

The Tensions Between Arabs and Africans in Sudan

Sudan offers a striking example of the effects of ethnic and sectarian strife. As you read earlier, the peoples of Africa fall into two broad groups: the lighter-skinned peoples of the north and the black Africans of the south. Those in the north are of Arab and Berber descent and are largely Muslim. Black Africans in many areas are largely Christian or followers of traditional African religions. The dividing line between these two groups runs through Sudan. The country has been at war with itself for most of its existence as an independent state.

But these two big groups are only the beginning. Sudan has one of the most diverse populations in Africa. Within each of the two distinct major cultures are hundreds of ethnic and religious subdivisions and language groups. This diversity has made it hard for Sudanese to work together politically.

Sudan's northern states cover the greater part of the country and include most of the cities and people. The majority of this region's people are Arabic-speaking Muslims. Most, however, have another non-Arabic mother tongue.

Southern Sudan's population has a mainly rural subsistence economy. For the most part, its people practice indigenous traditional religion. A minority are Christians. The south has many different ethnic groups. It also has many more languages than the north. The Arabic language binds the northern Sudanese together—even though it's not the mother tongue of most. But the southern region is a hotbed of linguistic diversity.

The Arab and Islamic Perspectives of Leaders in Northern Sudan

Sudan's modern history begins in the north. Northerners have traditionally controlled the country. And they have tried to unify it over the years along the lines of Arabism and Islam. They have done this despite opposition: from non-Muslims, from southerners, and from marginalized groups in the east and west.

Sudan's modern history begins around 1820–21. That's when Egypt conquered and unified the northern part of the country. Until that point Sudan was just a collection of independent little kingdoms. And so it remained in the southern part of the country, even after the Egyptians arrived in the north. The Egyptians established a few garrisons in the south, but that was about the extent of their presence. The south remained an area of fragmented tribes. Slave raiders attacked there frequently.

In 1881 a Muslim religious leader named Muhammad ibn Abdalla proclaimed himself “the Mahdi,” or “rightly guided one.” He began a campaign to unify the tribes in western and central Sudan. Then he and his followers took on the Ottoman-Egyptian government in Khartoum, the Sudanese capital. Since the Ottoman-Egyptian administration was not popular or effective, the Mahdists overthrew it in 1885. The Mahdi then installed what historians call Sudan's first real nationalist government. He was also the first to establish northern and southern Sudan as a single entity.



Despite strict Islamic laws and a lack of political freedom, students such as these at Sudan University's fine arts school in Khartoum find a growing amount of artistic freedom.

Photo by Danna Harman / © 2002 The Christian Science Monitor

The British and Egyptians governed Sudan jointly from 1898 through 1955.

He died soon after, but his state survived. Then in 1898 Lord Kitchener of Britain led an Anglo-Egyptian force into Sudan. It overwhelmed the Mahdists. That led to the establishment of the Anglo-Egyptian **condominium** in Sudan. A condominium is *a territory subject to joint rule by two or more powers*. In this case, Britain was definitely the senior partner. This arrangement lasted from 1898 through 1955.

In 1953 the two partners reached a deal to give Sudan self-government and self-determination. On 1 January 1956 Sudan gained independence under a provisional constitution. That constitution was silent on some important issues, though, and that led to real trouble.

Southern Sudan's Pursuit of Self-Determination

Sudan fell into civil war almost immediately. Its first civil war grew from a question never settled and a promise never kept. The question never settled was the character, or nature, of the state. Would the new Sudan, governed from the Islamic capital city of Khartoum, be a secular state? Or would it be Islamist?

The promise not kept was to create a federal system for Sudan. A federal system often works well to hold a diverse country together. It can accommodate cultural differences. States or provinces can act independently on local matters, but the country holds together as a whole on matters of defense and foreign policy. Sudan would have faced problems in any case. But a federal system might have helped ease the pressures.

It didn't happen, though. The Arab-led government broke its promise to create a federal system. That sparked a mutiny by southern army officers, and that, in turn, led to civil war. The war lasted 17 years.

Fourteen years into the conflict—in May 1969—Colonel Gaafar Muhammad Nimeiri and a group of leftist officers seized power. You may think that doesn't sound like a path to peace. But Nimeiri's coup would eventually lead to Sudan's 10-year window of peace.

Nimeiri's government marked a break from Sudan's ineffectual leadership. He proclaimed socialism rather than political Islam as the guiding national policy. He also outlined a plan for granting autonomy to the south. This was a move earlier governments had resisted.

But soon Nimeiri became target of an attempted communist coup. After that, he ordered a purge of Communists from the government. In response, the Soviet Union withdrew its support for Nimeiri's regime.

The Islamists had never supported Nimeiri. And now he had lost communist support, too. So to expand his narrow power base, Nimeiri turned south. He pursued peace accords with neighboring Ethiopia and Uganda. He made agreements with each to stop supporting the other's rebel groups.

He then opened talks with the southern rebels in his own country. The deal he signed with them in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1972 gave the south some autonomy. In return, southerners supported him in putting down two coup attempts.

However warmly southerners felt about the agreement, though, it had no support in the north—not from secularists or from Islamists. Eventually Nimeiri saw this lack of support for the accord as a potential threat to his rule. So he began to pursue national **reconciliation**—*an end to disagreement*—with the religious opposition.

Then in 1979 Chevron, the oil company, hit black gold in the south. That changed everything. The autonomy Nimeiri's deal granted the south extended to finances. Suddenly southern Sudan controlled a valuable resource no one had even known about when the deal was made. Northerners pushed Nimeiri to cancel the financial parts of the deal.

In 1983 he did more than that. He abolished the southern region. He made Arabic, instead of English, the south's official language. (Among other things, this move cut southerners out of careers in public service.) And he transferred control of southern armed forces to the central government. In effect, he canceled the whole treaty with the south. By doing so, he set off a second civil war. Southern soldiers mutinied rather than accept transfers to the north.

Nimeiri had earlier opposed Islamists, but now he embraced them. He declared that the penal code would include traditional Islamic punishments—amputations of hands to punish theft, and public lashings for alcohol possession. The grievances began to pile up: a collapsing economy, war in the south, and general political repression. A popular uprising in 1985 overthrew Nimeiri while he was out of the country.

In 1989 Sudan got a new Islamic government after General Umar al-Bashir mounted a coup. This intensified the north-south conflict. It also turned Sudan into a haven for Osama bin Laden and other terrorists.

During the 1990s the Sudanese civil war continued through a series of regional efforts to broker peace. Finally in July 2002 the Government of Sudan (al-Bashir's administration) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (representing the non-Muslim south) came to terms on the role of state and religion. The agreement also granted southern Sudan a right of self-determination.

On 9 January 2005 the two sides signed a comprehensive peace agreement. It called for wealth-sharing, power-sharing, and security arrangements. It provided for a cease-fire, northern troop withdrawals from southern Sudan, and the resettlement of refugees. After a six-year transition, Sudan will hold new elections at all levels of government. The international community has hailed the peace agreement as a decisive step forward. However, the ongoing strife in the Sudanese region of Darfur has complicated efforts to end the main north-south conflict. (See "The Darfur Crisis.")

The Economic Effects of Constant Strife Within the Country

The war between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement lasted 20 years. During that time, violence, famine, and disease killed more than 2 million people. Another 600,000 fled to neighboring countries. The violence also pushed about 4 million other people from their homes. This meant that at one time, Sudan had the world's largest population of internally displaced people. (Sudan has about 40 million people, so that was about 10 percent of the population.) Since the two sides signed the peace agreement in 2005, nearly 2 million of these displaced people have returned to the south, experts say.

In 2004 the end of most of the fighting and the expansion of crude oil exports gave Sudan's economy a real boost. It grew at 6.4 percent—a very respectable rate. And gross domestic product per capita—each person's share of the country's output, in other words—nearly doubled.

fastFACT

The *Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement* operates in southern Sudan. The *Sudan Liberation Army/Movement*, a separate organization, operates in Darfur, in western Sudan.

The Sudanese are still feeling the effects of their civil war, however. They have very little infrastructure, besides: few paved roads, water systems, and the like. The government is moving toward a market economy, or free enterprise system. But the state and supporters of the governing party remain heavily involved in the economy.

Sudan's civil strife has affected its neighbors as well. They alternately sheltered Sudanese refugees or served as staging grounds for rebel groups.