

## A Policy Paper on Sudan and Pluralism

### Workshop on Pluralism, Coexistence and Conflict: Majority and Minority Communities in Muslim Societies

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Sudan, one of the most ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse countries in African and Middle East and the nineteenth largest country in the world, has been described correctly as the microcosm of Africa. Its physical vastness not only encompasses every geographical feature, but also incorporates a population that replicates a similar cultural, religious and ethnic complexity. Sudan is also an old country. The variety and wide positions of religious representations or plurality within each faith (Ibrahmic and non-Ibrahmic traditions) have made pluralism a fact of Sudanese life, a phenomenon that has been prevalent across time. Nevertheless, the Sudan has broken into two countries since July 2011. What were the hindrances or impediments preventing the engagement of such a human potential for an action of a lesser severity?

It was a great opportunity to attend the workshop on pluralism, coexistence and conflict and to listen and become engaged with some of the scholars present, as well as activists from different parts of the Muslim world, for discussion about our different fields of study and comparison and contrast of conditions of coexistence and conflict. In all events, it seems that some other elements, encounters and involvements in addition to the question of religion cannot be avoided. Hence, there is more to the Sudanese issue than what the hasty critic might have realized.

Here, I differentiate between the Sudan the country, covering about one million square miles, that began at a definite date and remained within its geographical borders and human composition of Muslim, Christian and other African religions, and different power structures exercised within and across those 'rigid' borders since 1821, on the one hand, and the Sudanese field of action as a nation or historic people who have existed within 'malleable' imagined borders and real complex past experiences for a far longer time than that, on the other hand. With or without the creation of different borders, confirmation of archeological evidence and the conceptualization of peoplehood, the whole period from time immemorial to the present could be considered as the origin time of the Sudanese. Within and throughout this origin time, the Sudanese human experience—before the founding of the Sudan as a geographical and human space—has turned and transformed into a series of complex developments and different forms of interrelationships. The different modes and systems of these developments and their environments have created the Sudanese as a people.

Significant human experiences have molded and shaped the Sudanese mutual encounter with time and place, along with other external factors and internal conflicts and tensions. All these factors have acted together and separately to internally and externally provoke violence, and have allowed for systems of domination of nature and of other human groups, not to mention means of production of and modes of regulation. Hence, there is more to the Sudanese experience in its complexity than meets the eye and much more than what color alone can capture. At the same time, the Sudan as a 'rigid' geographical space and a meaning that has been reinforced by the establishment of a territory is one form of this Sudanese experience.

From the beginning of the creation of the Sudan in 1821, and to some extent ever since, the Sudanese saw their life-world colonized, civil experience constrained, and evolution of their society deferred. Such is the failure declaration issued on July 9, 2011 by the Islamists in power since 1989, who, while seeking to exercise a tighter grip over the Sudanese life-world, split the country into two states and turned the rest of the country into hot or cold battle grounds between them and other Sudanese groups and individuals.

After seeing or learning about all these systems of colonization, militaristic governance, and increasingly detrimental totalitarian control, are we ready yet to look back into this long and complex human experience and ask how the Sudanese civil society has been deferred and ask the most serious question? Have we—the Sudanese people—been liberated yet? Liberation comes in as many different ways, yet here we should qualify the term to mean not only freedom from totalitarian rule, but also, at least two distinctive practices which must be well-defined if they are to become germane. These include liberation from myriad series of contrivances and mentalities of ‘totalist’ politics, ideologies and systems; as well as freedom from the devices used by the state to give effect to such rule.

The Sudanese, who are experienced in leading successful uprisings and civil disobedience movements against dictatorial rule (which they did in 1964 and again in 1985), are certainly able to do it for a third time to finally liberate themselves from the tyranny and totalitarianism of the inherited state and its current and similar regimes. Then, perhaps, there would be a new opportunity for building a new Sudan out of the Sudanese collective order and its emerging good society. By that time, surely, the Sudanese “habits of the heart” that ameliorated and molded the Sudanese character and its deeper sense of civility (not the state or its regimes) would help them examine themselves, create new political communities, produce a new social contract and thus ultimately support and maintain conditions of democracy, freedom, equality and human dignity. Then, the gentler side of the Sudanese life, and the people’s propensity for it, would, should and maybe will, as Alexis de Tocqueville describes, “spontaneously [help create] the bonds of friendship, trust and cooperation that lie at the heart of civil society.” The dominant impulse by that time, I would say, will be that a change for the State of South Sudan will also be a change for the new Sudanese Sudan.