Rethinking Identity, Citizenship, and Violence in Sudan

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Since its political independence in 1956, Sudan has witnessed the rise of armed ethnic and regional protest movements that have resulted in great human suffering and the largest number of refugees and displaced peoples in Africa.[1] These protest movements have challenged the legitimacy of the independent Sudanese state, led by Arabized and Islamized elites at the pinnacle of power, to extend and define citizenship rights and responsibilities. In Darfur, Southern Kordofan, and Blue Nile, these movements are not only currently demanding equal citizenship rights, but they are also demanding recognition of special rights including claims to land, autonomous government, and the maintenance of ethno-national identities. They are thus opening up a debate about what citizenship entails, particularly in a multicultural context; how the current state reconciles competing claims of citizenship; and what kinds of viable institutional mechanisms are required for an effective relationship between the state, its citizens, and local power structures.

Similar to many former European colonies in Africa, the official history of Sudan has been written mainly by Europeans.[2] The European colonial discourse on Africa claims that African history, unlike European history, was a product of external influences. That is, the history of Africa begins and ends with colonialism. As a result, the histories and identities of African societies were imagined and represented in opposition to those of Europe. The rich precolonial social and political histories of African communities were either ignored or misrepresented as prehistoric vestiges of "darkness." Medieval Arab writers and later Europeans shared the same perspective about the history of Africa. Both presented the peoples of Sudan as comprising two different racial, cultural, historical, and regional categories. People of northern Sudan have been seen as "oriental," while people of southern Sudan have been presented as "people without history."[3] Northern Sudanese were deemed "Arab," Muslim, and civilized, whereas southern Sudanese were considered "black," heathen, and primitive. These geographical, racial, and cultural identities were, however, products of historical processes, namely, slavery and colonialism.

In reality, it does not make sense to take the "North"–"South" or "African"–"Arab" dichotomies as our units of analysis for studying Sudan. Neither the people of the North nor those of the South constitute a distinct cultural and racial group with a distinct history that can be taken as an object of inquiry. These racial and ethnic identities are political ones produced through specific discourses and practices. Scholarship on Sudan has simply accepted the "North" and the "South" as fundamentally distinct, absolute, and different from each other.[4] This scholarship claims that the northern region possesses a degree of cultural and political unity marked by the Islamic religion and Arab race. Yet many ethnic groups in northern Sudan, including the Fur and the Nuba in the west and the Beja in the east, were only marginally influenced by Arabization and Islamization. The Nubians, though Arabized, retained their language. In the same manner, the South

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contains an array of ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups united by shared geography rather than a collective national identity.

Much debate in contemporary scholarship has focused on the role of colonialism in instituting and constructing political identities, at the expense of the history of slavery and violence. Precolonial Sudan needs to be examined so that we can understand its impact on the colonial and postcolonial periods. Indeed, there is no simple narrative for periodizing the precolonial, the colonial, and the postcolonial; many continuities exist between them. The goal here is to shift the focus from essential ethnic and racial groups to the processes involved in the making of the state and its constituencies. This shift will speak to several broader debates: How does state formation shape political identities? What is the relationship between political identities and political violence? How have the legacies of slavery and colonialism established a common pattern of discrimination and racism?

The violent political conflict that led to the secession of South Sudan and the ongoing conflict in the western region of Darfur are legacies of the past, namely, slavery and colonialism. These legacies structure the political, economic, and cultural relationships between the postcolonial state and its subordinated groups. The history of political violence in Sudan contributes to the creation of meaning and truth and to deciding whose historical narrative dominates. This history cannot be isolated from the process of state formation, and it poses serious political challenges to the notion of citizenship in the postcolonial period.

After northern Sudan became Arabized and Islamized in the 16th century, Islam and an imagined Arab identity played a major role in grouping people into two categories: Muslims and non-Muslims. Northerners began to produce genealogies of their imagined Arab ancestry and Islamic identity, perceiving their cultural norms and social practices as superior to those of non-Muslims and non-Arabs.[5] The practice of enslavement further imposed meaning onto social, cultural, and religious differences, which served as the basis for redefining the society and its polity. Christian missionaries, British administrators, and northern Sudanese nationalist groups all institutionalized this racial and cultural categorization through political practices, including the British policy of indirect rule and the postcolonial policy of Islamization and Arabization. The processes of racial and ethnic categorization created two competing political identities: "Arab" and "African." The "Africans," however, were fragmented into "native" ethnic groups.

Much of the writing on Sudan's identity takes competing nationalist narratives for granted and assumes that the people who live in the South share unchangeable racial and cultural markers separating them from people of the North. Many scholars find it difficult to think beyond racial and ethnic essentialisms borrowed from colonial discourse and shaped by 19th-century racist conceptions of Sudan. Although enslavement and colonialism contributed to the formation of competing "Arab" and "African" identities, it is not the artificiality of these two identities but rather the artificiality of the Sudanese polity that makes political violence persist in Sudan. That is, the postcolonial state has failed to devise a policy of inclusive citizenship with the capacity to transcend existing racial and ethnic categories through a national framework for unity.

Scholars of Sudan need to take into account three interrelated premises in order to understand the intersection of identity, citizenship, and violence. First, political identities are the product of how the state was formed in relation to society. Second, these political

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identities are not static or unchangeable; the conflicting identities that produced violence could become peaceful identities if the state were redefined and restructured in a way that makes the managing of and coexistence between overlapping identities possible in a postcolonial context. Third, the national crisis of political violence in Sudan requires a political solution, and it is for the peoples of Sudan to reinvent their political identities in order to de-racialize the state and de-ethnicize their societies.

In addition, scholarship on Sudan has to move away from the debate on race to one on racialization and racism. The problem with a focus on race is that it assumes that "African" and "Arab" races exist and then seeks on that basis to understand relations between them. A focus on racialization, in contrast, questions the existence of races, looks at how groups not previously defined as races have come to be defined as such, and assesses the multiple factors involved in this process. This alternative and transformative approach is needed because the development of the racialized structure at the societal level in Sudan has put institutional constraints on the political and economic development of many ethnic groups. That structure and those constraints have not gone unchallenged, however. The excluded groups in South Sudan, Darfur, and, more recently, the states of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile have mobilized to protest their exclusion and have invoked the history of enslavement and subordination. These groups are politically and militarily resisting the dominant racial and political order, and that resistance testifies to their histories of sufferings and alienation from the state.

Understanding the possibilities of democracy and inclusive citizenship in Sudan means understanding the actual practices through which Sudanese societies conduct social and communal life. These practices are shaped by historical legacies of the precolonial and colonial periods that manifest in multiple actual and symbolic practices of political power. They have also manifested in violence, civil war, and genocide in the postcolonial era. Creating a political community in such a context poses particular challenges for how we reframe citizenship in Sudan from both a theoretical and policy perspective. And it will have to take into account the various historical legacies that shape the memory of identities marked by violence and exclusion.

NOTES

[1]See Jane Kani Edward and Amir Idris, "The Consequences of Sudan's Civil Wars for the Civilian Population," in *Daily Lives of Civilians in Wartime Africa: From Slavery Days to Rwandan Genocide*, ed. John Laband (Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 2007), 227–52.

[2]For example, see John Lewis Burckhardt, *Travels in Nubia* (London: Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, 1819); Emil Ludwig, *The Nile* (New York: Viking Press, 1937); and Harold A. MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922).

[3]See Amir Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity in Sudan* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005), chap. 1.

[4]For example, see Harold A. MacMichael, *A History of the Arabs in the Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922); Mohammed Omer Bashir, *The Southern Sudan: Background to Conflict* (London: Hurst, 1968); William Deng and Joseph Oduho, *The Problem of the Southern Sudan* (London: London University Press, 1963); Yousif Fadl Hassan, *The Arabs and the Sudan* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967); Deng D. Akol Ruay, *The Politics of Two Sudans* (Uppsala, Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1994); and Dunstan Wai, *The African–Arab Conflict in the Sudan* (New York: Africana Pub. Co., 1981).

[5]See Idris, *Conflict and Politics of Identity*, chap. 2.

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