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Sudan: Race and Religion in Civil War

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Abstract

This case study explores the background and bases for Sudan's two civil wars (1955-1972 and 1983-2005), which pitted the powerful Muslim Arabs in the North against the Christian and indigenous Black Africans of the South. The case study addresses four primary questions: What are the historical origins of the conflict in Sudan? How were domestic religious forces and identities involved? How important were international religious and political forces? What role did socioeconomic factors play? Along with its core text, this case study also includes a timeline of key events, a guide to relevant religious groups, political organizations, and nongovernmental organizations, and a list of recommended further readings.

About this Case Study

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INTRODUCTION

The two civil wars of Sudan (1955-1972 and 1983-2005) have been primarily understood as conflicts between the dominant Arab Muslim North and the less developed Christian and traditional African South. While religious affiliation served as a principal marker of national identity during the two civil wars, neither conflict can be understood exclusively as a religious conflict because the southern Sudanese were also concerned with political freedom, African identity, and economic opportunity. Indeed, religious issues came to the forefront in

1983 when President Gaafar Nimeiry decreed sharia to be national law; President Omar al-Bashir's Islamist policies have exacerbated the situation. Throughout the conflicts, both sides were fighting for access to the massive oil resources that are based in the South. This case study focuses on the dynamics of difference that caused and exacerbated the conflict prior to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, demonstrating that religious tensions were deeply embedded in overlapping historical, cultural, social, and economic grievances.



Al-Mogran Mosque, Khartoum

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Christianity, which spread to Sudan in the sixth century, supplanted the pharaonic tradition of worshipping a polytheistic canon of gods. In 540 CE, it is reported that a missionary sent by Byzantine Empress Theodora arrived in Nobatia and started preaching Christianity in and around Nubia. It is possible that the conversion process began even earlier, however, under the aegis of Coptic missionaries from Egypt in the fourth century. Regardless of the origin of missionary activity, by the sixth century, the Nubian kings accepted Monophysite Christianity and acknowledged the spiritual authority of the Coptic patriarch of Alexandria. A hierarchy of bishops was named by the Coptic patriarch and consecrated in Egypt to direct the Nubian church's activities. By the time of the spread of Islam in the late seventh century, Christianity was firmly established in local social and political institutions.

The initial process of Islamization in Sudan was, by and large, peaceful. Following several failed attempts at military conquest in the mid-seventh century, the Arab commander in Egypt concluded the first in a series of regularly renewed treaties with the rulers of northern Sudan that governed relations between the two peoples for more than six centuries. Conversion to Islam occurred over this long period of time through intermarriage and contact with Arab merchants and settlers.

After changing hands between a series of regional powers over the next several centuries, an Anglo-Egyptian agreement in 1899 restored Egyptian rule in Sudan as part of a condominium, or joint authority, exercised by Britain and Egypt. In the years leading up to this agreement, Christian missionary activity had increased, stemming from Pope Gregory XVI's establishment of the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Africa.

During the condominium period (1899-1953) of joint Egyptian-British influence, the North-South divide increased as development was focused mainly in the northern regions around the

Nile River. The northern and southern regions were merged into a single administrative region, without major consultation with Southerners who feared being subsumed by the political power of the larger North.

After the February 1953 agreement by the United Kingdom and Egypt to grant independence to Sudan by 1956, the internal tensions between North and South increased. As independence approached, it appeared that northern leaders were backing away from commitments to create a federal government that would give the South substantial autonomy; northern politicians in the Umma Party and the National Unionist Party argued that Sudan was an Islamic country and called for the development of an Islamic parliamentary republic based on sharia. While religious controversy increased the tension between North and South, the primary concern was the South's lack of regional autonomy. In 1955, the Equatoria Corps, a military unit composed of Southerners, mutinied. Although this insurgency was easily suppressed, survivors fled the towns and began a rather unorganized secessionist movement, which eventually led to the formation of a guerrilla army, known as Anyanya. Throughout the 1960s, the coup-ridden government of Sudan remained too unstable to decisively manage the secessionist movement in the South, which kept the status of the conflict largely static. In 1971, former army lieutenant Joseph Lagu organized disparate guerilla bands into his Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM), giving the separatist movement a unified command structure for the first time in the history of the war.

The war was deadly: over 17 years, a half million people, of which only 20 percent were considered armed combatants, were killed and hundreds of thousands more were displaced from their homes. In the 1960s, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) worked diligently to build trust with the two sides. Their efforts, coupled with Ni-

meiry's coming to power in Khartoum in 1969 and the Southerners' initial support of him, led to the Addis Ababa Agreement of March 1972 officially ending the conflict. In exchange for ending their armed uprising, Southerners were granted a single southern administrative region with explicitly defined powers. Unfortunately, the Addis Ababa Agreement failed to completely dispel all of the tensions between the North and South.

Following President Nimeiry's 1983 enactment of sharia as state

International attention focused on Sudan in the 1990s not just because of its appalling civil war but also because Osama bin Laden, leader of the global terrorist network Al-Qaeda, was a prominent resident. The Sudanese government forced him out in 1995 under pressure from the United States and Saudi Arabia. The Sudanese claimed bin Laden was there as a legitimate businessman, as he owned trading and construction companies, and built bridges and roads across the country, but most saw Sudan as a safe haven for terrorist training and other activities.²



Soccer fans attend a ceremony at the conclusion of the Referendum Cup in Yambio, in celebration of the conclusion of the referendum vote.

law, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), led by John Garang, rebelled against the central government and attempted to establish an independent Southern Sudan, initiating the Second Sudanese Civil War. The war continued even after Nimeiry was ousted in 1985 and a democratic government was elected. The SPLA refused to recognize the new government. In 1989, Omar al-Bashir overthrew the government through a bloodless coup. He favored continued Islamization and used religious propaganda to recruit military personnel, as the regular army was demoralized and under pressure from the SPLA. Under these conditions, the government formed the citizen-manned, quasi-military Popular Defense Forces, and the fighting became more intense. During the 22 years of the conflict, roughly 2.2 million civilians were killed and another four million were displaced.¹

Peace talks, begun in 2003, culminated with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed on January 9, 2005. According to the peace agreement, southern Sudan was to enjoy autonomy for six years, and after the expiration of that period, the people of southern Sudan would be able to vote in a referendum on independence. Moreover, sharia would not apply in the South during the interim period. Khartoum was to make every effort to ensure that the South found it in its interest to remain in greater Sudan at the end of the period, so oil revenues from

the South were to be evenly split between the North and South (although the entireties of northern oil revenues are directed to Khartoum).

In 2010, national elections were held that were generally deemed by international observers to be fraudulent. A year later, the new country of South Sudan was created when nearly 99 percent of the population voted for independence. In the months that followed, hundreds died as Khartoum and Juba (the capital of South Sudan) jostled for control of the central Abeyi area and other oil-rich lands, but South Sudan has been able to maintain its independence as of this writing despite various violent interethnic conflicts within its borders.

DOMESTIC FACTORS

While northern Sudan has traditionally been tied to Arab Muslim culture and benefited from higher rates of development, the South remains comparatively poorer and comprised mainly of Christian and indigenous African populations.

Religious identity was an important, but not the only, dividing line between the northern and southern regions during both Sudanese civil wars. Roughly 70 percent of Sudan's population (before the official secession of South Sudan) was Muslim, with up to 90 percent living in the North. Christians comprised five percent of the population, and 25 percent of Sudanese held traditional indigenous beliefs, particularly in the South.³ Most Christian Sudanese and adherents of local religious systems live in southern Sudan, although the major churches in Sudan today, the Roman Catholic and the Anglican, along with smaller Coptic, Greek, Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox communities, are centered in Khartoum.

While the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement officially ended the 17-year First Sudanese Civil War and granted a single southern administrative region, it neither fully addressed Southerners' concerns for autonomy nor underlying religious tensions. In these social and political conditions, President Nimeiry's enactment of sharia as state law in September 1983 sparked a second uprising. Despite the restoration of democracy in 1986, the SPLA refused to recognize the government's authority, and Nimeiry's laws

imposing sharia on the nation remained on the books, if not fully implemented. National sharia laws contributed directly to the polarization of North-South relations in several ways. First, they led to increased conversions to Christianity as Southerners (and others) sought to avoid being prosecuted by Islamic law. These laws also drove an increasing number of southern youths into the ranks of the SPLM as the war took on significance in national and African identity. Moreover, increased civil unrest paved the way for General Omar al-Bashir, with the backing of hardline Islamists, to take control of the government via a coup d'état against the elected regime. Under his leadership, the new military government suspended political parties and established the Revolutionary Command Council for National Salvation. Al-Bashir also sought to defeat the SPLA militarily and impose a severe Islamic legal code at the national level.



South Sudanese women in Juba participate in a day of prayer before the independence referendum vote.

The Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005) lasted 22 years until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed on January 9, 2005. Since the signing of the peace agreement, initiatives to encourage religious tolerance have been promoted by many within both the Islamic and Christian communities. The South Sudan Council of Churches, Muslim leaders, and the Inter-Religious Council are presently engaged in confidence-building efforts.

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INTERNATIONAL FACTORS

Since independence, and particularly since Omar al-Bashir assumed control over the government in 1989, Sudan has had a troubled relationship with much of the international community. Aggressive Islamization policies and support of rebel groups in Uganda, such as the Lord's Resistance Army, led the United States to support an ad-hoc alliance between Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia, known as the Front Line States, to check the growing regional influence of the National Islamic Front, the Islamist organization whose political wing, the National Congress Party, has dominated Sudanese politics under al-Bashir's party leadership.

The United States has listed Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism since 1993. The 2002 report by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom labeled Sudan as "the world's most violent abuser of the right to freedom of religion and belief" for a variety of reasons, including: permits for church-building are systematically refused in the North; Christian NGOs and other organizations are constantly harassed; and unaccompanied females (usually non-Arabs) can be accused of prostitution and treated accordingly. Since 1997, the United States has barred its citizens from doing business in Sudan.⁴

Following increased US pressure after the 1998 US embassy bombings in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi, as well as the new development of oil fields previously in rebel hands, the Sudanese government gradually began to moderate its positions. Until the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the international community condemned the violence of the Second Sudanese Civil War and provided support to end the conflict. Condemnation of government support for militias in the (western) Darfur conflict continues.

Attention to Sudan by the West is largely a result of the work of transnational church-based advocacy groups from the mid-1990s onwards. Organizations like Christian Solidarity International, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Samaritan's Purse,

Servant's Heart, and Safe Harbor International, played a significant role in shaping international awareness and understanding of the conflicts in Sudan, especially the suffering of the southern Sudanese people during the Second Civil War. A coalition of these actors lobbied successfully for sanctions on Sudan and had Sudan in mind when championing the US International Religious Freedom Act, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1998.

Catholic and Anglican bishops in Sudan have also been sponsored by American church networks to tour the United States and discuss the suffering of their parishioners. For example, Faith McDonnell, a conservative Episcopalian who serves as the director of Religious Liberty at the Institute on Religion and Democracy, has frequently hosted Sudanese Anglican bishops, including Bullen Dollie and Henry Riak, during their visits. Perhaps most well known is the Sudanese Catholic Bishop Macram Gassis of El Obeid, who established the Bishop Gassis Sudan Relief Fund in 1998 for the purpose of bringing food, clothing, shelter, and medical attention to his parishioners.

In the mid-1990s, Gassis connected with a number of lay religious circles in Washington, DC. As a result, he testified before the US Commission on International Religious Freedom and held meetings with senior administration officials and members of Congress. He has also frequently led Western religious leaders, human rights activists, and congressional staff members on pastoral trips to Sudan.

Another major link between Western advocacy groups and Sudan involved the issue of slavery. Here, religious freedom stalwarts and US Representatives Frank Wolf, Chris Smith, and Tom Tancredo joined Senator Sam Brownback to push for the Sudan Peace Act. Passed into law on October 21, 2002, the act condemned violations of human rights on all sides of the Second Sudanese Civil War, the government's human rights record, the slave trade, government use of militia and other forc-

es to support slaving, including enslavement and slave trading, and aerial bombardment of civilian targets. It also authorized the US government to spend \$100 million from 2003 to 2005 to assist the population in areas of Sudan outside Sudanese government control.

In addition to faith-based advocacy groups in the United States, international Christian ecumenical movements played a major role in ending the civil wars in Sudan. With respect to the end of the First Sudanese Civil War, the WCC and the AACC played a critical part in the peace process. Initially engaged in refugee relief, the AACC sent a goodwill mission to Sudan in 1966 to assess the situation and offer its services to facilitate a peace process. By 1970, the WCC began to advocate strongly that church leaders in Africa try to contribute to a political solution in Sudan. Finally, both organizations helped to moderate the secret peace talks that led to the Addis Ababa Agreement of March 1972.



Wadi-Halfa, Sudan

tive in Sudan. In 1973, it initiated and helped in the formation of the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC). In 1990, the WCC assisted in setting up peace talks between the mainstream SPLA led by John Garang and what emerged as a splinter faction known as the SPLA United led by Riak Machdour. Led by Rev. Dr. Samuel Kobia, these talks lasted for six months and were sponsored by the National Council of Churches of Kenya and the People for Peace of the Catholic Church in Kenya, with technical assistance given by Nairobi Peace Initiative-Africa. Although these talks did not unite the two parties, they did meet with limited success, such as securing the release of 600 prisoners of war who had been held by the two factions.

In 1995, the WCC initiated and helped to form the Sudan Ecumenical Forum (SEF), which served as a major framework through which Sudanese churches, led by the SCC and the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC), could coordinate with international ecumenical organizations to promote an end to the Second Civil War. Through the framework of the SEF, the Sudanese churches embarked on a peace process that helped pave the way for the eventual signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Indeed, the president of Southern Sudan, H. E. Salva Kiir, himself acknowledged that, were it not for the churches, the CPA could not have been signed at the time it was.

CONCLUSION

A chief cause of Sudan's civil wars is that historically there were two Sudans: an Arab, Muslim North and a distinctly African South. Although patched together during the colonial era, modern Sudan fell apart a year before independence, and spent the majority of its life at war internally. Although much of the fighting is about political autonomy and access to the South's rich oil resources, the fighting is also about ethnic and religious identity and what it means to be a fully enfranchised citizen. The implementation of sharia at the national level in the mid-1980s only made the differences more stark, resulting in one of the bloodiest wars of the twentieth century.

What makes this war somewhat unique is the focused attention of Western governments, propelled in part due to the ghastliness of the war but also by Christian churches and organizations interceding on behalf of the Christians in Sudan. For a variety of reasons, both sides agreed over a two-year period to the CPA, which took effect in 2005, and at this writing the new country of South Sudan remains in existence following a successful national referendum on independence in January 2011 despite interethnic conflicts and tensions with Sudan to the north.

KEY EVENTS



Soccer fans and players attend a ceremony at the conclusion of the Referendum Cup in Yambio.

1955 Equatoria Corps uprising in the South.

1956 Sudan formally gains independence.

1962 The first civil war begins and is led by the Anya Nya movement.

1972 Addis Ababa Agreement signed. The First Sudanese Civil War ends.

1983 President Numayri enacts sharia as state law; The Second Sudanese Civil War breaks out again in the South between government forces and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), led by John Garang.

1989 Omar al-Bashir takes control of the government

through a bloodless coup and suspends political parties. Al-Bashir allies himself with the National Islamic Front, which aimed to impose Islamic law throughout the country.

1993 John Paul II travels to Sudan and urges an end to the violence of the Second Sudanese Civil War. He also calls attention to the plight of Christians suffering in the South and stresses the importance of ending religious persecution in Sudan.

2005 Sudanese government and southern rebels sign the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The Second Sudanese Civil War ends.

2009 The International Criminal Court issues an arrest

*For a more exhaustive timeline, please see <http://bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14095300>

RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Islam

An estimated 70 percent of the Sudanese population is Muslim and Islam predominates in the North. While the Muslim population is almost entirely Sunni, several divisions are present. The most significant divisions are along the lines of the Sufi brotherhoods. Two of the more popular brotherhoods, the Ansar and the Khatmia, are associated with the opposition Umma and Democratic Unionist Parties, respectively.

Traditional African Religions

An estimated 25 percent of the Sudanese population holds traditional indigenous beliefs, often referred to as animism. Such beliefs are particularly prevalent in rural areas. Some people who hold traditional beliefs have been baptized but do not identify themselves as Christians, or they combine Christian and animist practices.

Christianity

The Roman Catholic Church

The Catholic Church in Sudan consists of two archdioceses (Khartoum and El Obeid) and nine dioceses. The Church claims to have approximately 6 million baptized followers in the country.

Sudan Catholic Bishops Regional Conference

<http://scbrc-secretariate.blogspot.com/>

The Sudan Catholic Bishops Regional Conference (SCBRC) is a consortium of eight dioceses—Archdiocese of Juba and the Dioceses of Malakal, Rumbek, Wau, Yei, Tombura/Yambio, Torit, and Nuba Mountains/El Obeid—established in 1997. Current projects focus on the main areas of justice and peace, education, and pastoral and development activities. They have headquarters in Nairobi and Juba. It replaced the previous organization of the Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference (SCBC), first established in 1976.

The Episcopal Church of the Sudan

<http://www.anglicancommunion.org/tour/province.cfm?ID=S6>

The Church Missionary Society began work in 1899 in Omdurman; Christianity spread rapidly among black Africans of the southern region. Until 1974, the Diocese of Sudan was part of the Jerusalem archbishopric. It reverted to the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Canterbury until the new province, consisting of four new dioceses, was established in 1976. The Church claims to have approximately 5 million members in Sudan.

Sudan Council of Churches

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/africa/republic-of-sudan/scc>

The Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) was founded in 1965 for the purpose of engaging churches and people of goodwill in advocacy for peace, justice, equality, and human rights in the Sudan, and to enable member churches to acquire relevant skills and resources for ministering in word and service to the Sudanese people in general, and the poor in particular, in multi-faith, multi-ethnic and conflict situations. In 1989, a related organization, the New Sudan Council of Churches, was formed in order to help people in southern Sudan. The two groups merged in 2007.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS



Sudan People's Liberation Army deploys South (United Nations Photo)

The National Congress

<http://www.ncpsudan.net/>

The National Congress is the official governing political party of Sudan. However, it serves mainly as a legal front for the National Islamic Front. The National Islamic Front was founded and led by Hassan al-Turabi in the 1960s. It has dominated politics in Sudan since the 1989 coup led by al-Bashir. It supports the maintenance of an Islamic state based on sharia. It is nominally led by President al-Bashir.

The Umma Party

<http://www.umma.org/umma/>

The National Umma Party is a secular Islamic centrist political party. It was formed in 1945 and was influential immediately following independence under the leadership of Sadiq al Mahdi. Today, there are five active political factions of the Umma Party and each claims political legitimacy.

The Democratic Unionist Party

<http://www.sudan.net/government.php#DUP>

The Democratic Unionist Party is the oldest political party in Sudan. Ismail al-Azhari, Sudan's first president, was a member of the party when it was known as the National Unionist Party. The party's main platform today favors the unity of Sudan and an end to North-South divisions.

Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement

<http://www.splmtoday.com/>

The Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and its political wing, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)—known collectively as Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M)—is a predominantly Christian Sudanese rebel movement-turned-political party. In 1989, it joined the main opposition group in Sudan, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). After the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, SPLA/M had representatives in the government of Sudan, and became the governing party of South Sudan upon the country's independence in 2011. It was led by John Garang until his death on July 30, 2005. Currently SPLA/M is led by Salva Kiir Mayardit, who is also the president of South Sudan.

NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Bishop Gassis Sudan Relief Fund

<http://www.bishopgassis.org>

The Bishop Gassis Sudan Relief Fund was established in 1998 for the purpose of bringing food, clothing, shelter, medical attention, and the Gospel of Christ to the people of Sudan.

Christian Solidarity International

http://csi-usa.org/slave_liberation.html

Christian Solidarity International (CSI) is a Christian human rights organization for religious liberty helping victims of religious repression, victimized children, and victims of disaster. It was founded in 1977 in Switzerland by Rev. Hans Stükelberger to demonstrate support for persecuted Christians worldwide. CSI has been particularly active in raising global awareness of the slave trade in Sudan.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide

<http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/country.asp?s=id&urn=Sudan>

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is a human rights organization that specializes in religious freedom, works on behalf of those persecuted for their Christian beliefs and promotes religious liberty for all. CSW has helped raise global awareness of slave trading within Sudan, as well as the plight of displaced persons within Sudan.

Samaritan's Purse

<http://www.samaritanspurse.org/operation-christmas-child-countries/sudan/>

Since 1970, Samaritan's Purse has operated as a non-denominational evangelical Christian organization provid-

ing spiritual and physical assistance around the world to victims of war, poverty, natural disasters, disease, and famine. In Sudan, Samaritan's Purse has been active in church repair, youth development, adult education, and humanitarian assistance.

Servant's Heart Relief

<http://www.servantsheartrelief.org>

Servant's Heart Relief is a Christian human rights organization serving the Christian church in South Sudan with the goal of self-sufficiency. Servant's Heart addresses the community's immediate relief and developmental needs of spiritual growth, educational programs, public health, primary medical care, and agricultural and economic infrastructure.

Safe Harbor International

<http://safeharbor.us/>

Safe Harbor International is a Christian human rights organization whose works focus those persecuted for their Christian beliefs. In South Sudan they have been involved with water and emergency food relief projects, as well as public health and primary medical care.

Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development

<http://www.kuwait-fund.org/index.php?lang=en>

The Kuwait Fund assists Arab and other developing countries with making their economies stronger by providing loans and grants and contributing to capital stocks. In Sudan, the Kuwait Fund has helped with projects focused on industry and tourism, dry farming, and irrigation, among others.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the historical origins of Sudan's religious divides?
2. How were domestic religious forces and identities involved?
3. How important are international religious and political forces?
4. What role have socioeconomic factors played?

¹See BBC's reporting: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/232803.stm>

²For additional information on this controversy, see the BBC's reporting: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/1559624.stm> and <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/161445.stm>

³These data are available at: <https://cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/su.html> and <http://countrystudies.us/sudan/47.htm>

⁴See Gérard Prunier, "Les Frères Musulmans au Soudan: un Islamisme tacticien" in Marc Lavergne (ed.), *Le Soudan Contemporain*, (Paris: Karthala, 1989), pp. 359-380 and Gérard Prunier, "Les Frères et l'Armée", *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, No. 27 (Third Trimester 1992), pp. 53-70.