

Ethnic and Religious Politics in Sudan:

Lessons Learned for Indonesia

A general lecture presented online by **Professor Abdu Mukhtar Musa** (Omdurman Islamic Univ. Sudan) to the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Diponegoro, Indonesia: 30th May 2024.

drmukhtar60@gmail.com

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgzQVwnbntnsFgfvDRcKlfBpQvpklg>

Introduction:

Generally, linguistic, religious, ethnic, cultural or national diversity does not endanger stability in a state, but rather the politicization of diversity. Likewise in Sudan the root causes of the crises and wars in Sudan are not the diversity per se, but actually a manifestation of a conflict of identities resulting from the mismanagement of this multiplicity. Throughout their erroneous efforts in seeking political support on ethnic/tribal or regional basis, elites in Sudan developed sub-national identities at the expense of creating a 'melting pot' for one coherent national identity.

So, talking about ethnicity and religion entails examining the interrelationship between these two factors vis-à-vis the formation of identity in a highly diversified country that has been subject to lack of justice and equitable development. The discrimination on ethnic lines ignited the feeling of injustice and triggered mutiny and wars led by the elite of the 'marginalized area' and the exclude/underprivileged communities/regions.

Hence, this big issue necessitates examining two major factors (of religion and ethnicity) in Sudan and how this experience provide empirical lesson to draw by other similar nations of diversity such as Indonesia.

At one level I will talk about how these two organic factors of identity led to the secession of the South and later on other regions took arms against the central government of Khartoum for being discriminated – not on religious basis but on ethnic and racial/regional lines.

The Formation of Ethnic Identities in Sudan

Generally, the term Sudan refers to the Savannah belt which comprises a mixture of Sematic and Hametic groups. Actually Arab historians and geographers were the first to use precise terms designating African ethnic groups known to them. They called Bantu negroes of east Africa (the brown colour) extending to central Africa (Burundi). To those to the north they called Habash. They include present day

Abyssinians, Eritreans, and reverain Sudanese between Atbara and the Blue Nile. Further to the north come the Beja and Bishariyyin. Regions to the west of the Red Sea and south of Sahara to central Africa and westwards to west Africa and the shores of the Atlantic they call the land of the blacks (*Bilad al-Sudan*). (Abu Saq, 2002: 2)

Confining the term *Bilad al-Sudan* to the sub-Sahara region indicates that the inhabitnats were predominantly Muslism. “It witnessed the rise of the earliest Islamic Sultanates of the Sudan; it maintained commercial and diplomatic relations with North Africa and Arab Peninsula. The Islamic states that flourished , gradually adopted Islam as the basis of government, law and education.” (Hassan, 1977: 14)

Since **ethnicity** implies distinctions based on race, **religion**, language, and other cultural attributes, it constitutes the underpinning of ‘**identity**’. Therefore, ethnic conflicts in Sudan are somewhat of a manifestation of conflict of identities. It was evident in Sudan that the civil war between the South and North (prior to secession in 2011) was an apparent reflection of conflict of identities – between the **Muslim, partly-Arab North and the ‘African’, non-Arab non-Muslim South**. The people of the South (known as Southerners) differ from those of the North (Northerners in terms of language, religion, race and culture. Hence, they have a distinct identity.

Of course, a melting pot mechanism depends on other factors; to single out one is the pace and intensity of assimilation. This process may take place through education and urbanization.

However, identity formation in Sudan is influenced by the Arab/Islamic dominant or core culture. Regardless of the path it had taken to do so, this core culture domination succeeded in melting the North of Sudan into one Arab/Islamic identity. The South remained intact because of the British colonial policy of ‘closed districts’, which aimed at blocking the flow of Arabisation and Islamisation to the South, which was already ethnically different from the North. It was part of the presumed competition between Islamic culture and British civilization in this area of Africa: “We the British, who, whatever our failings, are better qualified than any other race, by tradition and taste and training, to lead primitives up the path of civic progress, are going to stand guard till the South can dispense with a guard, and I am not going to see the South dominated by an Arab civilization in Khartoum, which is more alien to them than our own”.

Accordingly, a different identity had developed in the South. Thus, when the ruling elite in Khartoum tried for years to keep the southerners united in one country with the northerners of Sudan, the Southerners resisted and took arms to gain independence

Nevertheless, some ethnic minorities have persistently maintained ethnic distinctions even in the North. They believe they are underprivileged on ethnic/racial bases as the ruling elite in the capital Khartoum, who belong to certain ‘dominant’ ethnicities, monopolies wealth and power, which are channeled along ethnic lines. These marginalized or excluded ethnic groups are primarily of non-Arab origin. The educated class of these groups has always been complaining of ‘Arab racial supremacy’, along with the “racially biased hegemony”.

However, the late John Garang, the ex-leader of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), made a distinction between Arabism as a culture and ethnic superiority: the "SPLM does not reject Arabism as a cultural identity but rejects it when the concept is used to convey a sense of political supremacy based on racial heredity"

Therefore, the whole question is related to conflict of identities which is, in turn, an outcome of the ruling (Northern) elites' ethnic political behaviour, especially with respect to mismanagement of ethnic diversity.

Structural inequalities, disparities between the Centre and the peripheries and domination of a certain limited number of tribes over the power and wealth of the country – while depriving the majority – are responsible for stirring up ethnic radicalism and separatism. The so-called "growth pole strategy" adopted by the Anglo-Egyptian administration in Sudan was taken over by the national elites after independence which reflected the concentration of all the socio-economic activities in the central region – Khartoum province, the Northern and riverbank provinces – whereas neglecting the rest of the country.

Of course, this constitutes a setback to nation-building. The elite of the marginalized regions believes that Al-Bashir Islamic government (1989 – 2019), through its ideological approach, instead of establishing the state of the rule of law and justice, pursued policies that produced the state of classes and identities: the "social stratification and class structure in Sudan took – through the reign of Al-Bashir's government – the shape of organic overlapping between ethnicity and class structure. It has developed a false sense of superiority to some ethnic groups, whereas motivated a feeling of injustice and persecution of others.

Land: A Factor of Conflicts

Generally, access to land and land acquisition may not be an issue for the advanced world because this is primarily (or rudimentarily) settled by laws. However, land ownership has always been a sensitive and complicated issue in the Third World.

In developing countries, the land is a source of wealth, power, influence, and pride (social prestige) at the individual and communal (family or tribes) levels. It is typically the case in Sudan, where **Land ownership** is also loaded with a sense of belonging – a question of **existence** and identity. Sultanates and kingdoms – such as Darfur – held lands over centuries and even named them after the name of the region. Conflict over land ownership along with limits or borders of grazing vis-à-vis farming had been sporadically a source for tribal conflicts. In the past tribal leaders (the Native Administration) usually settled those conflicts peacefully – containing the conflict to a minimum number of casualties or/and injuries. However, the Islamic government of General Omer al-Bashir politicized the tribes and intervened with the tribal system – including the nomination of tribal leaders (*Nazirs*, *Omdas* or Mayers and Sheikhs) that they be loyal to the Islamists' ruling party (the National Congress). This has stripped the tribal leaders of the traditional status and respect among the tribesmen. This has weakened the functioning of Native Administration where it was no longer

able to settle disputes and conflicts effectively as in the past – eventually leading to escalation of tribal conflicts. This had coincided with wars in Chad and the flow of weapons to the tribes in Darfur making a shift in the level of fighting and the volume of victims. This was paralleled with the emergence of the armed opposition movement in Darfur (from 2003 onward) complicating the crisis and war as the two warring sides (the government and rebel movements) resorted to ethno-political polarization of the tribes there.

The Question of Diversity (some examples)

Thus, Sudan could be envisaged as a poly-ethnic country. Scholars believe that Poly ethnicity “divides nations, complicating the politics as local and national governments attempt to satisfy all ethnic groups. Many politicians in poly-ethnic countries attempt to find a balance between ethnic identities within their country and the identity of the nation as a whole”. (Mazrui, 1968: 252) Many have succeeded, but others have not. Sudan is one of the latter cases.

Pure Arab tribes are a minority in Sudan. The majority are the non-Arab, or those known as “African” in ethnic and cultural terms – not geographical sense. However, on average, one may maintain that the majority are those who are a hybrid between the two – Arabs and non-Arabs or Afro-Arabs. In terms of colour, the black outnumbers the brown and the semi-white groups. However, in terms of culture, language, and religion, the Arab Islamic identity dominates – particularly after the secession of the South.

Generally, the emigrant Arabs – who settled in Sudan – have been ‘Africanized’ over centuries, and the Africans, or Negroes (in Sudan), have been Arabized, and both are Islamized. Only a few ethnic groups can be distinguished as of ‘pure Arab’ origin. So that many Sudanese scholars and intellectuals suggest that Sudanese are not to talk about Arabism, Africanism, or even Afro-Arabism, but rather of “Sudanism” or describe themselves as “Sudanese” – as a distinct identity to avoid conflict of identities or disintegration of the country.

The determinants of political and voting behavior in Sudan

This issue of politicizing religion and ethnicity is well manifested on political behavior, and hence, electoral as well as voting behavior. Whenever ethnicity and tribalism is dominant or influential, it will have a direct impact on political behavior. Also when religion is politicized or manipulated in the political process, the political system may be endangered or generate political instability. The outcome may escalate into wars – as the case of Sudan.

It is difficult to measure which of the various factors/determinants have the greatest share or highest impact on voting behavior. The variation in communities, the nature or type of the political system, the level of political culture and the quality of democracy, and many other variables contribute to the complications. In some

societies, such factors as class, gender, age, and socio-economic status may be more effective. (Musa, 2023)

In other societies, one may find a different set of forces, such as social forces (ethnicity, tribe, religion and sects), more influential in voting behavior.

With respect to Sudan, it is a traditional political community with some features of modernity that started to show up gradually in the urban centers. However, this relative modernization process has not had discernible impact on political/voting behavior yet.

One may argue that the determinants of political behavior in Sudan are also the determinants of voting behavior. Sudan's case – to a greater extent – corresponds with the empirical findings of the theory of the “Columbia school of Voting Behavior”, which states that social forces determine voting decisions. In Sudan, social forces are manifest in such traditional groupings as clans, tribe, racial and ethnic entities, as well as religious sectarianism (*Sufi Tariqas*).

Political participation in Sudan is largely motivated not only by partisan affiliation but also by religious/sectarian belongings. Political attitudes are partly shaped by deep loyalty to *Sufi* traditions or allegiance to the leader of *Sunni* religious sect. Tribe or ethnicity and other forms of traditional reference groups play a considerable part in shaping political behavior and attitudes in Sudan.

Unfortunately, this conscious group mind of the Sudanese people has always been let down by the political elite. The political institutions are lagging far behind the peoples' drive for conscious political participation. A new generation appeared within the so-called “traditional” political parties, namely the *Umma* Party (UP, of the *Mahdists*) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP, of the *Khatmiyya* religious sect). This young generation has exerted pressure on the old leaders to give way to the youth to assume leadership and modernize the parties to cope with the changed circumstances and to enable broader participation beyond the limits set by the mentality of the parochial sectarian leaders. (Musa, 2023)

However, there was a paradigm shift starting from the first decade of the third Millennium with the Internet and social media becoming accessible worldwide. In Sudan, students' politics was of great significance particularly under the military dictatorships and totalitarian rules (1958–1964, 1969–1985, and 1989–2019), where out of 66 years of independent democracy only two transitional governments survived the total of nine years. Students' politics, which continued in the campus – although sporadically undermined by security interventions – sustained the continuity of democratic traditions. Some sort of political culture developed among students and relatively conscious political behavior was maintained among this educated group, better off than in the society where the political parties were banned by the three military regimes.

Hence, a trend of political consciousness developed and accumulated over the years. The three military dictatorships that governed the country since gaining independence (1956) were toppled by popular revolts. The October Revolution of 1964 led by students and supported by the masses, ended the six-year military rule of General Ibrahim Abboud (1958–1964). The second was the 16-year-old military regime of

General J. M. Numairi (1969 –1985), who was compelled by a week-long popular unrest and demonstrations to surrender to the upheaval (*al-intifada*) and handed power to a civil rule after a one-year transitional government. The third was in December 2018 – April 2019, which toppled the 30-year-long Militant Islamist Regime (MIR) of General Omer al-Bashir (1989–2019). (Musa, 2021)

Empirical explanations

The determinants of voting behavior are inseparable from the determinants in civic participation in politics. Many factors either influence or foster political participation or motivate people to engage in political processes. However, there are variations in the degree of impact of different factors or determinants in different states – namely established democracies vs. emerging democracies. The Sudan provides a good example in this context.

Although ethnicity is so influential in political and voting behavior in Sudan, it is not the only important factor. Sectarianism and “*Sufism*” (a religious path of the Sunni Muslims) are also powerful factors. However, the two sets of factors (i.e., ethnicity and religion) are not always separable in political manipulation or vote seeking campaigns. Candidates are more likely to combine both in their competition. (Musa, 2023)

Moreover, in Sudan it is not the socio-economic status, or class or professional identification that influences political, electoral, or voting behavior. Thus factors, such as ethnicity and religion, play a decisive role here. However, the political leaders always try to manipulate this religious sentiment and adopt a rhetoric that touches on it by, for example, pledging to serve Islamic institutions – such as mosques, Khalawi (traditional religious schools), or even a promise to apply Sharia’ – as the Islamic Movement does by raising slogans for these promises. The major issue here is ethnicity along with party identification. Religion comes next, particularly when rivalry takes place on the ideological basis – notably the right versus the left (secularists and communists). Here, voters are bound to political leaders based on religion, ethnicity or race more than on other bases – geographical, class, professional or the like.

Generally, there was a wave of consciousness that started to sparkle from 1990s onward which has been boosted by such factors as globalization, education and urbanization that is expected to usher in a process of detribalization in the long term. In reality ethnic-based identification in Sudan overrides cultural (religion and language) identity. To prove the hypothesis that instability in Sudan is a product of the failure of its elites to harmonize diversity in one national identity, one can have a glance at some states that are far more diverse but achieved stability – USA, India, Indonesia and Nigeria:

Comparison between stable countries despite high diversity compared to Sudan which is less diversified in terms several components (population, ethnic groups and language)

Country	Population	Language	Ethnic groups/castes	Religions
India	1.1 milliard	780	3000 castes/ 54 major ethnic groups	7
The USA	300 million	Over 80% English-speaking	6 ethnic groups	15
Indonesia	270 million in 17000 islands (7000 uninhabited)	700	1340	6 87.2% Muslims 9.9% Christians, etc.
Nigeria	175 million	500	250 ethnic groups	2 major religions: 50% are Muslims; 40% are Christians; 10% pagon.
Sudan	40 million	One (Arabic language – the mother tongue the majority). English is the second (learned at schools) besides tens of dialects	50 ethnic groups (prior to the secession of the South) and over 500 tribes (prior to the secession).	1 (one) Islam: the religion of 98% after the secession of the South, while it was 72%).

Source: compiled by the author

This table is self-evident. It explains how far more diversified than Sudan but managed to sustain stability. Therefore, it is the Sudan who is to draw lessons from these countries, not the opposite. However, academics in Indonesia approach the matter from a different perspective – that they will draw lessons from the crises and wars in Sudan so as to ward off the factors that caused a diversity to be a source of instability.

Lessons:

There are many lessons that Indonesia, as a nation of multiplicity, to draw from the crisis of state in Sudan that had culminated into wars.

First, they have to combat any patterns of behavior or attitudes that are likely to ignite dissensions on communal or ethnic basis.

Second, the central government should act neutrally towards all nationalities and minorities.

Third, the political elite should not appeal to political support on ethnic basis but rather on nationalistic programs.

Fourth, political parties should transcend the local or regional rhetoric to a national one.

Fifth, that equitable and comprehensive development is a major factor for building a feeling among citizens of different regions that they are not discriminated on regional or ethnic bases.

You are lucky that your society is more harmonious with respect of religion, color and culture as compared to other nations such as Sudan.

Conclusion:

The lesson that Indonesia should draw from Sudan is that you should not provide any opportunity for any feeling of ethnic identification to grow up at the expense of the national identity. And, for your case, the best way to do that is to foster religious identification. This is because the majority of the population of this country is Muslim. This helps a lot in building one national identity inspired by Islam as a religion of monotheism, unity, equality and justice. These values and principles are strong enough to build a harmonious society and a stable nation.

How?

Through education and mass media all opinion leaders are to undertake the mission seriously and devotedly. These responsible elites include thinkers, intellectuals, university professors, religious preachers and opinion writers through mass media.

The target is to build a solid ground for a tight knit national identity that overrides any sub-national identities – such as ethnic, tribal, doctrinal, class or the like.

To solve the conflict between religion and ethnicity vis-à-vis 'politics' as an intervening factor, religion should supersede ethnicity particularly in a country with one religion majority – as in the case of Islam in Indonesia or other states of the same status. This is because the heavenly religion encompasses vital morals and such values as fraternity, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence, which are necessary pillars for sustaining a coherent and harmonious society – whatever the degree of its diversity of plurality.

However, this depends on the type of elites. This necessitates elites with high nationalistic consciousness and faithful conscience who are devoted to uphold the sacred mission of preserving a stable society, a coherent state and a life of dignity.

We are lucky that our religion is Islam as Islam provides this ethical infrastructure. However, the challenge is how to stick to its teachings and values and commit to them devotedly.

References:

Abu Saq, Mohammad Osman (2002). "Background to Press and Politics in the Sudan," The Sudan Intelligence Review (SIR), Vol. 9, December, 2002, p.2.

Hassan, Yusuf Fadl and Doornbos (eds.), 1977. The Central Bilad al-Sudan: Tradition and Adaptation. Khartoum: Khartoum University Press

Mazrui, Ali (1985). The Multiple Marginality of Sudan. In: Yusuf Fadl Hassan, "Sudan in Africa" (Studies presented to the First International Conference Sponsored by Sudan Research Unit, 7 – 12 February 1968), p. 252.

Musa, Abdu Mukhtar (2023). The Underpinning Determinants of Voting Behaviour: The Case of Sudan. African Journal of Economics, Politics and Social Studies (2023, Vol. 2) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15804/ajepss.2023.1.06>

Musa, Abdu Mukhtar (2021) Popular Uprisings in Sudan: Revolutionary Processes intercepted. Los Angeles, CA, USA, *Advances in Politics and Society*, Vol. 5. No. 1. Dec. 16, 2021.

Nhial, Mom Kou (1973). The People's Regional Assembly Elections of November 1973.