Contributions in Black Studies
A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies

Volume 15 *Sudan's Predicament: Civil War, Displacement, & Ecological Degradation*

Article 5

1-1-1997

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Recommended Citation
Connell, Dan (1997) "Sudan: In the Eye of the African Storm," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 15, Article 5.
Available at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol15/iss1/5

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Dan Connell

SUDAN: IN THE EYE OF THE AFRICAN STORM

THROUGH BINOCULARS I can see clouds of reddish-brown dust billowing behind a Toyota pick-up racing across the burnt savannah—a Dashka .50-caliber machine gun is mounted on its back. Crouched around me are a dozen guerrillas armed with AK-47s, hand grenades and light machine guns. The mood is casual, but no one wants to give the enemy an easy target, so we stay low. It is a familiar scene, one I experienced dozens of times in the 1970s and 1980s after clandestinely crossing the border from Sudan to cover Eritrea's war for independence from Ethiopia. The difference now, in 1997, is that the guns point toward Khartoum and the fighters are not Eritrean.

The guerrillas are members of the Sudan Alliance Forces (SAF), one of several Sudanese groups with operational bases and training camps in western Eritrea. Their aim is to overthrow the government of the National Islamic Front (NIF), which came to power in Khartoum after a military coup in 1989. SAF leaders claim their forces killed or wounded dozens of government soldiers in cross-border raids in 1996. For its part, the Sudanese government last year announced death sentences for several high-ranking members of the armed forces in Port Sudan on charges of plotting a coup with the support of Eritrea. In January of this year, the fighting escalated sharply when the SAF and other anti-government forces launched coordinated attacks into Sudan along a 500-mile front from bases in Eritrea and Ethiopia, as opposition forces in the South also stepped up fighting. With the NIF regime confronting a threat to its very survival, the government declared a national emergency and issued a call for a full-scale mobilization.

This escalating confrontation—already enmeshed in a web of interlocking conflicts that stretches from Central Africa to the Middle East—has the potential at any moment to spark a larger regional war. As such, it is fast attracting the attention of outside powers whose growing involvement raises the stakes further. Sudanese opposition leaders claim that Khartoum is supporting Islamist forces in Egypt, Algeria, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya,

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Uganda, and as far west as the Gambia, Niger, and Senegal, as well as from Palestine, Lebanon, and elsewhere in the Middle East. The NIF also supports Christian "fundamentalists" in northern Uganda in reprisal for that country's aid to southern Sudanese opposition forces, and it is reportedly helping Hutu militias based in eastern Zaire for similar reasons.

The backing of Iran, Iraq, and an array of wealthy Islamists from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf states enables Khartoum to pursue these objectives, even as the country's civilian economy teeters on the brink of collapse. This has in turn galvanized Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda into an alliance to support efforts by Sudanese opposition groups to topple the regime. In late 1996, the U.S. announced it would channel what it termed "non-lethal military aid" to these three front-line states. Meanwhile, France, increasingly concerned at its loss of influence in the region, has maneuvered to gain advantage by quietly assisting the NIF. For its part, Egypt has sought to steer an independent course, fearing any outcome that further erodes its traditional influence in Sudan and jeopardizes its access to the Nile waters.

The crisis radiates out in concentric circles from the war in southern Sudan. Like all the former colonies along the southern edge of the Sahara, Sudan is ethnically divided between an Arab, mostly Muslim, North and an African South, populated mainly by Christians and practitioners of traditional religions. These fault lines lend themselves to but are not the cause of the conflict. The latest fighting in Sudan began in the early 1980s, after the northern-dominated government violated a 1972 regional autonomy agreement that had ended the first civil war (which began immediately after the country became independent in 1956). Khartoum reneged on the pact after confirming oil discoveries in the south. fighting resumed in 1983, when the military regime of Gen. Ja'afar al-Nimeiri decreed that henceforth the entire country would be governed under Islamic shari'a law. Though Nimeiri was overthrown in 1985 and a democratically-elected, civilian government was installed the following year, little changed. Under President Sadiq Al-Mahdi, the government initiated a dialogue with the SPLA and pledged to reconsider the imposition of shari'a law, but days before the negotiations were set to begin, Al-Mahdi was overthrown and the "peace process" was aborted.

The renewed civil war took a heavy toll on an already battered economy and wreaked havoc on the civilian population. Hundreds of thousands in the south were made homeless and famine became endemic. However, few people sought refuge outside Sudan's borders and access to the warfront for journalists was both difficult and dangerous. As a result of this isolation—and because no major powers were directly involved—the conflict remained largely hidden from public view. Despite ever-escalating military offensives, neither side appeared able to alter the balance of forces enough to gain a decisive advantage

over the other. All that changed after 1989, when the NIF seized power in Khartoum.

The new government first found support from Iran and then from Islamist patrons in other Gulf states. This enabled the NIF to make massive arms purchases from China and the former Soviet republics, which have become major suppliers of arms to anyone who can pay for them. Popular Defense Forces, modeled after Iran's Republican Guards, were mobilized to the warfront alongside regular forces. After backing Iraq in the Gulf War, the NIF also received stepped up military aid from Baghdad in the form of technical assistance and training, despite the continuing enmity between Iran and Iraq.

Meanwhile, the fall of the Soviet-backed Mengistu government in neighboring Ethiopia cost the SPLA its main rear base. In the early 1990s, Khartoum finally appeared poised for a military victory, but the NIF's support for Islamist groups operating in neighboring countries quickly put it on a collision course with these governments and once again changed the equation. Uganda now offered alternative access to the SPLA, and the new governments in Eritrea and Ethiopia upped the ante by supporting the SAF and other opposition groups.

In 1991, soon after Eritrea won its war for independence from Ethiopia, a Sudan-backed group called Eritrean Islamic Jihad (EIJ) began to launch raids from Sudan into the western part of Eritrea. Initially Eritrean officials termed it a minor irritant and did little to confront it directly. They refused to publicize the occasional incidents—ambushes, land mines and assassinations—carried out by EIJ, doing little to mobilize a military presence in the area. This changed at the end of 1994, after a raid in which Sudanese-backed Islamist militants, reportedly from several countries besides Eritrea, were captured or killed by Eritrean forces. Eritrea quickly broke relations with Sudan and announced its intention to support the opposition.

In 1995 and 1996, the Eritrean government, led by President Isaias Afwerki, hosted a series of high profile conferences in the Asmara capital that were attended by nearly all the Sudanese opposition groups. The broad coalition which emerged—the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—adopted a program that, among other things, called for the formation of a unitary, secular state in Sudan. It also recognized the right of the peoples of southern Sudan to self-determination. (The precise way in which this right would be exercised was not spelled out.) The main constituents of the NDA were the two largest traditional parties of northern Sudan, the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party (between periods of military rule, both of these parties have dominated Sudanese politics since independence), and the SPLA, led by Dr. John Garang, which has been waging war against the government in the southern third of the country since the early 1980s.

Several smaller opposition parties also joined, including the declining Sudan Communist Party, one of the oldest communist parties on the continent, and the Sudan Alliance Forces, a new player on the political scene.

By early 1996, the Ethiopians were again providing sanctuary, as well as training and heavy arms, for the SPLA. The scales were tipped for Ethiopia after Khartoum's alleged involvement in the June 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian president Hosni Mubaraq in Addis Ababa. The underlying motivation, however, was Khartoum's support for Islamist groups operating in southern Ethiopia and Somalia.

The SAF, launched in August 1995, appears to be the main armed threat to the Sudanese regime on the northern front; it also offers a direct political challenge to the traditional clan-based parties. The Beja Congress, an organization founded in the 1950s to represent an Islamic minority group that straddles the border between Eritrea and Sudan, also has armed units in the area, as does the SPLA under the name of the New Sudan Brigade. All three groups are engaged in cross-border combat along Sudan's eastern frontier.

The military strategy of the SAF and the other armed groups clustered in the NDA is to force the government into spreading its reserves in an increasingly elongated defense perimeter that weakens the center of the country to the point where a civilian uprising or a military coup, or some combination of the two, become viable. These allied opposition forces were in early 1997 prepositioning themselves for attempts to take control of the Roseires Dam and to cut the road and rail links from Port Sudan to the capital as a second phase in this strangulation campaign. For the time being, however, they were avoiding the capture of installations or large population centers that would force them into a defensive posture.

Meanwhile, an SPLA campaign in the south that got underway in mid-March near the Uganda border was targeted first at laying siege to, or even capturing, the critical city of Juba and then at connecting with SPLA forces in the Nuba Mountains. Opposition cadre of the Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance, another group now training military forces in western Eritrea, was also secretly organizing supporters in Darfur with the goal of opening a third front on Sudan's western border.

By March 1997, SAF leaders were giving the NIF regime a maximum life-span of 6-12 months before it collapsed. However, the growth of the SAF worries other opposition leaders, particularly those parties without significant military forces under their command, who see the emergence of a multi-ethnic armed force as a direct threat to their claim to represent the only viable alternative to the Islamist regime. From their standpoint, the longer the war continues and the more territory—and population—the SAF gains control over, the weaker the old political parties will be in a postwar transition. For this

reason, leaders of the Umma party of deposed president Sadiq al-Mahdi and the Democratic Unionist Party of Mohammed Osman Mirghani, who also chairs the NDA, are engaged in a flurry of diplomatic forays aimed at starting peace talks as soon as possible.

At the March NDA 1997 summit convened to begin discussions on a postwar transition program, Sadiq al-Mahdi tabled a proposal to return to the parliamentary system in place prior to the 1989 coup in a power-sharing agreement among the opposition groups that would leave the Umma party with the largest share, followed by the DUP. Despite the absence of both Dr. John Garang and the SAF's Abdel Aziz Khaled, this proposal was shelved until the next NDA meeting. However, the incident highlighted the fragility of the opposition alliance. Whether or not they are able to reach an agreement on specific postwar commitments, coupled with the question of where the SPLA situates itself in the debate, will determine the political viability of the coalition. The issue brings to the fore the simmering tensions between the traditional parties that have long-dominated Sudanese politics and the "New Sudan" forces of the SAF, the nascent SFDA, the Beja Congress, the Sudan National Party (from the Nuba Mountains), and, perhaps, the SPLA/SPLM, which has now to determine whether it wishes to remain identified principally as a regional military power or to transform itself into a national political party.

The SAF's multi-ethnic composition and its progressive political program distinguish it from the other parties in the Sudanese opposition. In one platoon based on the border, there were fighters from Equatoria, Kordofan, Darfur, Nyala, Kassala, Medani, and Khartoum. While most are defectors from the Sudanese army, the SAF also draws intellectuals, former communists, trade unionists and other civilians who are thoroughly disenchanted with both the NIF regime and the narrowly-based traditional parties. The SAF, like other left-oriented national liberation groups, has mass organizations of women, workers, and students. It trains its fighters in politics and history, as well as military strategy and tactics. "By the end of the day, you have not only a fighter, you have a politician," says SAF leader Abdel Aziz Khaled. "The problem of the Sudan is not the NIF," says the former Sudanese brigadier general. "It is the mentality of those who ruled this country from 1956 up to now. The NIF came out of the pockets of the traditional parties. We are not just fighting to defeat the regime, since we know it will go, we are building a new movement to have a modern state."

All this makes Egypt extremely anxious. Though the NIF has been closely identified with support for the Islamic Group, which has claimed responsibility for dozens of guerrilla attacks in Egypt and is believed widely to be behind the attempt on Mubaraq's life in Addis Ababa, Cairo has been slow to jump on the bandwagon to overthrow the Khartoum government. This is

because it cannot live with any of the potential outcomes of the NIF's demise, apart from the unlikely return to power of the traditional ruling families. other possibilities include the split of Sudan into two countries, North and South, or a descent into Somali-style chaos, with Islamists and various ethnic warlords carving out spheres of control. Finally, the NIF could be overthrown by a revolutionary regime that reorients the country away from Egypt and toward its African neighbors. All three scenarios involve an unacceptable loss of Egyptian influence, but Cairo's biggest worry is the potential loss of control of the Egypt's lifeblood—the headwaters of the Nile. Talk in Ethiopia of damming the Blue Nile has only exacerbated these fears, even as the Egyptians are considering a diversion of Nile waters into the northwestern desert to bring new areas under cultivation there. Under these circumstances, Cairo has been clinging to the possibility that it can either negotiate an agreement with the NIF that will remove Egypt as an Islamist target or that it can contain the Islamists within Egypt with no further damage. However, the high profile role that deposed Sudanese president Sadiq al-Mahdi has played in the opposition since escaping house arrest in Khartoum at the end of 1996, coupled with the changing military situation and a visit from Eritrean president Isaias Afwerki in early 1997, appears to be causing the Mubaraq government to re-evaluate this position.

Among Western countries, France is closest to Khartoum. In exchange for the 1994 extradition of "Carlos the Jackal," France is widely though to have provided Sudan with intelligence on SPLA positions. Sudanese opposition figures also claim France has provided various forms of technical assistance and military or police-related training to the NIF, and that it has brokered arrangements between Sudan and Zaire and Sudan and the Central African Republic to allow Sudanese forces to use their territories to launch surprise attacks against the SPLA. France, like Egypt, appears to be motivated in part by a hope that it can persuade the NIF to rein in Islamists threatening their interests in Algeria, if not within France itself. The French, however, are also worried by their loss of influence in the region, notably in Rwanda and potentially in Zaire. The Sudan is seen as a buffer against widening US influence in North Africa. Whatever its direct involvement with the NIF, France has rebuffed Sudanese opposition leaders, who claim they have been denied an audience to make their case in Paris.

Only time will tell how real is the developing challenge to the NIF. Much hinges on the viability of the Sudanese opposition—the first serious challenge to the rise of Islamist movements to emerge in this region since the Cold War. There are, however, a host of other questions on the table. Can a small core of former army officers and intellectuals—in the SAF or other new opposition groups—navigate their way through this political minefield to craft

an independent, progressive, secular Sudanese national movement? Can these new forces move to the forefront and take control of the NDA from the traditional political parties, which enjoy the backing from US and other outside forces? What level and kind of influence will the US have within this alliance? How will Iran react to a threat to its ally, the NIF? What will the Iraqis do in this odd political mix? Which way will Egypt move AS the conflict escalates? Finally, should the opposition succeed in ousting the NIF, would a stable, post-war Sudan be a building block in a powerful new regional alliance with Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, Rwanda and others that redraws the balance of power throughout the region?