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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

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Sudan at the Crossroads

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There is a tendency in the outside world to see the tragedy in the Darfur region of the Sudan in isolation from the regional conflicts that have been proliferating in the country for a half century. These conflicts reflect an acute crisis of national identity that is both a cause of genocidal wars and a factor in the state's indifference to the resulting humanitarian consequences. This explains the Sudanese government's resistance to international provision of protection and assistance to the affected populations.

The conflicts in the Sudan indicate a nation in painful search of itself, striving to be free from historical discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, and culture. It is, therefore, necessary to combine a suitable humanitarian response with solutions that go to the roots of the national identity crisis and address its stratifying implications.

The history of conflict

Initially, conflict dichotomized the country into the Arab-Muslim North, comprising two-thirds of the country in land and population, and the African South, comprising the remaining third, where people largely adhere to traditional African beliefs but have been increasingly converting to Christianity since colonial times. However, this dichotomy is an oversimplification, for the majority in the North are non-Arab, although Muslims. Even the so-called Arabs are in fact a hybrid African-Arab race, who, through assimilationist opportunities were encouraged to pass as Arabs.

The normative framework of assimilation in the North dictated that if one became a Muslim, was Arabic speaking, culturally Arabized, and could claim a genealogical link to an Arab ancestry, one was elevated to a status of respectability and dignity. In sharp contrast, if one were black, one was labeled as a "heathen," and cast into the denigrated

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category of slaves or enslavables. Islam and Arabism, therefore, allowed people to pass as Arabs, with marginal regard to the color of the skin. However, skin color remained important, for one must not be too dark, as black was considered the color of slaves, nor too light, as that indicated connection with the European infidels, or the *Hallab*, a gypsy-type racial category. Even the color of the white Arabs was considered undesirable. One had to be the right color of brown to join the honored class. The standard color of the Sudanese "Arabs" is therefore *akhdar*, which translates to "green," actually the brown color that is representative of the northern hybrid race. As the South was the hunting ground for slaves, this assimilation process was confined to the North and southern identity remained one of resistance.

The North-South dichotomy was reinforced by all the regimes that ruled the country. The Turko-Egyptian Administration (1821-1885) was the first to create a semblance of a state, although it could not fully control the South. The Mahdist revolution that overthrew the Turko-Egyptian rule in 1885 established a theocratic Muslim state, but still could not subdue the South. The Anglo-Egyptian conquest in 1898 established the Condominium Administration in which the British, the dominant partner, administered the country as two separate entities, encouraged Arabism and Islam in the North, and isolated the South, leaving it to develop along traditional African lines. While the North developed economically, politically, and socially, the South was neglected, except for rudimentary educational and health services provided by Christian missionaries. As the Sudan approached independence, because of pressure from the North and Egypt, the British suddenly reversed the policy of separate development in favor of a unitary state, with centralized administration and no safeguards for the vulnerable people of the South.

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It must be emphasized that what generates conflict is not the mere differences of identities, but the implications of those differences in the sharing of power, wealth, social services, employment and development opportunities. In virtually all of these areas, the South was totally neglected. Although the South is the richest in natural resources, abundant arable land, water supply, livestock, timber, and minerals, because these resources were not developed and the South remained in a state of inertia, the British felt that it was not viable as an independent country, and would remain dependent on the North. Implicit in that dependency was to be northern domination in which the "Arabs" replaced the British in a system of internal colonialism, which the South resisted violently.

Southern rebellion began in August 1955, four months before independence on January 1, 1956, as a result of fears that independence would not only result in northern domination, but could also mark a return to the Arab enslavement of the Africans. This triggered a secessionist war that would last for seventeen years, kill more than one million people, and force another one million into refuge in neighboring countries. The war was ended by the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972, which gave the South regional autonomy. The agreement also gave the Ngok Dinka of Abyei, annexed to the administration of the North in 1905, the right to decide by referendum to return to the South, although that provision was never implemented.

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citation
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In 1983, the war resumed because of the unilateral abrogation of the Addis Ababa Agreement by the central government. Unlike its secessionist predecessors, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A) recast the objective of the war as the liberation of the whole country and the creation of a New Sudan, in which there would be no discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, religion, culture or gender.

This recasting of the war objectives appealed to the non-Arab regions of the North, which began to see themselves as Africans and became more conscious of their own marginalization by the Arab-dominated center. They even saw themselves as worse off than the South, where decades of liberation struggle had gained some concessions from the Khartoum government. The first to join the SPLM/A in the mid-80s were rebels from the Nuba Mountains of Southern Kordofan and the Ingassana (or Funj) of southern Blue Nile. In 1991, non-Arab groups from Darfur, with the support of the SPLM/A, staged a rebellion that was ruthlessly crushed. Rebellion in Darfur resumed in 2003 by two groups, the Sudan Liberation Movement and Army (SLM/A) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). The Beja of eastern Sudan also engaged in a low-level rebellion whose objectives have much in common with the other regional rebel groups. Even the people of Nubia, to the far north, are reviving their distinctive identity and pride in their Nubian civilization. One word is often given by these regions to explain the root cause of their rebellions—marginalization—the denial of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of citizenship.

Ironically, while the South was initially deemed to be too poor to be viable as an independent country, the discovery of large oil reserves in the South has now shifted the argument to the North needing the South. The wealth of the South itself became a source of conflict. The mammoth Jonglei Canal that aimed at retrieving the waters of the swampy Sudd region of the South and channeling them to be used in irrigation schemes in the North and Egypt provoked a violent reaction from southerners that interrupted work on the canal. In the area of oil where commercial reserves were discovered in the South, pumping the crude to be refined in the North and exported to generate revenue for the central government also provoked a hostile reaction in the South that forced the Standard Oil of California to abandon work in the Sudan. Sanctions against the Sudan because of involvement in international terrorism kept Western companies out of oil exploration in the country, and international pressure forced Talisman of Canada to sell its concessions. Companies from China, Malaysia, India, and other Asian countries stepped in and intensified oil production, with little or no concern for the environment and the rights of the local population in the oil-rich areas, where people were massively displaced to clear the fields for production. Oil production literally fueled the conflict and raised the stakes very high. A joke has a northerner saying, "We fought the South for all these years because of their mango trees. Now that oil has been found in their land, how can we leave them in peace?"

Current agreements

After a long peace process that was initiated in 1993 by the sub-regional organization, the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD), and reinvigorated in 2002 by the international community—in particular, the United States—the government of the Sudan and the SPLM/A concluded the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on January 9, 2005, ending a devastating conflict that had killed more than two million people, displaced more than four million internally, and forced into refuge one-half million. The CPA gives the people of the South the right to govern themselves during a six-year interim period and to decide, by a referendum to be held after that period, whether to remain in a united Sudan or become an independent state.

The CPA also stipulates that efforts be exerted during the interim period to make unity attractive to the South. During the interim period, the South is to share in the Government of National Unity (GNU) in which the president of the South will also be the first vice president of all of the Sudan, and the SPLM will have proportional representation in all branches of the government. The South is to retain its own army, the SPLA, and Joint Integrated Units are to be formed as the nucleus of the national army, should the South opt for unity. Wealth-sharing arrangements give the North 50 percent of the revenue from the oil in the South and other southern resources. The Central Bank will have two branches, a northern branch, which will follow the Islamic banking system, and a southern branch, which will follow a conventional banking system. The guiding principle is "One Sudan, Two Systems," a concept that was developed by a task force at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.[1]

The CPA gives the people of Abyei the right to decide by a referendum to be held simultaneously with the southern referendum whether to join the South or remain in the North in a special autonomous administrative status under the North-South collegiate presidency. The agreement also gives the people of Southern Kordofan and southern Blue Nile a significant measure of autonomy and the right to have their views sought on their system of governance through popular consultation, a form of internal self-determination.

In Darfur, the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) was reached in May 2006 between the Sudan government and a faction of the SLM, which also offers the people of Darfur a measure of autonomy. The DPA has, however, been rejected by JEM and the SLM/A as well as by the overwhelming majority of the people of Darfur. As a result, war continues unabated in Darfur.

In the eastern region, with the mediation of Eritrea, the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) was reached in November 2006. It is, however, likely that the ESPA will meet with the same contradictions that confronted the DPA, and that hostilities will possibly resume.

While the CPA has stopped hostilities in the South and the border regions of Abyei, Nuba Mountains, and southern Blue Nile, and the DPA and the ESPA aim at doing the same in Darfur, these agreements have not effectively addressed the national identity crisis and the marginalization of the non-Arab regions. It

is also becoming obvious that their implementation is seriously flawed in both pace and content.[2] What appears to be emerging is a pattern of containment in which the National Congress Party (NCP) continues to dominate the GNU and pursue its Arab-Islamic agenda, with minimum concessions for containment purposes.

The process of transformation

Sudan's crisis of national identity is reflected in two major distortions that require a correction of the system of governance. One is the racial and cultural self-perception of the dominant ethnic groups as Arabs, despite the obvious indicators of racial admixture. The other is the imposition of Arab-Islamic identity as the framework for national identity, which is inherently stratifying and discriminatory.[3] The vision of the New Sudan postulated by the SPLM/A aims at transforming the country to be rid of any discrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, culture and gender. This has widely been misconstrued as turning the tables to make Sudan an African country and reverse the discrimination to be against the Arabs, an allegation which the SPLM/A vehemently denies. For the average southerner, however, northerners are so entrenched in their Arabism that even the objective of promoting equality seems farfetched.

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So, lofty as the vision of the New Sudan is, it was viewed with suspicion and even hostility by both sides. Southerners generally saw it as utopian and undesirable, in as far as it was premised on maintaining the unity of the country. They preferred to see the country as divided between North and South, Arab and African, Islamic and Christian, and demanded the right of self-determination with a predominant view towards secession. To them, the vision of a united New Sudan was that of the SPLM/A leader, Dr. John Garang de Mabior, and, at best, was a clever ploy to counter the anti-separatist biases in Africa and the international community, and perhaps gain allies in the North.

Northern reaction ranged from dismissing the vision as unrealistic, to resenting it as an insult to the Arab-Islamic image of the country, to confronting it as a threat to the establishment. With time, southerners began to appreciate the vision as it brought tangible benefits to their struggle. Northerners, especially from the marginalized non-Arab regions, became even more inspired than southerners by Garang's vision. However, his untimely death in a helicopter crash in the summer of 2005, only three weeks after being sworn in as first vice president of the country and president of the government of southern Sudan, was to become a major set-back for the pursuit of the vision.

Nonetheless, through his powerful vision, Garang set in motion a quest for the transformation of the country that seems irreversible. It is obvious that the division of the country into an Arab-Islamic North and an African-Christian and animist South is being seriously challenged. The perception of the hybrid African-Arab race and culture in the North as Arab is also being scrutinized by some, including many "Arabs." Even with the prospects of southern secession, the vision of a New Sudan is not likely to fade away. An independent South would remain sympathetic to the plight of the black Africans in the North, who are almost certain to continue their struggle against Arab domination and would continue to seek the support of the South. The question remains whether this will be done through a peaceful democratic process or through armed struggle.

The CPA was the outcome of regional and international solidarity in peacemaking. Beyond the South, Darfur at first seemed to offer an opportunity for the African Union (AU) to demonstrate its ability to transcend the traditional restrictions of sovereignty, narrowly interpreted as a barricade against international involvement, and to see it instead as a positive concept of state responsibility to protect and assist its citizens in cooperation with the international community.[4] If the AU fails in this apportionment of the responsibility to protect, it will be a major set-back to the nascent organization that promised significant progress beyond the constraints of its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity. The current formula of a hybrid force of AU plus, with more plusses from the international community as needed, may not only be the practical, but perhaps also the desirable way forward.

Beyond responding to the immediate humanitarian needs in Darfur, the international community should make a concerted effort to help the Sudanese develop a framework of transformation based on the acceptance of pluralism and full equality of citizenship. Just as peace came to the South, and will most likely be realized in the other regions, through the active involvement of regional and international actors, the transformation of the country into a New Sudan of full equality will also require the support of the international community. However, in the end, the destiny of the nation is in the hands of the Sudanese themselves. Will the country transform itself constructively towards the envisioned New Sudan or will it fragment and disintegrate into a failed state? This may sound like a rhetorical question in as far as the desirable answer is obvious, but what should be is not necessarily what will be. The question about the future of the Sudan therefore remains pertinent.

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that animate U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@mit.edu, 617.253.1965)

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The Sudan: Its States and Bordering Countries*

Dashed line represents the North and South division

*State and country boundaries are based on a map published by the World Health Organization (February 2006)

article footnotes

1 See the report of the CSIS Task Force on the U.S.-Sudan Policy "U.S. Policy to End Sudan's War," February 2001, p. 2, The Task Force was co-chaired by the author and J. Stephan Morrison, Director of the CSIS Africa Program. It was formed to develop a coherent U.S. policy for the incoming administration before the 2000 election.

2 For an initial critique of the CPA, see International Crisis Group, *The Khartoum-SPLM Agreement: Sudan's Uncertain Peace*, Africa Report No. 96, 25 July 2005. For later reports on the CPA Implementation, see ICG March 2006 Policy report Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement: *A Long Road Ahead*, and the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) monthly update reports.

3 For a selection of works on Sudan's crisis of identity, see Francis M. Deng, *War of Visions: Conflict of Identities in the Sudan* (Washington D. C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995); Ann Mosley Lesch, *Sudan: Contested National Identities* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998;) and Amir Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan* (New York: Pelgrave, 2005).*y.* New York: Wiley and Sons, 1998, p. 24.

4 For a selection of works on this concept, see Francis M. Deng, *Protecting the Dispossessed: A Challenge for the International Community* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1993); Francis M. Deng, "Frontiers of Sovereignty: A Framework of Protection, Assistance and Development for the Internally Displaced," *Leiden Journal of International Law 8*, no. 2 (1995); Francis M. Deng, "Reconciling Sovereignty with Responsibility: A Basis for International Humanitarian Action" in John Harbeson and Donald Rothchild, editors, *Africa in World Politics*, Boulder Colorado, Westview, 1995; Francis M. Deng et al, *Sovereignty as Responsibility: Conflict Management in Africa* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995); International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, *The Responsibility to Protect*, ICISS, Ottawa, 2001, Report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility* (New York: United Nations, 2004); U.N., 2005 World Summit Outcome, U.N. Document A/59/2005, 21 March 2005, para. 139; and Thomas G. Weiss and David A. Korn, *Internal Displacement: Conceptualization and its Consequences*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

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