

Book Review:

Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*.

Oxford, James Currey, 2003

Civil war in Sudan has become part of the fabric of society ever since independence in 1956, although there was a truce from 1972 (the Addis Ababa peace agreement) until 1983, shortly before the fall of President Nimeiri. Otherwise, with the end of the wars in Ethiopia and Angola, Sudan has been in a state of war for longer than any other African country. For much of this time the stereotypical view of the war has been a form of set piece simplification: a Muslim North against a Christian/animist South; Arabs versus Black Africans; Northern exploitation (the slave trade) versus Southern weakness.

Such assertions are challenged by a new book, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* by Douglas Johnson. A leading expert on modern Sudan, he uses a wealth of detailed scholarship to disprove such ideas or, rather, to demonstrate that the confrontation between the two religions is only part of much more complex pattern. Johnson, it is true, addresses the religious divide first, and shows that it is far more than just a struggle between Islam and Christianity. Southern Sudanese are not seen as having coherent religions of their own, but are described with depressing regularity as Christian and animist (or sometimes even Christian-animist). But "animism" is an archaic term with little descriptive value. In its original sense it referred to a theory of "primitive" religion. It has since been adapted as a pseudo-scientific replacement for "pagan" to avoid the latter's pejorative overtones acquired from centuries of Christian propaganda. Although only a small proportion of the people in the South are Christians while the majority have a number of theistic religions of their own, the concept of a Muslim-Christian divide persists in the West more because its suits aspects of Western *Realpolitik* than because it describes the reality.

Important as the religious question is, that of economics is just as valid. Much of the history of Sudan, both during the colonial period and since independence, has been dominated by the inequalities created by a dominant centre based in Khartoum. This base controlled and continues to control all aspects of development and the peripheries of the country (not just

the South) have been generally neglected and never receive their share of development finance or attention. This centre versus periphery phenomenon resulted from the long history of slavery and slave raiding.

Then, when Britain gave independence in 1956 it did so in a hurry, eager only to divest itself of a problem that it no longer had the capacity or wish to resolve before disputes about development priorities between North and South had been sorted out. There was widespread discontent in the South as a result of the 1954 elections and the Sudanisation process. The Southerners wanted a federal system or complete independence, but they have always operated from a position of weakness in relation to the North where the bulk of the population is found. The final paradox of Sudanese independence was that it was thrust upon the Sudan by a colonial power eager to extricate itself from its residual responsibilities. It was not achieved by a national consensus expressed through constitutional means.

The resource question is all important, for the bulk of Sudan's resources needed for the nation's revitalisation – oil, water, fertile soil and various minerals – are to be found in the South. And, as the author points out, the Khartoum government is more concerned to extract the South's resources with a minimum return to the South than to build a modern comprehensive state. As a result, when the civil war resumed in 1983, the SPLA attacked the Jonglei Canal (being dug in the South to increase the flow of the river Nile downstream) and oil extraction and brought the former to a standstill, though some years later oil production was started. The SPLA has seen itself as a movement to effect change in the government of the Sudan as a whole, and not as a provisional government for a future southern Sudanese state.

The roots of North-South differences are both multiple and deep. These involve the centre versus the periphery resulting from slavery and the slave trade; inequalities of development during the colonial period that always favoured the North; and the arrival in the late 19th century of militant Islam that then and since has mitigated against a North-South rapprochement. It also involves a British withdrawal before it had created a satisfactory and viable development plan, and the failure to find a national consensus, which was prevented by a Northern nationalism that sought to create an Arab, Islamic based state. And as though these differences were not enough, there has always been the foreign factor: Cold War (US) support changing according to what was happening elsewhere in the Horn of Africa but always ensuring that arms were available on a massive scale.

Against this background it is hardly surprising that Sudan has been divided and subdivided by civil wars for 40 years. It is the largest country in Africa, strategically placed between Egypt, the Red Sea, Ethiopia, East Africa and points further south. It is seen (wrongly for most of the time) as a bridge between the Arab world and black Africa. It would have been unre-

alistic to suppose that the major powers outside Africa would leave it alone. They never have and probably never will.

The author has produced an authoritative well-researched analysis of one of Africa's most complex countries and his book should be an essential addition to the library of anyone trying to understand and master the problems of the Sudan.

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