The political potential of displacement to urban areas: How has the "ethnic discourse" transformed the culturally polarized milieu in the Sudan?

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Abstract

Using the events of recent decades in the Sudan, this paper argues that localised as well as regional mass population displacement has caused enormous cultural and political transformation that is often overlooked in scholarship about the Sudan. This reality of bringing intact rural communities to the heart of urban Sudan with increased numbers of community-based organisations, has contributed to displacing the state's (modernist) development discourse and giving muscles and blood to the "religious"—or the "religiously-cloaked ethnic discourse"—on which the state, since 1983, started to lean as means of acquiring legitimacy. With their demographic weight and culturally-compact presence in and around the capital Khartoum, the displaced rural communities affected an enormous transformation in national politics. They were used by urban political groupings to install and legitimise a religious state in the Sudan; however, ultimately they contributed to discrediting this very religious state.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we argue that the enormous displacement of rural communities caused by environmental degradation and civil wars (inherently associated with authoritarian development and consequent ecological marginalisation) has brought "ethnic discourses" to the centre of national politics in the Sudan. In fact, the policies of the de-railed state in Sudan, particularly in association to the (claimed) granting of administrative autonomy to regions, had contributed to boosting "ethnic politics" in the form of tribal competition over posts of regional governments. This has, in fact, led to "re-tribalization" and ultimately resulted in advancing tribal values to the centre of the political system at the expense of the shrinking modern political institutions. The advancing tribal values may take the form of a socio-cultural displacement—the result of mass displacement of rural communities going on since early 1980s; precisely when marginalized displaced groups move together, carrying with them their cultural emblems to the urban areas. We shall view this condition as the existence of a rather discrete "ethnic" in and/or around the urban setting, where governments are often sensitive about "security problems" and where ethnic groups could use the urban media to assert their demands and to influence urban politics. In this paper, we would like to further expand the above argument (that of advancing tribal values), by claiming that the state in the 1980s-hitherto has "submitted" to these advancing tribal values; or, more strictly, it has bet on what has already become a dear source of mobilization—the ethnic discourse—for marginalized groups. The state "submission" or adoption of the ethnic discourse had, first, led to ethnic/religious polarisation and then, at a later stage, contributed to giving an added impetus to "ethnic" agendas. The latter have ultimately challenged the elite's "universalistic" discourse and strategic goal of creating a monolithic Arab and Islamic society in the Sudan.

The principal concern of this paper is, thus, to understand how the very state's authoritarian development policies, resulting in acute ecological marginalisation, have ultimately led to de-centring its power through giving an added momentum to the "ethnic" and how the latter has come to reshape and re-define national politics so dramatically. More precisely, the paper will focus on how the religious fundamentalist National Islamic Front (NIF) party (embodying a historical Arabist/Islamist drive of creating a monolithic society) had used the presence of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) to project itself as the party of the majority. How using a "universalistic" discourse, and as representative and claimant of a "high culture" had the NIF first succeeded to mobilise different "ethnics" to fuel its *jihad* (holy war) policy; however, ultimately exposed itself as ethnicist/racist party and started to crumble due to this very mobilisation through the "ethnic". Thus, rather than condemning the clustering of ethnic groups around cities as source of insecurity and as reactionary—causing the "ruralisation" of cities—we presume that ethnic groups, pursuing their own interests in urban areas, may counter-balance the monolithic Arabist Islamist regime of cultural desertification and push forward for a pluralist cultural milieu—the "cultural greening" of the region that had since 1820 been undergoing effective "cultural desertification". The cultural diversity the IDPs impose by their very presence at the heart of the political system may help de-polarise the political scene and provide new ingredients for conflict transition. The heart of the political system had for long been stripped of its cultural diversity; its cultural resources have persistently been depleted through imposing Arabist and lately Islamist exclusivist ideologies. This paper, therefore, calls for optimism: the racist politics in the Sudan is drawing towards an end; chances for a pluralist, multicultural New Sudan are becoming greater.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first addresses the enormity of displacement and the importance the IDPs came to acquire in urban areas as well as the harassment they met. The second addresses the assertion of cultural diversity, resulting from the presence of the IDPs and how they dealt with the challenges of the urban milieu.

2. Ecological marginalisation and the encroachment of the "ethnic" into/onto the political centre

Due to ecological marginalisation, the "ethnic" rose after the late 1970s—'the rampant, uncontrolled expansion of agricultural capitalism gave muscles and blood to ethnic politics' (Al-Karsani 2000:44). The aggressive "resource capture" or expropriation of communities' lands, which continues until this date in the most populated regions in the Sudan, has resulted in "ecological marginalisation"—pushing large groups of population onto marginal lands and, therefore, contributing to the severe environmental degradation of these lands and ultimately aggravating "environmental scarcity". This latter concept needs to be briefly discussed for its relevance to this paper.

According to Homer-Dixon (1998:205) environmental scarcity takes three forms. First is *supply-side scarcity* caused by depletion and degradation of natural resources, which makes the resource "cake" smaller (see also Ohlsson 1998:6). Second, *demand-side scarcity* is attributed to the population increment and new consumption styles, which boost the demand for a certain resource (see also Turton 2000:116); it makes 'the slices of the *diminished* cake smaller' (Ohlsson 1998:6, italics added). The last form of scarcity, *structural scarcity*, is 'caused by severe imbalance in the distribution of wealth and power that results in some groups in a society getting disproportionately large slices of the resource pie, while others get slices that are too small to sustain their livelihood' (Homer-Dixon 1998:205). The three forms of scarcity do not work in isolation of each other. In fact, the concept of ecological marginalisation gives more clarity to the interactions among them. '*Ecological marginalization* occurs when unequal resource access (skewed distribution) combines with population growth (an increase in demand) to cause long-term migrations' (Schwartz *et al.* 2000:80, italics original). It means forcing people who have

had their resource base captured to move increasingly to precarious locations (Turton 2000:116, Schwartz *et al.* 2000:80). Ecological marginalization also means that the conditions are opportune for others who have interest to cause this marginalization, those who "capture" the resources of others. Although it appears logical that ecological marginalisation follows from "resource capture"—the latter being caused by the legal or power regime that determines accessibility to a resource—the two processes, actually, affect each other. 'Resource capture and ecological marginalization are often intimately interlinked, with one leading to the other' (Schwartz *et al.* 2000:80). Resources, under these circumstances, become part of the power game with societal polarizations taking place at different scales. According to Percival and Homer-Dixon (1998:292)"Environmental scarcity increases the salience of group boundaries, which causes the segmentation of communities" and critically reshapes social institutions, particularly the state.

> I originally hypothesized that scarcity would undermine a variety of social institutions. Our research suggests, however, that one institution in particular—the states—is most important. Although more study is needed, the multiple effects of environmental scarcity, including large population movements and economic decline, appear likely to weaken sharply the capacity and legitimacy of the state in some poor countries (Homer-Dixon 1999:75).

The last three decades were a time of asserting identity politics in the Sudan, reflecting an increasing weakness of modern state institutions. Mobilisation at the local and national level increasingly leaned on the "ethnic", where the latter, we presume, provided the necessary condition for the success of the "religious", starting in early 1980s.

Policies of the de-railed state, particularly those granting regional autonomy, were originally meant to lift the financial burden from the central government. Yet they contributed to boosting ethnic politics in the form of tribal competition over regional government posts. Mohamed Salih (1989:73-4) refers to the competition between ethnic groups over executive government posts, among other aspects, as a 'retribalization' process or 'the shrinking...of the modern political institutions in the face of the advancing tribal values'.

Three interrelated changes in the 1980s seem to have given added importance to the "ethnic" and accelerated the state's appeal to it and ultimately aided the Islamist discourse, essentially ethnicist, to express itself more explicitly. These are, firstly, the inability of the (derailed) state to deal with matters at the local level, where environmental scarcity had increased the incidence of tribal clashes and where '[d]eterrent police forces are not found in the areas where the clashes occur' (Al-Karsani 2000:45). The multiple effects of environmental scarcity, thus, jeopardised the state's legitimacy in remote regions, where dissident groups such as armed bandits started to operate in the open. Secondly, the state found itself confronted with a new armed rebellion which had a political discourse that was eminently appealing to all marginalised groups. Lastly, the change in the population-political map with its enduring pressures, actually, represented the knot and condensation of the two first changes. This last change is of significance for us because it takes its vibrant form in the elite's "fortress"—Khartoum, the colonial and national capital of the Sudan.

In the 1980s, the "ethnic" came to have an important spatial dimension; instead of (population) spreading in the wider national landscape determined by the climatic zones, it became part of the dense micro level of city centre/margins. The most pronounced example where the rural structure, embodying the "ethnic", became part of the city, is the national capital of Khartoum—the place of responding to and formulating policies. It is only when this had taken place that ethnicity emerged as a *serious* discourse directly influencing the centre's politics. Ethnicity became a discourse for consolidating the solidarity of the IDP groups in their confrontation with state authorities as well as a discourse over which some urban political actors

competed in order to appeal to, ally with, or totally appropriate.

The ethnic gained this importance because its rural structures almost in their totality were abruptly brought to the margins of the city—'*whole families, villages, clans, tribes or towns* were compelled by the ferocity of the war to a life of destitution and poverty' (Al-Karsani 2000:37, italics added). Available statistics show that in 1988 the total number of IDPs reached approximately 6.8 million. This figure constituted 29.1 per cent of the total population, an extremely high proportion by all standards. Of this number, those displaced by drought represent 11.2 per cent, while those displaced for security reasons represent 17.6 per cent (Mahran 1995:64). This immense movement of groups of population mainly into the capital region (Khartoum State) and its environs actually represents the reversal of a historical pattern characterised by population movements out of the Nile Valley and the Gezira largely into the western plains of Kordofan and Darfur and into southern Sudan. Starting in 1820s, because of the Turkish invasion the Nile Valley and the Gezira were almost totally depopulated. Movements of population groups out of these regions continued, escaping the second colonial invasion and due to the expropriation of large tracts of land for modern irrigation starting by mid-1920s. Since the 1930s, the state had implemented regulations to restrict movement of people into the Nile Valley and the Gezira, making them "forbidden" areas and, in some occasions, repatriated migrants to where they come from.

Accompanying this earlier depopulation process of northern Sudan was a process of centralisation of the political system and the introduction of ideological Arabism and orthodox Islam, which later established a majoritarian ethnicist discourse of the ruling elite, which historically from Khartoum had insisted on imposing a monolithic Arab/Islamic state over a multicultural milieu. Worth noting here is that what had prevailed before this era in northern Sudan was   *sufism* (popular Islam) which coexisted with all other belief systems. During this era, Islam assimilated the various aspects of cultural heritages of Pharaonic, Christian, and local African origins, which became part and parcel of the popular Islam of the majority of the Sudanese people (Ali 1991:37-8). Ideological Arabism and orthodox Islam in association with political power had lent the ruling elite a claim of having a "high culture" (for details see Beck 1998), which was in turn used to in justifying their cultural hegemony. This "high culture", embedded in a "universalistic" religious discourse, is viewed as always superior to the "native culture(s)". The latter available for the "subjects" who dwell in the expansive regions other than central northern Sudan (namely the stock of rain-belt traditional farmers, pastoralists and agro-pastoralist) has most of the time, if not always, been judged negatively, undermined or totally neglected as component(s) in nation-building.

The IDPs numbers have continued to increase throughout the 1990s, with many of them now having chosen to stay permanently in the capital region and its environs. Most IDPs tended to flock together and settle in isolated slums (for details see El Nagar 1993:111). In this manner, the IDPs affected a "siege" [1] of ethnic *cultural zones[2]* around cities, especially after more of their kin came to bridge the physical distance isolating their slums from urban areas. The displaced groups carried with them, to the recipient areas, their *heritage*, forms of social organisation, perceptions about reality, and political bias, which helped them reinvent and proudly maintain their rural forms of social organisation in the now urban milieu (for details see Mohamed Salih 1999). Thus, against the expected 'urbanisation of cultures', El-Kheir (1991:163) notes that, 'The need to maintain rural traditions still holds strong among certain dominant [immigrant/displaced] groups such as the Nuba and people from Western Darfur. While this can serve to maintain traditions and kinship associations, it can retain tribalism and work against the establishment of urbanism and nationalism.'

In fact, the retaining of tribalism in urban areas is being reinforced by discriminatory policies adopted by the Khartoum municipality, such as the *kasha[3]* (eviction), the isolation of IDPs in

slums far from urban areas, the denial of urban services, and, importantly the imposition of the codes of a dominant culture (or, more precisely a proclaimed "*high culture*") on others. These discriminatory policies pushed most of the immigrant "ethnics" around Khartoum to resort to their indigenous forms of solidarity, initiating community-based organisations (CBOs) and primarily self-help institutions informed by their indigenous cultures. 'Extensive evidence of self-help in Khartoum's squatter settlements is ascribed to "*indigenous culture*" as well as lack of local resources' (Stern 1989:64, italics added). The institution of self-help, driven by indigenous values, generates an enormous political momentum impelling the IDPs to maintain apparent resistance to authorities' plans to relocate them and otherwise harass them.

This reality of bringing the "ethnic" to the heart of urban Sudan with increased numbers of CBOs has contributed to displacing the state's development discourse and given muscles and blood to the "religious"—or the "religiously-cloaked ethnic discourse"—on which the state, since 1983, has begun leaning as a means of acquiring legitimacy. With their demographic weight and now culturally-compact presence in and around the capital Khartoum, the IDPs affected an enormous transformation in national politics. In fact, localised as well as regional mass population displacement caused enormous cultural and political transformation that is often overlooked in scholarship about the Sudan.

Now how this displacement of development discourse occurred remains a central question to address. In our view, this stemmed primarily from treating the IDPs presence as a political/security issue—this presence was viewed as source of threats to the "fortress" of the elite and, therefore, should be eliminated or, otherwise, contained and used for consolidating the regime's power. However, because of its sheer size, the presence of the IDPs proved hard to eliminate. The old guard of the May regime—the President Nimeiri dictatorship (1969-1985)—and their allied religious fundamentalists (Islamists) of the NIF would then start competing over the IDPs, primarily by using a moralist incentive—effecting God's commands on earth in the form of *sharia* (Islamic laws) implementation. As a result, the IDPs were used (a) as a scapegoat to justify the failure of the state in meeting the demand of urban food and services, (b) as fuel for the civil (now re-defined as religious) war, and (c) as "objects" on which religious punishments were to be inflicted in order to prove the presence of an "Islamic" state in the Sudan, ultimately to credit the fundamentalist party for installing this religious state. (Later on, we shall explore (b) and (c) and their relevance to this paper in detail).

The extremist NIF party, having been a partner with the government during the May dictatorship and having monopolised political and economic power since the late 1970s, was able to benefit from the presence of the IDPs to reinforce its political programme by manipulating conservative group identities. The salience of group boundaries that was increased by environmental scarcity provided the NIF with the chance to incorporate large numbers of rural migrants into the presumably larger religious "group" of Islam, which might make possible the reinforcement of their central political agenda, i.e. of implementing *sharia* in the Sudan. This has threatened the old guards of the May regime, who probably started to compete with the fundamentalists over the same agenda.

Several incidences illustrate that the implementation of *sharia* was largely in response to a rapidly deteriorating security situation (Deng 2000:160), which threatened the positions of both the old guard of the May regime and their allied fundamentalists. In the face of the mounting internal dissent present in the outbreak of the armed rebellion, according to Goldsmith *et al.* (2002:223), President Nimeiri 'may have been seeking through the proclamation of sharia to consolidate his power by winning over the religious right, in particular the National Islamic Front.' While President Nimeiri knew that it was the religious right that was pushing in this direction, it was the presence of the IDPs that seemed to have triggered the situation and made it urgent to implement *sharia*,

primarily as a technology of control and as "something" the ruling elite could offer to satiate their hungry displaced compatriots. In other words, it was that moment—the moment of the presence of the IDPs—that implied the implementation of these laws, not before that by any means! In our view, it was in September 1983, the year when the harvest failed in expansive regions in the country and when the famine-affected IDPs reached Khartoum, that 'President Nimeiri, under pressure from the National Islamic Front, promulgated a series of new measures, including a new penal code, known henceforth as the "sharia laws"' (Duany and Duany 2000:175).

Mobilising the rural displaced in what was known as the "one million person demonstration", the NIF leadership was capable, first, to pressure President Nimeiri to adopt its political programme (namely the implementation of the Islamic laws) and, later, to mobilise support to consolidate it (see Ali 1991:80). It is worth emphasising here that it was the IDPs who, some years later, were mobilised by the NIF to consolidate the fragile military coup it backed in June 1989. This development signalled the collapse of the middle class-dominated power bloc in the Sudan.

Both the old guard of the May regime and the fundamentalists saw the way out of their political crisis in the implementation of *sharia*, creating an unholy alliance—an alliance of the half-hearted believer in the implementation of religious laws (i.e. President Nimeiri) and the opportunist leadership of the Islamists who wanted to fish in the dirty water, i.e. to capitalise on the weakness of their partner. Also, however, and importantly, it depended on the vulnerability of the IDPs. Thus, for President Nimeiri, on the one hand, there was a need for an appealing ideology to consolidate his crumbling regime—the ideology espoused by the Islamists was the best option available to him for two main reasons. Firstly, this ideology was sufficiently powerful not only to divert the attention of the hungry masses, but also to mobilise them to fuel the bloody war in the south, which, otherwise, would be impossible to sustain. Especially because the state's economic capabilities did not allow it to acquire advanced weapons, it was the amassing of the children of the IDPs, as *mujahideen*, that appeared to be the most feasible option for fighting this war. Secondly, for a dictatorship, the Islamist ideology was the best option available to justify and inflict merciless punishment on those who criticise the state's failure—those deviating from the "right cause" (see Suliman 2000:148). The interpretation of Islam adopted by the regime was *selected* to justify the harshest of regulations needed for controlling a situation that was slipping rapidly into chaos.

For the NIF, on the other hand, this was the time when the regime of capital accumulation through its Islamic banking system became more opportune; yet it was also the time when forces of disturbance to this accumulation process, manifest in the presence of the IDPs, became more apparent. It seems that the ruling bloc realised, by the early 1980s, that the realities created by displacement around the elite "fortress" could not be controlled through promises of economic development, which had become too difficult to achieve. Nor could it consolidate power through advocating a narrow ideology such as Arabism, for instance. While the latter might have—in the past—served the cause of (some) Arab/Muslim/urban middle class northern Sudanese, it has became problematic in more recent decades because now a large part of the population at the heart of the political system (the capital region) is of non-Arab origin, though with a majority still being Muslims.

The dramatic changes in Khartoum's ethnic mix necessitate, thus, a religious discourse. According to Hassan Mekki Mohammed (2001:20-1), Khartoum witnessed dramatic change in its ethnic diversity, with the city rapidly taking on an African identity rather than its previous Arab outlook. Most of the population increase, resulting from immigration and displacement, which changed the ethnic mix of Khartoum, occurred in the 1980s—the decade of adopting and reinforcing the *sharia*. Thus, a package of laws to be called "Islamic" was a miraculous solution, and with its implementation in 1983 the regime succeeded in killing two birds with one

stone—consolidating its grip on power through maintaining the wealth accumulation regime, and appeasing the starved popular masses by effecting God's commands on Earth. This sustained them, however, only for a short period.

For the IDPs, on the other hand, the implementation of the religious laws meant different things. At one level it provided an opportunity for recognition for those who would be incorporated or used for consolidating the "high culture". At another level, it represented the state's war against them—at least against a large segment of them who were culturally different on the scale of "high culture", or even alien to this culture, to be more precise. In both cases, the IDPs came as a great aid for the state—they served as *mujahideen*, the fuel for the then-ongoing civil war, and as "objects" upon which religious punishments could be exercised, primarily, to assert that the state is committed to *sharia*, which ultimately meant terrifying the organised urban opposition. These two (ab)uses of the IDPs would end up aggravating the "ethnic" at the centre of the political system.

2.1. The IDPs as new audience, as *mujahideen*/fuel of civil war:

President Ja'far Nimeiri abandoned his socialist orientations and secular politics (Duany and Duany 2000:174) and sought support from the right by the mid-1970s. Encountering the new audience, in 1983 President Nimeiri said that he had dreamt one night that El Sheikh El Tayeb (eighteenth-century spiritual father of the Sammaniyya religious order) visited and "ordered" him to implement *sharia* in the Sudan. He did. In fact, both through appealing to the "power of dream" and "submitting" to the will of a *sufi sheikh*, President Nimeiri had cunningly targeted the traditional structure provided by the IDPs ethnic cultural zones surrounding the national capital. President Nimeiri's night dream was used as a prophetic pretext for the adoption of the Islamists' political programme and it justified *sharia*. Dream as a source of "truth" in the religious discourse made of President Nimeiri's dream a decisive moment in Sudan's recent history. The existence of the traditional structure, however, would serve a significant political interest of the NIF.

The pressure of the IDPs was used effectively to displace the middle class programme (the source of inspiration of the urban opposition) from the political arena—a programme that had, at least theoretically, advocated economic development and appealed to democracy, both of which the regime could not afford. The middle class, present in the alliance between the military officers and the intelligentsia (Ahmed 1993) adopted in 1981 the "Programme of Building the *Modern Science-Based* State" (National Council for Research 1981), adhering to the secular culture and modern organisation of society. However, in 1983, when the state was religiously redefined, this discourse was reversed, indicating an extraordinary divergence that shook the status quo violently. Its adherents divided themselves into an *Islamist* middle class faction, increasingly responsive and using the "traditional" rural imagery; and a *secular* middle class faction that is increasingly excommunicated and harassed.

In their second return, through their involvement in the June 1989 coup, the Islamist faction of the middle class seemed to recall and assimilate this traditional structure, existing around cities, though for a short time, and in the process they propagated incredible "miracles" via national TV, radio, and newspapers, primarily presented as heavenly approval of the religious deeds on the ground—the political programme of the NIF. For an economically crumbling state, these "miracles" were an apt substitute that would make the mobilisation of the masses (in the ethnic cultural zones) possible, or even more effective. It is under such circumstances, it seems to us, that 'the Khartoum government… transformed the military campaigns in the South into holy war' (Kevane and Stiansen 1998:2); this was fuelled primarily by the children of the IDPs.

The IDPs engagement in *jihad* and falling as martyrs in the battleground had improved their bargaining position in urban areas a great deal. It also saved the lives of many IDPs living in the

north or moving northward as the NIF authorities entertained the belief that they can assimilate more of them, hence use them to continue fuelling its religious war.

This importance of the IDPs is derived from the need to confront the greatest of challenges to the May regime and its fundamentalist allies—the SPLA/M, appealing to all Sudanese with a programme to create a united "New Sudan" that would necessitate power restructuring and therefore threaten the adherents to "Old Sudan." This discourse made it possible for the multi-ethnic slum dwellers surrounding the cities to put their trust in John Garang and his SPLA/M (Suliman 2000:164).

Failing to control or compete with the SPLA/M's robust discourse, the government imagination went no further than to contain it through a counter-"ethnic," or a more hegemonic, "religious discourse." The adoption of religious extremism was thus a re-emphasis of the state's ethnic discourse in contrast to what was, ideologically, labelled as the ethnic discourse of the armed rebellion in the south (El Zain 1996). It was an example, as Mudoola (1993:101) says, referring to the Ugandan context, of 'using ethnicity to contain ethnicity,' which was clearly reinforced by the coming of the "ethnic" in the surroundings of Khartoum.

The "ethnic" and "religious" discourses are vital to each other in the sense that they are reactions to each other, yet compatible—they are negating or undermining the previous discourse (incommensurable to their "paradigm") and its terms of conflict. They replaced the previous 'fundamental contradiction between labour and capital' (Ali 1989:22) with one between one identity and another.

Nevertheless, most significantly, the centrist "religious" gave legitimacy to the de-centring "ethnic" discourse of the IDPs; or, more strictly, it allowed for the revival of a "compatible" or "commensurable" discourse(s). The IDPs' very presence contributed to deconstructing the prevailing political conceptions about how the Sudan should be ruled and how its resources should be redistributed. As a discourse in the centre, the "ethnic" became capable of making itself heard through the media of the urban and started to contest for power positions, which had been largely the monopoly of the urbanised elite of central northern Sudan. However, gaining some ground in the urban setting was simultaneously paralleled by effective victimisation of the IDPs.

2.2. The IDPs as "objects" upon which religious punishments are exercised/inflicted

While facing organised urban protest, the ruling elite found in the IDPs the "objects" upon which they inflict the harshest of punishment with the aim of terrifying the urban opposition. The condition under which *sharia* was implemented was one of worsening scarcity in urban services. During this period following the implementation of *sharia*, the state's relation to IDPs had become particularly harsh, noting that it pulled away from economic development in order to consolidate its security grip (see Ahmed and El-Batthani 1995:203). According to Suliman (2000:147), the violence of state apparatuses increased in parallel with aggravation of poverty and resistance. He points out that in 1983 when President Nimeiri implemented his set of *sharia* laws, the punishment of limb amputation tolled 200 persons in 18 months, the majority of them from the IDP *shamasa*. 'The sharia laws', according to Mohamed Salih (1999:67), 'were implemented not to curb the spread of the corruption within the state machinery, as declared by the proponents of the laws, but as *a weapon against the residents of the squatter settlements, the beer brewers and the unemployed*' (italics added). Adherents to the "high culture", present in Khartoum municipal authorities, also engaged in an effective incrimination of the IDPs, where according to Duany and Duany (2000:180), 'laws against alcohol and prostitution are used against them in an aggressive and discriminatory way'. A passage on IDPs in the report of the Human Right Rapporteur on Sudan, as Suliman (2000:404) notes, points out that 96 per cent of the women imprisoned between December 1993 and November 1994 were from southern and western Sudan.

The implementation of the amputation punishments actually served as propaganda with the aim of drawing attention to and assuring the state's commitment to *shaira*, rather than serving the cause of justice. For a crumbling state, the only remaining card was to project itself as an "Islamic" state, primarily concerned with spirituality, in order to rid itself of the duty of facilitating the delivery of material goods to society. In this manner, the IDPs condition of vulnerability provided a fertile ground for the operation of the strategies of the fundamentalist discourse, I elaborated elsewhere (El Zain 1996), including a *rétour* to the "mythological" and substitution of the material by a superficial spiritual.

3. Asserting cultural diversity in the capital region

Useful to the state's religious propaganda, the IDPs through ethnic solidarity founded on their peculiar cultural traits succeeded to gain some space in the capital region, while they are contributing to the erosion of the "universalistic" discourse of the NIF through increasing appeal to their indigenous cultures and ethics.

The Nuba community in Khartoum is one example of how appeal to traditions was crucial for survival under a cruel and corrupt Islamist regime. Though the majority of Nuba who migrated to Greater Khartoum tend to organise themselves along village-immediate lines, the 1980s effected a modification in this social organisation by way of enlarging the bloc along regional lines. This was namely to include the Area Council level, which was seen as necessary for achieving unity in the face of state repression, as apparent in the eviction of the Nuba from the streets of Greater Khartoum (Al-Karsani 2000:35).

What the IDPs of the 1980s "renovated", as their indigenous form of social organisation, is in fact, an old strategy, which immigrants reinvent, as a way of dealing with their troubles, when the authorities squeeze them (see El-Kheir 1991:156). The same strategies have gained momentum since the early 1980s. In the words of Al-Karsani (2000:50), 'The Nuba associations in the urban communities are gaining increasing influence among the Nuba migrants and displaced.' Al-Karsani (2000:51) continues, 'The numerous organizations are a reflection to the Nuba polyethnic nature. They also reflect the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety among the Nuba.' Such reinvention of communal organisation and solidarity in urban areas by different groups and to different degrees, helped IDP communities acquire a space in the urban scenery, being citizens of Khartoum, as the case of acquiring land plots in the Umm Badda neighbourhood illustrates (El-Kheir 1991:161). IDPs, in this way, have defied the persistent measures of banning them from settling in the capital region. They broke into the historically "forbidden" areas.

Asserting different forms of social organisation, the IDPs challenge the "high culture" in its own den. Failure of the apparatuses representing the "high culture" to eliminate the IDP organisations shows the ability of the latter to manoeuvre but also their demographic weight, which has become overwhelming.

Due to their demographic weight, in 1986, the Sudan National Party (SNP)—the Nuba-backed party—won a seat 'in the squatter settlements of Omdurman (the centre of Sudanese nationalism during the struggle for independence), indicating that the Nuba were taking centre stage in Sudan's national politics' (Mohamed Salih 1999:63). This, theoretically, means that the Nuba's representation is likely to increase both in urban seats and in potential to bargain to be part of coalition governments. The IDPs turn from prey of the "high culture" into organised groups that exert every day pressure on the authorities sanctioning this culture. The cultural diversity facts created by mass displacement to the capital region have given today a strong endorsement to the call by the SPLM for adopting pluralist constitution for Khartoum State against the monolithic one proposed by the NIF (currently renamed National Congress Party), the larger partner of the SPLM

in the Government of National Unity (2005-hitherto).

There is also another phenomenon, i.e. the persistent fracturing of political parties, which we consider to do with the large presence of IDPs in Khartoum. I have no intention of discussing this here; however, the IDPs' exposure to realities in urban areas has, to some extent, compelled them to go about the challenges they met and to envision their own "truth". This is a necessary learning experience, which help rethink and re-evaluate their previous experiences, including their political bias. The concrete example here could be figured in the self-help institutions that the IDPs created and, therefore, the increased awareness stemming from their engagement and practice of their self-help organisation. How this awareness contributes to challenging the hegemony of the "little" dictators or, more precisely, the patriarchs of the political parties and their "high culture" is crucial for deconstructing the "universalistic" discourse of the ruling elite.

3.1. The "ethnic"/religious discourse and erosion of the elite's universalistic discourse

This section examines how the ruling elite vision as manifest in the NIF political programme, which was introduced for refurbishing the political alliance through a universalistic discourse, is eroding from within, leaving a vacuum, so far, filled by ethnicist and regionalist ideologies. The NIF war policies, similar only to those under the Turkish rule in terms of the scale of destruction of Sudanese communities, gave rise to resolute resistance and consolidated the ethnicist and regionalist ideologies, which ultimately forced the ruling elite to succumb.

By implementing *sharia*, the May regime (and later the NIF Inqaz regime which reinforced it) triggered the fragile coexistence among the Sudanese communities and shattered the remaining tolerance among Muslim communities, which *sufism* had established over the ages. While the implementation of *sharia* represented the peak of the expansion of the state's political-ideological power and achieving the goal of establishing a monolithic Arab and Islamic society, it operated simultaneously as a dissipative move, which brought the political unity of the state and social integrity of communities to the brink of total collapse. Specifically, by essentialsing the tense issue of identity (in this case Islamic/Arab versus others) and bringing it to the forefront as the principal commitment of the state, the implementation of the *sharia* laws has deepened the divide between the Muslim northern Sudan and the animist/Christian southern Sudan, on the one hand, and reinvented the divide between a proclaimed "high culture" and a condemned "native culture" within northern Sudan on the other hand. Worth notifying here is that the proclaimed "high culture" essentially stems from Orthodox Islam, being the sanctioned faith of the colonial (Turkish and British) administration and national military regimes preying on the "native culture", which is associated with *sufism* and demonised as the source of unexpected ruptures. This preying has caused an incredible depletion of diverse cultural "resources" that had been nurtured under the reign of *sufism* in larger parts of northern Sudan.

The presence of the IDPs and the way they were treated in urban areas exposes the fallacies of the NIF's "high culture's" universalistic discourse and the IDPs have increasingly resorted to mobilising themselves through their ethnic solidarity and establish their self-help organisation. The leaning of the Islamist religious discourse on pre-modern notions, in fact, gave credibility to ethnic solidarity, which had started to discredit in effective manner the religious discourse itself, given the ethnically driven atrocities caused by this very discourse. Specifically, the religious punishments were targeted largely to those originating from specific regions, as mentioned above, and therefore its victims were largely from specific ethnic groups. The apparent prejudice stemmed not necessarily from a culture of ethnic segregation, but rather from structural differences, namely the degree of cultural, economic, political, and ecological marginalisation. The "high culture" definition of right and wrong represented a major contradiction between lifestyles of ethnic groups in the so-called "one Sudanese nation". A western Sudanese would say, 'We believe in God, but we still like to drink millet beer' (*The Economist* 26 June 2003), while a

fanatic Islamist who is being re-socialised through instructions from "high culture" in the capital region would not only ridicule the former but in the name of God would inflict punishment on these believers, destroy their property and confiscate their homes. Outside the capital region, the fanatic Islamist would justify taking Muslims' lives in large numbers through *jihad* campaigns (e.g. here are the Nuba Muslims) and looting their ancestors lands.

The "ethnic" or ethnicist/regionalist ideologies acquired more credibility because of counterproductive government policies. The NIF had installed a new breed of dogmatic Islamist leaders to replace both the modernist elite and traditional leaders. In rural areas, the role of Islamist localised leadership was particularly focal, as it contributed to reproducing the ethnic. The NIF installed, for rural, local, and regional administration, political cadres who were half-literate young men who could neither stand in the shoes of civil servants nor possess the wisdom of the elders or traditional institutions. They adopted a typical "divide and rule" policy towards tribal entities (Ibrahim 2002:76) and neglected what would certainly lead to tribal feuding. These arrangements and institutional transformations were advocated from within the framework of a new implicitly verbal discourse, yet an explicitly religious and fanatic one, manifest in an ethnicist frame of Arabism and Islamism (Ibrahim 2002:76). This marked the beginning of a stark polarisation founded on religious and ethnic hatred. The NIF government, in the words of Ibrahim (2002:76-7), directly or indirectly, started to adapt to the religious and ethnic polarisation as a requirement for the civil war in the Nuba Mountains. The NIF government did not conceive the conflict in the Nuba Mountains in its historical, social, economic, and political context. Instead, it viewed the Nuba fighters as nothing but opponents of *al-mashroó al-hadaari* (the "civilisational project"), which it had officially adopted. The Nuba, under the NIF government—being the shadow of God on earth—must have their resources looted, killed in large numbers and/or evicted. To control the anger that it helped generate, the NIF committed a fatal mistake which would ultimately erode its universalistic discourse.

The clearest sign of the erosion of the NIF ideology was its involvement in the creation of a coalition at the macro level involving the state and some tribal entities on the one hand against other tribal entities on the other. Although this coalition-making could be traced back to the period 1983-86 (De Waal 2000:29), both under the May dictatorship and the elected democratic regime (for details see Mohamed Salih 1989, Goldsmith *et al.* 2002), a clear-cut polarisation took place only later by 1990 when the NIF government had officially recognised the tribal militias, following the issuing of the Popular Defence Law (Suliman 2000:143). The NIF will now use IDPs from the surroundings of Khartoum who were remobilised with fanaticism to inflict damage on rural communities who are now politically defined as the other "ethnic".

Referring to the conflict in the Nuba Mountains, Ibrahim (2002:161) points out that this local conflict became part of the larger polarisation between the SPLM/A and the government of the Sudan. Incited by these two parties and under their auspices, the tribal conflict in the Nuba Mountains—in South Kordofan State—became part of the military strategy and discursive undertakings of these two parties. The discursive undertakings or ideologies of the two parties, according to Ibrahim (2002:161), are Africanism/Christianity/Paganism for the SPLM/A versus the ethnicist Arabism (*al-shu'ubeeyya al-'uroobiyya*)/Islamism for the government. According to Francis Deng (2000:165), 'The intervention of the government, with centralizing notions of Arabism and orthodox Islam as bases for building the Sudanese national identity and determinants of who should get what or occupy what status in the system, introduced stratification along racial, cultural and religious lines.' This first segregated people along religious lines; however, later its declared *jihad* targeted Muslims and non-Muslims alike (Beswick and Spaulding 2000:xvii).

The new Holy Terror differed from anything the Sudan had seen before. Newly-created

"Popular Defense Forces," often called militia or *murahilin*, were enjoined to wage a total war against anyone who was not an Arab Muslim. They were given complete freedom to kill, rape, loot, and enslave such people, and above all to expel them from their territories so that these lands might be colonized by Arab Muslim settlers from the north (Majak 2000:49, see also Beswick and Spaulding (2000:xvii).

In the past, some groups espoused Islam to escape the cruelties of opportunist Muslims; now this no longer provided safety. 'The idea of creating a monolithic Arab and Islamic society governed by the historical sharia law implies ethnic cleansing—the extinction of the diverse cultures and different ways of life of the numerous non-Arab communities' (Duany and Duany 2000:178).

The ethnicist resentments that were aggravated by the state religious wars against communities become deeper when the victims escaping the wars find the same in would-be safer places. Interestingly, this would now impact the cadres of the ruling Islamist party itself. Within the rising ethnic discourse, cadres of the NIF who belong to peripheral regions, namely Nuba Mountains and western Sudan saw on a daily basis the bulldozing of homes and eviction of their kin from prime areas to marginalised and risky areas on the outskirts of towns. How the IDPs in urban areas were treated has exposed the NIF to its own devout cadres, who for some time entertained the abstract belief that their party is concerned with justice and that its principles were founded on that. These devout cadres had opened their eyes to see "high culture" powerful cadres crush, incriminate and amputate the limbs of their feeble kin and bring all sorts of humiliation upon them. The astute universalistic "truth" of the NIF will then start shaking.

The facts of incredible enrichment of cadres who belong to certain regions or ethnic groups and poverty or even impoverishment of others prompted the ethnicist divide inside the NIF ranks. Many of the cadres would start rethinking their belonging to the NIF—it is in urban areas that the recruits of the NIF saw that the *sharia* laws were used primarily for keeping them at bay, blocking their encroachment into the "fortress" on the ground that they are criminal and they do not belong here.

The NIF-advocated universalistic discourse, being crisis-driven, carries the germs of its total failure. Through targeting Muslims and non-Muslims alike, it has discredited its espoused universalism and destroyed its ambitions to build its aspired larger Muslim majority. From within its universalistic discourse, the groups that were incorporated saw in their leading *imams* the same old *jellaba*[4]—greedy peddlers, fake *sufi* followers and dishonest, yet, smart merchants. Increasingly losing credibility, the NIF started to crumble, necessarily as representative of consensually universalistic culture in north Sudan. To illustrate this, we shall give the example of Muslim groups from Darfur Region, in order to see how they started to distance themselves from the mainstream hegemonic ("high") culture.

The early 1990s witnessed the slipping away of Daoud Yahya Bolad (a Fur community member) who would lead an armed faction into Darfur, as an SPLA guerrilla commander, against his erstwhile NIF party (for details see Minority Rights Group 1995). This indicated that some Muslims of Darfur had second thoughts about being classified in the camp of northern Sudanese larger Muslim community. Being subject to increasing alienation at the seat of power, the educated NIF cadres from western Sudan have shown increased resentment. This by 2002, escalated in the walking away in protest of some important cadres who established the Justice Party. The NIF's leading cadres have increasingly slipped away, in fact, pulling out with them large numbers of kin supporters and generating a tribal polarisation over the cause of religious fundamentalism. Most recently, some cadres of the Popular Congress Party (PCP) quit and formed the Justice and Equity Movement (JEM), which took arms and is fighting the Islamist government to this day in concert with the much larger Darfurian compatriots of the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement. Noteworthy is that, in the late 1990s, some members of the JEM members authored the *Black Book* (*Justice Africa* 31 January 2004), a widely read document that had remained anonymous for several years. The *Black Book* detailed political injustices in

the Sudan and clearly pointed a finger to the riverain elite as the ones who historically monopolised power and confined the largest part of the development pie to their own circle (*Justice Africa* 27 May 2003).

Conclusion:

This paper addressed the political potential of displacement, as an important component of studies of displacement that seems to be undermined.

Mass displacement, since early-1980s, indicating the acute manifestation and peak of the crisis of the socio-political system, has, in fact, exposed the political leadership in the Sudan to its misery and lack of ingenuity. As the peak of crisis, however, displacement has brought about the unexpected solutions to the troubled polity in the Sudan. It has brought to the heart of the political system the enriching diverse cultural "resources", which the ruling elite strived for decades to eliminate for the sake of imposing a monolithic Arabist Islamist society. This paper, therefore, calls for optimism: the racist politics in the Sudan is drawing towards an end; chances for African Sudanese and "Arab" Sudanese to establish a pluralist, multicultural New Sudan are becoming greater.

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Footnotes

[1] Words such as "siege", "assault" (*ijtiyaah*), and "invasion" were commonly used in reference to the displaced groups' advance into towns. Hostile language, expressing such tones, is echoed by Bannaga (2001:36) in whose view the IDPs 'had ransacked Khartoum and besieged it all around'.

[2] To refer to the cultural zones around cities as "tribal" or "ethnic" underlines the fact that these were cultures of remote areas that had, largely, not been homogenised by the modernisation process and which were advancing, as noted above, for some time, to claim the vacuum left by the shrinking modern national institutions. In this respect, remote regions preserved a degree of "purity" in their ethnic culture, which was now boosted by the process of re-tribalisation.

[3] The *kasha* is a type of surveillance, though arbitrary, to figure out rural migrants in Khartoum, capture them and forcefully "repatriate" them to their areas of origin or take them to the so-called "(agricultural) production areas" (for details on the *kasha* see Mohamed Salih 1999:65-9, Suliman 2000:410-11, Shazali 2000).

[4] The *jellaba* is a local term, which was originally used to refer to merchants who trade goods between the regions in the Sudan. Though these merchants were largely from the Nile Valley region in northern Sudan, they were actually a mixture of different ethnic groups including emigrants such as the Syrians, Memlukes, Greeks, Armenians and Turks.

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