

Exclusion and Conflict: The case of the Sudan

Sudan has been at war with itself for most of its independent life. The conflict has strong ethnic and religious overtones. As both cause and consequence of conflict, the country also has an abysmal record on human development indicators, despite considerable natural resources, a relatively small population and access to considerable external resources except for the first 8 years of the current regime that came to power in June 1989.

In late 2002, UNDP started the process for preparing a National Human Development Report, under the theme of Post Conflict Sudan: The Roots of Conflict and the Challenge of Peace-Sustaining Human Development.¹ The Sudan NHDR, which was to be released in 2004, ahead of the peace agreement, will now see the light of the day at the same time as the creation of the Government of National Unity in 2005. By underscoring “exclusion” as a root cause of conflict it can hopefully help the unified government to come to grips with this politically contentious issue by informing broad based discussions on conflict prevention, social inclusion and equitable development.

The Colonial Legacy

The Sudan NHDR adopts a historical perspective, going back to the period before the advent of the first colonial incursion by Turco-Egyptian forces in 1821. The incursion marked the beginning of modern Sudan, as we know it to day. The colonial power, subordinated a number of independent kingdoms in the North, Nuba Mountains and parts of the South proper, under a single polity. This process derailed a potential process by which either the existing multitude of kingdoms would have developed into a number of modern nation states, or through a process of fission and fusion, led to the creation of one or a few more inclusive polities. The colonial intrusion replaced a system of governance where the governed and the elites shared the same culture, within which the authority had assumed a certain level of legitimacy, by one where an external entity was ruling over the populace by sheer force of weapons and an assumption of cultural superiority. The authority did not, however, have any legitimacy and the governed did not have any loyalty to it. This gulf between the governed and the governors has persisted to this day.

The colonial rulers were interested in exploiting Sudan’s resources, with the most lucrative commodities, being slaves and ivory at the time. The expansion of slave raiding into the South and Nuba Mountains led to depletion of population in these areas and left behind social scars that would take centuries to heal. The fact that the slave trading spared the Black Darfurians, due to their Islamic faith and that the perpetrators were supported by a so-called Moslem power, gave rise to a cleavage between the Northern Sudanese, who were seen as more in tune with the colonial power and the South

¹ The report was prepared by an independent team of Sudanese researchers. The study adopted a largely historical approach in its analytical part. This was done in order to avoid disagreements that can easily emerge about choices in a fractured society, if one starts with an analysis of the current state of affairs, without first having an agreed understanding of the factors that have led to the situation

Sudanese. The fact that the most important slave traders were expatriates was lost to most people.

The Mahdist State that replaced the Turco-Egyptian colonial administration dismantled the native administration, formed of pre-existing power centres that had been beaten into submission and were considered collaborators, and replaced it with an administration run by commanders of the national army. These commanders did not enjoy local legitimacy and in many cases committed excesses, thus laying the foundation for the overthrow of the Mahdist regime and the reconquest of Sudan by the Anglo-Egyptian forces in 1899.

This new period of colonial rule, though marked by a move to ban slavery, was actually more instrumental in bringing about a structural malformation in the Sudanese economy and polity. The British colonial masters were interested in developing Sudan into a major source of cotton for the Lancashire mills. They achieved this through importation of West African labour, supplemented by seasonal Sudanese labour which was provided by the Sudanese farmers and pastoralists, who had to engage in paid employment in order to have sufficient cash to pay the capitation tax imposed by the colonialists. They were thus not forced to introduce any technological innovations into the Sudanese subsistence agricultural sector, in order to free labour for work on the schemes. The focus on primary exports meant that there were no backward and forward linkages between the irrigated schemes and the rest of the economy, by which modern practices would have spread and a national market created. At the same time, they provided protection for expatriate traders who appropriated the bulk of profits that resulted from the limited exchange of commodities entered into by the Sudanese producers. Hence there was no growth of an indigenous capitalist class, who would be investing its profits in setting up local industry.

On the political front, the Anglo-Egyptian condominium sat about recreating Sudan's tribal structure by reestablishing the native administration system, as opposed to promoting greater intermixing of groups in the interest of developing a sense of a shared national identity. The refashioned local elite owed its very existence to foreign patronage and thus later on developed into a comprador bourgeoisie, identifying more with the colonial master than with its own kin.

The closed districts ordinance that severely limited the interaction of Northern Sudanese and other outsiders, including West African migrant workers, with the South, Darfur and Nuba Mountains actually constrained any interaction amongst these groups. The focus of attention in terms of agricultural schemes in the North, around which economic and social infrastructure was created, exacerbated differences by essentially limiting the modern sector to the North. Different educational systems emerged in the North and the South, with the former based on a public system that culminated at the tertiary level with a small number of students reaching Gordon College, which was part of the University of London system and later became the University of Khartoum. This system was supposed to produce the educated cadre needed to run a modern government and business machinery. The system in the South was essentially composed of a number of missionary schools at primary level that aimed at facilitating the access of new converts to the scriptures and enabling them to in turn engage in proselytizing. Hence, when Sudan

achieved independence in 1956, there were very few Southerners with the requisite technical qualifications for participating in the process of Sudanization of the civil service at senior levels. The development of political forces was also stifled in the South due to lack of contact with the outside world and the complete absence of an organized trade union movement as the few modern activities that brought large numbers of workers together, such as the railways and the Gezira Scheme were concentrated in the North.

The fact that Sudan was run under a condominium arrangement as opposed to a direct colony, meant that the colonial power did not leave behind a solid local administrative structure, which could continue functioning once the colonial authority was gone. The colonial period thus initiated the institutionalization of “exclusion” in governance arrangements and socio-economic development, which was further entrenched under subsequent regimes.

The nature of the post independence State

Sudan has now been an independent state for just under fifty years and during this period could have ideally dealt with the colonial heritage constructively by reducing centre periphery differentials and addressing the exclusion of most national groups from the corridors of power. In actual fact, militarized governance and a civil war that has raged for most of the period have meant that the Sudanese nation state not only frittered away this chance but further exacerbated religious, cultural, ethnic and tribal cleavages.

At independence, essentially the northern riverain elite replaced the colonial rulers and projected its own Arab and Islamic origins as national traits. The top echelons of civil service were occupied almost exclusively by members of the Northern elite, as they were the only ones with the stipulated technical expertise. Thus the exclusion of Southerners from the formal educational system ended up sealing their exclusion from political and administrative power. Hence the association of ethnicity and religion with entrenched socio-economic disparities. This reinforced the feeling of marginalization of Southern elites, who initiated a civil war on the eve of independence.

The link of the two main northern political parties, Umma and DUP, with Islamic sects and the cult of personality that surrounds their leaders, led to the politics of patronage hence excluding people outside an inner circle from political power, whether Moslem or not. This has led to a far more widespread feeling of marginalization by the majority of the Sudanese, whether of Arab or African extraction and irrespective of systems of belief, than most outsiders are aware of.

There was a brief period when a more inclusive polity could develop during the first half of the Numeiry regime, with its socialist and secular agenda. That agenda, however, was not translated into action for solving the problems of inequities in socio-economic development and cultural cleavages amongst the many different peoples inhabiting this vast country. It rather remained at the level of rhetoric. With the makeover of the Numeiry regime as an Islamist one in the early 1980s, even the rhetoric has changed, with the Islamist agenda becoming ever more forcefully present. With the end of the cold

war and popularity of concepts such as clash of civilizations, the Islamic colours worn by successive governments in Khartoum and the importance of the Church in the South, the civil war has been projected as a religious one.

Post independence Sudan failed to adapt traditional structures, such as native administration, to modern democratic norms. The elites were dismissive of what were considered outdated relics of the colonial past and wanted to super impose on them a badly conceived centralized governance structure, with a lopsided so called parliamentary democracy, thanks to an electoral college system that unduly favours the urban elites. At the same time in a contradictory move, prompted by a desire to minimize the impact of the war on the urban population, many of the so called national governments have actually ended up promoting tribalism through their policies of arming pauperized and disaffected tribes and using them as surrogate forces in the South, the transition areas and lately in Darfur.

National governments, after having initially excluded Southerners from senior administrative positions on the claim of adopting a merit based system, proceeded to undermine the very foundations of that system by infesting the civil service with nepotism, thus excluding people not associated with the powers of the day from top positions. Hence the perceptions of exclusion became ever more generalized and lost any trapping of a rationale as the marginalized groups witnessed the recruitment and promotion of cadres simply based on group association rather than merit. A golden opportunity for dealing with the deep sense of exclusion through an effective affirmative action programme was thus frittered away, at the same time as undermining a merit based system.

The national governments also inherited ingrained gender biases, dating back to the colonial period, when women lost much of the independence that they had enjoyed in many of the pre-existing local kingdoms, some of which were run by Queens. While women formally got the right to be elected to parliament in the early 1960s and joined different parts of the civil service, they continued to be treated as second class citizens, in line with patriarchal interpretations of Sudanese and Islamic belief systems. Parties to conflicts have used gender based sexual violence as a weapon in their efforts to clear areas of presumed enemies. The marginalization of women has deprived society of a viable and tested means of local conflict resolution and thus further aggravated tribal cleavages.

The militarized governance that has characterized most of post independence Sudan has stifled the emergence of a developmental state, and retained and even reinforced weak linkages between the governed and the authorities that characterized the colonial period. Political power been monopolized by what has come to be known as a nest of 1000 families, which has been buttressed by and in turn reinforced a small commercial elite that controls all economic activities, where trade plays an important role, and is engaged in rapacious surplus extraction. This elite would then invest the surplus thus extracted either in luxury activities in country or sent abroad, thus stifling the development of

domestic economic activities to absorb the increasing numbers of rural populace being driven to poverty by the urban bias of government interventions.

The colonial government had recognized customary rights of most tribes to the areas that they normally cultivate or use as pasture and also maintained traditional systems of conflict resolution in cases of conflicts between different groups over access to the same land. They only expropriated some prime land in Eastern Sudan and also in the areas around the river Nile, where large scale irrigated farming was propagated. This led to the immiserization of the Beja tribe, who have been engaged in intermittent conflict with the authorities ever since.

However, the post independence governments propagated land insecurity by taking over land for mechanized agricultural schemes and granting preference to farming over pastoral activities as a matter of general policy in cases of conflict over the use of the same land. They further undermined the native administration structure, which had traditionally adjudicated conflicts over access to land and water resources. The governments also reduced public support for rural water supply, and failed to control natural degradation of resource availability due to changing climatic conditions, combined with increasing population pressure on the land. At the same time, they actually contributed to the decline through misguided implementation of the mechanized farming system, that led to mining of prime land and drove more and more of the rural population to cutting down the remaining forests for fuel wood, as opposed to using plants from pasturelands.

The anti pastoral bias of post independence governments and neglect of traditional agriculture, which led to increasing pauperization of large segments of the rural population, has further exacerbated conflict and spread it throughout the country. Now, almost the entire pastoral belt is conflict ridden, though some of it is of a secondary nature. The resultant disintegration of rural production has led to substantial population movement to urban areas and been translated into widespread urban poverty.

The unresponsive governance system and continued exclusionary politics was allowed to continue thanks to cold war conditions and the strategic position of Sudan, which meant that successive military and partially democratic governments had access to external support to the tune of billions of dollars. This support only dried up in the early 1990s, with the emergence of Sudan as a Pariah state due to its overly Islamic tone, support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and implication in an assassination attempt against President Mubarak of Egypt.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The first civil war from 1955 to 1972 was mainly confined to the South and was largely based on issues of identity and differential levels of development as the two mutually reinforcing causes of conflict. The second war, starting in 1983 spread into the transitional areas, Darfur and the East, and added to the generalized insecurity of tenure and increasing competition over natural resources combined with a breakdown of

traditional local conflict resolution mechanisms. Hence, what started out as a North-South conflict, for which the colonial power had major responsibility due to the differential development processes it set in motion in the North and South, was transformed, thanks to militarized governance in the post independence period, into a contest between a centre formed around a small belt close to the Nile and a periphery to which almost the entire hinterland of the country belongs, irrespective of tribe, ethnic origin or religious affiliation.

The recently concluded peace agreement between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) offers hope for a new beginning based on principles of equity and social justice. However the details, particularly on the shape of the interim governments that would be in place until such time as elections are held, are a cause for concern. Many observers have characterized the recent agreement as a compact between two entrenched centres of power, which will use the agreement to cement their respective positions within the areas over which they claim hegemony, rather than build a truly inclusive polity.

Many civil society actors from both sides of the main political divide have thus been pushing for much greater attention to democracy and respect for and protection of human rights in a post conflict Sudan. The above analysis of the historical genesis of the current conflict also argues in favour of the critical importance of a genuine representative democracy and socially inclusive development for the success of peace. The form of democratic governance that would have the best chance of sustaining peace would have to be in tune with historical realities in the country, and likely include a revival of native administration and customary law, in an adapted form that pays due regard to democratic norms and human rights principles.

For such democratic governance to be sustainable, it needs to go beyond partisan interests and provide scope for the emergence of a developmental state, that redresses the urban bias of development, by focusing attention on the most deprived areas of the country, notably the South, the West, the East and the transition belt. Given the importance of identity and cultural issues as sources of conflict, the Sudanese state has to actually turn the cultural diversity of the country into strength by promoting cultural and linguistic pluralism.