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One Against All: The National Islamic Front (NIF) and Sudanese Sectarian and Secular Parties

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One Against All: The National Islamic Front (NIF) and Sudanese Sectarian and Secular Parties²

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Abstract

Any attempt to define and characterize the relationship between the National Islamic Front (NIF) and the sectarian and secular parties in Sudan must start with assessing the impact of Islam on the Sudanese political scene since the early days when the Arabized Muslim groups dominated the centres of power in Central Sudan. Today the NIF capitalizes on the adherence of the general public in the country to Sufi Islam and in the past used this as leverage to further its goal of establishing an Islamic state. In dealing with other parties, it used such strategies as intimidation, deception, control of key institutions in society and the like. The sectarian and secular parties were unable to counter these strategies due to internal weaknesses and limited resources. Instead of organizing an effective opposition inside the country, they opted to organize in exile, an act that distanced them from the masses and left the platform fully under the control of the NIF and, to a certain degree, the rebel movements. With the signing of the CPA the major rebel group, the SPLM, became a partner in the Government of National Unity, thus strengthening the grip of the NIF on power and wealth. This has led to further marginalization of the sectarian and secular parties which are left to seek alliances with discontented groups in Eastern and Western Sudan or to try to forge relations with the NIF which remains in full control of the political space.

I

As the largest country in Africa, Sudan is characterized by a geographical diversity which is reflected in its multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual population. During the closing decades of the twentieth century, the country felt the burden of dealing with complex religious and political issues while striving to resolve its ethnic, cultural and economic dilemmas and preserve its dignity. However, despite the various agreements that have recently attempted to address the country's multiple conflicts and settle the civil unrest in the different regions, such as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), and the East Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA), stability has so far not been achieved and the political landscape is more fragile than ever before.³ It is within this context

² The writing of this paper was facilitated by the Micro-macro Issues in Peace and Capacity Building, a joint project between CMI, Bergen, Norway, and Ahfad, Khartoum and Juba Universities, Sudan. Comments by Liv Tønnessen on an earlier draft were of great help and highly appreciated.

³ The complexity of the situation in Sudan has been addressed by a number of scholars. For a discussion of this issue see Ahmed (2008: 71-87) in Nhema and Zeleza (eds.), (2008).

that this paper endeavours to address the relationship between the sectarian and secular political parties and the Islamic Movement and its political front, the National Islamic Front (NIF), regarding control of the political arena.

The political scene in modern Sudan began to take shape during the late 1930s and early 1940s, at a time when the national feeling against the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium had reached its height and the colonial power had begun to accept the idea of self-determination, starting with an offer of self-rule. The political parties that emerged during this period represented elitist groups originally organized under the umbrella of the Graduate Congress (see Kheir, 1948). This historical experience, more than any other factor, impacted the way in which the political parties were organized and consolidated their structure (see Panebianco, 1988:49-50). Since their early emergence on the political scene, the sectarian parties had the support of the main traditional leadership of the Ansar and the Khatmiyya sects; hence, Islam came to be a major factor in shaping the daily interaction of the parties with the general public throughout the country.

The answer to some of the most puzzling problems of modern Sudan may be found through an understanding of the impact of Islam on Sudanese politics, which has roots dating back to the Islamic states of the fifteenth century. In the last few decades, the Islamic Movement in Sudan has assumed different names and developed a variety of organizational structures at different points in time.⁴ The strategy behind these changes has been based on the realization that the Islamic Movement does not represent the multitude of groups that advocate Islam as a guidepost for everyday life in Sudanese communities. Such groups include Ansar al-Sunna, the Republican Brothers, and other minor Sufi groups, in addition to the leaders of the traditional major sects. None of these groups were in line with the political Islam that the Muslim Brothers advocated at an earlier stage and the NIF later propagated, nor did they accept the means that the Movement used to achieve its goal of establishing an Islamic state in the country. The use of the term “Islamic Movement” refers to those who organized themselves into a political party that advocated the takeover and “Islamizing” of the Sudanese state through all possible means, including force.

The relationship between the Islamic Movement and other political parties has changed over time, ranging from alliances to direct opposition and confrontation, which at times has deteriorated into violence.⁵ From the perspective of the Islamic Movement, the rules of the game were defined by how much other parties were willing to accept the prominence of the Islamic *Shari'a* law as a guiding principle in governing the country and shaping state and societal relations. This arises from the fact that Northern Sudan has been integrated into the Muslim world since approximately the eighth century.⁶

One of the most important developments in Islam that gave form to the religious practices among Sudanese Muslims is the prevalence of *Sufism*. As practiced by the Sudanese, some of the salient

⁴ The history and development of the Islamic Movement in the Sudan has been addressed in a number of publications in both Arabic and English. Most prominent among these are Muddather Abd al-Rahim and al-Tayyib Zein al-'Abdin (eds.), (1987), El-Affendi (1991), and Abdel Salam Sidahmed (1997). Also see Warburg (1978 and 2003). Mekki (2006:15) explains the stages of the naming process as follows: The Islamic Movement first appeared on the scene on 12/8/1954. Later it appeared on the political scene under a variety of names such as the Islamic Constitution Front, 1955-1958; the Islamic Charter Front, 1965-1969; and the National Islamic Front, 1985-1989. Internally among its members it continued to be known as the Islamic Movement while among university students it adopted the name the Islamic Front. In addition to Mekki's comments, it should be noted that at present the Movement has split into three factions: the National Congress Party (NCP) which is in control of the government; the National Popular Congress (NPC) which is the opposition party led by al-Turabi; and the core of the Muslim Brotherhood which was the driving force behind the establishment of the Movement in the early 1950s and which is trying to distance itself from the other two factions.

⁵ The use of violence rather than peaceful debate became one of the major methods used by the Islamic Movement to intimidate its political opponents. As early as the mid-1960s, violence became one of the tools used by the organized militia of the Islamic Movement. It reached its height after the NIF takeover of the government in 1989. The security forces, which are mainly a trained party militia, carried out all forms of violent acts against other political rivals. See El-Affendi (1995).

⁶ The process of Islamization and Arabization of Sudan was a gradual one that started as early as the seventh century. “The spread of Islam was mainly due to the peaceful intercourse of the traders and the penetration of Arabs who settled and intermarried with the people of the Sudan” (Hassan, 1967:18). Also see MacMichael (1922) and Trimingham (1949).

aspects of *Sufism* were the emphasis on ecstatic and place-oriented rituals, which resonated with earlier traditional practices, and the transmission of religion from a master to his students, which is consistent with the traditional passing of authority and oral transmission of knowledge. The contrast that sometimes is made between *Sufi* and orthodox *Sunni* Islam, which prevails throughout most areas of the Muslim world, does not apply in the case of Sudan. The Sudanese *Sufis*, and especially the leading families among them which came to dominate the political scene, saw no contradiction between their *Sufi* practices and their adherence to *Sunni* Islam. That is to say, they were able to make a peaceful merger between “traditional” and “orthodox” practices.⁷

It is not easy to speak in general terms about Islam as practiced in the Sudan today because it is highly complex and diverse. For part of the population, Islam is mainly seen as an integral part of their historical heritage. For others, it takes on a broader meaning and serves as the basis for their connection with the wider Islamic world. Values and practices associated with Islam are pervasive throughout Sudanese life and are shared with the wider Islamic world. These range from the notions of *haram* (forbidden), *halal* (acceptable) and *baraka* (divine blessing) to ideas about the danger of the evil eye and power, and what it means to be spiritual, moral or even magical.⁸ Those who are inclined to essentialize Islam, especially the dogmatic Muslims who insist that there is one “true” Islam, sometimes regard the actions and beliefs of the general public in Sudan as deviating from real practice.

The various dimensions of Islam mentioned above have impacted daily life within the different communities in central Sudan since the early stages of the process of Islamization and Arabization. Islam even gained authority during the emergence of the Sudanese Islamic Kingdom of the Fung and the Fur and later during the Mahdist State (cf. Theobald, 1951; Holt, 1958; O’Fahey and Spaulding, 1974; O’Fahey, 1980; Spaulding, 1985). The present relations between the organized and politicized Islamic Movement in Sudan with other sectarian and secular contemporary parties have been built over the decades on the adherence of such parties to what the movement considers as “true” Islam. This is why Islam and the modern structure of the Sudanese state tend to be closely related. Islam provided an important foundation for the development of a centralized state and has been critical to the definition of the modern Sudanese political system (Voll, 2000:153) Based on such a foundation, the Islamic Movement has attempted to invoke the heritage and authoritarian history of the Islamic kingdoms of Central and Western Sudan and the Mahdist State and to utilize to the maximum the *Sufist* notions without openly acknowledging them. This being the case, it has not been difficult for the Islamic Movement to infiltrate other parties, either sectarian or secular, or the military regimes that have come to power since independence in 1956, including the current regime which is seen by many Sudanese as reminiscent of the Mahdist State under the Khalifa.⁹

However, to reach its goal of transforming the state into its envisaged model the Islamic Movement had to devise opportunistic strategies that allowed it to dispose of any serious opponent, such as the Communist Party of Sudan (CPS), and to create and dissolve alliances with sectarian and secular parties and military regimes until it could eventually rise to power and enforce its own authoritarian rule. Guided by its ideologue Hassan al-Turabi, the Movement realized that it had to do things in stages and to view the process of gaining power as a lengthy one in which the exploitation of the “ballot box democracy with its limited opportunities is none the less an important stage towards the

⁷ The social history of Northern Sudan has been influenced by the introduction, spread and development of the Sufi sects. A number of studies have dealt with this topic. Most important among them is Voll (1971), Karsani and Osman in Daly (Ed) (1985) and McHugh (1994). Even the Mahdist State in Sudan, whose name might indicate association with Shi’a Islam, is in fact part of the Sunni order. See Sadig al-Mahdi (1975). For analysis of the roots of Islam in Sudan and the Islamic response to indigenous traditional beliefs, see Khalid (1986:304-349).

⁸ Religious leaders, especially in rural areas, are mostly poorly educated, yet they are the ones who decide on all aspect of the daily lives of members of their communities. In almost all cases, they combine what they think of as Islamic practices with local traditional beliefs. In fact, this applies to the most sophisticated leaders of traditional religious sects. Many of the traditional practices in Sudanese communities such as drumming and dancing have been integrated into and accepted as genuine Islamic practices which do not contradict with their faith.

⁹ The similarity between the present NIF domination of the political scene and its use of violence to maintain its grip on power recalls the history and behaviour of the Mahdist regime under the Khalifa Abdullahi. See Theobald 1951, and Holt, 1958.

final goal” (Warburg, 2003:207). Asked about the reconciliation between his party and Nimeiri’s regime, Turabi was quoted in al-Majallah (29 June 1986) as saying, “[w]e reconciled with Nimeiri because he had seen our strength in the July movement. We knew what he wanted from the reconciliation and we did not expect anything from him. Our intention then was to build a wide base and an encompassing Islamic movement while avoiding any open move that may antagonize him because he wants power today and tomorrow and we want to inherit the social, political and economic future of the nation (umma). We were mobilizing the masses in rural areas and establishing banks, not for the sake of money but for the sake of applying our theories and transferring services to the South. We were doing this while others were not paying attention” (‘Ilaish, 2005: 19).

In the meantime, the Islamic Movement used intimidation as a major tool for bringing the sectarian and secular parties under control, knowing that the parties could not publicly oppose the use of Islamic principles to establish a system of governance for the state. It was obvious that if these parties objected to the application of Islamic principles, they would risk losing their public support since most of their constituency came from Muslim groups with *Sufi* leanings. However, now that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) is in place and the Islamic Movement, under the name of the National Congress Party (NCP), must share power with the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), a secular party of mainly non-Muslims, the Islamic Movement is working laboriously towards creating alliances with the traditional sectarian parties to ensure its emergence as a leading force in the general election planned for 2009.

II

Knowledge has been associated with the maintenance of power, and power, to use the words of one traditional Sudanese tribal leader, is like a stick: “If you throw it away someone can pick it up and beat you with it.”¹⁰ The Islamic Movement has realized this since it began its efforts to reshape Sudanese society according to its vision. For al-Turabi, its ideologue, as well as for its other leaders, knowledge about the country was the first essential tool for gaining power (cf. ‘Ilaish, 2005). However, this knowledge would have to rest on a more complex foundation than the common beliefs, values, and categories of perceptions which constituted the cultural background of Sudanese society. These issues had to be confronted and reshaped by other essential factors, such as the situation of the general public and the imperatives and necessities of maintaining a state. In practice this meant that these leaders had to learn everything that would be strategically important for ruling the country. This implied learning from the challenges faced by previous states that had attempted to apply Islamic principles. There were lessons to be learned, for example, from the reasons that the Mahdist revolution failed to maintain a state based on Islamic principles, and from the history of the leading religious families and the role they played in shaping Sudanese society. These lessons constituted the guidelines for what to do and what not to do. Much of this historical knowledge was de-contextualized and re-interpreted according to the framework and categories of understanding of the general public in Sudan. This knowledge, which is perceived through stereotypes, was necessary in order to provide reliable information about the population in different regions of the country and to serve as useful guidelines for social conduct. It must be acknowledged that the Islamic Movement has devoted time and energy in providing such information (cf. Al-Affendi, 1991, 2008, Sidahmed, 1997, Warburg, 2003).¹¹

As early as the 1920s, the traditional sectarian political parties realized that their tribal and religious-based constituency was being threatened by the emergence of an elite who aspired to transcend the

¹⁰ This parallel between the power and the stick is reputed to be drawn by the late traditional Chief (Nazir) Babo Nimir of the Missiriya of Southern Kordofan. The wisdom of this man as a traditional leader and manager of power relations is documented in Deng (1982).

¹¹ These three studies provide a detailed analysis of the attempts made by the Islamic Movement to take over the state apparatus and the kind of effort it put forth in order to understand the dynamics of the social systems in rural and urban Sudanese communities. The Movement devoted most of its organizational experience to influencing the educational system in the country, thereby directing the thoughts and aspirations of the younger generations.

tribal and religious boundaries which they viewed as detrimental to the development of Sudanese society. The sectarian parties believed that this new elite's call for equality among all people in the country would have a negative impact on the parties' economic dominance. The military cadets and other civilians, who were influential in establishing the White Flag League organization, were pioneers in the modern history of the country in their call for a "Sudanese identity" that transcended tribal and religious boundaries and emphasized equality and justice. This in effect antagonized the traditional leaders and the dominant religious families to such an extent that they called the group "riff-raff" and said they occupied the lowest strata of society (Kurita, 1997, Ahmed, 2007, Vezzadini, 2007).¹² This was the start of the rift between the secular and sectarian parties and the Islamic Movement, which has persisted in various forms up to the present day.

III

Sudan has been governed by a number of regimes which have fluctuated between systems of multiparty parliamentary democracy and military dictatorships supported by minor political actors. Under all these systems of governance, the "Islamic factor" has played a significant role either in a latent manner, as in the sectarian loyalties that gave the mainstream parties their power base, or in an overt manner, as in the various experiments of Islamic constitutions and legalisation. Some of the most obvious examples of Islam's encroachment into politics include the drafting of the "Islamic constitution" in 1968 following the ban on the CPS which was believed to be the main party that might openly oppose such a move; Nimeiri's enactment of what is called the *Shari'a* laws in 1983; the execution of Mahmud Mohamed Taha in 1985 on charges of apostasy for having opposed these laws; and the affirmation of such laws later in 1991 after the rise of the NIF to power in 1989.

Although in the earlier stages of this process the Islamic Movement was a minor pressure group, it always managed to use its power of intimidation against the sectarian parties, knowing that they could not publicly oppose such a move without losing the support of their constituency. At the same time, the Islamic Movement, under the name of the Muslim Brotherhood, had designed various strategies that would enable it to assume power in the country. Its first step was to build a strong power base among the labour organizations and students in high schools and universities, and consequently, it had to find ways of competing with the CPS, which already had a strong power base among these groups. Its most effective strategy was to adopt almost the same organizational structure that its opponent in this arena was using - namely, building small, clandestine cells and infiltrating other groups to learn what they did and how to counter their possible future moves.¹³ Efforts were also directed towards recruiting members from among young students at different levels of the educational system. To realize these objectives, prominent members of the movement were posted to schools in remote rural areas. These areas represented the power base of the traditional parties and were located far from the urban population from which the CPS derived a comparative advantage and which it depended on for support.¹⁴

The Islamic Movement was carefully fostering its advance into the main political arena in the capital. It spent considerable time building its support among students in high schools and universities as well as rural communities without being in a hurry to contest the general elections. For this reason it did not

¹² The religious leaders and other prominent individuals who controlled the economic institution during the early days of the Anglo-Egyptian rule of the Sudan opposed the rise of the new and modern elite which challenged their dominance of Sudanese society. This was expressed openly in their opposition to the revolt against the colonial powers, as seen in their attitude towards the leaders of the 1924 revolution (see the above-mentioned studies).

¹³ In recent years a number of prominent political figures who held leading positions in sectarian and secular political parties and supported the NIF military regime have announced in the media that they have always been members of the Islamic Movement.

¹⁴ Assigning a number of the young graduates of the Islamic Movement to work as school teachers in remote areas is a case in point. This strategy yielded fruit in the election of 1986 when the NIF managed to gain most of the constituencies in Western Sudan, a region which had always been regarded as a closed constituency for the Umma (Mahdist) party. The election results confirmed the strong support for the NIF, winning 51 seats and becoming the third major party in the parliament after the Umma with 99 seats and the DUP with 64 seats. (Mohamed Salih, 2001: 93).

field candidates under its own banner during the 1953 general election nor did it gain a seat in the 1958 election. Table 1 below shows the Movement's performance in the last three multiparty elections in which it participated after rigorous planning.

Table 1: Distribution of seats resulting from general elections in 1965/68/86

| Y/P | Umma | NUP | ICF/NIF | SCP | PDP | South | Beja | Nuba | Indep. |
|------|------|-----|---------|-----|-----|-------|------|------|--------|
| 1965 | 76 | 54 | 5 | 11 | 3 | -- | 10 | -- | 14 |
| 1968 | 72 | 101 | 3 | 2 | -- | 25 | 3 | 2 | 10 |
| 1986 | 99 | 63 | 51 | 3 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |

In 1965 ICF had 3 territorial constituencies (seats) and 2 graduates; SCP had 11 graduates.

In 1986 NIF had 28 territorial constituencies (seats) and 23 graduates; SCP had 2 territorial seats and 1 graduate.

South includes 15 seats for SANU and 10 for the Southern Front.

Source: Compiled from Bechtold (1976) and Atta El-Battahani (2002).

The controversy over an Islamic constitution became the arena for competition between the Islamic Movement and the sectarian parties, as well as a point of conflict between the Movement and the secular elements in society. The struggle started as early as the 1960s when the country began its quest for a permanent constitution. The first signs of conflict over a constitution were not generated by the Islamic Movement but rather by the sectarian parties led by the Umma Party (UP). The Technical Committee, entrusted with the task of preparing the draft, came up with three options. These were (i) a full Islamic constitution totally committed to the *Shari'a* and its various obligations; (ii) a constitution with Islamic orientation but not as strict as the above one; and (iii) a non-religious or secular constitution. The first was proposed by the Islamic Charter Front (ICF), which was the name adopted by the Islamic Movement at the time; the second was proposed by the National Unionist Party (NUP), and the third by the Southern Sudanese representatives on the drafting committee. Although the UP and NUP were intimidated by the propaganda of having an Islamic constitution, they were not as keen as the ideologically committed and outspoken ICF which spearheaded the campaign. However, the UP and NUP could not openly oppose such a proposal and hence worked hard to dilute its Islamic content. The real opposition to the proposal came from the Southern Sudanese parties and the CPS (Sidahmed, 1997: 95-112).¹⁵

“Although both the Southern Sudanese parties and the CPS were united in their rejection of an Islamic constitution, their motives and arguments naturally differed. For the Southerners, the question was rather simple: an Islamic constitution would question the very political right of non-Muslims and amount to an enforcement and imposition of another religion. For the CPS, the issue was rather complicated, particularly with reference to the political circumstances at the time in which the CPS¹⁶ was dissolved on charges of atheism. For the CPS to oppose an Islamic constitution would naturally be portrayed by its adversaries as a rejection of Islam as such. Therefore the campaign of the CPS against the draft constitution was extremely cautious and rather apologetic” (Sidahmed, 1997:109). The stand of the CPS was political rather than ideological, arguing that Islam is noble; however, what was being questioned by the CPS was the honesty of those who advocated an Islamic constitution and abused the sacred name of Islam in pursuit of worldly matters.

Following the ban of the CPS in 1965, the Islamic Movement began concerted efforts to develop a broader base of support and attract as many sympathizers as possible. To this end, it established the ICF as an umbrella organization to bring together all those who supported the adoption of an Islamic constitution. The ICF gradually became stronger and more active, offering an alternative ideology as

¹⁵ Abdel Salam Sidahmed's gives a detailed account of the process of establishing the Islamic constitution. The reference to the fact that intimidation was used as an effective tool to pacify any opposition from the different parties on the political scene still applies today. It is interesting to see that the current CPS members go out of their way to prove that they are also devout Muslims.

¹⁴ The charge was initiated following a debate among university students in which an assumed member of the CPS was accused of defaming one of the wives of the Prophet.

well as opting for pragmatic strategies for dealing with different political regimes. It increasingly prioritized loyalty to the system and gained influence within the existing political order under both military and parliamentary regimes. These pragmatic strategies are important for explaining how the movement moved from being a minor player to a major political force within Sudanese society and why it was catapulted into the centre of the Sudanese political maelstrom.

Table 2: Regime types in Sudan (1956 to date) and the role of the Islamic Movement

| Type of regime | Parliamentary | Military | Parliamentary | Military | Parliamentary | Military/Islamist |
|--|--|---|--|---|--|---|
| Period | 1956-1958 | 1958-1964 | 1964-1969 | 1969-1985 | 1985-1989 | 1989- |
| Party/person in power | Coalition: The Umma Party (UP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) | Abboud Military and technocratic support | Coalition: The Umma Party (UP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) | Nimeiri Socialists first, Liberals and Sufis | Coalition: The Umma Party (UP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) | Bashir NIF and its militias |
| Leading Islamic Movement | The Muslim Brotherhood | The Muslim Brotherhood | The Islamic Charter Front | The Muslim Brotherhood | The National Islamic Front | The National Congress Party (1991-) The Popular National Congress (2000-) |
| Islamic Movement in the political system | Minor pressure group in opposition | Minor pressure group in opposition | Political organization in opposition | Political organization in opposition (1969-77) and in power (1977-85) | Political party in opposition (1986-88) and in power (1988-89) | Political party in position (1991-99) and in opposition (2000-). National Congress in power and Popular Congress in opposition. |

Adopted with slight modification from Tønnessen (2005). With the signing of the CPA in 2005, the Government of National Unity was established and the SPLM became a junior partner in the Government along with minor representation by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). This did not change the nature of the control that the Islamic Movement had over the system of governance.

However, in 1989 the Islamic Movement chose to exit from the current political order and establish its own after it failed to gain full power through the ballot box or establish a system of governance based on Islamic principles through collaboration with the authoritarian regimes in the country (see Hirschmann, 1970; Tønnessen, 2005). According to its leaders, their efforts failed due to the fundamental lack of change in the group of political parties that comprised the parliamentary regimes, so that the Movement found itself stuck in endless opposition. The Movement attempted to seize power through a coup d'état, claiming that the parliament was about to amend the Islamic laws passed by Nimeiri's regime and that the current government of Sadig al-Mahdi had initiated peace talks with the SPLA/M which could lead to the annulment of these laws. In order to halt this unwanted development, the Movement argued that it had to seize power through military means, using its cadre in the National Armed Forces, other sympathizing elements and the party militia.

IV

In its ascent to power, the Islamic Movement has continued to change its strategies, just as it has changed its name for pragmatic reasons to attract the largest possible number of members and sympathizers. It has relied on the adherence of the general public in Northern and Central Sudan to *Sufi* Islam whereby no individual, civil society organization or political party can be vocal in their opposition to *Shari'a* laws. The strategies used by the Islamic Movement throughout the various stages of its development, as well as its relationship with the other national parties, may be summed up under five main categories, some of which have already been briefly mentioned above. These include: i) intimidation; ii) control of key institutions in society; iii) alliances; iv) deceptive moves; and v) delaying tactics.

The other parties have responded to these strategies in a variety of ways - from attempting to pacify and marginalize the role of the Islamic Movement to allying themselves with the Movement on some issues and for certain periods of time. This is clearly demonstrated by the events during the period referred to in Sudanese political history as the "third democracy". However, behind all this lies the fear of the traditional national political parties that they will be outmanoeuvred by the Islamic Movement's ability to attract the support of the rural public and thus erode their constituency.

The strategy of intimidation was obvious when the ICF proposed the Islamic constitution. None of the parties would speak out directly against such a proposal, except for the Southern Sudanese representatives who are non-Muslims. As noted above, even the CPS, who for ideological reasons opposed the Islamic Movement's agenda, was apologetic in its stand. The Islamic Movement used this leverage to advance its ideas and attract the support of religious leaders and their followers outside of the two main religious sects. This strategy was so successful that after the downfall of Nimeiri's regime, the Islamic Movement was able to halt any attempt to annul the *Shari'a* laws.

Efforts to control key institutions in society were firstly directed toward the economic sector. The Islamic Movement, with support from other quarters in the Muslim world, introduced the idea of the Islamic banking system. This was the most effective tool in giving the Movement the financial means to attract support and buy influence among different labour, student and other civil society organizations. It was also able to use funds provided by these banks to build a very effective media platform which it used to disseminate information and attract new recruits to its ranks and which enabled it to discredit its opponents when it needed to do so.¹⁷ Secondly, its attention was directed toward the armed and security forces to which the movement assigned some of its active, young and educated cadre. It is through these two key institutions that it was able to take over and establish its "Islamic state" later in 1989, and start putting its Civilization Project¹⁸ into action. Once in power, it made sure that no individual or group would interfere with the implementation of its project. To accomplish this it opted for a policy of replacing those in the civil service, security, armed forces or any other key institution who might not be trusted with those of its own cadre. It emphasized loyalty rather than qualifications in order to strengthen its grip on the state apparatus. This policy became known as *tamkin* (see El Affendi, 1995:44-48; 165).

¹⁷ The Islamic banking system established during the 1970s gave the NIF a sound financial basis. By 1989, economic and financial companies under its direct control gave it the power to control the media and dominate the political scene (Warburg, 2003: 212). The security forces, a major pillar of the regime, prided itself on owning most of the effective companies in the country. Its director claimed that he did not even need a budget from the treasury since he could run the force using the income generated by the companies controlled by the force.

¹⁸ Through the Civilization Project the NIF sought to lead Sudanese society toward what it envisaged as the true Islam of the early days of the spread of the Islamic message. It planned to change the day-to-day behaviour of individuals and to restructure the state system in a manner that reflected adherence to the basic Islamic principals.

Attempts to make alliances with the main traditional national parties took different forms. One major aspect was to work from inside these parties and ensure that it could influence their decision making processes. A number of national figures in the traditional parties have at certain points in time acknowledged their close relationship with the Islamic Movement. During the mid-1960s, the ICF was able to create a strong front in the parliament which enabled it to ban the CPS. Later on it became a key player in the National Front which it formed with the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in opposition to Nimeiri's military regime (see Khalid, 1990, Sidahmed, 1997, Lesch, 1998, Mohamed Salih, 2001 and Warburg, 2003). However, after spending eight years opposing Nimeiri's regime, it ended up being the only supporter of that very regime during its last years, based on the argument that the regime was implementing the *Shari'a* laws which could be used for building its own power base.¹⁹ Nevertheless, when Nimeiri's regime collapsed it managed to manoeuvre itself back into the power game by striking an alliance with the traditional parties before engineering the coup d'état that carried it to its position as sole power holder.

The Islamic Movement proved to be a master of deception in its dealings with the traditional sectarian as well as secular parties. Even though it stands in polar opposition to the CPS, the Movement learned from the way the CPS organized its clandestine activities and emulated this during the different stages of its organizational development. It also went into rural areas on the pretence that it was only an educational association interested in raising educational standards and fighting illiteracy in these areas, so as not to raise any suspicion of its political ambitions. It was able to post most of its active cadre to these rural areas in order to recruit young students to its ranks, an activity that ultimately brought such high dividends that this generation of young members became the leading force behind the coup d'état. It was also able to deceive other parties by making public addresses on certain issues in which it suggested one line of action while discreetly carrying out another. Other parties might have done the same at other points in time; however, the NIF turned out to be a master of the game. This became very clear when in 1985 it pretended to oppose reserving constituencies for the "graduates" in the elections, while at the same time and after conducting a thorough survey of migrant workers in Arab countries, it asked its members in the diaspora to register under the names of different regions and vote accordingly. As the National Islamic Front (NIF), the name it assumed after 1985, the Islamic Movement pretended all the while to reject the idea of reserving seats for "graduates", but in the final hour it agreed to allow it. By then the NIF was the only party that had laid the groundwork for winning these seats, and it was so successful that it became the third bloc in the parliament. However, the most successful of its deceptive strategies was the way it managed to disguise the nature of its relationship with the army officers who led the coup d'état in 1989. It was an act that not only deceived the national sectarian and secular parties but also those regional political actors who were thought to be closely following events in Sudan.²⁰

Now that it has assumed power, the Islamic Movement under the name of the National Congress is forming and dissolving alliances with different political actors almost all the time. Its strategy is to create a state of confusion among its opponents by playing them against each other. The Movement has different teams of negotiators who contact different parties or influential individuals within these parties and attempt to recruit them to their side. However, it always ensures that any decision taken during such negotiations should not be implemented at the time agreed upon, and it works to frustrate and weaken the position of those who signed the agreements. This is in addition to paying money to

¹⁹ In 1986 al-Turabi was quoted as saying, "Nimeiri reconciled with us after he saw our might in our attempt to force him out of office in 1976. We knew exactly what we wanted from him and we were not expecting much in dealing with him... We were not in need of something from him... We were working to build an extended Islamic Movement and trying to avoid whatever may antagonize him. He wanted power today and tomorrow and we want to inherit the social, political and economic future of the nation. We were working towards the mobilization of the rural masses and building financial institutions, not for money but for allowing us to apply our theory and to transform services to the South while others are not paying attention" (El-Majallah, Saudi Arabia, 29 June 1986).

²⁰ To ensure that no party would doubt its claim that it was not involved in the coup, the NIF arrested and detained for a short time its ideologue and leader al-Turabi along with the leaders of the other sectarian and secular parties and the civil society organizations. The Egyptian government, which followed events in Sudan with great interest, was led to believe that such a move was not engineered by the Islamists, and Egypt went out of its way to convince other Arab countries to support the new regime.

individual leaders whose support it wants to attract using the funds generated from the oil sales that it fully controls.²¹ In this way it has been able to ensure that it can effectively play a divisive role among any opposition forces it may encounter (cf. 'Ilaish, 2005).

V

Although all indicators during the early months of 1989 showed that a coup was in the making, and the NIF had announced more than once that such a move would come sooner rather than later, all the other parties seem to have been taken by surprise. The quick takeover and the arrest of leading figures in the parliament, the armed forces and the security forces deprived these parties of any immediate organized response. This was followed by the deceptive move of the NIF in its attempt to show that it was not behind the coup.

The new regime used violent means to intimidate any group that may have the potential to engage in a counter movement, especially from among the civil society organizations, and at the same time it used the NIF militia to maintain its stronghold rather than depending on the armed forces and the police in whose names it ascended to power.²² The SLPA/M and the CPS were the only national political actors who did not fall for such a ploy. However, the SPLA/M had little influence on the political scene in the central and northern parts of the country while the CPS, which had been weakened since the failure of its coup attempt in 1971, was targeted by the NIF militia, severely repressed and hence unable to organize any effective opposition.

Only after the NIF claimed responsibility for organizing the takeover and declared its intention to realize its Islamic Civilization Project did the sectarian and secular parties begin to consider organizing an opposition front to dislodge the new government. Since it was not possible to organize the activities of such a front inside the country, most of the national political leaders had to go abroad to do so. It was only then that these parties were able to establish the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) as an umbrella organization which brought all the sectarian and secular parties together and started to operate from both Asmara and Cairo. It began with civil opposition and attempted to establish some bases inside the country. However, since the NIF had made clear its unwillingness to negotiate with any force that did not carry arms, the NDA had to organize a military wing under the leadership of the army officers who had been removed from their positions during the coup but who continued to claim that they were the legal military command.²³ It was only when the SPLA/M joined the NDA that the regime in Khartoum began to view the NDA as a force to be reckoned with. The Umma Party joined the NDA for a short while but later withdrew and initiated its own negotiations with the regime.

With the Asmara Declaration (1995) in place, the SPLA/M entered into a series of negotiations with the regime attempting to smooth the way for a democratic transition. It was thought that the SPLA/M was acting on behalf of the NDA as well, but it later transpired that this was not the case. It was at the point of entering into negotiation with the SPLA/M that the NIF (now the National Congress Party, the NCP) was able to divide the opposition and started to deal with each faction separately. The political

²¹ There is no transparency regarding the oil revenues. Even the Ministry of Finance at the national level has no control of how much is received from oil sales or for what purpose it is being spent. The Minister of Environment is the sole commander of the group in charge of this fund.

²² Some detailed accounts of the kind of violence encountered by those whom the regime regarded as possible opposition organizers appeared in a number of publications nationally and internationally. See, for example, the publication by Markaz Al-Na'eem (2003), a human rights non-government organization based in Cairo which used detailed interviews with Sudanese refugees who were subjected to harsh treatment before they were able to escape from the country..

²³ The commanders of the National Armed Forces insisted on calling themselves the Legal Command and tried to regroup and organize forces along the Sudan-Eritrea border. They joined the NDA and became its fighting force. The problem they faced is that once they no longer held official leadership positions in the army, the rank and file did not accept their claim to authority.

scene became fragmented and the opposition totally ineffective after the signing of the CPA in 2005 which detached the SPLA/M from the NDA. Other agreements with the opposition factions in Western and Eastern Sudan were also part of the NIF strategy to divide and rule, drawing on all possible means to attract the support of influential figures in the national political parties and the rebel groups by using the oil money it has been accumulating over the past few years.

VI

It may be concluded that the response of the sectarian and the secular political parties to the NIF (now NCP) is very weak and rather confused. This is mainly due to the fact that these parties lack organization and have no clear vision of the future or programme of action to counter the NIF's proposed Civilization Project and its aspiration to establish an Islamic state in Sudan. Also, over the years these parties have not been able to recruit new members to their ranks while the Islamic Movement has continued to bring most of the younger generation into its fold. The fact that most of the opposition's able leaders were either out of the country for a long time or kept in detention for extended periods deprived these political parties of the ability to take any serious initiative to dislodge the Islamic Movement or weaken its grip on power and wealth.

The rebel groups, including the SPLA/M which became a partner in the Government of National Unity pursuant to the CPA, have continued to emphasize their regional inclinations and become comfortable with the organisational as well as personal gains that they feel they have made. The crisis in Darfur and the feeling of disappointment due to delays in the peace process are contributing to the ongoing instability in the country. So far the NIF finds itself in a very comfortable position vis-à-vis other parties and is able to maintain its position of power. Because the NIF controls the key institutions in the country, it may take the other parties a long time to weaken the NIF's grip on power and wealth.

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SUMMARY

Any attempt to define and characterize the relationship between the National Islamic Front (NIF) and the sectarian and secular parties in Sudan must start with assessing the impact of Islam on the Sudanese political scene since the early days when the Arabized Muslim groups dominated the centres of power in Central Sudan. Today the NIF capitalizes on the adherence of the general public in the country to Sufi Islam and in the past used this as leverage to further its goal of establishing an Islamic state. In dealing with other parties, it used such strategies as intimidation, deception, control of key institutions in society and the like. The sectarian and secular parties were unable to counter these strategies due to internal weaknesses and limited resources. Instead of organizing an effective opposition inside the country, they opted to organize in exile, an act that distanced them from the masses and left the platform fully under the control of the NIF and, to a certain degree, the rebel movements. With the signing of the CPA the major rebel group, the SPLM, became a partner in the Government of National Unity, thus strengthening the grip of the NIF on power and wealth. This has led to further marginalization of the sectarian and secular parties which are left to seek alliances with discontented groups in Eastern and Western Sudan or to try to forge relations with the NIF which remains in full control of the political space.

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