

On Being A Sudanese In A Changing World

Address delivered at the Luncheon offered by the Sudanese Studies Association on the occasion of its 28th Conference, East Lansing, Michigan, 24, May 2009

Dr Nureldin Satti*

Who exactly is a Sudanese? This question is answered in many conflicting ways even today, one hundred eighty-seven years after the inception of the Sudan in its present borders. The failure to adequately answer this question emanates from the different interpretations that are given to the Sudanese identity and to agree on objective and realistic criteria and parameters for the definition of that identity which continues to be given a reductive and exclusionary definition. That definition, as well as its political, socio-cultural and ethnic applications has resulted in a deep political and social crisis, practically since the Independence of Sudan, which has led to what is now being called the revolution of the “margins” (Alhawamish) which threatens, if not adequately addressed, to lead to the fragmentation and total dislocation of the country. The question which now persistently poses itself is *for how long will Sudan continue to exist in its present borders? In other words, the question now is: the Sudan, **to be or not to be?***

The year 2011 is a crucial landmark: it is the year of the Referendum when the Southern Sudanese will probably

** Ambassador Nureldin Satti is a retired Sudanese diplomat and Senior UN official. He also served as Acting Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Burundi in Burundi.*

vote for the secession of Southern Sudan. This will constitute the death of a dream: the dream of unity in diversity of the Sudanese people, symbolizing that of the African continent; a dream turned into a nightmare due to the stubbornness, selfishness and lack of vision of politicians and intellectuals. The Sudan seems to be like a derailed train, which is being precipitated towards the precipice with nobody being able to stop it from going over the cliff.

The failure of the Sudanese to live together in peace and harmony is yet another evidence that it is not the physical borders that makes a country but rather the will and the wish of the people to live together. What makes a house is not its walls, but rather the spirit of togetherness and the living space that it creates which is conducive to mutual understanding, conviviality and respect. It is that feeling of sameness; solidarity and common purpose that binds its inhabitants and makes them feel that living together is worthwhile.

This seems to no longer be the case in the Sudan. Or this is what we are made to think by the harbingers of division and separation. But the question is: should we despair or is there still room for hope?

To answer that question, let me share with you a thought I always had concerning the Sudan's single predicament: *I always wondered what keeps the Sudan together.* The mighty Soviet Union came and went; Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia are no more; but Sudan is still there despite the longest civil war in Africa, the war in Darfur, in the East and all the other movements of dissidence or protest in the various parts of the country, including the North, long considered to be the fiefdom of dominant oligarchies of power in the country. Sudan is still there despite the horrific mistakes by its ruling elite,

intellectuals and power mongers who have committed all the mistakes and crimes in the book. *But will this continue to be the case, and for how long?*

What keeps the Sudan, and the Sudanese, together is probably that *Sudanness* or *Sudanawiyya* that I described in my articles in the Seventies and Eighties of last century. * It is that *being* which is better expressed and lived in the *margins* or *hawamish* than it is in the center because the *hawamish* remain to be the custodians and the reservoir of the *Sudanawiyya* in its simplicity, frugality, patience and generosity, untainted by modernity, greed and dubious wealth. It is that feeling that I call *the least common denominator*, opposed to the greater common denominator predicated by those who will not accept less than the full conversion of the Sudanese to one culture and to one religion.

What are the core values that have kept the Sudan and the Sudanese together within the same borders for the last one hundred and eighty seven years? Some may say that it is only the borders, nothing more. But, as we said earlier, it is not the walls that make the house but what is within the walls. We should also recall that in the case of the Sudan, the walls are porous, permeable and fluid. The Sudanese personality is more distinguished by its openness than by its isolation from its

- *See my articles in Majallat Althagafa Alsudaniyya, 1979-1980, titled "Dialogue between the Cultural Components of the Sudanese nation". In those articles, I advocate for the "Sudanawiyya", meaning Sudanness or sudanism which a calls for a new vision of the Sudanese identity based on recognition of diversity, equal rights and equitable citizenship.*

surrounding environment. *Openness* is one such characteristic of the Sudanese that helped keep them together. The Sudanese are at their best and are in their natural element when they open up to each other and to their surrounding environs to the North, South, East and West; and they are at their worst when they shut off their eyes, minds and hearts to these surroundings and pay allegiance exclusively to one or the other social, cultural, regional or ethnic affiliation, to the exclusion of all others.

Sudanese identity was partly shaped by the various movements of population from North, West, East and central Africa. These movements and migrations have given the Sudanese people their unique personality and their single identity as Sudanese. It has also given the Sudan its unique position in Africa as a melting pot of peoples and cultures and as a rainbow nation in the making.

This unique position of the Sudan and the Sudanese people does not seem to be sufficiently understood or appreciated by all Sudanese, particularly the politicians, thinkers, intellectuals and the shapers of public opinion who would like to reduce the Sudan to a single culture, religion or ethnic or racial affiliation. This discriminatory and elitist way of thinking has led to the exclusion or marginalization of large spans of Sudanese regions and cultures, to the control of the levers of power and social and economic promotion by cultures of central Sudan and to the emergence and radicalization of dissident and rebellion movements in the peripheral areas of the country. This came as a result of the growing awareness of those populations of their socioeconomic marginalization and their lack of access to the levers of power.

The global movement for human, social, cultural and economic rights and the call for a new way to deal with issues of governance, in addition to the call for the empowerment of civil society institutions, further enhanced this new and growing awareness. This global agenda, internalized by the Sudanese civil society will undoubtedly shape the future trends of Sudanese political and social life, come sun or come rain.

What is new is that the dissidence and rebellion movement that for decades had been kept within the margins is now moving closer to the centers of power in the capital Khartoum and in the Northern provinces. This signals a quality change in the nature of the movement: it is no longer only a rebellion of the “margins” against a hegemonic power center, but rather a deeper social and political movement of protest that will have far-reaching effects on the manner in which Sudan will be governed in the future. This new movement calls for a long-term vision, which embraces in a holistic manner the problems of the country with the objective of drawing a political, social and economic road map, which takes into consideration the deep social, demographic and political transformations in the society.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) has partially addressed some of the underlying issues of sharing of power and wealth but has done so in a fragmentary manner and the fact that it is only limited to Southern Sudan leaves the rest of the country in the cold. We hasten to say that the CPA is a landmark agreement that has provided, in an ingenious manner, the framework for the resolution of the problems between North and South, thus stopping the civil war in Southern Sudan. The CPA implementation should be continued with the objective of the full implementation of the agreement. Meanwhile, we should walk the extra mile and push for a

holistic approach to the resolution of the problems of the Sudan. A piecemeal approach will only further exacerbate the competition between the regions and within the political class for getting a bigger share of the national cake.

The new roadmap for governance in the Sudanese should address the issue of the equitable re-distribution of power and wealth between the capital Khartoum and the regions. This includes the Northern regions, some of which are as marginalized as the East, west and South if not more.

There is, of course, a history behind that hegemony and for the accumulation of power, wealth and knowledge in the central areas of the Sudan. This has to do with the early exposure of these areas to education, trade and other influences from the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, West and Central Africa in such a way that has created a relatively affluent and dynamic society in these areas while other remoter or less accessible areas of the Sudan remained in a state of isolation and marginalization. Successive national governments failed to adequately address issues of governance, citizenship, and socioeconomic development and further exacerbated the isolation and marginalization of these areas. Prolonged civil wars in Southern Sudan, Darfur and the East have not made the situation any better and have further worsened the predicament of the populations of these areas.

The Sudanese take pleasure in telling stories of past tolerance and openness of spirit of their national or tribal leaders. The most famous among those anecdotes are the ones about Deng Majok, Chief of Abieye, and Banu Nimir, Chief of the Misseiriyya, who were good friends and were able to keep the good relations between their two tribal groups in a situation of acute competition over land, pasture and water resources. It is

to be regretted that those two role models have not been emulated and that the Sudanese find themselves in a situation where Abieye that used to be considered by many as a symbol of peace and harmony between North and South is now being taken to international arbitration. This alone says volumes about the failure of the Sudanese to find negotiated solutions to their problems.

The openness of mind that characterized the Sudanese and got the Sudan going despite the many problems that plagued it has been eroded by the spirit of radicalization, exclusion and obscurantism that has befallen Sudan during the last two or three decades. Dogmatism, religious extremism and politics of exclusion have taken their toll on the Sudanese society. These politics have drawn the various components of the Sudanese society farther apart and caused further radicalization and feelings of exclusion and marginalization and deepened the social, cultural and political crisis and the growing chasm between the center of power in the capital, Khartoum, and the peripheries in the South, East and West. This crisis, which is of a political nature, has exposed, more than ever, the 'historical' grievances of the marginalized areas against the center of power in Khartoum and the Northern provinces. The culture of dissidence and contestation, introduced by the SPLM/SPLA in the early Eighties, has gained new heights in the Eastern and Western Regions and is threatening the unity and cohesion of the country in an unprecedented manner. We should hasten to say that the Government in place is not making things any easier by always taking the wrong choice and introducing divide-to-rule policies that have further complicated the problem rather than helped finding a solution to it.

But the major challenge to the Sudanese identity is not only the perceived incongruousness and lack of harmony between its

basic ingredients but more particularly the future cohesiveness of that identity in the face of new challenges and changing times. It is particularly about finding the right answers to the right questions.

The first question is that of unity in diversity. It is important that the Sudanese realize that unity does not, and should not, mean uniformity. A fully uniform country does not exist and diversity is in the nature of things, whether biological, physiological, social, cultural, linguistic, religious or economic.

The second question is that of equality. No viable society can be created on the foundations of segregation, discrimination or injustice. In their movement towards building a sound, healthy and equitable society, the Sudanese should endeavor to identify the sources and causes of inequity and discrimination and take all measures towards their eradication. These inequalities, and the grievances that ensue from them, are the main root causes of conflicts, armed or not, that have beleaguered the Sudan for so long. The feeling that there are first class citizens, mainly Northern and Muslim, and second-class citizens, mainly Southern and non-Muslim has given rise to claims of marginalization, oppression and persecution. Any further delay in addressing those grievances will only lead to further polarization and may ultimately lead to the unraveling of the state and the society.

The third question is that of basic freedoms, democracy and human rights. A country like Sudan cannot be governed without due respect to the freedom of expression, democracy and human rights. Perceiving these core values as “conditionalities” of the international community is no alibi for not implementing them. There is, of course, a need to do some serious work towards the adaptation of these universal values

to the Sudanese situation in full respect of its culture, traditions and socioeconomic conditions but at the end of the day, no real progress can be made on the political and governance level without the application of these basic values. More than any other country, Sudan needs the application of these values due to its political, socio-cultural and ethnic diversity and to the complex problems of governance which call for a sustained national debate over these issues in order to build a national consensus around them. Such a debate cannot be held in the absence of the full respect for the freedom of expression, democracy and human rights.

End of the old order and birth of a new one:

Undoubtedly, the Sudanese society is more fragmented now than any time in the past. This is partly due to the fact that the old social order is dying and that the new one is not born yet. The birth of the new order will undoubtedly be a tedious and laborious one. It is in these moments of painful social transformations that societies are at their weakest. The failure of the political class and the government of the day to forecast, comprehend and adequately address these transformations, or in many cases going against them, further complicates the social and political crisis and leads to all kinds of confrontations. The ongoing wars and conflicts in the Sudan are the symptoms of a deep crisis which is political in its manifestations but the root causes of which are historical, cultural and socioeconomic.

The end of the new order manifests itself in the following developments:

1 – The end of the feudalistic society:

The remaining pockets of feudalism in western, eastern and northern Sudan have been gradually phased out due to the positive effects of education and the emergence of new types of socio-economic relations. This partly explains the progressive disaffection for the traditional parties and the void that has been created due to that fact.

2 – The erosion of the virtuous, generous and benevolent Sudanese personality. The current crisis in the Sudanese society and the deep social and economic transformations, which it is undergoing, has laid bare the fragility of the centuries old claims of the generosity and compassion. The Sudanese are negatively affected by pervasive consumerism and opportunistic pseudo-capitalistic behavior

3 – The rise of the “margins” and re-formation of governance institutions:

The rebellions in the “margins” and their claim to their share of power and wealth are symptoms of the deep political and social crisis and pose, in a persistent manner, the issue of governance in the Sudan. This calls for the redefinition of the basic premises upon which Sudan has been constituted and governed and for a more equitable participation of the “margins” in governance at the regional and central levels. This calls for a creative look at the governance institutions and structures in the Sudan. A combination of a genuinely federal and con-federal systems can be a way out of the present predicament.

4 – Making unity attractive:

Unity should remain the first option of the Sudanese. Making unity attractive is the responsibility of all Sudanese; not only

that of the two signatories of the CPA. A **national debate** should be held around this issue so that all Sudanese can be associated in making unity attractive rather than making it the sole monopoly of the NCP and the SPLM/SPLA.

5 -The end of totalitarianism:

The temptation and the practice of totalitarianism have been deep-rooted in the Sudanese society. Before being a political phenomenon, which indeed it is, totalitarianism is a social and cultural one promoted by tradition, negative socialization, power relations and education. It is, however, being more and more evident that totalitarianism, whether social, ideological, political, cultural, religious or ethnic is losing its grip on the Sudanese society due to the promotion of freedom of expression, culture of diversity and novel intellectual, cultural and religious ideas and social practices.

5 – The failure of the totalitarian approach to the “Islamist Project” based on forced Islamization, oppression, exclusion and culture of uniformity. The last twenty years have shown the limitations of that project and its non-applicability in a multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious society like the Sudanese society. The CPA has demonstrated the possibility for the Islamist Project to accommodate and be accommodated by competing social and political projects. This experience should be further developed and improved upon; but the final choice should be made by the people in an open democratic debate.

6 – Sudan as a central player in regional integration:

At the end of the day, a viable and sustainable solution to the problems of Sudan can only be done in the context of regional integration. This is mainly due to the inter-relations and inter-

connectedness between Sudan and its neighbors. The fact that most conflicts take place in the “peripheries” and “margins” call for a regional approach to the resolution of conflicts and to the transformation of areas of conflict into poles of development and integration.

The New Sudanese Order:

The new Sudanese order can only be predicated on the bases of equality, freedom and democracy and socioeconomic development. The Sudan, which is yet to come, will be the result of the struggle and interaction of many social, political and regional forces, which will influence and create this new order. But for the new Sudan to be democratic it has to be diverse and equitable at the same time. It should also be able to resolve issues such as the relation between religion and the state that has only been partially resolved by the CPA; the issue of governance and the interrelation between the center and the peripheries; the issue of identity, which can only be resolved within an all-embracing framework that recognizes the equity and basic rights of all Sudanese and a constitutional and governance framework that recognizes, guarantees and enforces those rights.

It is only by applying these basic principles within the framework of the rule law that all Sudanese will learn to give the right answer to the question of “Who is a Sudanese”. It will then be the answer on which all the Sudanese will agree because it reflects all their affiliations, aspirations and vested interests.