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Why Sudan? Ambiguous Identities Forge Persistent Conflict

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Ambiguous identities forge persistent conflict

By Laura N. Beny

Sudan is ambiguously included in both Africa and the Middle East. This dual orientation and the Middle East. This dual orientation has been a source of persistent conflict, in large part because successive post-independence governments have, while sometimes paying lip-service to multiculturalism, defined the state as exclusively Arab and Islamic. Virtually all of the ethnic groups that reside outside of what is commonly referred to as the “central riverain culture” (the so-called “Arab-Nubian core” of the Sudan) have been variously marginalized by the socioeconomic, cultural, and religious policies of successive governments, culminating with the most extreme policies of the current National Islamic Front government, which came to power via a military coup in 1989.

These policies, which have been biased toward the interests of the center, have threatened the existence of the peoples and cultures of the periphery. The non-Arab, often non-Muslim or only nominally Islamic peoples and cultures of the south, west, and east have been variously assaulted, either through direct state (or state supported private) violence or indirectly through neglect and attrition. The forms of direct and indirect assault have included imposition of the dominant culture (i.e., forced Islamization and Arabization), driving men out, intentional starvation, forced displacement and relocation, indoctrination, rape and other gendered assaults, aerial bombardment, enslavement, and
malign neglect. These assaults on human dignity have been most evident in southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains of the southwestern Sudan and, more recently, in Darfur, western Sudan.

While all this is occurring, Sudan is enjoying a growing geopolitical significance, which surged when it became an oil-exporting country in 1999. The newly oil-exporting Sudan is strategically located, culturally and geographically, to offer a window into the conflicts in the Horn of Africa and into the spread of radical Islam (or Islamism) in a vast region. It is an area long of interest because of its African and Arab combinations and tensions; its Muslim, Christian, indigenous religious interactions; its complex legal system (with religious, civil, and customary co-existing); its economic potential; and its dynamic of military-civilian conflicts. It is also a society with a complex civil society, a weak state, regional and political fragmentation, and fierce competition among sectarian, non-sectarian, religious, and secular political parties.

Furthermore, Sudanese society has never recovered from the diverse waves of colonialisms and foreign intrusions that have punctuated its history (Ottoman, Egyptian, Arab, and British) and dramatically bifurcated its land into “northern” and “southern.” Sudan is a fertile testing ground for numerous inquiries in the areas of colonialism, racism, economic and human exploitation, neocolonialism, human rights, rule of law, constitutionalism, the role of religion in the state, development, self-determination, state formation, human rights, and now, tragically, genocide.

That the warring parties of the North-South conflict achieved a peace settlement in 2005 does not render such study irrelevant as it relates to that particular conflict. Indeed, sustained peace and lasting reconciliation rest fundamentally upon the establishment of truth and justice, however they are administered.