‘DISCOVERING THE SOUTH’: SUDANESE DILEMMAS FOR ISLAM IN AFRICA

ABDELWAHAB EL-AFFENDI

The resurgence experienced by the radical Sudanese Islamist group, the National Islamic Front (NIF), a resurgence which, since September 1985 appeared to have a direct correlation with the civil war in the South, poses some important questions about the interaction between ‘Africanism’1 and political Islam. The way this apparent conflict is resolved is likely to have significant implications for the future development of political systems in Africa.

In a sense, the dynamics of this conflict are not unfamiliar. Although Islam seeped into most of Africa slowly, and interacted with indigenous institutions over centuries in the context of a largely peaceful process, there were nevertheless points when the dynamics of the process led to conflict. The jihad movement of Shehu Osumanu dan Fodio and the Mahdist uprising in Sudan are two of the more prominent examples.2 These movements were based on the awareness of a discrepancy between the actual content of the Islamic message and the habitual practices of African populations who were to a large extent only nominally Muslim. The movements then interacted with local forces to give a new shape to Islamic observance. But there is also a sense in which the current conflict in Sudan presents novel features. For the Islamic advance in Sudan is not a one-sided process representing the locomotive carrying forward the development of a given culture in the face of the retreating vestiges of an earlier one. What we are witnessing is the clash of two antagonistic cultural outlooks, both of which are experiencing a revival. The introduction of Western culture as a dynamic external factor, offering both a paradigm and material and cultural backing to the anti-Islamic forces is a new development. Although not completely absent from earlier phases of Islamic ‘revival’ alluded to, the Western factor is important precisely because it is working in conjunction with well-developed internal forces.

There is also a sense in which the present clash in Sudan was inevitable. The much-maligned British ‘Southern policy’ adopted by the imperial

The author was a graduate student at the University of Reading and is currently doing research at St. Antony’s College, Oxford.

1. I prefer this term to the more common ‘Pan-Africanism’ to denote the emphasis laid by some African intellectuals and political leaders on a distinctive identity. Cf. Colin Legum, Pan-Africanism, (Pall Mall Press, London, 1965).
government (especially between 1930 and 1945) aimed not at creating a non-Islamic culture, but an anti-Islamic one. The objective of stemming the tide of Islamic expansion, the philosophy behind the policy and the attitude of the missionaries and some officials all meant that hostility to Islam became the very basis on which the new cultural edifice was to develop. This led to an opposite if not equal reaction from Muslim northerners, who responded to the anti-Islamic bias of the policy by reaffirming the value of Islam. Thus we find the only point on which the largely secularist Sudanese nationalist movement expressed Islamic viewpoints was the issue of the South. In the first memorandum sent by the Graduates’ Congress when it emerged in 1938, the question of Arabic and Islamic education in the South and hostility to the Christian missionary activities there figured prominently.

The emergence of the ‘South’

It is interesting then to note that the ‘South’ as a political concept emerged in terms of opposition to the ‘Muslim and Arab’ North. The rising nationalist movement was in its early stages Northern-based and Arab-oriented. The intelligentsia was possessed by a fear of being absorbed into non-Arab Africa, and looked to Egypt to save Sudan from such a fate. But they also exhibited a romantic attachment to the South, ‘the lost brother’ snatched away by the aliens, and long due back. The perception of the ‘South’ in nationalist circles had little to do with the actual South, since few of the nationalist leaders had direct experience of the region. Nevertheless, there was a general feeling of a need to make up for lost time by spreading the ‘national’ (Arab-Islamic) culture in the South as a basis for unity. This conception presupposed that the South would act as an inert mass, waiting to be reshaped anew, a view that was not challenged at the time, because political consciousness in the South did not arise or acquire an independent existence up to the early 1950s. Even for the ‘southerners’ themselves, their self-definition as they emerged onto the political arena was purely negative. A southerner was primarily a non-northerner. Even when southern ‘nationalism’ witnessed an upsurge in the 1960s, the first pan-southern organization which emerged to embody this consciousness found no appellation more suitable to adopt than the Sudanese African Closed Districts National Union (SACDNU). Thus the ‘South’ came to be defined as that area which was declared ‘closed’ by the Condominium authorities according to a 1922 statute empowering the government so to

5. See, for example, the Graduate Congress memorandum of April 1939 in Beshir, Educational Development in the Sudan, p. 152.
designate certain areas. But the southern identity started to be more sharply defined after independence in the conflict that ensued with the new Sudanese state. More and more 'southerners' started to emphasize their non-Arab identity, leading to a similar tendency in the north to emphasize Sudan's Muslim and Arab heritage. There remained an important distinction for southerners, however, between Arabism and Islam, since some of those who supported the rebel cause were Muslims, but identified themselves as Africans. Later, however, southern nationalism came to be based on hatred 'for everything connected with the [north]', and this included Islam.

**Islam and the South**

The emergence of a specifically Islamist modern movement in the Sudan was not uninfluenced by the emerging north-south conflict. The first leader of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*), Ali Talb-Allah, was influenced by the romantic vision which coloured the view of early nationalists towards the south. Originally belonging to the pro-Egyptian Ashiqqa Party, he campaigned vigorously for north-south unity in the run-up to the 1947 Juba Conference, and even married a southern woman to emphasize his commitment to unity. His successors were not so keen on the issue, and their attention was more attracted to events in the north, or across the border in Egypt. In the few instances when they expressed views on the matter, they were opposed to southern demands for a federal system, arguing that the system was harmful to southern interests, and could lead to collapse or secession.

The two groups, the southerners, represented by the Federal and Liberal parties, and the Islamists, represented by the *Ikhwan* and the Islamic Front for the Constitution (IFC) (which *Ikhwan* formed with other minor groups), nevertheless suffered comparable marginalization in the political field, symbolized by the rejection by the Constitutional Commission in the course of 1957 of both the proposal for an Islamic state and the southern demand for a federal system. The political elite regarded both views as extreme, although there was no evidence at the time of a direct clash between the two demands.

The military regime of General Ibrahim Abboud, which displaced the parliamentary system in 1958, was equally unsympathetic to both groups. But it did pursue a policy of Arabization and Islamization in the south to counter rising opposition there, and also made moves to curb Christian

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8. Interview with Yassin al-Imam, *Ikhwan* leader since the 1950s and former close associate of Talb Allah, Omdurman, 17 December 1987.
missionary activities. The fact that a regime criticised by the Islamists and even the general public as irreligious should pursue such vigorous Islamization policies in the south is testimony to the paradoxical impact the north-south conflict had on Sudanese political life, creating the only area in which the generally secularist political and military elite accepted the merits of Islamization.

The Islamists were not impressed, however. When the junta decided to open a debate on the ‘Southern Question’ in 1964, Dr Hassan Turabi, a prominent Ikhwan leader, was forthright in his criticism of government policy. In an intervention which helped spark the uprising that toppled the military regime, Turabi asserted during a public debate at Khartoum University on 9 September 1964 that the ‘Southern problem’ was in essence a constitutional problem. It was the loss of freedoms by people in both north and south which created tension. Certain additional factors caused the conflict in the South to degenerate into armed conflict, but the only solution was to end military rule and restore democracy.

With hindsight, some Ikhwan commentators have said that the policies of the military regime were beneficial to southern Muslims, for many mosques were built and education was brought within reach of Muslims who earlier boycotted mission schools and thus enjoyed no education. Indeed the military regime had probably hoped to mobilize support in the north as it was conscious that its policies of Arabization enjoyed wide support there. However, the refusal of the Islamists to co-operate delivered a significant blow to such hopes.

This stance contributed to the downfall of the military regime and also caused Turabi to emerge as the undisputed leader of the Ikhwan. In addition it increased awareness among the Islamists of the problem of the south. In the ‘Islamic Charter’ issued by the movement in 1964 as the basis of the newly-established party, the Islamic Charter Front (ICF), the Islamists dropped earlier conditions that the head of state be a Muslim, and accepted the principle of non-religiously based citizenship. They also advocated political equality and economic justice for minorities. On the problem of the South specifically, the Charter said the issues should be resolved on the basis of decentralization in a way acceptable to the South.

The ICF participated in the Round Table Conference held in March 1965 to discuss the problem of the South, where Turabi played a leading role in

formulating the northern response to southern demands. But although Turabi played a prominent role in the conference, and in the Committee of Twelve chosen to follow up the issue, the movement as a whole does not seem to have attained a sufficient grasp of the issues involved. The ICF set of proposals to the Committee of Twelve was rejected out of hand, because members judged that it was no more than a continuation of the status quo. This led the ICF to support the set of proposals put forward by the National Unionist Party (NUP).16

The New Forces Congress

As a marginal party with only seven seats in parliament, the ICF remained an opposition group during the Umma-NUP coalition government set up after the April 1965 elections. However, given the religious legitimation of the major political groups, the tiny ICF retained influence disproportionate to its size; this was because of their capacity to put pressure on the leaders of the sectarian parties through their constituencies by demanding reforms in the name of Islam which it was impossible for them to reject. This was already evident in the 1950s. When the Constitutional Commission rejected the idea of the Islamic state in 1957, the Islamists led a campaign which forced the religious patrons of the two major parties in the government to issue a communique supporting the Islamic constitution. The opposition was also quick to affirm its commitment to work to reverse the resolution in parliament.17 In 1965, the ICF spearheaded agitation which forced parliament to ban the Communist Party and expel its MPs after anti-Islamic remarks attributed to a Communist student.

When a split within the Umma Party brought Sadiq al-Mahdi to the premiership in July 1966, the ICF supported the government which adopted some Islamization measures. The ICF influence also increased with the formation of the National Committee for the Constitution in 1966. Through the legal skills of its leader, Dr Turabi (a law graduate of the Sorbonne and the University of London) who dominated the Technical Committee, and through exerting public pressure on the two major parties, the ICF managed to push many Islamic measures through the committee. Inter and intra-party squabbles soon toppled Sadiq al-Mahdi’s cabinet in May 1967. With that defeat, al-Mahdi and the groups supporting him formed a new parliamentary bloc, which called itself the New Forces Congress (NFC). The grouping comprised al-Mahdi’s faction of the

Umma Party, the Sudan African National Union (SANU), and the ICF. SANU (formerly SACDNU) was the main southern party.

The programme of the NFC emphasized determination to pass the constitution as soon as possible, to prevent the government from dissolving parliament and appropriating its legislative powers, to work for peace in the south, to address regional issues, and to hold elections in March 1968 at the latest, under parliament supervision. The grouping was interesting in that it allowed the Islamists and southerners to work together for common goals and get to know each other better. But the scope of co-operation was limited. SANU was more interested in regional autonomy and peace in the south, and only supported the speeding up of the promulgation of the constitution with this end in mind. Sadiq al-Mahdi wanted to pose as a symbol for the forces of modernization in the Sudan and thus as the heir to the ‘ancien regime’. The ICF wanted to see the constitution passed because it was the cornerstone of its drive towards the Islamic state in Sudan.

While co-operation continued, the allies did not always agree on what to do. SANU voted against most Islamic provisions put before the National Committee for the Constitution, but the ICF supported regional autonomy, and hoped to convince the southerners to accept the idea of an Islamic state in return. But as the constitution came for its second reading in parliament, tension between the allies mounted. Forty Christian MPs boycotted the second reading of the constitution in parliament in January 1968 in protest at its ‘dominant Islamic spirit’. Following the boycott, SANU leader William Deng called for the formation of a new committee to draft the constitution anew. Later in the month, southern MPs submitted a memorandum which called for the removal of all references to Islam from the draft constitution, the creation of a post of Vice-President who must be from the South, and granting the proposed regional assemblies the right to choose the regional governors. In spite of this, the constitution was passed in its second reading, by 168 votes. Ten Christian MPs, including Rev Philip Ghabboush and Luigi Adwok, voted in favour.

After lengthy negotiations, an agreement was reached with southern MPs which stipulated certain amendments to the original draft constitution. The provisos that the state must respect Christianity and not object to the use of English language in the South were added to the relevant clauses. The southerners also wanted the phrase on promoting ties of Muslim brotherhood with other Muslim countries omitted. The northern delegates, with the exception of Turabi, accepted this. However, the demand to remove references to Shari'a (Islamic) law from the constitution was

rejected. At least twelve southern MPs rejected this compromise and boycotted parliament.\textsuperscript{22}

In February, the Christian MPs again presented new conditions. They objected to the clause banning communism and to another calling for cooperation with Muslim states.\textsuperscript{23} This inaugurated a new phase in which southern MPs identified themselves as 'Christian', and signalled the emergence of a broad secularist coalition including left-wing groups and southerners. But all these manoeuvres became academic with the dissolution of parliament in February 1968. The murder of SANU leader William Deng in May 1968, and Sadiq al-Mahdi's proposal to bring the Communist Party into the NFC precipitated the disintegration of this rather precarious alliance.

When the constitutional debate was re-opened following the April 1968 elections, new elements were introduced. The reunited Democratic Unionist party (DUP), comprising the NUP and the quasi-secularist People's Democratic Party (backed by the influential Khatmiyya religious sect), was not now as committed to the Islamic constitution. So a new Constitutional Committee was formed, and was sent back to the drawing board again. The issue of a presidential versus a parliamentary system was discussed, and there was consensus that the former was better. The presidential system meant that one of the two major parties (Umma or DUP), must take power, as opposed to the perennial coalitions which followed indecisive elections. The Umma responded by reuniting itself in October. But it was clear that the South would have a decisive say in who should become president. The forces of the left could also be influential. The idea of a double ticket (with President and Vice-President running together) became attractive.\textsuperscript{24} A southern running mate could be a great boost to any ticket. The DUP was rumoured also to have promised the Communists that it would support lifting the ban on communism if its candidate was supported.\textsuperscript{25}

In all these machinations, the Islamic constitution appeared to have faded in the background. However, this was not the case. The Umma leader, al-Hadi al-Mahdi, was an adamant supporter of the Islamic constitution. DUP leader Ismael al-Azhari also favoured Islamization, although with less enthusiasm. In the final agreement reached between the two major parties shortly before the coup of 25 May 1969, the Islamic constitution was firmly supported, with the proviso that points of disagreement should be put to a referendum.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{22.} \textit{al-Mithaq al-Islami}, 30 January 1968. \\
\textsuperscript{23.} \textit{al-Mithaq al-Islami}, 4 February 1968. \\
\textsuperscript{25.} \textit{al-Adwa'} 16 March 1969. \\
\textsuperscript{26.} A. Y. Ahmad, 'Jabhat al-Mithaq', pp. 113–14.
The May Coup and After

The left-leaning May coup brought to power decisively anti-Islamist forces. But in spite of overtures to the South, the Anya-Nya rebels and their backers (including Israel) were not enthusiastic about a pro-Communist regime which sought a union with two radical Arab regimes, Egypt and Libya. For a while the Islamists, who were driven underground, were able to co-operate with southerners opposed to the regime. In 1972 the African National Front (ANF), representing the southern students at the University of Khartoum entered into a coalition with the Islamists and supporters of the banned Umma Party to prevent communists and their leftist allies winning seats in the student union elections.

This co-operation was short-lived though. The Addis Ababa agreement of March 1972 brought peace and the establishment of the Southern Region, and cast the May regime of General Gaafar Nimeiri in a more favourable light in the West, especially after his violent break with the communists the previous year. The southerners now actively supported Nimeiri, and in fact were the main prop of the regime when Ikhwan-led widespread demonstrations and strikes threatened to bring it down in August-September 1973. The Islamists and their allies were very suspicious about the Addis Ababa agreement, and were certain that it had secret clauses of an anti-Islamic character. This was demonstrated, they alleged, by the opposition to any Islamic provisions in the 1973 Permanent Constitution by southerners, and the way the regime duly obliged them.

After what some observers termed the 'stabilizing role' of the South manifested itself during the attempted coup of July 1976, when southern support was again important in propping up the regime, serious debate started among the Islamists about allowing the South to secede if that was necessary for the setting up of an Islamic state in Sudan. The debate had actually begun earlier than that, when a programme proposed by Ikhwan in 1974 for the formation of a broad Islamic organization grouping all major political parties in the Sudan appeared to exclude any southern participation. In fact the call for a united Muslim front was justified by Ikhwan because of the need to meet 'the new challenge of the South which demanded from the North unity in defence of its interests and its cultural identity against the [Christian] missionary, imperialist, racist monster'.

Ikhwan, which put forward this proposal to unite the major opposition groups (Umma, DUP and their own ICF) into a united organization based on Islam, were aware of the charge that 'any association based on Islam automatically excludes non-Muslim citizens. The most serious effects of

this would be to isolate southern leaders of note and to prevent the movement from attaining truly national stature'. This charge 'looks plausible at first hand', Ikhwan retorted. But it is clear that:

southerners have since independence joined national parties only through unnatural connections. As soon as they developed national consciousness, they proceeded to set up distinct regionally-based organizations except in rare cases. There is no doubt that in the new situation [following the Addis Ababa agreement] they have set their public life and constitutional framework apart from the North. It is unlikely that they could be absorbed in Northern parties. Even if our major parties were to shed their sectarian content and declare open secularism, national sensitivities are likely to persist for a while.

Thus it was not Islam which was impeding national integration. It was even hoped that Islam would become the basis of integration in a later phase:

In the long run we believe that Islam will not continue to be presented as a basis for Northern nationalism, especially since there are many southern Muslims who have not attained education or leadership positions yet, and that many southerners could come over to Islam, thus creating a basis of ideological and cultural unity with their brothers in the North.29

This line of thinking led to a tendency to disregard the South in short-term political calculations and hope in the long term to replace the Christian mission-educated elite there by a new Muslim one emerging from within the South. But this was a mere hope, and no active intervention was undertaken to speed up this process. In this period the discovery of the South for the Islamists had yet to come, and 'the South was completely outside our reckoning', as Turabi put it later.30 The extreme solution of separating the South was not adopted.

National reconciliation

The 'National Reconciliation' deal with Nimeiri which brought the opposition National Front (including Ikhwan) to government in 1977, only a year after its attempted coup, locked the Islamists in direct conflict with southerners for the first time. Southerners were suspicious of the Committee for the Revision of Laws (CRL), set up in April 1977 with a mandate to propose replacement of laws not conforming to Islamic Shari'a. When Turabi was appointed to the CRL in August shortly after his release from jail, concern in southern circles mounted. Information Minister

29. 'National Unity', pp. 331-40.
Bona Malwal led the campaign against the National Reconciliation deal and lost his job in the process. 

Malwal's opposition to the National Reconciliation process, and his nostalgic reminiscences of the earlier phases of the Nimeiri era and of the transitional government of the post-October 1964 era, reveal an interesting aspect of the north-south divide. The periods favoured by Malwal were those of radical regimes where popular representation was minimal. The failure of the Sudanese policy was precisely this: it was unable to devise a system that could satisfy the minority without disenfranchising the majority.

Up to 1983 the southerners and their allies in the regime managed to stall the work of the CRL, and the work of the Committee remained erratic. But the struggle continued on other fronts. The Islamists supported the Islamic African Centre, established in Khartoum by a group of Arab states in 1972, and attempted to use it to promote the cause of fusing African and Islamic identity, and thus present an alternative to Christian and Western based 'Africanism'. The institution was mainly educational and missionary, but was unique in Africa in this respect. In the early 1980s the Islamic Da'wa organization was established with the purpose of promoting the cause of Islam in Africa. It soon established the Islamic African Relief Agency to work in the humanitarian field in Africa. The reasoning behind these organizations was that Christian missionaries had used education and humanitarian aid to 'subvert' African Muslims, and it was therefore essential to give Africans an alternative which would not allow the missionaries to exploit African poverty and thus 'to impose' Christianity on Africans.

In 1982 work was carried a step further by establishing the Association of Muslims of Southern Sudan (AMSS) as an organization working towards the advance of southern Muslims. The organization, headed by a senior official in the Southern Ministry of Education, worked mainly in the fields of education, humanitarian aid and religious organization (such as building mosques and organizing religious festivals). But it was also vocal on political issues.

When the debate on redivision in the South flared up in 1981, it created new alignments in national and southern politics. The pro-division lobby of Equatorians sought and got the support of the Islamists for their cause. This created a new cordiality between Equatorians on the one hand, and Ikhwan and southern Muslim leaders on the other. An influx after 1979 of mainly Muslim Ugandan refugees connected with Amin's regime, and who were united in tribal origin with several Equatorian tribes, boosted the fortunes of southern Muslims slightly. However, when Nimeiri's Shari'a

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32. See Malwal, People and Power, pp. 87-8.
(Islamic laws) were suddenly declared in September 1983, southern opinion united in rejecting them, and the AMSS, which supported them, became isolated; the division lobby now sought mainly the exemption of the South from the new laws, and still maintained cordial relations with Ikhwan.

The Second Civil War, 1983–

Ikhwan's policy during this period centred on reviving the fortunes of southern Muslims and strengthening their position. Ikhwan also expressed concern about the moral and economic corruption which they said was rampant in the South. It was argued that endemic corruption and poor communications weakened the state and contributed to the near collapse of the system. The resulting discontent among unemployed youth could provide a fertile ground for the spread of communism. Northern traders were blamed for encouraging this corruption, and also for contributing to the destruction of the fabric of family life by indulging in promiscuity. There were calls for a vigorous promotion of Arabic and Islamic culture in the south and the provision of adequate support for the run-down national educational institutions in the region.

These remarks, written in early 1983, were apparently too late to avert the escalation they warned about. In the meantime, the situation of southern Muslims did not advance significantly, and the Muslims were distinguished by their absence from top posts in the Southern administration. The appointment of Ali Tamim Fartak as Commissioner of Bahr al-Ghazal province in 1979 faced stiff resistance from the Dinka majority there and he was soon replaced.

The appointment of General Gismalla Abdalla Rassas as interim President of the Southern Region in 1981 was tolerated precisely because the man had no power base and was not a politician. The deterioration in law and order which coincided with the worsening of the economic situation witnessed a number of deliberate attacks on southern Muslims. Mosques were attacked, and so were religious gatherings and festivals. The incidents were not widespread, but they were cause for concern.

As early as 1981 the deterioration of law and order was approaching a civil war situation. In early 1983 serious mutinies in southern garrisons occurred, and after Nimeiri's decision to re-divide the south into three regions in June 1983, it became a real civil war. Ikhwan supported the re-division. They also supported the introduction of Islamic laws in September 1983. The laws were initiated by Nimeiri himself, and although Ikhwan were initially willing to accept the exemption of the South and foreign diplomats from some provisions of these laws, especially those relating to drinking, Nimeiri's tough line on these two issues soon met with

34. Muhammad-Ahmad, al-Siyassa al-Ta'leemiyya, pp. 63–6.
their whole-hearted support. The laws proved unenforceable in the South, but they were valid there in principle.

The fact that the laws were not enforced in the South was of course due to the non-co-operation of the southern branches of the law enforcement agencies. But this behaviour was not unique in Sudan's modern history. The incorporation of the South into the political system had proved difficult ever since independence. Following the fall of the Nimeiri regime in April 1985, some radical southern politicians protested because those southern politicians who were pillars in the Nimeiri regime were allowed to go free, while others who were supposed to answer charges of corruption were not called to face them. The radicals wondered, therefore, if there were two standards of justice, one for the North and the other for the South. This 'immunity', however, only reflected the fact of the limited incorporation of the South into the Sudanese state. The central government was able to enforce its writ in the South only through the mediation of local politicians, and the legitimacy of its authority was recognized only through the consent of these figures. The state thus lacked direct legitimacy and also lacked the power to enforce its writ if the consent of local mediators was withdrawn. Needless to say, this turned some of these mediators into a law unto themselves, since law could only flow through them.

It is interesting to note that John Garang's Sudanese People Liberation Army (SPLA), which emerged as the dominant force among the assortment of rebel groups which roamed the countryside before 1983, is addressing this problem directly and appears set to achieve some success in resolving it. Garang's charismatic authority proved a unifying factor and a source of legitimacy for a new force that looks set to impose its hegemony on the South. If this movement succeeds in imposing control, it would be the first time since independence that the potential basis of a state has been established in the South. It has always seemed inevitable that the creation of a modern state out of the recalcitrant tribal structures in the South required the use of 'legitimate force'. In earlier attempts, however, actors lacked either the legitimacy, or the force, or both.

Garang hopes that with success in the South he will be able to extend his 'liberation' process north, but this looks unrealistic. Nevertheless, the civil war has transformed the South radically. In fact little of the 'South' of the last few decades is left today. With hundreds of thousands killed, over two million displaced (mainly to the north), and with the infrastructure destroyed, and traditional life-styles irretrievably disturbed, a radically novel situation had been brought about. The conditions for the establishment of a modern state may have been created, and the task of state builders made that much easier, albeit at a monstrously high cost in human terms. But also, the existence of the South as a 'barrier against Islam in Africa' has been seriously compromised. Close to two million 'southerners' have
taken residence in the North, and many have shown remarkable adaptability to the local culture. It is likely that many will not want to go back south, and this could have significant implications for the dynamics of north-south interaction. The direction this process could take will depend largely on political developments. For the time being, Christian organizations and Western relief agencies take care of some of the displaced and 'shield' them from direct interaction with the local culture. This is likely to preserve the special 'southern' identity of many refugees. However, the young generation is going to the local Arabic-language schools, and many have become indistinguishable from their northern class-mates.

The National Islamic Front counter-offensive

The north-south polarization took a distinctly Muslim-secularist over-tone towards the end of Nimeiri's rule; but the process had been taking shape slowly since the 1960s. In that period, the quasi-secular major parties did not take much notice of the South except when the behaviour of southern MPs affected the central balance of power, or when southern demands had to be balanced against Ikhwan pressure for Islamization. Their responses to the 'southern problem' were therefore ad hoc in nature, not to say blatantly opportunistic. The Islamists were the only group in the North (the Communists apart) which worked to shape a well-defined response to the issue, and thus managed to set the agenda for the north-south debate. This was frustrating for radical southern leaders who complained about the 'blackmail' the ICF exercised over northern parties.35

A similar situation recurred after 1977, when Ikhwan and southerners represented the only two groups with an independent power base within the regime. As Nimeiri tilted progressively towards Islam, his secularist advisors dared not oppose him, depending as they did on his authority for their positions and with no hope of securing mass support for an anti-Islamic stance. This was not the case with more radical southerners, like Bona Malwal, who were confident of support in their own constituencies for an overt secularist position. With the emergence of the SPLA and its adoption of a radical ideology, the broad secularist alliance, which existed in a tentative form in the 1960s, as we have seen, became a reality. And for the first time it appeared that the leadership of this alliance had moved south. The combination of pressure through civil war and trade union activism led to the intifada (uprising) which brought Nimeiri's regime down in April 1985 and looked set to establish the secularist alliance in power.

This was not to be, though. The refusal of the SPLA to put down arms and come to join its allies in Khartoum weakened the secularist position. Secularist hostility to the army, which maintained its cohesion during the

35. Malwal, People and Power, p. 108.
upheavals that brought Nimeiri down, meant that the secularists were caught up on the wrong side of the fence. The newly-formed National Islamic Front (NIF), backed by Ikhwan, made largely successful attempts to befriend the army, and its hardline position appealed to the junior officers who bore the brunt of the escalation of the civil war, and in turn put pressure on the generals to distance themselves from the secularists who refused to condemn the SPLA’s apparent slowness to negotiate. The NIF also won the support of sections of the Sudan Workers Trade Unions’ Federation, the farmers’ union and the teachers union, thus isolating the professional-based National Alliance for the Salvation of the Country (NASC), the main forum of the secularist forces. A series of scandals involving leading figures in the NASC weakened the latter even further, and cracks began to appear as the two major parties (Umma and DUP) started to distance themselves from the radicals as soon as they managed to reorganize themselves.

In September 1985, an incident of alleged treachery by SPLA soldiers claiming to be delivering a letter to the Prime Minister through the commander of the Nasir garrison (to which the rebels then laid siege), caused anger in the army and provided an occasion for the NIF to organize its first successful protest march. The failure of the NASC and the groups represented in it to prevent the march or limit support for it was a serious blow to the secularists. The NASC-supported cabinet banned the march and prevented the media from publicizing it, while all parties instructed their followers not to participate. Nevertheless, the NIF, with tacit army support, managed to organize the biggest rally held in post-Nimeiri Sudan up to that time. A coup attempt later in the month by Nuba and southern NCOs confirmed the worst fears of northerners about the possibility of attempts to impose southern minority hegemony by force. This further isolated the secularists and lent credibility to NIF propaganda.

From then on the NIF managed to establish itself as the carrier of the banner of ‘northern nationalism’, thus assuming a comparable role to that played by the SPLA in the South. In contrast to the opportunism and lack of vision of traditional politicians, both groups offered their constituents a clear and bold vision about how Sudan’s future should be shaped. It is also paradoxical that each group derived support from the existence and actions of the other. The threat to northern cultural identity posed by SPLA, including opposition to shari’a demands, swelled the ranks of the NIF, while fear of the rising power of the NIF drove groups threatened by it to seek a rapprochement with the SPLA, and also secured for the latter the support of foreign powers fearful of an Islamic takeover in Sudan. On the other hand, the NIF participation in government from July 1988 was brought to an abrupt end in March 1989 when the escalation of the civil war and the promise of peace held by a deal agreed between the SPLA and the DUP in November 1988 led the army and trade unions to press for an end to NIF
domination of the government. Furthermore, the NIF hardline position proved to have its limits, since it was not able to offer a solution to the problem of foreign economic dependence in the country. The cost of the civil war and the rehabilitation of Sudan's bankrupt economy required the continuance of foreign support which the NIF was unable to secure.

Conclusion

The polarization which brought all the inherent contradictions of the Sudanese polity into the open was in some aspects the manifestation of a general deterioration in the political, economic and social spheres which afflicted the country during the latter part of Nimeiri's rule. A despotic regime which stifled debate was not helpful for the flourishing of moderate groups. Both the southerners and the Islamists had at times sought to exercise influence through the agency of this despotic regime, and thus were under no pressure to work for a synthesis of diverse opinions in order to enhance their influence, as would have been the normal course in a genuine pluralistic society. The high level of tension in a rapidly evolving society in which traditional society was being ripped apart by ill-planned high rates of urbanization and skilled manpower attrition through massive migration to oil-rich Arab states, was not conducive to a peaceful synthesis where ideologies and identification symbols were judged 'on the basis of their own appeal'.

36 The experiment of regional autonomy in the South did not fulfil the expectations pinned on it, as the successive regional administrations came to be bogged down in corruption, inefficiency, interminable personal and tribal rivalry and serious friction with the centre.

But the polarization also reflected some positive developments. Southern nationalism was maturing and taking shape as peace offered education and national influence to an unprecedented number of southerners. The SPLA reflects a higher level of development of southern nationalism, which attempts to rise above tribal and regional parochialism (though with questionable success). The potential for a new-found oil wealth in the South also gave the southerners increased confidence and higher aspirations.

37 The NIF is also part of the wider phenomenon of Islamic revival, reflecting the rising influence and confidence of Muslims, and their attempts to give a positive expression to their identity. Thus it could be said that this dual polarization (north/south, Muslim/non-Muslim) represented at once the fragmentation and disintegration of Sudanese society, and the simultaneous reconstitution of this society along new axes reflecting the influence of new forces.


In both its positive and negative aspects, this polarization poses apparently insoluble problems. To arrest the general deterioration, peace and consensus are needed. However, in the present apparent hopelessness of the situation, forces which would have worked to cushion the demands of ideology by offering hopes of prosperity are not operative. This was no United States seducing the ‘citizen’ with its promise of the ‘American dream’ which could induce him to forget from where he came. At the same time, no satisfactory formula has emerged yet which could reconcile the demands of resurgent Islam and the inherently anti-Islamic southern regional self-consciousness. All the solutions which attempt to square this circle suffer, in addition, from the weakness of the mechanistic conception of the identity question on which they are based. Northerners have been trying in vain to fight against the ‘foreign’ influence of past ‘evil colonialist policies’ and ‘hypocritical European missionaries’, in their very attempt to create a positive relation with people who consider themselves not just products, but rightful heirs, of these ‘evil influences’. Similarly, the secularist forces since the Condominium have believed that the suppression of ‘extreme’ manifestations of Islam coupled with the encouragement of ‘moderates’ would cause the problem of political Islam to go away. A similar, if more vigorous, approach was adopted by Nimeiri’s regime between 1969 and 1977. After Nimeiri’s fall, secularists again called for the ‘isolation’ of the radical Islamists. Thus, both groups appeared to be wishing for the disappearance of the other, instead of seeking dialogue or accommodation with it.

This approach was in turn beset by contradictions, as secularists, including the SPLA, saw no inconsistency in declaring that the ‘fundamentalist’ position was not ‘truly’ Islamic, as if they were rejecting this position in favour of a more truly Islamic one. All this adds to the confusion, for it portrays the debate as one which tries to determine what is truly Islamic and what is not, an inaccuracy which does not help the secularist cause. The secularist forces increasingly recognize that, in the present Sudanese society, they cannot gain mass support for their vision, and they have also discovered that they have not the muscle to enforce it. That is what makes the SPLA so significant. But the SPLA’s influence on the political arena has been mainly negative, and has been compared to that of the South African-supported Renamo rebels in Mozambique, who only managed to prove that a poor African state could be brought to its knees by any group of well-armed rebels. The SPLA is of course somewhat different, for at least in the context of the South it represents a genuine nationalist force, although

38. These terms were used by the then prime minister Sir El Khatim Khalifa in his address to the March 1965 Round Table Conference on the Southern problem (Beshir, The Southern Sudan, p. 169).
40. I am indebted to Dr M. Ibrahim al-Shoush for bringing this point of comparison to my attention.
its insistence on imposing its vision by force is in itself an admission that its national appeal is limited. In a recent intervention in London, SPLA's leader John Garang seemed to admit as much when he remarked that in a future election he could hope to win all the seats of the South and some more from votes of 'southerners resident in Khartoum'. The SPLA's vision of a yet undefined 'Sudanese identity', if it excludes Islam, cannot offer serious competition to the latter as the basis of Sudanese culture. The isolation it implies from Sudan's Arab and Muslim surroundings does not hold any attraction for the Muslim majority. The current world wide Islamic resurgence is in fact a reflection of the fact that secularist visions, even those taking adequate note of Islam, have proved a poor substitute for the real thing. The SPLA's vision suffers from additional problems, stemming from its hostility to some of the most basic elements of political Islam such as solidarity with other Muslim communities, an aspect which is recognized by the most secularist of Muslims as the minimum tribute to be paid to the Islamic heritage.

This feature explains why the SPLA challenge has enhanced, rather than weakened, attachment to Islam in Sudan. Some southerners believe Islam was deployed specifically to retard southern advance within the national state, after other handicaps, such as lack of mastery or Arabic, were overcome by the latter. This view is not an accurate reflection of the truth, but it must be recognized that the threat posed by the SPLA has pushed many northern Sudanese to barricade themselves behind the shield of Islam. But here, still, the matter is much more complicated than a mere conflict of material interests. Nevertheless, the 'use' of Islam to buttress northern Sudanese nationalism would be rejected by purists like Sayyid Abul A'la al-Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb, who have maintained that Islam would be diminished by such exploitation. But it remains true that such employment of Islam was not uncommon in early Islamic history nor in Africa. Islam has worked to enhance Arab identity, and has become the basis of identity for whole communities in Africa, where it helped the anti-colonial struggle as well as state formation.

However, the close association between Islam and northern Sudanese nationalism would certainly rob Islam of an advantage in the short term. While the NIF has made a point of enlisting southern Muslims to dispel the image of being a vehicle for northern interests, it remains beset by problems similar to those that limited the appeal of the SPLA's Africanism. Northern Sudanese, who identify strongly with their Arab heritage, are in

42. It should be recalled that the Southern bloc raised the fiercest objections to phrases in the 1968 draft constitution advocating co-operation with Muslim countries, and also maintained strong opposition to rapprochement with Arab states. Even the most militantly secularist groups and regimes in the Muslim world pay homage to the idea of inter-Islamic co-operation.
no danger of being seduced by Africanism. Far from being inclined to sing with Césaire ‘hurray for those who never conquered anything’, their poets have long boasted about ‘our many exploits in Spain which showed the Franks who they really were’. But, equally, Islamic ideology is, by definition, unacceptable to non-Muslims. Its association with Arab northern self-assertion makes it even more unpalatable to southerners.

The Islamists’ acceptance of the institution of the national state without corresponding modifications in their ideology has introduced insoluble contradictions into their thinking. This was exhibited in a document entitled ‘The Sudan Charter’, which was produced by the NIF in 1987 and claimed to be the basis for a new, pluralistic Sudanese polity. The document basically aims to accommodate non-Muslim demands for full citizenship without sacrificing the hegemony of shari’a, through proposals for a decentralized legal system where non-Muslim regions could opt out of the central Islamically-based laws. (Some southern radicals had earlier proposed the reverse as a solution: the choice for predominantly Muslim regions to opt out of a central secular system). These proposals were incorporated into the alternative set of laws which were presented to the Constituent Assembly for a third reading in March 1989, but were withdrawn by the new government to abide by the conditions of the November SPLA-DUP deal. Southern politicians who were not SPLA sympathizers accepted this solution, with the proviso that the National Capital region also be exempted from Islamic laws, and sufficient guarantees for non-Muslims be incorporated in the system. However, the SPLA has consistently and adamantly rejected the idea of such a compromise, insisting that it would not enter into negotiations ‘to determine the best possible outcome of second class citizenship’. But, unless the NIF vision gains the approval of influential southern sectors, it could not claim to offer a solution to the problem. And there is little chance, given the self-identification of the present southern elite, that this vision could be accepted voluntarily by southerners.

It is thus unlikely, in the given circumstances, that the conflicting demands of the two major camps could eventually be satisfied within one state. The emergence of the shari’a laws as a key issue in the dispute only hides deeper divisions that predate and will survive the issue. Illusions that a strong authoritarian modernizing regime could enforce national homogeneity in the long run must now be abandoned in the light of the emerging realities about such entities in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and the Soviet Muslim republics. But the likely break-up of the Sudanese state could have far-reaching implications for the fragile state system in Africa, and for Islamic ideology and practice. However, the greatest loss would be the destruction of that charming, unique, fairytale-like oasis of human warmth which survived almost outside

time in that space which Ali Mazrui once referred to as Sudan’s ‘multiple marginality’.

But a multi-state solution may be the only way to preserve what is left of that once much-loved oasis, and could be the only substitute to an illusory ‘united country’, like the costly fictions of Lebanon or Cyprus.

Arnold Toynbee had earlier remarked that Sudan, a microcosm of Africa, ‘holds Africa’s destiny... in her hands’. It is a heavy burden the modestly educated, inexperienced first generation Sudanese nationalists neither sought nor were equipped to shoulder. Their successors are much bolder (not to say reckless) and are more forthcoming with grand designs. One day, they may hear about the virtue of modesty.