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PS 219: Politics of Civil Wars

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Confronting Conflict in the Sudan

Geographically the largest state in Africa, the contemporary Republic of Sudan is a land of great geographic and human diversity. Though other states fall on the Saharan/sub-Saharan border, the Sudan has historically played a defining role in national relations between Arabs and Africans. The people of the Sudan have a rich, extensive history that incorporates everything from cultural, ethnic, and religious 'traditional' African tribes, to pre-Abraham paganism, to an ancient Jewish tribe of Judean-Israeli royal lineage – the *Kushites*, to whom some scholars contentiously point as an origin of the Beta Israel Ethiopian Jewry – to Islam and Christianity. The Nile River, well known for its advanced, highly successful ancient and biblical settlements, runs through the Sudan, and tales of the greatness of societies that once lived there continue to inspire scholars today. Despite its great diversity, superlative early history, and historical significance to the world polity and the religious polity, the contemporary Sudanese state is consistently plagued by persistent, intensive civil conflict and disaster; a plague with roots – at least to a minor extent – in the very diversity and history that could give the Sudan its greatness. Ethnically-tied culture wars and politically motivated wars have kept this weak, failing state on the brink of destruction for generations, with casualties and victims of genocides and strategic famines ranking in the millions. Countless efforts to end the bloodshed have failed, and the Sudan's instability threatens to trigger interstate wars. Understanding the roots and causes of the Sudan's conflicts and of the immense failure of treaties, agreements, and negotiations offers the only hope of finding any solution with the potential to endure.

The first step in understanding the situation in the Sudan is to understand the people, and this is best done by analyzing information representing demographics from early, broad historical accounts with more detailed modern-day records. While details and dates are disputed, scholars currently agree that the Sudan's earliest archaeologically traceable inhabitants lived in the Northern region of Sudan some 60,000 years ago, and that settled communities of hunter-gatherers and herders appeared in the Sudan some 10,000 years ago ("Sudan" 3). These traditions continue today in some parts of the country, and a person's status as a nomad or sedentary individual can determine his/her status in society. The continuation of these lifestyle trends in modern times is cited as a source of tension and economic disparity, where some Sudanese groups considered nomads have recently taken to armed militia practices against the sedentary population ("Janjaweed" 1). These militiamen, the Janjaweed, are a complex blend of African and Arab tribes, and no clear, unified definition of their identity currently exists; however, their motivation in becoming militant not only includes social, political, proprietary, and economic disparities, but also cultural and ethnic tension ("Janjaweed" 1; Prunier 97).

The complexities of the Janjaweed militia illustrate how contemporary societal identities and descriptors can play a bigger role in determining a Sudanese person's status – particularly Sudanese definitions of 'Arab' and 'African.' The roots of these contemporary definitions are so convoluted by the influence of time that any understanding only becomes possible with an analysis of historical information.

As far back in time as scholars and archaeologists trace documents describing the Sudan, its people have been described as having black skin. Historians and theologians often attribute the titles Kush (Kushites) and Nuba – or Nubia – (Nubians) to contemporary Sudan. Kush, Nuba, and Sudan all roughly translate to 'the land of the 'negroes' or dark-skinned people'.

Having biblical names such as Kush and Nuba suggests the presence of pre-Islamic Arabs in the Sudan- the *land of the blacks* (“Sudan” 3; Johnson 2) because of the Middle Eastern role in the formation of the Bible.¹ Continuing through to the Quranic era, Arabs and the Arabic language entered Saharan Sudan en masse and Christian influences reshaped sub-Saharan Sudan. While there is evidence for generations of intermarriage between Arabs and Africans, genealogical ties over the centuries have lost influence (Prunier 5). As Gérard Prunier explains, the population of the Sudan does identify as Arab and African, but these identities present great complexity:

some of the “Africans” have lost their language and adopted Arabic.... Racially, to use this politically obsolete term, the mix is as complicated as linguistically. In terms of skin colour [sic] everybody is black. But the various forms of Sudanese cultural racism distinguish “*zurug*” from “Arab”, even if the skin has the same colour [sic]. (4)

This information plays an extremely significant role when evaluating the definition of ‘Arab’ or ‘African,’ considering all native Sudanese are black, but may identify as either Arab or African, challenging Western definitions of the terms.

Having examined some of the social complexities of the Sudan, the next step in understanding the Sudan’s enduring conflicts is examining applicable political theory. States may have diversity and troubled histories, but that does not necessarily mean that a state will have persistent unrest. Certain factors must contribute to these tensions to perpetuate and

¹ Information on life before an Arab or Arab-ancestral presence in the Sudan is virtually non-existent, by the nature of ancient African tribes’ oral tradition; however, with the coming of ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, and others several centuries before the birth of Christianity, details of national wars were recorded and preserved. It is largely thanks to these war documents and remains from the era that scholars can definitively state that, even in the times of ancient Egyptian wars, the populace was dark-skinned (black) (Johnson 2-3, “Sudan” 3) despite its Saharan and Middle Eastern ties.

intensify problems into long-lasting civil wars. This is exactly what has happened in the Sudan, and there are various theories to explain why.

The first set of devices for theoretical analysis come from a sociopolitical perspective. In analyzing civil conflict by this means, Ted Robert Gurr contends that political action can have an *ethnic basis*. An ethnic group, Gurr says, is a people who “share a distinctive and enduring collective identity” based on commonalities and culture (5); however, he claims that not all ethnic groups take political action. Those groups that do take political action Gurr terms *ethnopolitical groups* – ethnic groups “whose ethnicity has political consequences resulting either in differential treatment of group members or in political action on behalf of group interests” (5). Ethnopolitical action is incentivized by communal consciousness of past suffering, a “fear of future losses,” and a hope for future gains (69) and is generally triggered by economic, political, and cultural discrimination (105-132). Ethnopolitical groups, he explains, may make simple demands on their larger community or government such as freedom of speech or freedom of religion without demanding a share in political power, but the more prevalent ethnopolitical groups are communal contenders – those who are seeking a share in power (17-18). Whether a group seeks a share in power or a degree of fairness without requesting power, many states consider ethnic minorities and ethnopolitical groups – particularly communal contenders – a threat to state control.

An important facet of all of Gurr’s sociopolitical terms is their relation to repression. Ethnic minority groups are regularly subjected to discrimination and repression on the grounds that they threaten the structure and culture of the state – there are countless historical records of this from around the world. However, despite its common use, Gurr points out that repression is a double-edged sword for states: “A government’s use of force against people... is likely to

inspire fear and caution on the short run, but in the longer run repression provokes resentment and enduring incentives to resist and retaliate” (127). This repression can ultimately strengthen the salience of a collective or ethnocultural identity, providing a more stable rallying-point for opposition to the state (Gurr 5-8, 66-69, 75, 229). Repressive measures generally fall into seven categories of intensity, he argues, with the severity increasing from I don’t think you need to list all of the steps – too wordy – especially because you shoot it down later as not being explanatory of Sudan “*conventional policing*” to “*emergency policing*” to “*counterinsurgency and accommodation*” to “*counterinsurgency*” to “*preemptive control*” to “*“dirty war”*” methods, all the way to “*genocide and politicide,*” and he notes that these actions “may be taken proactively by government, regardless of whether a group is in open conflict with a government” (128). This self-destructive, double-edged nature of repression illustrates the complex nature of relations between people and their states, and offers a strong explanation to the causes of some conflicts. However, this theory cannot explain the cyclical nature of conflicts such as the Sudan’s “multiple and recurring” (Johnson xiii-xiv) civil wars, even if political theorists consider the Second Sudanese Civil War an inseparable continuation of the First Sudanese Civil War, as many do. Gurr concedes this point, saying that the protracted nature of the Sudan’s wars “represents the worst possible outcome of negotiated settlements,” (207) and that conflicts in the Sudan “seem to be intractable unless and until one party or coalition wins a decisive victory” (282). While sociopolitical theory can explain the roots of a civil conflict, it fails to uncover the factors that have so significantly prolonged the Sudan’s struggle.

Gurr explains that the government’s abrogation of the treaty that settled Sudan’s 1955/(1963)-1972 civil war directly led to the civil war eleven years later, 1983-2005, but only explains that the president violated the original peace agreement under pressure from Islamists

(207). Why the president would knowingly reignite such intense turmoil for outside influences is a detail that Gurr leaves unanswered. This is where the second set of devices for theoretical analysis of the Sudan situation comes into play. The fact that the Sudan has maintained a high-ranking position on the *Failed States Index* for years supports sociology expert Ann Hironaka's analysis of protracted civil wars as results of "weak" states. The Sudan, Hironaka says, is an excellent example of a weak state. To her, the First Sudanese Civil War's ending treaty – the Addis Ababa agreement – was an exemplary agreement and showed great political strength by granting regional autonomy to the South and openly conceding "that Sudan should not be an Islamic republic" (71). The president's division of the South, against Addis Ababa's terms, and imposition of *sharia* Islamic law over the entire nation, including religious sects and ethnic minorities, was bowing to external influences from Islamic elders (Johnson 79-80; Gurr 207), which explicitly displays the Sudan's lack of "state autonomy" and state strength (Hironaka 70-72). The state, in this sense, is subordinate to outside actors, and lacks the institutional structure to maintain ideological independence: "Although frequently described as the result of [the president's] villainous breaking of promises to the people of southern Sudan, this example better illustrates the reliance on the sanction of powerful social elites that typifies the governments of weak states" (Hironaka 72). This failure of state autonomy certainly illustrates institutional and structural weakness, but this aspect of state weakness goes further.

A state's structural weakness is embedded in the entire world polity, which creates and perpetuates war-prone states by its enforcement of borders – even over unstable areas – and by its providing support for the recognized-state's sovereignty or by using a state's preexistent weakness to undermine a disfavored regime (Hironaka 63-65, 136; Gurr 34). International or foreign support for communal contenders, Gurr says, can "improve an ethnopolitical group's

cohesion and political mobilization, can cause protracted, bloody wars, and can even evolve into ‘proxy wars’” (88-89) – a point on which Hironaka and Gurr both agree. Despite the fact that state borders historically acted more as frontiers – shifting frequently – the modern system has stabilized state borders, largely as a defense mechanism to protect each state from spill-over effects of turmoil (Hironaka 2, Gurr 89-91). The maintenance of borders in this nature is partly the result of the effects of realizing state-sovereignty and “territorial integrity” since the Treaty of Westphalia (Mingst 18), but has evolved and grown to a point where “the international community has the power to create states out of unstable colonies, but [in the name of sovereignty] it has ignored more robust candidates that are secessionist regions, and conferred sovereign status on one rather than the other” (Hironaka 18).² While the south of Sudan temporarily enjoyed autonomy for 11 years between 1972 and 1983, dividing states to grant sovereignty to national, ethnic, religious, and other minorities is actively prevented as a measure against state fragmentation (Hironaka 18). This gives devout freedom-fighters no choice but to continue their battle indefinitely. Hironaka agrees that, theoretically, dividing or subdividing a state into manageable countries could offer a solution to their problems (18), such as is often suggested with Israel/Palestine, but says there is no such hope for most weak states, thanks to state and international structure.

² Of Note: While both the sociopolitical [Gurr] and geopolitical [Hironaka] analyses comment on the role of international influences on an unstable state, Gurr also comments on a different sort of *international spillover*. This alternative relation between civil conflict in a state and international events suggests that a civil war – particularly an ethnopolitical conflict – can inspire parallel civil wars in neighboring states with contagious examples of success, and can diffuse neighboring conflicts with examples of failure (Gurr 89). In the case of the Sudan’s conflicts, this is apparent in the parallel war in Ethiopia in the 1980s, which was inspired by south Sudan’s efforts, and even lent support in the war (Johnson 87-88). Other spillover is apparent more recently related to the ongoing conflict in Darfur – western Sudan. Cross-border attacks on civilian refugees, as well as other offenses, have occurred in at least two neighboring states: Chad and the Central African Republic (“War in Darfur” 9). In addition to these attacks directly constituting international spillover, they have also caused political tensions between the involved nations, and have notably raised explicit talk of war from Chad against the Sudan.

Falling to international influences and being constricted by the world polity are not the only signs of state weakness. Some scholars argue that “potent ethnic ties... lead ethnic groups to carry on a fight when other groups would surrender, despite hardship, casualties, and war weariness,” and this is the base cause for the bloodiest protracted wars such as in the Sudan (Hironaka 46). The theory of state weakness conversely posits that ethnicity is not the reason these conflicts endure and are so deadly. While she explains that ethnic conflict thrives in weak states, Hironaka suggests that the structure of a weak state fosters opposition groups which are commonly ethnic only by chance and out of convenience (47), relating to Gurr’s aforementioned analysis of repression. Beyond just these structural dilemmas, a weak state, by the nature of its weakness, is prone to atemporal conflict. The fact that a state is forced to stay as a single state, despite its people’s wishes certainly prolongs civil conflict, but some nations have the ability to squelch such threats. Even a strong state could be threatened by civil discord, but only the truly weak states lack the material resources to maintain control and institutional fortitude.

“Material resources” in the sense of state strength is a broad, somewhat ambiguous term. Perhaps the most significant application of this measure of state strength is in quantifying a state’s resources to control the borders. A strong state, even if threatened by institutional instability and weakness, would be able to restrict its borders – preventing external persons and supplies from supporting the state’s opposition. Without weapons and other supplies necessary to sustain civil conflict, the insurgency must end. Weak states, however, lack the ability – lack the manpower, vehicles, weapons, infrastructure, and even technology – to govern their borders, which allows a tenable flow of arms and supplies to insurgents, and enables the indefinite continuation of the war (Hironaka 42).

As a weak state and host of culture-wars, center of human rights violations, and home of various minorities in conflict, the Sudan has been an archetype of state instability and failure since its independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule in 1955/1956, if not before. At no clear point in time has the Sudan had reasonable material resources to control its borders or any other essential component of its statehood. The discrimination put in play by sects of the Arab Muslim majority has disenfranchised the population and strengthened communal ties amongst the repressed to the point of rebellion and civil war. While there is no clear, concise way to summarize the involved parties in each war, some generalizations can be made: the first civil war was primarily between northern black Arab Muslims and southern black African Christians over religious and political reasons. The second civil war – a continuation of the first civil war – was primarily between northern black Arab Muslims and southern black African Christians, though other southern and eastern groups joined the rebel forces, including those who practice traditional African religions, and was triggered by religious and tribal tensions and political tragedy. The current conflict in Darfur (درفر) – an offshoot of the second civil war – is primarily political with a great focus on economic and developmental disparities and virtually indistinguishable ethnic groups battling for land-rights and basic human rights, though tribal, religious, ethnic, and other hostilities have surfaced (“War in Darfur” 1; “First Sudanese Civil War”; “Second Sudanese Civil War”; Johnson).

All of these conflicts, including the war in Darfur, have brought various groups to arms against the government of Sudan, although many analyses of the Sudan’s current status ignore Darfuri resistance and rebellion and focus on the apparent one-sided genocide being perpetrated by the Janjaweed and the government against civilians (“War in Darfur” 1-14; De Waal). By fulfilling every level of repression, failing to establish and maintain state autonomy, failing to

manage material resources effectively, discriminating against minority populations, and failing to practice just and consistent politics – renegeing on treaties – the Sudan presents one of the strongest examples of weak, destructive, failing states since the Treaty of Westphalia and the birth of state sovereignty. Coming in at near the top of the *Failed States Index* – a guide to the states most likely to fail and collapse based on 12 factors³ – the Sudan offers a complex problem with no straightforward solution. Gurr and Hironaka agree, the Sudan’s conflicts are, as they currently stand, formidable and intractable. According to Hironaka, the world polity will not allow the division of a sovereign nation at the behest of a rebel movement – it will continue to perpetuate the conflict through limiting potential solutions and supplying needed materials for war. Gurr says that a solution could exist if one side draws a clear victory, but the rebels and government have been deadlocked for decades with no sign of positive change. The only hope, if a definitive victory is necessary, comes with completing the government campaign of genocide and politicide – wiping out its opponents. However, the international polity prevents this, also, thanks to human rights charters and interventionist campaigns.

Barring a division of the state – which arguably accomplishes nothing but allowing the conflict to be deemed ‘war’ without the ‘civil’ qualifier – or the erasing of opposition, current circumstances present no obvious solution. Treaties and negotiations have failed. Although the rebel forces fighting the second civil war negotiated a treaty in January 2005 (“Second Sudanese Civil War” 1), the Darfur conflict is an unresolved offshoot of the second civil war, and has yet to mediate successful negotiations, running the risk of triggering yet a *third* Sudanese civil war, since the Darfur conflict has not yet earned the title for itself.

³ In 2008, the Sudan scored 113.0 out of 120 possible points, ranking second in the world for the most likely state to fail. Ten points are possible in each of the following categories: demographic pressures (9.0), refugees and displaced persons (9.6), group grievance (10.0), human flight (8.8), uneven development (9.3), economy (7.3), delegitimization of state (10.0), public services (9.5), human rights (9.9), security apparatus (9.8), factionalized elites (9.9), and external intervention (9.9). *The Failed States Index 2008*

If Hironaka and Gurr are correct, those watching the Sudan and hoping for peace will have to wait for a worldwide political revolution until they see the conflict resolved – or at least paused. From this, few resolutions can be hypothesized with any potential to endure. With any luck, the *Foreign Policy* prediction that Sudan is on the brink of failure can come to fruition, and the collapsed government could be replaced by one with better potential to serve its people – be it a series of smaller national governments or a singular, democratic institution that accounts for voices left unheard by the current dictatorial regime. It is entirely possible that the government of Sudan could once again be overthrown in a junta or coup, or that the current leader, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, currently age 64, could pass away of natural causes and leave room for a successor observant of human rights and international law. Aside from full-blown revolution or successful genocide and politicicide, the Sudan may be doomed to continue its timeless battles indefinitely.

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