



Book Review

Sudan: The Elusive Quest for Peace

Iyob, Ruth & Khadiagala, Gilbert M. 2006

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Writing a book – one book – on the elusive quest for peace in Sudan is a daunting and difficult task. Each of the many social groups who happen to live in this large and variegated country may of course prefer to write or read their own books and focus only on the versions of history, culture, religion, human rights and social justice that they are used to and that support their views. If individuals from one group were to read a book written from another group's perspective or from a perspective that claims to be objective, they may be inclined to write

critical comments and corrections in the margins, or reach a point where they throw down the book in disgust.

The authors of this book do not claim objectivity or neutrality, but one can surely agree with Terje Rod-Larsen's foreword which states that: '...the authors help us to move well beyond the oversimplified and misleading dichotomies that are usually offered to explain Sudan and its wars.... [They] provide us with a deeper understanding of the complex interplays of political, historical, cultural, and geographical factors and what they imply for current peace initiatives'.

In the introductory chapter the authors begin to outline the complexities which have repeatedly obstructed the way to peace. Sudan's peace agreements have been 'as numerous as the wars fought', but the promises written into agreements or accompanying them never became the realities that could have ushered in peace. Such abrogated promises have been one of the clearest signs of 'the gap between the official discourse of peace and the unofficial pursuit of war'. What has also been very clear, was that the hidden agendas were part of the wielding of power. A major obstacle, or as the authors venture to say, 'the one obstacle to a just and lasting peace', has therefore been the unwillingness of powerful leaders and their followers 'to acknowledge the plurality of Sudan's peoples and their rights of empowerment as equals in the land'.

A determined resistance by powerful political leaders (and their constituencies) against undertaking the paradigm shift from unwillingness to willingness is of course not peculiar to Sudan. It is found among politically minded people – and others – in every country of the world. What is exceptional in Sudan, however, is its degree of plurality. It is a country in which many lines have been drawn by history and geography.

In early times, the area became labelled as 'land of *black* peoples', but after four tides of Arab immigration, a colonial period under two powers (European and African), and the inroads made by two

expansionist religions, Sudan ended up with an inevitable ‘maze of identities’. The authors emphasise that the cleavage between Arab and African is still wide, but that through the centuries it has been criss-crossed by ‘fusions of cultures, ethnicities and identities’. Sweeping terms are often used: Arabised Africans and Africanised Arabs. But more precise descriptions are usually more appropriate. There are, for instance, Sudanese identities that were fabricated by colonialists, but were later adopted and owned by the ethnic groups themselves. Sudan also has various kinds of ‘hyphenated identities’. Finally, cultural and religious choices had to be made between original matrilineal kinship systems and imported patriarchal institutions, and between traditional African religions, Islam and Christianity.

The lines drawn by geography include those related to topography (rivers, plains and mountains), vegetation/climate (desert, savannah, forest) and weather (droughts, outside the desert proper), but also those of ‘an ideological geography’ according to which the domain of believers/masters was distinguished from that of unbelievers/slaves.

After the chapters on Sudan’s plurality and polarisation, the authors provide a very apt identification of the main divides underlying the hostilities: ‘racial, religious, and resource cleavages’.

In the chapters on the decades of intra-Sudan conflict and failed attempts to make peace, the authors give a clear overview of the fighting between different sides, as well as the in-fighting between factions of the same side. They give enough particulars but do not overburden the already complicated account with unnecessary detail. In addition to the actions and reactions of the various parties in the centre and at the southern, western and eastern peripheries of Sudan, the initiatives, involvements and interventions from neighbouring or other regional countries and from actors on the international scene are duly described and discussed.

The authors show how two issues remained contentious and conflict-generating over more than half a century: *self-determination* and

secularisation. It was a southern ‘mutiny’ against domination by the north that precipitated a hastily implemented independence for Africa’s largest country and set in motion a protracted and violent tug-of-war. Time and again it was a matter of using brute political and/or military *power*. Ruling elites and rebel forces, with more blatancy than tact, fervently pursued social (or socio-religious) engineering in order to advance their own ideology. For the policies of manipulating or pressuring people into ethno-political and/or religio-social camps, *-ise* verbs and *-isation* nouns had already been coined, and the authors could conveniently make use of them in this book. Typical sets of opposing terms are Arabising and Africanising, ethnicising and Sudanising, Islamising, Christianising and secularising, centralising and marginalising (plus pauperising).

Although the greatest part of the book inevitably deals with the depressing past of wars and failed peace agreements, there are also the sections that point to a scenario of reconciliation in a possible future. On the last page of the concluding chapter this possibility is succinctly outlined as follows: ‘Willingness to recognize the past without remaining its prisoner may be a first step toward correcting the injustices of the past and constructing a shared future built on mutual respect and accommodation’.

It is to be hoped that enough of such willingness will be revealed in the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement. If the parties and their allies do remain committed to what was agreed, without reverting to ‘hidden transcripts’, then ‘pragmatic policymaking and a spirit of reconciliation’ may become realities in a future-oriented Sudan. The daily interaction of southerners and northerners ‘as equal members of Sudanese society’ may contribute to the tolerance and compromise that will be needed to peacefully resolve issues of self-determination and secularisation.

In my opinion, the authors have produced a really reader-friendly publication. As already said above, they have effectively included

enough information but not unnecessary detail. They have made the complex material easier to follow by arranging it under helpful chapter headings and sub-headings. At the end, the book has forty pages of very useful annexures: chronology, acronyms, glossary, bibliography and index.

Readers from particular Sudanese, regional or international perspectives may have their critical comments or additional emphases, but most of them may agree that the approach of the authors is fair and balanced. *Sudan: The Elusive Quest for Peace* can be strongly recommended as meaningful reading for leaders and followers in all contexts where religious convictions, cultural traditions, equality aspirations and poverty alleviation are burning issues. Ruth Iyob and Gilbert Khadiagala have produced a book that should be of great value to many readers, including academics, researchers and practitioners in the field of conflict and peace.