

## Sharia inflation: a preacher speaks politics

Wednesday 6 February 2013

By Magdi El Gizouli

February 6, 2013 - The allies of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) recently welcomed the professional Moslem cleric turned politician Yusuf al-Koda in their Kampala habitat. Yusuf and the Chairman of the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement in North Sudan (SPLA/M-N) Malik Agar, also the Chairman of the SRF, signed on 31 January a joint political statement of four articles: the guarantee of the unity of the country, public freedoms, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, peaceful transition of power and the federal system of government; the guarantee of citizenship as a basis for rights and duties without regard to religion, race, colour, geographical or political affiliation; issues of dispute between the political forces such as the system of rule and the relationship between state and religion should be deferred till further dialogue, preferably in the context of a constitutional conference. The fourth article stated that Yusuf al-Koda's organisation, al-Wasat Islamic Party, is a political party registered according to law in Sudan that ascribes only to peaceful popular struggle and dialogue as means of change, an indemnity note I guess.

The SRF event was titled 'al-Wasat Islamic Party signs the New Dawn Charter', which is simply not true. Yusuf did not sign the Charter, and once that became clear the Sudan [Islamic] Scholars' Board, the highest formal religious authority in the country, withdrew the apostasy charge it had threatened with to discipline its dissident member. The Secretary General of the Board, Mohamed Osman Salih, told the Sudan News Agency that every Moslem is obliged to acknowledge the rule of Allah, as laid out in the Holy Quran and the Sunna of his prophet. Salih said the press misinterpreted his criticism of al-Koda's step as an apostasy declaration while his concern was to explain the religious obligation to adhere to sharia, and the violation of this obligation that follows from agreeing with the proposition of the New Dawn Charter to separate between religion and the state. The semantics of the debacle are worth detailing. The Charter does not actually spell out separation between religion and the state as such; instead it calls for "constitutional and legal provisions based on the separation between religious institutions and state institutions to guarantee that religion is not exploited in politics". The convoluted phrase was arrived at to satisfy the ideological histories and preferences of the motley of forces that signed the Charter. The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), for instance, feeds from strong roots in the Islamic Movement; its top cadres, almost without exception, look back to a history of student activism in the ranks of the Movement in the 1980s and in the service of its regime in the 1990s. The SPLA/M-N figureheads and Abd al-Wahid al-Nur would have preferred a frank declaration of secular creed, while some of the visitors from Khartoum, representatives of the National Consensus Forces (NCF), possibly argued for deferral, as did Yusuf al-Koda, but did not get it, since it is deferral that they agreed upon in their own charter, the Democratic Alternative.

The limits of this sharia poetry were put on display when al-Koda joined the debate. The Saudi-trained preacher presented his grievance against his former custodians in the ruling NCP in distinctively secular terms; he complained of nepotism, corruption, lack of public freedoms and so on. The hosts, delighted by the presence of a Salafi sheikh in their midst, borrowed the sharia discourse to impress upon their potential Youtube audience the NCP's abuse of the transcendent values of Islam for the sake of power, an argument that once abstracted copies the puritanical twist at the heart of every 'revivalist' political project under Islamic banner. Plainly put, Yusuf al-Koda seemed for a moment closer to passing the test of secularism than the SRF allies, and why not? Yusuf is the younger brother of two other 'political' Kodas: Osman al-Koda who as a fresh communist soldier, barely twenty, freed the Communist Party Secretary General, Abd al-Khalig Mahjoub, from detention in the Shajara military barracks south of Khartoum shortly before the abortive 1971 coup, and Mubarak al-Koda, a committed Islamic Movement functionary who served in several minor posts in the NCP government over the years. Yusuf on the other hand moved from Ansar al-Sunna preacher to TV fatwa-man to pro-NCP Islamic moderate to full-blown opposition politician with a Turabist taste for surprises. The pathways of the three brothers are typical of the adaptive response of Sudan's rural communities to the shenanigans of the urban political elite, each positioned neatly in a strategic locus of the rainbow.

In 2001, Turabi's party, the Popular Congress Party, signed a memorandum of understanding with the SPLA/M that was supposed to function as a voucher into the post-NCP Sudan. The agreement landed Turabi in prison but did not encase the SPLA/M in sharia baraka (blessing) considering that its new ally was the country's most prominent sharia proponent. Today, recognized opposition to the NCP joins the PCP, Sadiq al-Mahdi's National Umma Party (NUP) and shreds of Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), none of which are sharia-shy, but the holy flare remains nevertheless elusive. Rather it is the fringe Salafis whom al-Koda fled to the political elite who appear more successful in harnessing the dream of Islamic 'liberation'.

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