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THE RISE AND FALL OF POLITICAL ISLAM IN SUDAN[2]

Abstract

In April 2019, Sudan's long-serving President Omar al-Bashir was deposed in a bloodless military coup d'état, which took place amid a major wave of popular protests in the country. The present paper aims to assess the historic path of Sudanese Islamists toward the seizure of power in the course of the 1989 Salvation Revolution and their role in domestic and foreign policies of the Republic of the Sudan in 1989-2019. It will be argued that by the time of the demise of the regime in 2019 political Islam in Sudan had fully eroded and could no longer serve as an effective instrument of legitimization for the government of al-Bashir and that the return of the Islamists to power is improbable.

Keywords: Sudan, political Islam, Islamism, al-Bashir, military coups, political transition

Introduction

Notwithstanding the present-day political and economic crisis, the Republic of Sudan remains a pivotal African country, which possesses rich land resources (it even used to be called an Arab "bread-basket") and a relatively developed industrial base, and which occupies a strategic position at the crossroads of North Africa, Tropical Africa and the Middle East. Despite the separation of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011, Sudan is still one of largest countries in Africa, trailing only Algeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and its territory is comparable to the area of Western Europe. The contemporary significance of the country is buttressed by its rich and fascinating history: the ancestors of modern Sudanese were the founders of some of the most ancient states in the world –

Nubia, Meroe, Napata and Axum.

Indeed, modern Sudan may be considered the amalgamation of ancient African civilizations and Arab influence. The Arabs first came to North Africa in approximately 1000 BCE, but their immigration from the Arabian Peninsula to the region intensified in the second half of the 1st millennium CE, and to Sudan – at the turn of the 1st and 2nd millenia CE. Islam was spreading along with the Arabs, who initially established considerable presence in the northeast regions of modern Sudan bordering the Red Sea, as well as in the valley of the Nile, penetrating further and further south along the river.

By the late 15th – early 16th centuries CE, the political and economic apex of African civilization in the region was to be found in the sultanates of Darfur and Sennar, which successfully resisted Arab encroachment but adopted the religion and, to a certain extent, the language of the latter. For instance, for several centuries, the court of the Sultan of Darfur spoke both Arabic and Fur languages. Islam was adopted by the Fur people as the state religion in the 16th century CE. The dissemination of Islam was also facilitated by the movement of Muslim pilgrims from West Africa to Mecca through Darfur and Sennar, some of whom chose to settle in the sultanates. In addition, an important role in the sultanates was played by graduates of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, one of the chief centers of Islamic and Arabic learning in the world, which had been founded at the end of the 1st millennium CE. Indeed, the proximity of Al-Azhar to Sudan will also play a critical role in the spread of Islamism in the country in the 20th century.

In the 19th century, the territory of modern Sudan was consolidated by Turco-Egyptian and then British colonialists. The rule of the former was marked by the cooperation with the Khatmiyya Sufi order (*tariqa*), which the Egyptians co-opted in order to solidify the control of Sudan. This contributed greatly to the importance of Islam in general and Sufi orders in particular in the political life of Sudan in the following decades.

The politicization of Islam in Sudan

While the foundations of political Islam in Sudan had been laid during the Turkiyya (the rule of the Turkish-Egyptian and Anglo-Egyptian administrations in 1820-1885), it came to play the critical role under the Sudanese Mahdiyya – the national liberation uprising and the subsequent state-building project led by Muhammad Ahmad bin Abdullah and his followers in 1881-1898.

Excessive taxes levied by the authorities, the compulsion to grow sugar cane and cotton – the main articles of Egypt's exports – instead of grain crops, and the artificial reduction of prices on locally produced goods led to the depletion of fertile soils, impoverishment of the population and the depopulation of large swaths of land in Sudan.[3] The country had been rioting with little success since

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3   Sergei Smirnov, *A History of Sudan (1821-1956),* Nauka, Moscow, 1968, p. 50.

1877, but in 1881 the Muslim preacher Muhammad Ahmad bin Abdullah proclaimed himself the Mahdi (messiah) and called on all Muslims to disobey the authorities of Egyptian Sudan and to begin the armed struggle against infidels, which according to him included not only the Europeans, but also the Turks.[4] The uprising was joined by peasants, nomads, artisans and slaves who were discontent with severe economic and labor exploitation of the colonial regime.

The hotbed of the uprising was Darfur (occupied by the colonial authorities since 1874), where the rebel cause attracted both Arab tribes such as *Baggara* and non-Arab groups such as *Furs*. *Baggara* herders made up most of the Mahdi's army when he routed the Anglo-Egyptian forces at the battle of Shaykan in 1883. Consequently, in 1883, Darfur became the first territory liberated from the Turkiyya.

Interestingly, the concept of jihad – an armed struggle against foreign oppression inspired by religious Islamic leaders – had been brought to Sudan by Muslim pilgrims, just as the talk of the imminent coming of the Mahdi, which had initially spread in West Africa and then disseminated along the Hajj routes.[5]

The Mahdist movement managed to unite for the first time peoples of the Nile Valley, Darfur and Kordofan (a region between Darfur to the west and the Nile to the east, formerly under the control of Sennar) against a foreign colonial force on the ideological basis of Islam. In fact, the Mahdist revolt entailed an alliance of disparate peoples on a much larger scale than any other movement the colonial authorities had faced or would face in the region. When, in January 1885, the Mahdists drove back the Turkish-Egyptian troops and killed General Charles Gordon, the British governor of Sudan, a shock wave swept through capitals of Europe, Turkey and other major powers.[6]

The very fact of the establishment of the first independent state in Sudan on the basis of Islam and the strict obedience of Sharia law and its injunctions has left a lasting impression on Sudan's elites and the general public. This was especially true for Sudanese Islamists in the second half of the 20th century, who considered the Mahdiyya the Golden Age in the history of their country.[7]

Indeed, the Mahdiyya was the first attempt to establish a united and independent state by inhabitants of Sudan. It started off as a radical (jihadist) theocracy, which initially was run as a military camp. The western provinces of Darfur and Kordofan became outposts of Mahdism and the corresponding Ansar movement, which resembled a Sufi brotherhood. At the same time, the Ansar was not an ordinary Sufi order, since the Mahdi was a "post-Sufist" and argued that the days of the Sufi brotherhoods had come to an end (in the messianic sense) and that only one single order remained – that of Prophet Muhammad, whom he – the Mahdi – represented. Thus, the Ansar Brotherhood combined an anti-Sufi

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4   *Africa. Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, Institute for African Studies, Moscow, 2010, p. 348.

5   Mohammed Ahmed Kani, *The Intellectual Origin of Islamic Jihad in Nigeria*, al-Hoda, London, 1988, p. 43.

6   Winston Churchill, *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1899, p.34.

7   Konstantin Polyakov, *Islamic Fundamentalism in Sudan*, Institute for Israel and Middle East Moscow, 2000, pp. 57-58.

stance with Sufi organizational structure and prayers.[8] It must also be noted here that historically in Sudan, unlike in many other Islamic countries, there has been little conflict between the established clergy (*ulama*) and the Sufi orders, but rather they have been cooperating or allied[9], which has led to the prevalence of horizontal rather than vertical tensions within the Muslim community.

The Mahdist rule would bring about the enduring competition between the Ansar (followers of the Mahdi) and the Khatmiyya (who had collaborated with the Turkish-Egyptian authorities under the leadership of the Mirghani family that had immigrated from Hejaz). During the years of the Mahdiyya, the leadership of the Khatmiyya was forced into voluntary exile in Egypt. The Khatmiyya did not join the Mahdist movement as they did not recognize the messianic nature of the Mahdi and also saw the rise of the Ansar as a threat to their position and privileges.[10] This conflict would manifest itself in the colonial and post-colonial years in the fierce political competition (interspersed with periods of collaboration) between the National Umma Party (founded in 1945 with the assistance of Sayyid Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi, the posthumous son of the Mahdi and Imam of the Ansar order) and the National Unionist Party (established in 1952 by members of the Khatmiyya order; currently – the Democratic Unionist Party). The Ansar (Mahdiyya) and the Khatmiyya had undoubtedly the largest following among all *tariqas* in Sudan and exerted a significant political influence. Their power bases were to be found mostly among the rural population (the Ansar enjoyed the greatest support in the west and the center of the country, while the Khatmiyya had many supporters in the north). Politically, the Ansar would occupy a pro-independence stance, invoking the memories of the existence of independent sultanates in Darfur and Sennar and of the united Sudan under the Mahdist regime, while the Khatmiyya would advocate for closer relations or even unification with Egypt.[11]

As a result of the war of 1896-1898, the Mahdist state was destroyed by the British. According to the convention concluded between Great Britain and Egypt in January 1899, Sudan was declared a condominium, i.e. a joint possession of the two powers, and became officially known as Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. However, despite the collapse of the first centralized state in Sudan, Islam's role as the backbone of the country's political system and nation-building project has been recognized ever since.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan

The period in the late 19th – early 20th centuries in Islamic thought was marked

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8   Ibrahim Abd al-Rahman Abubaker, *Development and Administration in Southern Darfur*, University of Khartoum, Khartoum, 1977, p. 36.

9   Ahmed Al-Shahi, A Noah's Ark: The Continuity of the Khatmiyya Order in Northern Sudan, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1981, p. 15.

10   Ibidem, p. 17.

11   Ibidem, p. 13.

by an emergence of the so-called revivalists – Islamic reformers that sought to revive the past glory of Islam and reestablish its purity, but accompany this with the embrace of Western technological advances. The most prominent figures in the Arab revivalist movement were Jamal-al-Din Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida.[12]

The Arab revivalism inspired Hassan al-Banna, an Egyptian schoolteacher, who in 1928 established the Society of the Muslim Brothers (the Muslim Brotherhood). At the core of al-Banna's ideology lay the principle of Islam's all-encompassing nature as the regulator of all aspects of human life and society, not least politics. Al-Banna also rejected Sufi practices to the extent that they contradicted the Koran and Sunnah (traditional customs and practices of Prophet Muhammad). Another important element of his ideology was the struggle against Western values, norms and ideologies, including Communism.

Meanwhile, in Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, the British authorities revived the old Turco-Egyptian policy of the co-optation of the local population in society, politics, and economic life with the assistance of Muslim orders – in particular, the Khatmiyya. At the beginning of the Anglo-Egyptian administration, Sayyid Ali al-Mirghani of the Khatmiyya was recognized as the sole religious and political leader in Sudan. While the Khatmiyya never supported the establishment of a theocracy in the country and always separated the spheres of religion and politics, it indeed took advantage of sectarian affiliation to develop a political base in society.[13]

Yet the destruction of the Mahdist state, which by the time of its defeat had evolved from a theocracy into an ordinary feudal state governed by the bureaucratic elites, did not mean the collapse of the Ansar order. Conversely, under the British governors, ideas of the Mahdists became increasingly popular with Sudan's national elites that were interested in the regaining of independence by the country. In the late 1930s – early 1940s, the colonial authorities started to accept the idea of self-determination of the Sudanese and offered self-rule to Sudan. In 1953, Britain granted Sudan self-government. In general, the playing field in Sudan's domestic politics in these years seemed to be divided nearly exclusively between the Ansar and the Khatmiyya.

It may be said that from the late 1940s to the late 1970s, political Islam (Islamism) in Sudan underwent three important stages. During the first stage, in the late 1940s, a group of Islamist students started to spread the culture of political Islam, markedly different from Sufi Islam that was dominant at that time, having the most success in urban centers. The adoption of such Islam demanded the strict fulfillment of the Koran, especially in terms of rituals, and the total rejection of alcohol.

12 "Islamic Modernism and Islamic Revival", in: *Atlas of the World's Religions*, available at: *http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t253/e9*, (date accessed: 11.12.2020).

13 Ahmed Al-Shahi, A Noah's Ark: The Continuity of the Khatmiyya Order in Northern Sudan, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1981, p. 17.

The introduction of the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood was mostly carried out by Sudanese who had studied in Egyptian universities, where al-Banna's influence had become noticeable. Among the Sudanese students sent home by the Egyptian Brotherhood to disseminate the ideology of the Movement were Jamal al-Din al-Sanhuri, Sadiq Abdallah Abd al-Majid and al-Swim Muhammad Ibrahim. In 1947-1948, the first two set up branches of the Brotherhood in several small Sudanese towns; al-Swim founded the Islamic Liberation Movement at Gordon College (the University of Khartoum after 1956) with the aim of fighting Communism and establishing a socialist Islamic state. In Darfur, the first cell of the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in the early 1950s by Suleiman Mustafa Abakar, a local teacher who had studied at Al-Azhar and became the first Brother in the region.[14]

The second period, which began in 1951, was marked by the massive recruitment into the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood, which at the time and until the late 1980s remained closely associated with its Egyptian parent organization. The Brothers developed a strong power base among the labor organizations, as well as among high school and university students. In this, the Brotherhood was facing the main competitor in the face of the Sudanese Communist Party. In response, it adopted the organizational structure used by the Communists, i.e. the network of clandestine cells, informed by infiltrators in competing groups.[15] The Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood was officially founded in August 1954. However, most of the followers of the Brotherhood in those years retained their loyalty to Sufi orders, mostly to the Khatmiyya.[16]

In 1955, the Brotherhood established the Islamic Constitution Front (ICF) as an umbrella organization for proponents of the adoption of an Islamic constitution[17], which would supposedly become a remedy for the bitterest problems of Sudan – the conflict in the South of the country and socio-economic backwardness. Evidently, the Brothers' goal was to use the single-issue approach to extend their influence over a wide sector of society. In this the ICF faced the opposition of the Ansar and the Khatmiyya, which did not want to yield the laurels of the builders of an Islamic state in Sudan to the Muslim Brothers.[18]

At the same time, the military in Sudan for the first time became strongly involved in politics.[19] In 1958, General Ibrahim Abboud led a coup d'état and took

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14 Sharif Harir, Recycling the Past in the Sudan: An Overview of Political Decay, in: *Short-Cut to Decay: The Case of the Sudan*, Harir Sharif, Tvedt Terje & Badal Raphael (eds.) Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, 1994, p. 40.

15 Ahmed M. Abdel Ghaffar M., "One Against All: The National Islamic Front (NIF) and Sudanese Sectarian and Secular Parties", available at: *https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/3115-one-against-all-the-national-islamic-front-nif.pdf* (date accessed: 11.11.2020).

16 Gabriel Warburg, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan: from Reforms to Radicalism", available at: *https://actveng.haifa.ac.il/PDF/article/Muslim_BROTHERS_fin.pdf,* (date accessed: 05.12.2020).

17 Ahmed M. Abdel Ghaffar M., "One Against All: The National Islamic Front (NIF) and Sudanese Sectarian and Secular Parties. . ."

18 Ismail bin Matt, "Toward an Islamic constitutional Government in Sudan", in: *Association of Muslim Social Scientists 35th Annual Conference "Muslim Identities: Shifting Boundaries and Dialogues"*, Hartford, CT., 27—29 October 2006, p. 6.

19 Tatyana Denisova, *Tropical Africa: The Evolution of Political Leadership*, Institute for African Studies, Moscow, 2016, p. 333.

over the government. In November 1959, a group of the Brothers led by Al Rashid al-Tahrir entered in an unlikely alliance with the Communists and army officers in an attempt (the third that year) to overthrow the increasingly unpopular military regime of Abboud. While the coup d'état failed and the plotters were arrested, the political ambitions of the Brotherhood were made clear.

The beginning of the third phase can be attributed to the successful 1965 election campaign in North Kutum, which had been made possible by the fall of Abboud's regime in 1964 and which became the first political action of the Brothers in Darfur. The victory of Suleiman Mustafa Abakar, who ran as a representative of the Muslim Brotherhood, in the elections to the city council of the town of Kutum was largely achieved due to the personal involvement of Hassan al-Turabi, the leader of the Sudanese Brothers. In fact, the Brotherhood won this constituency from the Umma Party, which had long been the most influential political force in Darfur, including the region of North Kutum.

The Muslim Brothers' Path toward the National Salvation Revolution

Since the mid-1960s, the spread of Islamism was mostly the business of the Muslim Brotherhood, despite the emergence of other Islamic groups, such as Wahhabists, including, for instance, the Ansar al-Sunnah (Defenders of the Sunnah); traditionalist factions of the Brothers (who disagreed with al-Turabi's mainstream Sudanese Brotherhood on various issues such as the cooperation with the regime or rights of the women); or Takfirists, who advocated for the use of indiscriminate violence to achieve the goal of Islamization.

In 1964, the ICF formally reincarnated under the name of the Islamic Charter Front (also ICF). This Islamic movement came to unite over 50 Islamist and fundamentalist groups under the general guidance of the Muslim Brotherhood, headed by Hassan al-Turabi, the energetic thirty-two-year-old graduate of the University of Khartoum and Sorbonne University in Paris. The Islamists were fully engaged in political life until the next military coup in 1969, which was led by Colonel Jaafar an-Nimeiry, who was supported by nationalist officers and trade unions and who opposed Islamists. Hassan al-Turabi and many other prominent figures of the Islamic movement, as well as hundreds of their ordinary followers, were placed behind bars; the ICF was officially dissolved.

While initially Nimeiry sought alliance with the Sudanese Communist Party and the USSR, the failed coup d'état of 1971, carried out by a group of pro-Communist army officers, led him to reverse his policies: he began to drew closer to the West and China. A campaign of brutal repression against Sudan's Communists followed. Nimeiry, however, faced opposition not only from the left, but also from the right. In the early 1970s, there were numerous abortive coup attempts against Nimeiry, carried out by right-wing officers supported by the Brotherhood

and Sudan's traditionalists, the Ansar and the Khatmiyya.[20]

In 1973, these political forces set up a joint anti-Nimeiry movement – the National Front (NF) – an umbrella-type organization that was established through the merger of the overseas branches of the Umma Party, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP, successor of the National Unionist Party), the Muslim Brotherhood and a number of smaller political parties and organizations. The NF was led by Sadiq al-Mahdi, Hussein al-Hindi and Hassan al-Turabi. The organization had offices in Jeddah, London, Mecca, Cairo, Tripoli, Beirut, Addis Ababa and Rome. The front enjoyed the support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, had significant financial resources and armed units that were trained in Libya and Ethiopia. The NF repeatedly attempted to overthrow the Nimeiry regime by force. The largest putsches were carried out in January 1973, November 1974, May and September 1975, July 1976.[21]

However, by the mid-1970s, the situation had reached a deadlock. The ruling regime realized that it could not completely destroy the right-wing opposition. In fact, many of the left-wing elements in the state apparatus and security services had been replaced by the sympathizers of the right-wing. On the other hand, Nimeiry still enjoyed support of the military, so the opposition could not take power by force. Given the situation, the country's leadership decided to reach a compromise with the right opposition by granting it a limited right to participate in the country's political life, as well as in its governance processes, in exchange for stopping the subversive activities of the NF militants. This, nonetheless, was not enough for Nimeiry: he decided to actively employ the popularity of Islam in the country to expand his support base. Nimeiry, apparently, set out to solidify his power by turning Sudan into an Islamic state.

Correspondingly, Nimeiry made a deal with the Islamists. In 1977, Hassan al-Turabi and his supporters were released from prison. A year later, the leader of the Sudanese Islamists was introduced to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the ruling (and the sole) party in the country – the Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU). Finally, in August 1979, al-Turabi was appointed to the position of Attorney General of Sudan, where he, on the orders of Nimeiry, started to prepare a set of measures to introduce Sharia law into the legal system. Simultaneously, he was facilitating the inclusion of his followers in the political and military establishment in the country. By the early 1980s, the Islamists had firmly integrated into Sudan's elites and established independent channels of funding – both internal, in particular connected to the rapidly developing Islamic banking in Sudan, and external, which relied on Sudanese diasporas in the West and foreign sponsors. For instance, in 1978, the establishment of the Faysal Islamic Bank enabled the Brotherhood to obtain access to credit and to a share in profits.[22]

20 Ibidem.

21 Konstantin Polyakov, *Islamic Fundamentalism in Sudan*, Institute for Israel and Middle East Moscow, 2000, p. 209, 277.

22 Gabriel Warburg, *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in Sudan since the Mahdiyya*, Hurst and Company, London, 2003, p. 212.

In 1983, the law that demanded the correspondence of all legislation to Sharia was passed. Over the following two years, Islamization from above spread to all spheres of life. The sale of alcohol was prohibited, as was bank interest, and an Islamic taxation system was introduced. Meanwhile, the fires of the rebellion in the South, which had been pacified by Nimeiry with great difficulty in 1972, re-ignited, as Christian and animist population saw the introduction of Sharia as a break with previously reached agreements.

In April 1985, a successful military coup d'état against Nimeiry finally took place in Sudan. It happened after more than a week of civil unrest, caused by increasing food prices and growing dissatisfaction with the government. The coup was organized by Colonel General Abdel Rahman al-Dahab, who had been appointed the Minister of Defense and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces by Nimeiry shortly beforehand. Al-Dahab announced the transfer of power to the Transitional Military Council and in his address to the nation explained that the armed forces had taken power because of the dire situation in the country and the looming political crisis. Curiously, shortly before the coup, Nimeiry arrested al-Turabi and dozens of his fellow Islamists in an attempt to blame them for the mismanagement of the country.[23]

In the wake of the coup d'état, the Brothers quickly regained their positions and sought to take full advantage of a new cycle of political liberalization. The ICF was transformed into the National Islamic Front (NIF) in May 1985. The power, however, fell in the hands of the alliance of the Umma and the DUP; Sadiq al-Mahdi became the Prime-minister in May 1986, while the NIF, relying on improved organization and finances, became a junior partner in the ruling coalition after winning 51 seats in a parliamentary election that year (the Umma won 99, the DUP – 63). Two years later, in May 1988, due to skilful political maneuvering, Hassan al-Turabi (who also happened to be Sadiq al-Mahdi's brother-in-law) became Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs in al-Mahdi's government. What happened next may be interpreted as the perception of the ripeness of the political moment by al-Turabi.

The National Salvation Revolution

On 30 June 1989, a group of Islamist-minded officers and their subordinates, numbering about 300 people, including 175 paratroopers of the 8th Infantry Brigade commanded by Colonel Omar al-Bashir, took over Khartoum and deposed the civilian government of Sadiq al-Mahdi.[24] The NIF initially did not demonstrate its involvement in the coup d'état; in fact, in the wake of the coup al-Turabi and other NIF figures were sent to prison, but the role of the Islamists as the instigators of the plot soon became quite visible. Al-Turabi became what some called

23   Konstantin Polyakov, *A History of Sudan, 20th Century*, Institute of Oriental Studies, Moscow, 2005, p. 305.

24   *Sudan, a country study*, Berry LaVerle (ed.), available at: *https://www.loc.gov/item/2014043450,* (date accessed: 07.12.2020).

"the power behind the throne."[25]

The trigger for the 1989 coup, which was later officially proclaimed the National Salvation Revolution (*al-Ingaz*), must have been the inclination of al-Mahdi to conclude peace with the southern rebels, which would have demanded the abrogation of Sharia law in Sudan. Clearly, the Brothers also did not see overestimate their chances of gaining predominant power through the ballot box or implementing Islamic principles in a coalition with other political forces.

Once in power, the NIF tried to direct the loyalty of Sudanese Muslims toward political Islamism. Although this Islamist endeavor ultimately failed, it has had a great impact on the political life in Sudan. Under the new regime, the NIF made sure that all key positions in the state were held by Islamists. Omar al-Bashir, the military leader of the country, himself had been involved with the Islamic movement from schooldays.[26]

After al-Bashir came to power, there began the promotion of pro-Islamist persons to positions in the upper echelons of power. It seemed that the Islamists succeeded in establishing total control over the state. Their goal was to eliminate the factional divisions that characterized the previous regimes. Hence, an important political principle for the NIF was the appointment of Islamists to all key posts in the state. The Islamists also started the Al-Dawa Al-Shamla (the comprehensive call to Islam) campaign, which envisioned the transformation of all social, economic and administrative institutions according to the principles of an Islamic state. It involved "the unification of education, proselytising, humanitarian, developmental, financial and counter-insurgency efforts"[27]. Essentially, the campaign linked religious teaching with delivery of services and political control, and began with mosque and school construction and food distributions. Indoctrinated youngsters were recruited to the Popular Defense Forces (PDF), an irregular militia that was entrusted with guarding the gains of *al-Ingaz*.[28] Government agencies were turned into cells for jihadist mobilization and social services were transferred into the hands of Islamist philanthropic agencies.[29] However, the membership in the NIF was seen by many as a way to get access to the services the state supplied and was usually combined with the loyalty to other parties, factions, tribes or clans.

In 1998, the National Congress Party was established to replace the NIF and to become the political front of the Islamists and the dominant political force in the country. However, since the early days of the Islamist government, its policy

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25 "Biography of Hassan al Turabi", available at: *https://www.hrw.org/legacy/press/2002/03/turabi-bio.htm,* (date accessed: 07.11.2020).

26 Paul Moorcraft, *Omar Al-Bashir and Africa's Longest War*, Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2015, p. 88.

27 Alex De Waal and AH Abdel Salam, "Islamism, State Power and Jihad in Sudan", in: *Islamism and its Enemies in the Horn of Africa*, Alex de Waal (ed.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2004, pp. 89-90.

28 Harry Verhoeven, *Water, civilisation and power in Sudan: The political economy of military-Islamist state building,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015, p. 219.

29 Alex De Waal and AH Abdel Salam, "Islamism, State Power and Jihad in Sudan"... pp. 90-91.

was determined by power struggles between the security apparatus and civilian institutions, as well as between individuals in the highest echelons of power. The divisions within the ruling group were first highlighted in August 1990, when al-Bashir, the leader of the military junta, promised the Kuwaitis, Egyptians and Saudis that Sudan would stand with them against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, while at-Turabi declared his support for the Iraqi dictator. Another visible crisis took place in June 1995, when a group of militant Islamists, including Sudanese, attempted to assassinate Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak without President (since 1993) al-Bashir's knowledge. The conflict between al-Turabi and al-Bashir was slowly intensifying.

The rift between al-Bashir and al-Turabi

The period between 1989 to 1996 was, undoubtedly, the peak of the influence of the Islamic movement in Sudan. The revolution seemed to be total. A harsher version of Sharia than the one that had been adopted in 1983 was introduced throughout the country. On the face of it, Sudan was building the second theocratic state (if one is to count the Mahdist regime in the late 19th century as the first one). Some in the West suggested that Sudan was copying Iran. Sudan's Islamists explained that they were developing a form of Islamic democracy, which had no place for direct rule of the clergy, as was the case with Iran's Ayatollahs. However, in the wake of the revolution, the Iranians started helping Khartoum with organizing the PDF and provided advice on other security matters.[30]

At the same time, the Brothers were making Sudan a Mecca for all shades of extremists and fundamentalists from around the world. The country's doors were open wide to all Islamist organizations. Osama bin Laden, who had founded al-Qaeda in 1988, became the most famous guest of the Sudanese government. Al-Qaeda members obtained Sudanese passports and freedom of action in the country. In 1991, the country hosted the first congress of the Popular Arab and Islamic Congress. Also known as the Green International, it aimed at uniting extremists and generally all dissatisfied with the status quo in the Arab world. At the conference, in addition to al-Qaeda, such organizations as Hezbollah, Fatah, Hamas, the Egyptian Islamic Jihad were represented. Ben Laden lived in Khartoum in 1991-1996 and over the years created a network of training camps for militants in Sudan.[31]

After Sudan-based extremists staged a failed assassination attempt on Hosni Mubarak in 1995, the UN Security Council took up to scrutinize Sudan's ties with terrorism. The UN sanctions imposed in 1996 caused Sudan not as much economic damage (despite them, the Sudanese economy was growing rapidly due to an oil boom), but political. They formalized the international isolation of Sudan, which could not win a seat at the UN Security Council or join the World Trade Or-

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30   Paul Moorcraft, *Omar Al-Bashir and Africa's Longest War*, Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2015, p. 93.

31   Wako Gabriel Zubeir, "Sudan may still have bin Laden terror camps", *Sudan Tribune,* 6 October, 2005.

ganization, was denied observer status at the Francophonie and excluded from the 2000 Cotonou agreement on trade and economic assistance.

Under pressure from the West and the UN, Khartoum noticeably changed its policy. In 1996, bin Laden was expelled from the country, and the activities of the Green International were terminated. Al-Turabi, who had masterminded the policy of supporting international jihad, was increasingly blamed for the country's troubles. Even some of his closest associates, such as Ali Othman Taha, chairman of the NIF and former al-Turabi's personal assistant, became disillusioned with the latter's political skills.[32] The desire of al-Turabi to dominate all spheres of life started to irritate not only al-Bashir and his supporters, but a significant fraction of the Islamists, who would rather see him in the capacity of Imam rather than a political leader.

In 1998, al-Bashir and al-Turabi became, correspondingly, the chairman and the general secretary of the reformed NIF – the National Congress Party (NCP). However, the tensions between the two reached the boiling point soon thereafter – in 1999, when it became clear that al-Turabi, who had become the speaker of the national assembly, was planning to concentrate all power in his hands by using the parliament to limit the powers of the presidency, leaving for al-Bashir the role of a marionette. The conflict of the two leaders became a public knowledge. Al-Bashir acted preemptively: on 12 December 1999, two days before the national assembly was due to vote on al-Turabi's new legislation, the President ordered the parliament dissolved and al-Turabi arrested; the army surrounded the assembly, and a state of emergency was declared.[33]

Al-Bashir proved unable to prevent al-Turabi from forming the opposition People's Congress Party (PCP) in June 2000. For the next decade, al-Turabi, despite regular house arrests and imprisonments, remained the biggest threat to al-Bashir's rule. For instance, al-Turabi supported the establishment of one of the rebel movements of Darfur – the Justice and Equality Movement – and tried to find allies in the South as well, all in attempts to subvert his one time ally. In fact, the rupture in the ruling group manifested itself at two levels – the national and the provincial ones. While at the national level the ruling party split into the NCP and the PCP, at the provincial level Darfur region, where al-Turabi's influence was substantial, became engulfed in violence. However, oil revenues helped al-Bashir to stay in power. The country began exporting oil in 1999, and the state budget quickly grew from $900 million to more than $11 billion in the early 2000s.[34] To the conflict in Darfur, al-Bashir responded by mobilizing Arab militias, which came to be known as the *Janjaweed*. Al-Bashir, however, proved unable to resolve the Darfur conflict decisively during his presidency, unlike the war in the south, which he ended with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005.

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32   Paul Moorcraft, *Omar Al-Bashir and Africa's Longest War*, Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2015, p. 92.

33   Ibidem, p. 142

34   "Sudan-At-A-Glance", World Bank, *https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/sudan*, (date accessed: 05.06.2020).

Sudan after the Islamist split

While the program of nearly total Islamization of Sudan lost its consequence with al-Turabi's downfall, al-Bashir's regime continued to rely on Islamist ideas and Islamic institutions as the backbone of its ideology and the glue of society. The Council of Sudanese Scholars (*ulama*) supported the al-Bashir regime and issued political *fatwas* that declared it impermissible to disobey the authorities. The Islamic Fiqh Academy also provided political legitimacy to the regime through the interpretation of relevant political issues.[35] It also remained immensely difficult to draw a line between the military and Islamist elements of the regime; Sudan was still essentially a military-Islamist regime. Ali Othman Taha, a leading figure in the Sudanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, served as al-Bashir's close associate; in 2005-2013, Taha was Second and then First Vice President of Sudan. The Islamic social and economic norms, Sharia, and the memories of the great victories of the Mahdists were the main constituents of Sudan's national idea at the time, while the oil bonanza provided sufficient finance to enlarge and reequip the national army and various paramilitary forces.

However, since 2011, the internal situation in Sudan has been characterized by an acute political and economic crisis associated primarily with the secession of the oil-rich South and the increasingly ineffective armed struggle against insurgent movements on the western and southern outskirts of the country – in Darfur and also in the states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. The anti-crisis economic program did not lead to the restoration and diversification of the Sudanese economy promised by the government, and the process of the National Dialogue, launched in 2014 by al-Bashir and formally designed to mitigate internal political differences, was stalling due to the reluctance of the opposition, including armed rebel groups, to take part in it on the terms of the ruling group. Protests against censorship, war and economic hardship were taking place regularly in the capital and other major cities.

The division of Sudan into two states – the Republic of Sudan with the capital in Khartoum and the Republic of South Sudan with the capital in Juba – was proclaimed on 9 July 2011. For Khartoum, the division meant the loss of the vast majority of oil fields and the resulting fiscal cliff – the loss of almost 60% of the total tax revenue.[36] The split of the country became the political solution to the conflict between the North and the South, which had lasted (intermittently) since 1956. At the same time, in Darfur and neighboring provinces, the conflict continued between the Sudanese government and the Sudanese Revolutionary Front (SRF), which set itself the objective of reforming the country's political sys-

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35 Shaib Abdelkhalig, "Sudan: Have the Juba and Addis Ababa Agreements Untangled the Dichotomy between Religion and the State?", available at: *https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/sudan-have-the-juba-and-addis-ababa-agreements-untangled-the-dichotomy-between-religion-and-the-state*, (date accessed: 12.11.2020).

36 See: Sergey V. Kostelyanets, Sudan After the Partition of the Country: Search for Ways to Overcome the Crisis, *Asia and Africa today*, No. 10, 2014, pp. 31-35.

tem and removing the ruling NCP from power.

The SRF was established in November 2011 as an alliance between the main Darfur rebel movements and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement North (SPLM-North) from the southern borderlands of the country. On 5 January 2013, the SRF and a number of other armed factions signed the so-called New Dawn Charter, which called for the overthrow of the al-Bashir regime by political or military means.[37] Military action against insurgents cost the country dearly, with 70% of Sudan's budget being allocated to defense and national security expenditures.

The disappointment of the population with the "surrender" of the South, the devaluation of the national currency and a sharp rise in food prices, the elimination of fuel subsidies and an increase in a number of taxes, as well as the success of street protests in neighboring countries (the Arab Spring) were the main factors in the growth of mass dissatisfaction with the policies of the regime and the escalation of the protest movement since 2011. Protests stemming from economic hardship, increased media censorship and the unresolved conflict in Darfur recurrently erupted in the capital and other major cities of the country, ending in clashes with the police and mass arrests.

In 2013-2014, the ruling group realized the need for change (or rather, an appearance of change). In addition to the "stick" in the form of executions of demonstrators and arrests, the regime also needed a "carrot". At the end of 2013, several notable figures left the government, including long-term Vice President Ali Othman Taha. This created a fertile ground for the launch in January 2014 of the National Dialogue process designed to facilitate a compromise between the regime and the official opposition, primarily the oldest Sudanese parties, the Umma and the DUP. The stated goals of the dialogue included ending the war, restoring political freedoms, fighting poverty and reviving national identity. There was a talk of appointing an interim coalition government and holding general elections, forming a constituent assembly, and preparing the country for a "new democratic era".

Through the process of the National Dialogue, President al-Bashir managed to temporarily deter the country's opposition parties from supporting street protests, while the security services were neutralizing the main organizers of the street movement. However, in May 2014, al-Mahdi, the leader the Umma Party, was arrested for criticizing the regime, and his party soon suspended its participation in the National Dialogue. The left-wing parties of Sudan, as well as a number of parties constituting the National Consensus Forces coalition, which had opposed al-Bashir in the 2010 elections, had previously already refused to participate in the dialogue. The PCP did join the National Dialogue, becoming a junior partner in the government of Sudan, but al-Turabi died in 2016, leaving no one of comparable influence at the helm of the party. The regime's ideology started to lose its meaning, especially since the regime became focused solely on its own

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37   Sergey V. Kostelyanets, *Darfur: A History of Conflict*, Institute for African Studies, Moscow, 2014, p. 211.

survival At the same time, Khartoum was unable to involve the armed opposition in the dialogue. Consequently, the regime placed great emphasis on arming and training the Rapid Support Force (RSF) paramilitary organization, which was based on the notoriously brutal *Janjaweed* militia.

In the meantime, the government's economic policy proved to be ineffective. In 2017, Sudan resumed negotiations on accession to the WTO and took on obligations to liberalize trade in accordance with the IMF recommendations, which led to a significant increase in imports amid lagging export growth and, accordingly, new problems with filling the national budget. The financial crisis deepened in 2018, primarily due to the growing deficit of convertible currency in the country. In December 2018, the government was forced to drastically reduce flour subsidies, which led to a significant hike in bread prices for bread and served as the catalyst of a political crisis.

Since 19 December 2018, almost entire country was engulfed in mass protests, which regularly turned into violent clashes between protesters and security forces. The latter used tear gas, rubber bullets, and less often – firearms. In a number of cities, protesters burned down buildings of the NCP, the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), and local administrations. In December 2018 alone, about 400 protest actions were held in the country.

President Al-Bashir decided to suppress the protests by force and methods of propaganda: in December-January, a state of emergency and a curfew were introduced in the cities most affected by the protests; protester leaders were arrested, NISS and paramilitary units were sent to help the police; schools, universities and student dormitories were closed; the issue of the majority of Sudanese newspapers was suspended and the licenses of foreign correspondents were revoked; access to social networks and many other Internet resources was blocked. On 22 February 2019, al-Bashir imposed a yearlong state of emergency on the entire national territory of Sudan.[38]

However, the street protests, supported by a motley coalition of more than two dozen opposition parties and movements, trade unions and professional associations, which came together to establish the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) alliance, were only gaining momentum. The most influential opposition parties – the Umma and the DUP – predictably expressed their support for the protesters, and the PCP, which had rejoined the government within the framework of the National Dialogue, did likewise and called on al-Bashir to meet the demands of the protesters.

The finale of political Islam in Sudan

On 11 April 2019, al-Bashir was overthrown in a military coup. The Transitional Military Council (TMC), which took over the country, acted chiefly to pre-empt a

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38   "Facing Protests, Sudan's Leader Declares Yearlong State of Emergency", *The New York Times*, February 22, 2019.

street revolution in the country. The FFC aimed at a radical transformation of the entire political system and immediate investigation of war crimes and corruption of the al-Bashir regime, which threatened interests of Sudan's military and economic elites, including General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemeti), the head of the Rapid Support Force, who became the deputy chairman of the TMC.

After the ouster of al-Bashir, the TMC and the FFC held a series of negotiations on the conditions for the transfer of power in the country to the civilian government. The FFC demanded that the TMC transferred power to civilians immediately and dissolved the state security apparatus, but the military refused to meet these demands and eventually used force to disperse protesters in Khartoum in June 2019. Under international pressure, the TMC and the FFC reached a comprise by the end of the summer of 2019, which entailed a power-sharing agreement that would be in force until the 2022 general elections.

The Islamists were the biggest losers of the agreement. The TMC claimed that the Islamists of the NCP attempted a counter-coup and initiated a major army purge; hundreds of officers suspected of pro-Islamist views were arrested. Hemetti, according to his own words, survived two assassinations attempts, which he blamed on the Muslim Brothers and elements of the former regime.[39] The United Arab Emirates, Hemeti's main foreign partner and sponsor, which had designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, was insisting on the full ban of the Brothers in Sudan.

The street opposition, which was dominated by urban professionals, students' and women's organizations, and leftists, demanded to put functionaries of the NCP on trial, repel Sharia and secularize social life in the country. The NCP was banned in Sudan in 29 November 2019, all its property confiscated and all party members barred from participating in elections for ten years. Simultaneously, a restrictive law that controlled women's behavior and attire in public was repelled. In July 2020, Sudan scrapped the apostasy law and public flogging and lifted restrictions on the importation and consumption of alcohol in private by non-Muslims. In September 2020, Sudanese Prime-Minister Abdalla Hamdok inked a deal with a rebel group that provided for the separation of religion and state in the country, which was followed by the Juba Peace Agreement signed on 3 October 2020, which reiterated the commitment of the government of Sudan to end the rule of Islamic law. Nonetheless, the shift from Sharia was far from complete. It would be left for the National Constitutional Conference (to be held before the end of the transitional period in 2022) to determine the main source of legislation in Sudan.

On the one hand, the abolishment of Sharia was a precondition for the transit of the country toward peace in Darfur, Kordofan and Blue Nile regions. On the other hand, surveys indicated that most of the Sudanese support the role of

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39 "Hemeti targeted by Muslim Brotherhood", *Africa Intelligence*, October 4, 2019.

Islamic law in the country. Another matter, however, is attitude toward the influence of Islamic clergy and *tariqas* on politics: only 53 percent of Sudanese trusted religious leaders, while 61 percent considered religious leaders as corrupt as non-religious ones.[40] It seems that the decades-long era of political Islam in Sudan has come to an end.

Concluding remarks

The phenomenon of political Islam in post-colonial Sudan may seem to have completed a full life cycle. It was gaining strength and experience throughout most of the second half of the 20th century, by 1989 having matured enough for its zealots to take and hold the reins of power. Over the following half a decade, they tried to implement an ambitious task of exporting ideals of Islamism to other countries through the support of international fundamentalists, simultaneously conducting a comprehensive transformation of Sudanese society along the lines of the Koran, Sunnah and Sharia. On both accounts, they failed: Islamist internationalism provoked a major international backlash and made Sudan a pariah state on the global arena, while the attempt to Islamize and Arabize the country led to incessant wars in Sudan's periphery and the eventual secession of South Sudan, which eventuated in the financial ruin of the regime in Khartoum. Furthermore, the forcible recruitment to the PDF and heavy casualties alienated many supporters of *al-Ingaz*.

In the late 1990s, the radical brand of political Islam in Sudan sought to rebound, but the revolutionary wave had already ebbed. The army and the moderate wing of the Islamists easily curtailed the influence of al-Turabi's faction. Since then the politicization of Islam prevailed merely as a tool of legitimization, a favored crutch of the autocratic regime; the theological aspects gave way to political necessity. Moreover, political Islam failed to provide answers to social and economic problems, and it also no longer offered spiritual guidance. The factionalism of the Muslim Brotherhood in Sudan contributed to the weakening of the Islamists' support base and decreased their mobilization potential. Meanwhile, security services became involved in the power struggle and even attempted a coup against al-Bashir in 2012, sowing distrust between the president and his security apparatus.

Corruption and nepotism, the decreasing standards of living (after 2011) and pervasive unemployment were undermining the legitimacy of al-Bashir's rule; the populace was also losing trust in religious leaders associated with the corrupt regime. By 2019, the economic crisis had become unbearable for the population, but also for some of the elites, who did not see any prospects of successful reforms. Behind the facade of political Islam, the over-bureaucratized and de-

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40   "Sudan's government seems to be shifting away from Islamic law. Not everyone supports these moves", *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2020.

praved system was crumbling.

Despite the continuing popularity of Islamic values and norms in Sudanese society, a revival of political Islam in the country seems improbable. The Islamists have exposed themselves as opportunists who, once in power, proved to be vastly ineffective politicians and managers, and also moved away from the core values of Islam. While the transitional government of Sudan led by Abdalla Hamdok in 2019-2020 failed to improve the economy, which was still plagued by old problems and adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters, there appeared to be little public interest to turn to political Islam and the Islamists for solutions. The impending dismantlement of the Islamic foundations of the Constitution is likely to erase most of the legacy of the Islamists in Sudan.

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Сергеј В. Костељанец

УСПОН И ПАД ПОЛИТИЧКОГ ИСЛАМА У СУДАНУ

Сажетак

У априлу 2019. године, дугогодишњи председник Судана Омар ал-Башир збачен је са власти у крвавом државном удару који се десио за време великих протеста у земљи. Овај чланак бави се историјским развојем суданског исламистичког покрета и његовог циља да преузме власт од револуције из 1989. године и улоге у унутрашњој и спољној политици Судана од тада. У раду се тврди да је до тренутка пада режима 2019. године политички ислам у Судану у потпуности пропао и да више не служи као ефективан инструмент легитимизације власти ал-Башира, те да је његов повратак на власт мало вероватан.

Кључне речи: Судан, политички ислам, исламизам, ал-Башир, војни пучеви, политичка транзиција