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The Nationalities Question and National
Unity or Disintegration in Sudan

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1.0 Introduction and Definition

Most of us feel uneasy in talking openly and frankly about our national weaknesses for fear of hurting each other's feelings. This attitude does harm to us because we will not easily realize that we are largely the authors of our own problems. We shall render a great service to this country if we can indicate clearly and resolutely the obstacles to national unity and progress as ways of removing those same obstacles.

The nationality question arises in all multinational or multi-ethnic states. Few countries are made up of homogeneous people with common language, culture and economic life. The heterogeneity of a country can be a problem or a source of strength depending on how the leadership handles it. The nationality question refers to how the interrelationships between the various nationalities or ethnic groups within a country are handled. Is one nationality imposing itself on others? Are the various groups living in such a country doing so voluntarily or are the boundaries of such a country being maintained by force?

What are the political, legal, economic, cultural, language, etc. policies of such a country? Do these

policies promote harmonious coexistence or do they create and promote antagonism etc.?

Some leaders consider conflicts among various nationalities as inevitable. Others even conduct policies aimed at provoking such conflicts so that they can rule, as without these divide-and-rule policies, the masses will soon discover their lack of credible programmes. However, a more scientifically oriented leadership realizes that the main causes of national tragedies should be sought, not in racial, national or religious differences between peoples, but in the antagonistic character of all social formations based on the exploitation and oppression of some classes by others. These antagonisms can be promoted or reduced by the national leadership. The leadership can promote peaceful coexistence or suspicion, hostility and violence among the diverse nationalities within a country. This paper attempts to analyse the Sudanese situation along this framework.

2.0 Background and History

It is a well-known and obvious fact that Sudan is a multi-ethnic or multi-national country. This ethnic

heterogeneity is a consequence of two major factors in the country's history: the Arab penetration from the Arabian peninsula, and the definition of the present boundaries of the country by the European colonialists enclosing many diverse nationalities.

However, the problems and opportunities presented by pluralism or multi-ethnicity are not unique to Sudan. Many countries, in both the industrially developed and the underdeveloped countries, are faced by these same issues. Some countries have gone a long way in resolving these issues while others have created problems out of the situation.

History has seen the rise and fall of many multinational states. These include the Roman Empire, the Napoleonic Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire, etc.. All these empires were created when small weak peoples were engulfed by larger and stronger ones.

There was no genuine community of peoples in these multi-ethnic state entities due to the violence of the ruling classes with respect to the disadvantaged groups. This community was also obstructed by the disuniting effects of the established production relations which bred great disparities of opportunity and hence the means of livelihood. Thus such societies had no common interests as the production relations ensured the domination of the weaker ethnic

groups by the ruling class. Under these circumstances one cannot expect common interests to develop.

All these multi-national empires or states had a common approach to the solution of the highly complicated nationality question. They saw the political and economic oppression of the dependent nationalities, the exploitation of their socio-economic and natural resources in the interests of the élite of the dominant nationality or ethnic group. They inculcated ethnic arrogance among the nationality of their type and formed alliances with the élite of the oppressed to disunite the bulk of the population.¹

Naturally, the class and ethnic contradictions made for instability in such state entities; they were plagued by endless conflicts and, as a rule, disintegrated. A similar situation can be observed today, for example, in South Africa, Sri Lanka, Lebanon, Britain, etc.. The situation in Sudan is not different from that of the present multi-ethnic states. Here, the ruling clique from the Arab nationality has imposed its domination on the non-Arab nationalities. Because the Arab nationality is smaller than the other non-Arab nationalities combined, the ruling clique then uses both Arabism and Islamism interchangeably. However, Islam is being

1 In Sudan, Arabism and Islam are used by the ruling clique to divide the people while bribes and other means are used to divide the leaders of the underprivileged nationalities.

used to divide the non-Arab nationalities. If one examines the power structure in the country and the socio-economic structure of the population, they are correlated with race rather than religion.²

True, the colonialists took advantage of the ethnic heterogeneity to pursue their policies of divide and rule. This policy was designed to pit the various ethnic groups against one another, to ferment national and tribal discord and to exacerbate religious-communal contradictions.

This policy bred reciprocal mistrust and alienation of individual ethnic groups and communities, which overflowed into overt hostility and acute conflicts. One of the most important objective causes of these conflicts was the factual inequality of ethnic groups in economic, political and cultural spheres, which was consolidated by the system of colonial domination.

After the winning of, or being granted, political independence the governments of the new states should have begun to tackle the task of formulating their own nationalities policy. In many of the politically independent countries, including Sudan, instead of rationally trying to resolve the nationality question

2 Look at the lists of present and past Presidents, Prime Ministers, high ranking military officers, top civil servants, diplomats and managers of public institutions and enterprises as well as the composition of students at various institutions of higher learning.

they continued, in their own way, the colonial policy of divide-and-rule.³

In the specific case of Sudan, we embarked on the imposition of the Arab way of life on the other Sudanese - a situation not different, if not worse, than that of the European colonialists. The ruling cliques, whether represented by the military or civilian Arab élites have consistently pursued the policies of Islamization and Arabization so as to assimilate the other nationalities. They have used and are using all domestic and foreign instruments and resources to attain that end. They have failed to address the nationalities question and have either underestimated or do not care about the dire consequences that can occur from such underestimation or arrogance.

3 For example, other nationalities were led to believe that the Southern nationalities were fighting against Islam in the 1960s and hence these Northern nationalities from the neglected parts were mobilized to fight against those struggling for justice. In the 1970s when soldiers of Western nationalities attempted to take over power, they were accused of wanting to divert the course of the Nile westwards. This propaganda was meant to mobilize the riverain nationalities against the Western ones. Presently divisive leaders including Nimeiri and Sadiq al Mahdi have maintained the false accusations that the SPLM/SPLA is a Dinka movement. When such leaders want to divide even the Dinka nationality they try to narrow the base of the SPLM/SPLA into a Dinka Bor Movement.

Frequently, the arrogance and/or underestimation of the importance and complexity of the nationalities question is manifested in a simplified approach to the problem of national unity. Such unity is asserted by means of ignoring the ethnic composition of the population. The nationality question is reduced to the problem of tribalism. Moreover, the existence of links between the ethnic problems and socio-economic and political transformations of society are ignored. Yet the inter-ethnic discord can be attributed to fully objective causes: national inequality and disproportion in the level of socio-economic and cultural development. This means that condemnation alone cannot eradicate tribalism and that it is necessary to remove its political and socio-economic roots.

The national question reflects the distribution of power in the state. The latter in turn reflects the social system controlled by the ruling clique. The ownership of the means of production, the control of state power and hence the grip on the allocation of national resources form the foundation not only for social, but also for national inequality, for oppression and violence. It disunites people and gives rise to class and ethnic, and hence national antagonisms. National oppression and inequality, and national hostility can be reduced and eventually liquidated only through the establishment of a system that distributes opportunities to all and hence brings hope to the oppressed.

3.0 The Economic Basis of National Unity

The decisive sphere of the struggle for equality is in the economic field. The implementation of this task is crucial for the strengthening of the community of interests among various nationalities and hence the building of a new society. A firm economic basis has to be set up so that the peoples can merge together, so that political equality can become not just a formality but a real factor for all the country's peoples.

Under unequal development, economically weak and culturally underdeveloped peoples seek separation since they are oppressed by the economically stronger peoples.⁴ A programme which encourages the various nationalities to develop natural desire to unite with other peoples, including the ones that formerly dominated or ruled them, can eliminate the struggle for separation.

4 For indicators of uneven development in Sudan see B. Yongo-Bure. "Prospects for Socio-Economic Development in the Southern Sudan since the April 1985 uprising", presented at the 29th Annual Conference of the African Studies Association, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA, October 30 - November 2, 1986 - Edited and published as Chapter 5 of the Book by Francis Mading Deng and Prosser Gifford, (eds.), *The Search for Peace and Unity in the Sudan*, (Washington D.C.: The Wilson Center Press, 1987).

However, the issue of national oppression cannot be reduced to economics alone. The economic foundation of the solution must also involve a democratically organized state, a democratic army, etc..

The democratic organization of a multinational state also envisages the need to take into consideration the nationality factor in the administrative-territorial structure and to emancipate the regions from bureaucratic patronage from the top. Such forms of national statehood as federation and national territorial autonomy can serve as important state and legal means of solving the national question.

A most important element of national equality is the legal and actual equality of the languages of all the nationalities making up a multinational state. This envisages the provision of an opportunity for studying in educational institutions in the local languages and their use by the mass media (books, magazines, newspapers, radio and television broadcasts, etc.).

Thus, the solution of the national question is a very complex and relatively protracted process as it includes a vast number of widely differing problems and establishment of both legal and actual equality, formation of a national language (without imposition), training of national cadres, improvement of state structure, elimination of separatism (not by guns), fostering of friendship and cooperation

between the various groups, etc.. Trying to solve it by isolating nationalities and preaching the supposed inherent superiority of some peoples over others is counter-productive. The consistent implementation of the principle of equality of all ethnic groups and communities is crucial for accelerating the process of national integration and consolidation and alleviating the inter-ethnic conflicts which have been promoted by the sectarian leadership.

4.0 Towards a Solution in Sudan

Diverse nationalities or ethnic groups can live together as long as this diversity is not being manipulated for the advantage of some against the interests of others. Unfortunately, for Sudan the ruling clique from the Arab (or Afro-Arab as they sometimes describe themselves) nationalities have been threatening national unity since the mid-1950s. They have been promoting national disintegration by arrogating to themselves the right to dominate the other nationalities. They have imposed their identity, culture, language, religion and other ways of life on the rest of the Sudanese nationalities. Their monopoly of state power has led to the

concentration of all national resources on the advancement of their own nationalities or ethnic groups in all fields of national life.

By so doing, they have driven the other nationalities to the extreme and the country is now at a crucial moment of its history. Its continued existence will depend on the position of those who share the same ethnic constituency with the ruling clique, but do not share the latter's arrogance and bigotry, to act fast in mobilizing their constituency away from the oppressive arrogance and bigotry supposedly being perpetuated on their behalf.

To avoid national disintegration and minimize mutual damage the suggestions made in this paper provide some framework for resolving the national question. In summary form, they include:

- (I) The implementation of legal and political equality of all the Sudanese nationalities. All ethnic groups and religions are equal.
- (II) The government should reflect the national diversity in the centre. There should be a system which ensures that the executive head of State or Prime Minister can come from any nationality or religion.
- (III) The regional governments should have powers to realize the aspirations of their peoples. For example, they should have the right to develop

their educational systems up to university level; have direct access to foreign loans, etc..

- (IV) There should be an administrative hierarchy that is responsive to the needs of the various peoples from the village level to the State House. The people should directly elect their political leaders at all levels. We do not need colonially appointed governors.
- (V) The political precondition for the solution of the nationalities question is the establishment of a truly democratic system where there are full equality in rights and actual equality of the ethnic groups in all spheres of state, economic and cultural activity. We deceive ourselves if we claim to be democratic now. Democracy is not based on three sectarian leaders only making decisions. Nothing moves in Sudan today unless Sayed Sadiq al Mahdi and Sayed Mohamed Osman al Mirghani and Hassan El Turabi agree. The parliament is toothless. In about two years of its existence it has not addressed the basic issues threatening the survival of the country. In fact, we are more undemocratic now than under the Nimeiri regime. Nimeiri had a structure though it did not function. But the "Sayeds" have not attempted to set up any structure at all at the regional, provincial, district and other lower levels.
- (VI) Introduction of socio-economic transformation especially agricultural and rural development, development of infrastructure, the health and the educational system.

(VII) We cannot build a New Sudan with minimum interethnic antagonisms when social services are limited to few ethnic groups. Look at the opportunities for higher education. It is almost limited to the high income groups and mainly to those from Khartoum and Gezira.⁵ This is not because students in these areas are naturally cleverer than those from elsewhere. But it is because of the facilities and extra tutoring afforded by their rich parents. These riches have resulted from the historical allocation of resources and control of state power. Hence, before a fairly efficient system of basic education is established all over the country, places in higher institutions of learning should be regionally allocated subject to a certain minimum level of performance. If this is not done there will be no supply of educated and trained personnel to the regions as the children of the rich dominating the universities and institutes do not want to work in the regions. So, what is our education for if it is not geared to meeting the country's needs?

(VIII) The role and significance of science in the life of society should be emphasized and sectarian dogmas eliminated. Scientific reasoning promotes unity while dogmas promote division.

5 Northern, Eastern and Kordofan regions follow Khartoum and Gezira but these are limited to particular, especially well-off migrant ethnic groups in towns such as Port Sudan, Kassala, Gedarif, Kosti, El Obeid etc., and big towns along the Nile north of Khartoum.

- (IX) The elimination of illiteracy is a vital task. Therefore, there should be an anti-illiteracy campaign in a planned way.
- (X) The radio should have programmes on agriculture, public health, child care, current affairs, etc., in the languages of the various nationalities. In fact, each region should have an efficient radio station for broadcasting in the languages of the particular region.
- (XI) The number of banks should be reduced to the number of the regions with each region having a bank for activities within the region. The regional banks will constitute an advisory council to the Central Bank on monetary policy, particularly credit policy. This will ensure wider regional and social distribution of the seigniorage.⁶

6 The term seigniorage is found in International Monetary Economics being applied to the benefit a reserve currency country derives from the use of its currency as international money. The country in question can purchase goods and services from other countries just by mere printing of more of its currency without any assets backing its currency issue. The same thing happens with domestic money including the credit creation process of commercial banks since they are not backed 100 percent by deposits. Those with monopoly of access to domestic credit facilities have command over goods and services without participation in actual production while those without access to credit have to toil alone in order to earn any money. Credit extended to socially productive activities that are geographically widely dispersed would in turn distribute the seigniorage to as many people as possible.

But while some of these proposals will depend on the ending of the present civil war, the initiation of some of them could help in bringing the war to an end. It must be realized and accepted that all the wars (including the present one) and other conflicts in Sudan are a reflection of the underlying oppressive structures in the country and the racial and religious arrogance of the ruling clique. That arrogance will have to go if we are to have peace and begin to build confidence among the various nationalities. There can be no peace where there are marked inequalities and injustice.

The country is experiencing a general crisis. The economic situation is continuously worsening. The ruling circles cannot prevent imminent catastrophe as long as they continue with their divisive racial and religious arrogance and bigotry. Continued fighting will eventually lead to the drying-up of foreign support. The economy will not sustain both the population and the war effort. Soldiers will, if they have not already, refuse to continue the war. Sectarian militia will soon, as some have already, realize that they do not have the monopoly of the instruments for inflicting harm on others; and will have to accept or resign to the fact that they cannot perpetuate sectarian domination. The general crisis will intensify disagreements, discord and confusion at the top.

With increased hardship the masses will eventually see the tremendous gap between the words and deeds of the sectarian leadership. Left unorganized, they will react haphazardly on the basis of the old conception of inter-ethnic and religious relations. This will cause a lot of inter-ethnic, regional and religious fights and killings. But this will not solve the problem.

Instead it will worsen it, and lead to later regrets and continued antagonisms. Hence, a rational, foresighted and broad-based leadership should step in, to direct the masses to support a rational and consistent pro-people programme which provides for the interests of all the masses regardless of their nationality and religion.

Division of the country may become the slogan of the short-sighted élites. But where shall we fix the boundaries? How shall we divide the various assets we have created together particularly given the fact that they have been concentrated in few areas? Wherever these assets are located, they are our national assets and if we are to divide, then we must share them out fairly. But who will define what is fair or what is unfair? And if we part in bitterness shall we be able to live as friendly neighbours? Permanent enmity of neighbouring countries benefits neither of them. Overall, we will still need to cooperate on the utilization of the waters of the Nile.

In the final analysis, the only solution to our national problem is to establish legal and political equality of every nationality and religion as soon as possible. This will set the stage for working for the achievement of actual equality in socio-economic and cultural terms. We should begin to persistently struggle for the interests of all regardless of their nationality or religion. After all, whether one is an Arab or non-Arab, a Moslem or non-Moslem, one needs the same things in life: food, health, education, clothing, housing, security, etc.. So why don't we focus on our common basic needs and leave what are personal to the individual? And as long as we do not channel our efforts into constructive discussion, constructive work, in fact, constructive everything, our problems will not go away on their own; instead they will increase in both magnitude and intensity.

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