



PEACEFUL CHANGE AND THE RISE OF SUDAN'S DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

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Negotiations to end Sudan's devastating civil war have repeatedly faltered, but among other developments, the re-emergence of civil society in both the north and south provides greater impetus for peace, as well as greater prospects for democracy and respect for human rights. Particularly important, but thus far relatively unnoticed, is the rise of a southern-led civil society movement in the north. Although Sudan's complex history and demographics provide an explanation for much of the conflict, in fact the conflict is essentially political, while it is this very complexity that could provide a basis for the resolution of the conflict. Some intriguing parallels with South Africa's recent experience underscore the role of civil society, and point to some options for the future.

Introduction

It is Easter Sunday in Jabarone, a desolate settlement plopped in the middle of the desert some 20 miles from Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. Three thousand worshippers have filled the Catholic church of Saint Josephine Bakhita with singing, drumming and dancing by children in colourful tie-dye dresses and grass skirts. As the sweet scent of incense mingles with the heat, a barefoot nun warms up the crowd with a litany of *Salamu Alaki Ya Mariams*. Then, Father Daniel Deng preaches his sermon in a lively Arabic, throwing in a little human rights message, exhorting husbands to treat their wives fairly, and for wives to

treat their husbands likewise. After communion, the congregation streams out into the bright sun and back to the mud brick shelters of their impoverished community of 150,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). Although Sudan is a predominantly Muslim country, these people have fled the war and famine in the mostly non-Muslim south to seek refuge in the relative calm of the north. They certainly did not choose to live here. 'Jabarone' means 'we are compelled', because ten years ago they were compelled by the government to leave their original and more convenient refuge in camps on the outskirts of Khartoum, and were dumped here with virtually no shelter and no services. Families

dug holes in the ground to shield themselves from the wind and slept in the open. “Despite the hardship”, Father Deng notes, “the people are happy today.” They have persevered, struggling to get education and find jobs in this alien environment. Father Deng estimates that 95% are still unemployed, nor does the community have any real schools, so social problems are enormous. Yet even though they have come from every part of southern Sudan, the people of Jabarone live together in reasonable harmony. There are five other major settlements like Jabarone around Khartoum with a total population of some two million; altogether four million southerners are estimated to be living as IDPs in the north. This is a significant part of the total population of Sudan, which may be 30 million. The people of Jabarone and other southerners living in the north have attracted little attention, but they are becoming an increasingly powerful factor in the destiny of this troubled nation.

Sudan’s civil war has lasted nearly half a century. In the past 20 years, two million people have been killed, in addition to the four million who have fled their homes. But things are changing. The North–South, African–Arab, Christian–Muslim divisions generally attributed to Sudan obscure the host of contradictions that present genuine opportunities for peaceful negotiations and political accommodation. Geopolitical realities, including America’s campaign against terrorism and the lucrative potential of oil, seem to have persuaded the Sudanese government—which still espouses a fundamentalist Islamic ideology—to moderate its policies. The armed southern opposition to the government has recently united, after ten years of bloody internecine conflict. A mission by former US Senator John Danforth has proposed a four point peace plan that still seems to be moving forward, despite some setbacks. And a series of negotiations based in Machakos, Kenya, after a period of suspension, have tentatively resumed, and a cessation of hostilities has been declared.

Sudanese sometimes compare their

situation to that of South Africa ten to fifteen years ago. The parallels are striking even if there are risks in drawing too many similarities between two dramatically different societies at opposite ends of the African continent. The racial divide is obvious. Both Sudan and South Africa are extremely complex societies, with heterogeneous populations deeply divided along racial and ethnic lines. Both countries have long histories that weigh heavily on the present, and both have strong modern as well as traditional institutions. In South Africa, apartheid ideology contended with the African National Congress’s (ANC’s) non-racialism and in Sudan, Islamic fundamentalism opposes moderate religious and secular perspectives. Social engineering and repression, human rights abuse and terrorism, have characterised the behaviour of both governments. Both nations have faced international condemnation and sanctions, both have experienced high levels of violence, both have expanded their conflict to neighbouring countries, and both have great economic resources as well as social inequality. South Africa benefited not only from the statesmanship of Nelson Mandela and Frederick de Klerk, but from a dynamic civil society and the mass movement of the United Democratic Front, as well as a culture of negotiation that reached every level of society. Sudan’s leadership, both pro- and anti-government, remains doubtful; however, its civil society is beginning to re-emerge. Just as the role civil society played in South Africa has often been underestimated, so also the role Sudanese civil society could play has not been widely appreciated. But, just like South Africa, the church (and mosques), trade unions, human rights groups, women’s movement, peace movement, media, cultural groups, youth and community-based organisations are slowly, peacefully, transforming the society.

Sudan’s complexity

The failure of the state, especially in Africa, has become commonplace in the aftermath

of the Cold War, but Sudan is a country that some might argue was doomed to fail from the beginning. United by the British in a landmass half the size of the continental US with a population of barely 10 million at independence in 1956 (growing to 30 million today despite war and famine), Sudan contains 19 major ethnic groups, including 597 subgroups and more than 100 languages. According to the 1956 census—the only one to examine ethnicity—39% of Sudanese consider themselves Arab, 12% Dinka and 7% Beja. The Arabs may be divided between the sedentary Julayin and the nomadic Juhaynah, which are in turn divided among several subtribes. In addition, there are the Muslim, but non-Arab Nubians, Beja, Fur and Zaghawa. More than half the population is Sunni Muslim, belonging to various brotherhoods, including the Qadiriyyah, Khatmiyyah and Mahdiyyah. The largely non-Muslim Dinka, Nuer and Shilluk comprise perhaps another 20% of the total population; and to these may be added the non-Muslim Bari, Azande and Nuba. More than 30% of Sudanese are estimated to follow traditional religions, and 5–10% are Christian. Added to this *mélange* is a growing population of Muslims of Nigerian origin, the Fellata, who now make up as much as 10% of the population.¹

After the complex demographics, there is the challenging physical environment. With the exception of the lands fertilised and watered along the Nile, the northern half of the country is mostly uninhabited desert. The southern third consists of undeveloped savannah and swamp, and the rather arid area in between is steadily being lost to the encroaching desert. This hostile environment has exacerbated conflict, as nomadic peoples have moved south for grazing areas, competing with farmers for land, and sometimes raiding for cattle and slaves. But this traditional dynamic has been turned upside down as war and hunger forced four million southerners to the north. Famine, exacerbated by the war, and sometimes even manipulated as a weapon of war, has been the main killer in Sudan. American and international humanitarian

relief has gone to victims on both sides of the fighting through Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), the largest relief operation under way anywhere in the world, at a cost of some \$1 million a day—about the same amount the government is estimated to be spending on the war.

Sudan has been described as a bridge between the Arab world and sub-Saharan Africa, suggesting peaceful trade and cultural melding. Others have described Sudan as the advance guard for the Islamic conquest of Africa. Sudan's geographic context has made it critical to its neighbours. Egypt is obsessed with control over the Nile, among other concerns. Proxy wars have been fought by rebel groups along the borders of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Libya, Chad, Congo and Uganda, and refugees from each country flow back and forth across the borders. For many years, Sudan's neighbours to the south have attempted to mediate between the government and the southern rebels through the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), but the negotiations have repeatedly broken down. More recently, Sudan's two neighbours to the north, Libya and Egypt, have attempted to contribute to a peace settlement by bringing the northern opposition parties into the negotiations. And on the other side of the continent, the Nigerians have offered their good offices, including a series of conferences in Abuja in 1992–993, and some more recent diplomatic interventions.² Although these international peacemaking efforts at the elite level merit continued support, their futility thus far suggests not simply an intransigence on the part of the antagonists, but the absence of any effective popular constituency or support for a peace process.

Sudan is the political expression of one of the most ancient cultures in Africa, its rulers conquering Egypt in the 9th century BC. The Sudanese kingdom of Merowe left traces as far as Mali and Zimbabwe before its conquest by Christians in the 4th century AD. The successor state of Nubia lasted until the Mameluke conquest in 1250, and Sudan was reconquered by Muhammed Ali, the Ottoman ruler of Egypt in 1821. Penetration

of the south, including the slave trade, intensified at this time. British control over Egypt and Sudan culminated in the defeat of the British General 'Chinese' Gordon at Khartoum in 1886 by Muhammed Ahmed, the Mahdi, whose great grandson is today the leader of the Umma Party, Sadiq al Mahdi. The Khatmia were opposed to the Mahdists, remaining aligned with the Egyptians, and their descendants today largely comprise the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), led by Mohamed Osman al Mirghani. Although the British at first favoured the Khatmia, they switched favour to the Madhists when the Khatmia began supporting Egyptian nationalism.

After World War II, the Sudanese Communist Party, one of the strongest in Africa and the Middle East at the time, became an important political force with its core of support among the railroad workers and nearly half a million members at its height. As Sudan neared independence, however, southern concerns were ignored, and as a result the Anya-Nya rebellion began in 1955. Shortly after independence on 1 January 1956, Gen. Ibrahim Abdoud took power in a coup, but his regime collapsed in 1964 following a general strike led by the Communists. Sadiq al Mahdi then led a coalition government with the Umma and NUP (later DUP), but failed to end the war and lost his majority in parliament. The government of Mohamed Ahmed Mahjoub was subsequently overthrown in May 1969 by Colonel Jaafer el-Nimeiry with the support of the Communists. A year later, 11,000 armed supporters of Sadiq al Mahdi were killed by the military and al Mahdi was exiled. In 1971, Nimeiri crushed a coup led by Communist army officers. Although it was effectively abolished by Nimeiri, the Communist party remains an important secular influence even today, analogous perhaps to the role played by the South African Communist Party.

Nimeiri ended the civil war in 1972, however, granting the south autonomy in the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement. The following eleven years would be the only time of peace modern Sudan has known. In

1975 and 1976, with Egyptian help, Nimeiri crushed another uprising by the National Front, which consisted of the Umma, NUP, and Moslem Brotherhood. But he soon allowed al-Mahdi to return and released the leader of the Moslem Brotherhood, Hassan al Turabi, from prison, making him attorney general in 1979. In 1983, Nimeiri redivided the south, reducing its independence. He also promulgated the September Laws, which imposed Islamic punishments (*huddud*), including amputations for theft, floggings for drinking beer, stoning for adultery, and execution for apostasy—the fate of the great reformist Muslim theologian Mohamed Taha in 1984. Nimeiri's abandonment of the Addis Ababa Agreement and other policies triggered the outbreak of war in the south led by the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA). In 1985 a popular uprising in Khartoum led to the overthrow of Nimeiri and the installation of an interim government, which nevertheless failed to abrogate the September Laws. The war continued.

In April 1986 Sadiq al-Mahdi was elected prime minister of a coalition government. The Koka Dam Declaration of 1986, which was signed by the Umma Party and the SPLA, was unfortunately ignored by Sadiq after he came to power, and instead Turabi's NIF joined the government in May 1988. The DUP, which had rejected the Koka Dam Declaration, then reached an agreement with the SPLM on 16 November 1988, and although al Mahdi forced the DUP to resign from the government on 27 December, considerable military and popular pressure nevertheless compelled al Mahdi to initial a draft bill suspending Islamic law on 29 June 1989. The next day the military, led by General Omar Hassan Ahmad al Bashir, seized power in a coup backed by the NIF.³

The new government banned political parties, trade unions, various student and professional associations, and the independent press. The army was purged, and a parallel militia, the Popular Defence Force, was established. Although initially imprisoned in the first days after the coup, Hassan al Turabi was soon released and

became the acknowledged power behind the throne. The Islamicist agenda was pursued with greater fervour than ever, severe restrictions on clothing and behaviour were enforced, and the war was declared to be a jihad against infidels. Human rights abuses escalated as political prisoners filled the jails and 'ghost houses' (clandestine prisons), dissent was repressed, torture became routine, and the independence of the courts was emasculated.

But what was happening in the south made the north seem tame by comparison. As the war continued and various peace initiatives failed, the SPLM became increasingly brutal in its own tactics and ethnic rivalries became apparent. In 1991, a split occurred between the SPLA-Torit, led by John Garang and comprised mainly of Dinka, and the SPLA-Nasir, led by Riek Machar and comprised mainly of Nuer. The past decade has seen the splintering of South Sudan's rebel movements, brought about by the Khartoum government's divide-and-rule policies as well as by traditional rivalries between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups. Fighting between such factions as the SPLM/A, SSIM/A, SSUM, USDF, SSDF and SAF has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, created humanitarian emergencies, led to severe human rights abuses, destroyed vital institutions such as schools and courts, and forced civilians into a state of constant insecurity. The destruction and loss of life resulting from these factional disputes is generally considered to be greater than that directly perpetrated by the government. Although the main Nuer leader, Riek Machar, had signed a peace agreement with the government in 1997, the agreement lacked credibility and he eventually resumed his armed opposition to the government, rejoining his former arch-rivals in the SPLA. The SPLA has made various efforts at reform recently, such as ending the executions of prisoners of war, releasing of child soldiers, and establishing civilian administrative structures in the areas it controls.⁴ Even more importantly, the reunification of the forces of Garang and Machar on 12 February 2002, has eliminated the most

egregious source of conflict. Although the SPLA and the other armed opposition groups are roughly analogous to South Africa's ANC and PAC, the scale of violence the Sudanese have waged against each other, the degree of conventional military activity, and the resulting level of destruction are far more severe than anything South Africa experienced.

The international dimension: Slavery, bombs, politics, religion and oil

Also on nowhere near the same scale as the old anti-apartheid movement, Sudan has nevertheless become an important international cause among various human rights and church activists, particularly regarding the issue of slavery. Slavery has persisted in Sudan for centuries, despite attempts since the British came to stamp it out, but the war has inflamed it. Southerners may still be mocked as 'slaves' by northerners. Yet the encouragement of slave raids as a government policy to terrorise the population of the south is another question. Militia groups, the *murabaleen*, periodically raid southern villages on horseback, usually killing the men and capturing the women and children whom they then sell in slave markets. There are many reliable accounts about how these innocent people are horribly abused and often killed.

After denying that the problem even existed for many years, the government finally conceded that 'abductions' were occurring, and announced that it was working to end the practice. A Commission for the Eradication of Abductions was established and received considerable donor support, and at first seemed to be making progress. The effort lost steam, but may be revived. Meanwhile, Western groups such as Christian Solidarity International (CSI) have gained attention by travelling to southern Sudan and apparently redeeming thousands of slaves for perhaps \$40 each. Critics of CSI charge that these redemptions only encourage the taking of slaves, but those who are being redeemed are undoubtedly grateful for the help.⁵

The bombing of civilian targets in the

south has also become a major human rights concern. Usually, Russian-made Antonov bombers, flying at a high altitude, will drop bombs on villages thought to be sympathetic to the rebels. Inevitably, the only persons hurt are innocent civilians, and larger structures such as churches, schools and hospitals seem to be the easiest targets for the often inaccurate, but still deadly, bombs. More recently, however, the flow of oil from parts of the south has both increased the incentive for the government to clear these areas of potentially hostile local communities, and has provided the financial means to increase the level of fire power targeted against them, including the purchase of helicopter gunships. In the last year, tens of thousands of civilians have reportedly fled from areas around the oil fields in Unity (or Western Upper Nile) State.

Another parallel with the anti-apartheid movement is thus the debate over sanctions. Oil is exacerbating the Sudanese conflict by providing something more to fight over and providing the means to pay for it; but just as occurred in South Africa, some argue that 'constructive engagement' could also inject some pragmatism into the government's behaviour as it seeks to attract foreign investors, and the foreign presence in the country serves as leverage by international human rights advocates to end the conflict. The NDA remains firmly opposed to international investment in the oil industry; the US Congress has unsuccessfully proposed capital sanctions against companies investing in Sudan; and Senator Danforth has suggested some kind of revenue sharing between the government and SPLA for an interim period. Yet Sudan may soon be able to pump 200,000 barrels of oil a day, making it one of the largest producers in Africa. Some American companies have expressed interest in doing business in Sudan, but commercial interests from Europe, Canada, China, Malaysia and Russia have demonstrated fewer scruples than the US. Clearly, sanctions may have symbolic significance, but given the nature of the oil market, it is unlikely that sanctions

alone can generate sufficient pressure on the Sudanese government to end the war or improve its human rights record.

Like oil, religion exacerbates the Sudanese conflict, but it is not the cause, and need not prevent a solution. The government's religious agenda still seems to have some resonance among the devout Muslim population, at least as a justification for the war and for the government to maintain power. However, Sudan's traditional and popular Muslim sufi sects do not adhere to the same brand of Islamic fundamentalism the NIF has tried to import from Saudi Arabia, and there are some indications that some of the old ideological fervour may be dissipating. Osama bin Laden once found shelter in Sudan, and a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory was apparently bombed by mistake by American cruise missiles in retaliation for bin Laden's destruction of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. But bin Laden has since been expelled, and more recently, although Sudan is still on the official list of countries sponsoring terrorism, the government has made concerted efforts to co-operate with American authorities in handing over intelligence and even terrorist suspects.⁶ The government's protestations of sympathy for the victims of the September 11 attacks was matched by an apparent popular condemnation of the attacks as well. Turabi's political and ideological control of the country has given way to that of the security forces, who are no less dictatorial or zealous in their application of Islamic law, but who, in their competition for power, may be more ready to accommodate other political forces in Sudan. On the domestic front, however, some discrimination against Christians has continued. Even this seems to be backfiring, however, since it has apparently only galvanised the faith and multiplied the numbers of Christians—such as those of Jabarone—changing them from a minority concentrated in the south, to a restless and growing presence surrounding the capital. Were it not for the oil, many northerners might be relieved to see the south granted independence, the

southerners return to their homelands, and the Islamic culture of the north restored undiluted.

Religious conflict and human rights abuses might seem to be endemic, but Sudan has known periods of both peace and democracy. Sudanese are famous for their hospitality and tolerance; Christians and Muslims often express their friendship with one another; northern and southern children go to school together; there is a lively intellectual tradition, debate and political pluralism.

In the past year, several internal political developments have added to the confusion, as well as the potential political space. First, the ruling National Islamic Front (NIF) has recently split into two parties, Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP) and the Popular National Congress (PNC) led by Hassan al Turabi. Turabi and much of the PNC leadership have recently been imprisoned by the government after Turabi signed an agreement with John Garang of the SPLA. Adding to this political turmoil has been the return to Khartoum of Sadiq al Madhi, leader of the powerful Umma Party. Some rumour of the imminent return of Al Mirghani, leader of the equally powerful Democratic Unionist Party. These two parties and the SPLM/A were the most important members of the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA). But the Umma left the NDA after al Madhi returned to Khartoum, and a faction of the Umma has recently even broken away to join the government. Multiparty elections held in Sudan in December 2000 were won by the government, but were boycotted by both the NDA and the Umma Party, which declared them to be unfair. The fact that Garang and Turabi can ally themselves, and that Machar was a member of the Sudanese government for many years, and that the various political parties have at one time or another been allied, makes one wonder why the antagonists are so ready to kill each other. It might also be grounds for hope that they are not so irreconcilable. In fact, the history of Sudan since independence, culminating in the current set of alliances and positions,

demonstrates with remarkable clarity that it is politics—not religion, not ethnicity, not oil, not slavery—that is driving the Sudanese conflict. All this turmoil may produce some opportunities, and although these long-time leaders retain great influence and would likely be the ones to contest and win free and fair elections, they have yet to lead the Sudanese people out of their predicament.

Civil society to the rescue?

In the aftermath of September 11, one Sudanese human rights activist, Ghazi Suleiman, suggested in the *Washington Post* that undemocratic and unaccountable governments are the breeding ground for the kind of social unrest that gives rise to terrorism.⁷ Although the implication was that his own government constituted such a breeding ground, his ability even to make such a remark suggests that there is more political space in Sudan today than there was just a few years ago. Although the government has conceded this ground grudgingly and may still reverse what modest progress has been made, and although repression is still very present, the SPLM's contention that reform is impossible may be too harsh, just as the ANC's opposition to the Nationalist government of South Africa once seemed equally uncompromising. South Africa had many similar contradictions to those of Sudan as it struggled to achieve a just and democratic dispensation, largely through peaceful means. The key was the emergence of a culture of negotiation that eventually pervaded every level of society from the ruling elites to the grassroots. In fact, it was the grassroots, including the press, the church, the trade unions, students and civic organisations of every description that ultimately coalesced into an irresistible force for change. Little noticed in the West, such institutions have re-emerged in Sudan, and have begun the incremental, non-violent, but profound transformation of Sudanese society. Their struggle will be gradual, usually undramatic, and will mostly be carried out by individuals whose names will

never make the newspapers. But their solution to the long crisis of Sudan will be indigenously Sudanese, not imposed from outside or on high. For this reason, it is also more likely to be sustainable. Their first objective is to end the war, and this cause will continue to gain momentum and support from a growing spectrum of society, including leadership of the government and rebels, just as the struggle against apartheid in South Africa did. With the experience and space provided by an end to the fighting, they will be able to move on to address the political causes of the conflict and repair and improve the democracy Sudan has known in the past. Finally, they will have to rebuild the country, harness the natural and human resources, and make of Sudan the great 'rainbow nation' it should be.

In particular, it is the enormous population of disenfranchised southerners struggling to survive in the alien environment of the north who may hold the key to the future. Like the people of Jabarone, the majority of these southerners would prefer to return to their homes in the south if peace were to be achieved, and if a referendum on self-determination for the south were to be held, as has been promised in the Sudanese constitution and the Machakos agreement. Most would undoubtedly vote in favour of it, and by implication, complete independence for the south as well. In the meanwhile, whether or not a referendum and independence ever occur, their presence is increasingly felt in the daily economy and social life of the north. Despite discrimination and repression, after living in the north for more than ten years, they are beginning to coalesce and organise, becoming more aware of their identity and rights, and taking action to assert their place as full citizens of Sudan. It is not inconsequential that, unlike apartheid South Africa, southerners and northerners constitutionally have equal rights, go to school together, can live together, and in many other respects are less divided than blacks and whites once were in South Africa.

Galvanising this movement has been the

church, which has sheltered and spawned a variety of initiatives. Students, as well, have begun organising, and the trade unions may also reassert their traditional progressive role, just as they did in South Africa. Another remarkable recent development, however, has been the success of groups such as the Kwoto Cultural Centre. Founded in 1994 as a popular theatre group, and bringing together youth from 20 southern Sudanese language groups, Kwoto (the word is from the Toposa language and refers to a sacred stone uniting the Ateker ethnic group living throughout Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia) has steadily expanded its outreach and impact. By promoting the richness of Sudanese culture through dance, music, poetry and theatre, Kwoto is reaching hundreds of thousands of Sudanese in the north and south, in displaced persons camps and universities, prisons and even the national theatre, with a subtle but powerful message of pride and dignity in diversity; an appeal for peace, democracy and human rights; and a vision of hope for a united and free nation. Kwoto's cultural and intellectual appeal is reminiscent of the Black Consciousness Movement of South Africa during the 1970s, but its emphasis on non-violence and tolerance is inspired by many others such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and certain Sudanese philosophers and artists. By nurturing a democratic culture, Kwoto is strengthening the grassroots foundations for the political and institutional changes that must follow.

Another promising development has been the independent press. Some journalists who have been critical of the government have been jailed as a result of their boldness, but they continue to publish. One of the most noteworthy of these is Alfred Taban, publisher of the *Khartoum Monitor*, an English-language daily newspaper. There are two million English-speaking southerners living around Khartoum, and many Arabic speakers also speak English. When the *Monitor* began publishing on 23 September 2000, it was the first northern outlet and forum for English-speakers. This was critical since it is unlikely that the war can be ended

until the grievances of southerners are heard and their perspectives are understood. Although the government has harassed the *Monitor*, the newspaper has managed to overcome this with persistence and determination. Every issue must now be cleared by the government censor. Censorship was first imposed on 12 December 2000, and has since been repeatedly lifted and reimposed. Taban was harassed and his house searched in December 2000. He was briefly detained along with the paper's editor, Albino Okeny, in February 2001, and detained again for six days in April 2001 and four days in October 2001, along with the managing editor, Nhial Bol. The paper was closed down on two occasions in September 2001 for a total of five days, and the staff is currently facing three court cases. Yet the *Khartoum Monitor* still publishes, not only serving as a voice for the southerners, but also airing the views of northerners, and has encouraged the dozen or so Arabic-language papers to become more independent and to recognise the concerns of southerners, whom they had previously ignored. Now even the government orders a bulk subscription.

Despite the high risks, human rights activism in Sudan is also growing stronger. Sudan's human rights record remains grim, but the pressure for reform not only from international groups such as CSI, Human Rights Watch and the exile-based Sudan Human Rights Organisation, but increasingly from domestic groups, is beginning to bear fruit. The government has expressed its intention to improve respect for human rights, but its political will to do so remains in doubt. Most political prisoners have been released from jail, although changes made this year in the Criminal Code Procedures and the National Security Act—which increased police powers and the length of detention time without charges—have opened the way for more abuse. Students at Sudan's universities have suffered increased persecution, including harassment and torture; newspapers continue to be censored and fined, and journalists arrested; and the resumption of

amputations as a punishment under shari'a law, particularly in Darfur, has been an especially disturbing development. Human rights violations associated with the civil war in Southern Sudan include 568 bombs dropped on non-military targets and the killing of more than 100 civilians in the past year. Meanwhile, fighting over land rights in Darfur last year led to the death of 1,376 from the Fur tribe and 271 from Arab tribes.

But the Khartoum Centre for Human Rights and Environmental Development opened in May 2001. The Centre works closely with the Amal Centre for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Physical and Mental Trauma, also in Khartoum, as well as several other organisations that have brought a new professionalism and openness to the human rights movement within Sudan by monitoring, documenting and disseminating information about the human rights situation in the country, as well as providing training, advocacy and assistance to victims of human rights abuse. Such boldness has come at a price, however. The director of the Amal Centre, Dr Nageeb el Toum, was arrested for two weeks last year, as was briefly his staff. Faisal el Bagir Mohamed, a journalist and human rights activist with the Khartoum Centre, was also briefly arrested and continues to be harassed. Tahani Ibrahim Ahmed, a student monitor, was suspended from college for 12 months for her human rights activities. Amir Mohamed Suliman, the director of the Khartoum Centre, has been harassed for his legal defence efforts; one of his witnesses was seized for five days and tortured by police. In January 2001, human rights lawyers Ghazi Suliman and Ali Mahmoud Hassanain were detained for more than 70 days, and Suliman was arrested again earlier this year. Mustafa Abdel Gadir was also arrested on 5 June 2001, for his legal defence of political activists. The Khartoum Centre and Amal Centre, as well as several other groups, all had their activities suspended for two weeks on 9 October 2001. Yet such repression seems only to have fuelled Sudan's human rights movement.

Although Sudan's new constitution gives women equal rights, in reality they still

suffer from a broad range of discriminatory laws. Sudanese women suffer not only from the violence, rape, torture, abduction and displacement of the war, but also from restrictions on freedom imposed under the Personal Laws of 1991. These include restrictions on dress, prohibitions on socialising with men, subordination to a male guardian, marriage as young as 10 years old, prohibition of marriage to a non-Muslim, inability to initiate a divorce even if the husband marries another wife, inability to move outside the household or to travel abroad without permission of a guardian, and the ability to inherit only half as much as a male. Non-Muslim women, many of whom are vulnerable refugees, are especially disadvantaged and treated harshly for violating prohibitions against offences such as adultery and the traditional brewing of beer. Security of the Community Police (formerly known as Public Order Police) have intensified their harassment of female students for dressing 'improperly', and the young women are subjected to summary trials before special tribunals which may then sentence them to jail, fines or flogging.

In a particularly notorious case last year in the province of Southern Darfur, an 18-year-old Christian Dinka woman, Abok Alfa Akok, was sentenced on 8 December 2001 to death by stoning for committing adultery. She was tried without a lawyer and the proceedings were in Arabic, a language she did not speak. Fortunately her case came to the attention of two lawyers who lodged an appeal which, after an international outcry, proved to be a limited success in that the sentence was at least reduced to 100 lashes. As the case of Abok illustrates, the struggle for human rights in Sudan's courts, although extremely difficult, is by no means hopeless. Sudan's Ministry of Justice is co-operating with some women's NGOs to review all of Sudan's laws to identify those that discriminate against women, and has allowed human rights training for its judicial officers and police and prison officers. By most accounts, the government has become less harsh in its application of laws, releasing hundreds of women who had been held for

brewing alcohol, for example, and easing up on enforcement of some of the other personal laws. Nevertheless, progress has been fragile and may be easily reversed. Another example of the growing power of Sudan's women's movement was when the Khartoum state government issued a unilateral decree which would have forbidden women from working in any job in the service sector that would bring them into contact with men. This included jobs at service stations, stores and restaurants. Women's organisations were quick and effective in articulating their opposition to this arbitrary law, alerting international partners through the internet, and ultimately forcing the government to withdraw the decree. In this case and others, women's networks have been able to generate greater political space by advocating for human rights and women's rights. It is noteworthy that many of Sudan's human rights activists are Arab Muslims who are finding common cause and endangering their own safety to help their Christian Sudanese brothers and sisters. A nice analogy might be South Africa's predominantly white Legal Resources Centre or Black Sash and the important role they played in fighting apartheid.⁸

The insecurity that pervades much of the south, and the essentially military-style government under which the SPLA has operated in the territories it controls have not been conducive to a flourishing civil society. Nevertheless, several new NGOs have also begun operating in the south on programmes such as economic self-help, women's rights, youth empowerment and education, a phenomenon virtually unknown until very recently. These groups are beginning to expand and deepen activities on the ground designed to achieve greater human rights protection and decrease the level of violence in the region.

The most positive recent developments in the south are a series of grassroots peace agreements that were bringing an end to much of the violence between the Dinka and Nuer even before the Garang-Machar agreement. This so-called 'People to People

Peace Process' has been spearheaded by the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC). After several preliminary meetings between Dinka and Nuer leaders, the NSCC organised the West Bank Peace and Reconciliation Conference, held in Wunlit, Bahr el Ghazal, in southern Sudan 27 February–8 March 1999. An airlift brought 150 Nuer delegates to Wunlit, which is in Dinka territory, and a total of 1,500 people participated in the conference, the housing and facilities for which were provided with volunteer labour. The conference began with the sacrifice of a Great White Bull, and concluded with the signing of the Wunlit Dinka-Nuer Covenant. Since Wunlit several similar conferences have been held, including one in Akobo on 18 August 2001, that brought together the Lou Nuer, the Gawaar Nuer and the Jikany; and one between the Dinka and Didinga in Kikilai near Chukudum on 20 August. In March 2002, warring factions of the Dinka/Padang, Nuer and Shilluk signed a peace covenant at the end of a three-day conference in Magang, northern Upper Nile. Some of these gains have been jeopardised by recent fighting, but they still represent a process that can be strengthened and pursued. Although the SPLA had at times demonstrated ambivalence about this peace process, since it did not directly control it, the popular groundswell for peace was apparently a major incentive for Garang and Machar to settle their differences.

These are only a few examples of Sudanese efforts to restore peace and democracy to their country in the absence of the political will from their leadership. There is a lot more going on. A new Sudan Civil Society Forum convened in Uganda in October 2002 by the NSCC and its northern counterpart, the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), is a recent example of civil society's effort to press not only for peace, but for democracy and respect for human rights. Will it be enough? In South Africa, the movement for democracy began in a similar way: a few enterprising journalists, a church meeting, a women's society protest, a trade union strike, a student demonstration, an

election boycott. Ordinary people started talking to each other, began to understand one another, and then to work together. Young new leaders gained experience, old leaders abandoned the past, and the masses mobilised to demand change. Sudan is not South Africa. Yet considerable inspiration can be drawn from the fact that sometimes a little courage can go a long way.

Just as the international community rallied to the aid of the non-violent democratic movement that led to South Africa's rescue from apartheid and the threat of full-scale civil war, so also does the potential for a resolution of the Sudanese conflict deserve the world's assistance. The triumph of civil society in Sudan would mean an end to one of the oldest and bloodiest wars of the past century. It could also mark the beginning of the nation's healing and the elimination of a potential breeding ground for terrorism in the new century that has suddenly come to seem much more dangerous than anyone ever thought it would be.

Notes

- 1 Sudan, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 28, 15th edition, 1993, pp 255-6.
- 2 For a review of these negotiations, see S Wondu and A Lesch, *Battle for peace in Sudan*, University Press of America, 2000.
- 3 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, op cit, pp 262-270.
- 4 Human Rights Watch, *Abuses by all parties in the war in southern Sudan*, 1994.
- 5 For a balanced recent review of the issue, see Slavery, abduction and forced servitude in Sudan, Report of the International Eminent Persons Group, 22 May 2002.
- 6 K Vick, Sudan, newly helpful, remains wary of US, *Washington Post*, 10 December 2001, p A15.
- 7 K Richburg, Worldwide sympathy mixed with caution, *Washington Post*, 16 September 2001, p A18.
- 8 An excellent review is the Annual report on the human rights situation in Sudan, March 2001–March 2002, Sudan Organisation Against Torture, London.