSSUK Symposium, September 2023 (Credit: Charlotte Martin).*

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a talk given by the author at the SSSUK Annual Symposium on 16<sup>th</sup> September 2023 at SOAS, London.

through the deliberate targeting of these facilities by the warring parties.

We are at a point now where death amongst civilians is more likely to be the result of not being able to access health care and services than as a direct result of the fighting. In addition we are witnessing the return of genocidal mass killing in Darfur. So the scale of the human tragedy is unimaginable.

There is also great damage being inflicted on the economic wellbeing of the country. Dr Ibrahim Al Badawi, the ex-finance minister of Sudan, made a study that concluded that the country's capital stock sustained a \$50 billion reduction in Khartoum alone. At the same time a conservative estimate suggests that Sudan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been reduced by 20%. This means that in the first five months of the war the GDP shrank by about \$7 billion, bringing it down to \$29 billion per annum. If this war continues and runs its natural course, (which is estimated at between 15 and 20 years) it is quite credible that Sudan will lose between \$195 billion and \$2.2 trillion of potential economic growth.<sup>2</sup>

Given the loss of life, the suffering and the economic damage, it is the right moral position to demand a stop to this war, which has been described by both protagonists at different points as 'senseless' and, 'a war in which no one is a winner'.<sup>3</sup>

We hope that the peace initiatives undertaken by the international community will succeed and we will see an end to the fighting.

In 2023 for the third time the International Community seriously engaged with the ongoing Sudanese crisis. The repeated cycle of peace deals and transitions to democracy followed by military coups and dictatorships suggests that there's something amiss in the country's body-politic. There is a countervailing force that militates against establishing a national political project which could unite all Sudanese people behind a common goal. This aspect of Sudanese political culture is being extensively discussed and pored over.

There is a broad consensus that the process of state and nation building in Sudan has been held back for over a century by the progressive 'racialization of the state'.<sup>4</sup> Nothing better illustrates this racialization than the two most

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<sup>2</sup> The information here is gleaned from an interview given by Dr Al Badawi citing an unpublished study he has made about the financial cost of the war. Saad Alkabl Podcast, Streamed on 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2023; Dr Ibrahim Albadawi: A Live Interview, YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1jh6-hjqYg&t=1010s>.

<sup>3</sup> Afatih Gabra, 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2023, Title: *Damn You All!* (تبا لكم!), Facebook article in Arabic, <https://www.facebook.com/alfatihgabra>

<sup>4</sup> Amir Idris 2005, 'Slavery, Colonialism and State Formation in the Sudan', in A. H. Idris (ed.), *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 23-41.

earth-shattering events of Sudanese political life of the last two decades. The first is the secession and subsequent independence of South Sudan. The second, is the recurring genocide in Darfur. Looking at the on-going course of this war it is easy to see how it could metastasize into an all-out ethnic conflagration engulfing the entire country.

This running sore of ethnic friction and violence issuing from Sudan can no longer be described as mere ‘mismanagement of diversity’.<sup>5</sup> There is an unmissable pattern here. Successive regimes have invested in racializing inherent differences of phenotype, language and lifestyle so as to mask and entrench the interests of dominant elites.

This tactic of setting ethnic groups against each other worked effectively when the South was portrayed as the ‘enemy within’.<sup>6</sup> This trope acquired potency from mainlining deep-seated prejudices and enmities rooted in both Christian and Muslim traditions. However, when the Islamist regime turned its attention to Darfur, the mobilizing tropes of holy war were ineffective. Darfur is one of the ancient Muslim communities of Africa. So the regime turned instead to recruiting local militias along ethnic lines and framing the economic disparities of material wealth between agriculturalists and pastoralists as an issue of ‘African’ versus ‘Arab’ tribes.

What the regime did in Darfur initiated a chain of events that has led directly to this war. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF), one of the warring parties, was the militia that fought the Darfuri armed resistance movements on behalf of the regime and committed genocide in the process. The impact of the December revolution has shaken loose old alliances and created new ones, thereby ushering in the RSF as a new political player in the centre of power, motivated by ambition and fear of accountability in equal measure.

Despite the heavy toll exacted by this war on our confidence in the future, it is imperative to remain hopeful and open to new possibilities.

There are two experiences that occurred during the still stirring popular revolution that shed light on why there is cause for optimism about the future of civilian rule and democracy in Sudan. Both indicate the extent of possible changes engendered by the experiences of struggle against the dictatorial National Congress Party (NCP) regime.

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Deng Mading 2018. ‘Preventing Mass Atrocities in Africa: The Case of the Two Sudans’, T. Karbo and K. Virk (eds), *The Palgrave Book of Peacebuilding in Africa*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 103-118.

<sup>6</sup> During the resistance war in the South 1983-2005, there was an army-sponsored propaganda programme on state TV called ‘The Fields of Sacrifice’ which often labelled SPLA combatants as Khawarij: intended to mean ‘outsiders inside the national body’.



Firstly, the experience of the two-month long sit-in that launched the revolution. This became a living experiment attesting to the values that the revolutionary youths were fighting for. For the time it lasted, the sit-in community acted out the slogans of the revolution, 'Freedom, Peace and Justice'. People often describe the community of the sit-in as offering a glimpse of what a future Sudan could be.

Secondly, whilst the Jeddah peace process seems to lack progress, there have been several unpublicised and informal 'cessations of hostilities' agreements negotiated between the warring parties by civil society organisations, traditional leaders, and the Resistance Committees which are still holding on in the North, South and East Darfur States.

These events provide enough evidence to show that this is a war imposed on the population from above and that most Sudanese see it as solely serving the interests of those who started it and continue to fan its flames.

The strongest repudiation of this war comes from the Revolutionary Committees who from the first days of the outbreak of violence have organised themselves with ingenuity and dedication into volunteers' emergency rooms in the capital's neighbourhoods and in other places. They took on the task of humanitarian relief by operating makeshift ambulances, establishing new medical supply routes to hospitals and ferrying doctors and medical staff to where they are needed. They are the true heroes of this war.

Hope of what is possible is still alive within the hearts of the young who led the revolution to victory in its first wave in December 2019, in a second wave in June 2020, and again in a third wave that forced the 25<sup>th</sup> October *coup d'état* into retreat. We are now at a juncture that offers an unparalleled opportunity not only of stopping the war but possibly of opening the way for a lasting settlement. This requires a new departure and a new beginning.

It is true that all previous political settlements and transitions have produced distorted and unintended outcomes, if not outright failures. The focus has always been on the diagnosis of the problem and the standard course of treatment, but never on the capacity of the therapist (the political actors in this case), to administer the experimental treatment prescribed.

Peace agreements always failed because of the deadly sins of non-compacted peaceful settlement and democratic transition. There are two main points here:

Firstly, non-compacted peaceful settlement inevitably results in a power grab as the emphasis is put on who governs rather than how the country should be governed. Power-sharing and wealth-sharing are prioritised over state and nation building and peace above justice and accountability.

Secondly, democracy can only be built by those who genuinely believe in it



and practice it. Transition to democracy is a national project recognising that everyone has a stake in it because of its empowering potential for ordinary people.

Mass mobilisation in support of the transition to democracy is crucial. This is not about the size of crowds but about the moral force of the argument for democracy when it is expressed by a mass movement. That moral high ground can never be achieved by winning through political scheming and deal-making alone. State and nation building projects are compacts that are forged with the people in broad daylight after all the scheming and deal-making is done, not before. This is the only antidote to the countervailing forces mentioned earlier that fuel ethnic strife and violence. The success of the political process is in the gift of a public who trust in it and imbue it with their engagement and participation; without this no democratic transition is possible.

The mistake, universally acknowledged by the civilian forces as undermining the entire transition in 2019-21 but that went uncorrected at the time, was to start with a government and not an assembly. Therefore, to my mind, the route to a successful transition is to turn that sequence on its head. Begin with an assembly and not a government.

A national assembly along the lines suggested in both the original Constitutional Document and the Framework Agreement,<sup>7</sup> should include representatives of major pro-democracy political movements, civil society organisations, Resistance Committees, women and youth. This should be the first order of business in any future political process. One of the first tasks of such an assembly must be to embed Resistance Committees at the basic level of local government, so as to ensure that democracy is built on a foundation of popular participation by those who fought to bring about this change and who are therefore the most capable of defending it.

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<sup>7</sup> The Constitutional Document is the 'Sudan constitutional Declaration', August 2019, <http://tinyurl.com/yo5gy2fz>. The Framework Agreement is 'The Political Framework Agreement' proposed by the Lawyers' Union and a draft of which was initially agreed by the army and the civilian actors as the basis of a new settlement to end the military's seizure of power and return the country to civilian rule and the path to democratic transition. The war broke out in the morning of 15<sup>th</sup> April, before the final workshop session to agree arrangements for the Security Sector Reforms <https://tinyurl.com/ys9yx236>.



## *Sudan Studies*

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It is helpful to have some relevant details about the author (2-3 lines), e.g. any post held or time spent in the Sudan and interest in the topic being discussed.

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