

Sudan: The Way forward

Thursday 28 February 2013

By Amir Idris

February 28, 2013 - Dr. Elwathig Kameir's recent article titled, "Disintegration of the Sudanese State: the most likely scenario," published in Sudantribune, February 10, 2013, raises provocative yet very timely questions about the future of the country. Indeed, the article opens up a debate about what political reform entails, particularly in a divided country such as Sudan. My goal in writing this short piece is to add my modest contribution to the debate.

In recent years, commendable intellectual contributions have been made by civic and political forces as well as individuals to enrich the debate on the future of the country by searching for inclusive political project that speaks to the aspirations of all Sudanese. Sadly, the views of these forces have been marginalized and ignored by the dominant political forces. Instead, the public political debate has been mainly hijacked by two political camps: those who support the armed protest movements - defining themselves as non-'Arabs', 'seculars', and 'democrats' and those who support the current government - identifying themselves as defenders of Islam and Arab culture. Both political camps, however, invoke their ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations to advance their political and economic interests. In the process of doing so, nationalist sentiments marked by ethnicity and religion become the driving force behind the public political debate about the future of Sudan. This polarized political environment makes peace talks for reaching a political compromise and accommodation very tenuous, with hardliner nationalists and deeply conflicting political positions on both sides of the debate.

The search for peace and political stability in Sudan, however, is a responsibility of the Sudanese people if peace and development is ever to take deep roots in their country. There is no doubt that the ongoing military confrontations between the central government in Khartoum and the various regional protest movements are antithetical to peace and development. Reaching political consensus or compromise between or among these polarized political actors will require rethinking identity and citizenship from a group to a national conception. Post-colonial political history of many African countries shows that citizenship can be harmful to the social and political processes of a political community when framed in narrow and exclusive group terms. It also retards the process of forging national identity and weakens the loyalty of the individual - citizen to the state.

The way forward for Sudan will require the following two policy reforms. First, it is vital for the country to embrace democracy as inclusive system of governance. Despite all its weaknesses, democracy is a tool through which some of the values and principles embodied in citizenship can be translated into reality. For instance, principles and norms such as elections, the rule of law, the right of association and expression, political participation, could indeed offer the basis for the expression of citizenship in its substantive form. However, for this to be a successful political project, political reform should be an inclusive process in which all state structures and institutions are democratized. For instance, this process of political reform should transcend the divide between rural-urban, center-region, and local and state dichotomies. If this process of political reform is carried successfully should cultivate a new culture of citizenship from the bottom-up, supported by effective formal institutional reform and the expansion of democratic practices and norms at the society and state levels.

A second policy reform is to address the normative aspect of citizenship, which the democratic system of governance cannot guarantee. Who qualifies to be a citizen of Sudan and who does not? How is national identity to be cultivated in a multi-ethnic and religious space, and how will the state be able to attract and hold onto citizen's loyalty are valid questions which relate to, but transcend, the democratic system. These questions have impact on how the state is defined, constituted, and how the delivery of state policy ensure that the state affects the daily lives of the citizens in equitable manner, in a way that subordinate identities and groups do not contest the legitimacy of the state in society.

Sudan's recent political violence has unearthed buried memories and tensions grounded in the past and invoked in the present. The dead of Sudan's violent past remain a potent presence in the politics of the living. No doubt, Sudan has been through multiple civil wars over the past several decades. Two million peoples have lost their lives in the civil wars between the North and the South; hundreds of thousands have also been killed in Darfur, and thousands in the ongoing conflict in southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states. Different regional, national, and international bodies including the International Criminal Court (ICC) have demanded justice for the victims.

But the debate on justice after civil war in Africa raised questions about the intersections of justice, politics, and peace. Two arguments emerged from this discourse on justice. The first argument calls for criminal justice - holding those who committed the crime accountable through punishment. The second emphasizes the importance of forgiveness in exchange for the promise to not forget. Forgive, meaning there will be no punishment so long as the wrong is publicly acknowledged. In other words, impunity is exchanged for truth. It calls for structural reform as a priority over punishment of individuals. The first argument is about past injustices. The second is about how we shape an inclusive future after the conflict. In other words,

the former is about the dead and the latter is about the living.

Political forgiveness, however, involves both retributive and restorative justice. It is easy to see the need for restorative justice because it is easy to forgive when the crime has been admitted and compensation has been paid, but retributive justice is important as well because it speaks to human feelings of resentment and hate that can be quelled by holding someone legally or socially accountable for their actions. However, getting the right balance is vital for successful political forgiveness and compromise. In the case of Sudan, therefore, enacting too much retributive justice can lead to revenge and then failure in reaching political compromise. Retributive justice needs to be a much more symbolic action than a legal one.

There can be two kinds of reconciliation: that between victims and perpetrators and that between survivors who must together shape a common future. One of the main lessons of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is that both sides of the violence were addressed; Afrikaner violence was not isolated from that which was committed by black South Africans. Thus, both whites and blacks were both victims and perpetrators; potentially paving the way for both to be seen as survivors.

Therefore, the way forward for Sudan can only be constructed on the future, not the past. The search for inclusive citizenship in Sudan requires structural reform including political one which includes not only the victims but also the perpetrators of the violence. The quest of criminal justice might provide closure to those who were victimized by the state and its militia groups, but it does alienate and exclude others from being part of the political reform. In other words, inclusive citizenship is about the rights of those survive the political violence.

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