

Book Review

Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in Sudan

By Abdelwahab El-Affendi. Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in Sudan. London: Grey Seal, 1991, 208 pp.

The establishment of a new political system and social order as a result of a conscious Islamization effort is an important event in contemporary world history. The Islamic revolution in Iran and the establishment of an Islamic republic in that country in 1979 was such a landmark event. A development which may have a similar significance for the 1990s is the emergence of a formal social and political Islamization effort in Sudan following the revolution of 1989. In Sudan, the National Islamic Front led by Hasan Turabi is working with the revolutionary regime of Omar Hassan al-Bashir in a major effort to transform Sudan on the basis of a more active adherence to Islamic ideals and standards.

The Iranian and Sudanese experiences have many differences but also some important similarities. One of these is that in both cases, important intellectual leaders, the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and Hasan Turabi in Sudan, had been engaged in a long-term effort to define what a truly Islamic political system and social order should be. As a result, the revolutions of 1979 and 1989 brought to power groups possessing explicit conceptualizations regarding the nature of the systems to be implemented and leaders who were willing to work with governments to assist in this process of conscious Islamization.

Hasan Turabi has a long history of active involvement in Sudanese politics. By 1989 he had helped to create both an effective political organization, the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood, and an articulated ideology of sociopolitical Islamization. The organization and the ideology provide the foundation for what was in many ways to become "Turabi's revolution."

Abdelwahab El-Affendi, a journalist, political scientist, and diplomat, provides us with a description and analysis of this intellectual and political force. His substantial account of Turabi's revolution has the special benefits and difficulties of being written by "an Islamist engaged in studying the very movement within which I grew up and the general aims of which I still vehemently support."¹ This book becomes, as a result, a case study of a number of very different but important topics. There is the very nature and methodology of the author and the undertaking, as well as the issues raised by the content of

¹Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "Studying My Movement: Social Science without Cynicism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, no. 1 (February 1991): 84.

the Islamist program as it has emerged in Sudan in recent years. However, in the current political context, it is the latter set of issues which is most important for further discussion.

Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in Sudan is, from one perspective, simply a sound and thorough analysis of an important movement in the contemporary Muslim world. In this respect, it joins a growing list of works by scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim. This book provides an historical account of the development of the Islamist movement in Sudan since the end of World War II. There is a general introductory chapter on the contemporary Islamic revival and another chapter on the general development of secular politics in Sudan in the context of the emergence of nationalism and then of party politics and independence. One chapter describes the complicated beginnings of the brotherhood organization in the 1940s and 1950s and three subsequent chapters give the history of the Islamist movements in the second era of party politics (in the 1960s) and under the regime of Numayri. The final three chapters give an account of the development of the National Islamic Front (NIF) under Turabi's leadership and discuss the implications of "Turabi's Ideological Revolution" (chapter 9). While the presentation is lively, it is done in a clear and scholarly style which would make it difficult, until the more personal conclusion, to conclude that the author is describing a movement of which he is a part. El-Affendi regularly notes mistakes made and provides criticism of some of the policy paths taken by the Islamist movement.

It is Turabi's ideological revolution itself which attracts the most attention in this book, given current global political conditions. With the suspension of elections in Algeria and the denial of political participation to Islamist groups in Tunisia, as well as the establishment of an Islamically committed regime in Sudan, questions of the nature of an Islamized political system in the context of the contemporary world have increasing importance. Turabi's revolution assumes an important global role as representative of what might be the next stage in the Islamization paradigm. However, this revolution does not have the freedom of being primarily an intellectual exercise in comparative law; it is tied to the specific conditions of Sudan in the 1990s. In this way, the particular situation of long-standing civil strife within Sudan, often involving direct conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, becomes important in the broader global assessment of the effectiveness of Islamization programs.

El-Affendi notes the importance of this global dimension for the particular conditions of Sudan. He notes that in the 1980s, the National Islamic Front "presented itself as the symbol and champion of the Islamic identity of the Sudanese nation, but this has created a grave problem so far as the integrity of Sudan with its sizable non-Muslim minority was concerned, affecting the view the world takes of the country" (p. 144). In this discussion, El-Affendi points to one of the most important issues facing programs of Islamization and

one that tends to be the least effectively handled by Islamist groups: defining the nature of the Islamization of the sociopolitical order in an environment of religious and cultural pluralism. While El-Affendi raises the issue, he does not provide an extensive discussion on how the issue is dealt with within the conceptual framework of Turabi's revolution. However, both El-Affendi and the practitioners of Turabi's revolution will have to articulate effective answers to questions of pluralism before peace can come to Sudan or, in broader terms, a Turabi-style of social transformation will be seen as a possible model for others to follow.

El-Affendi recognizes the difficulties in the specific political programs of the National Islamic Front during the parliamentary era in the 1980s, when the NIF position was defined by its Sudan charter. He notes that this charter was "meant to impress non-Muslims inside and outside the country, and that that is precisely where it appears to have failed. Its problem is that it abounds in contradictions that negate any concessions made in it" (p. 176). Essentially, the "Sudan charter offers a programme of wary co-existence of separate communities, rather than a blueprint for a new nation. It thus suffers from the defect Turabi warned against elsewhere: projecting Islam as the interest of a particular ethnic-sectarian group, rather than a universal ethical imperative" (p. 177).

El-Affendi wrote this book before the establishment of the 1989 revolutionary regime and concluded his analysis of Turabi's ideological revolution with a description of an interview that he had had with Turabi. In their discussion, El-Affendi said that he had raised the subject of what he felt was the "excessive and disembodied idealism" of some of Turabi's writings. The author says: "I was trying to make him spell out the relevance of his idealized society to his politics, to say if it would make a difference to life here and now" (p. 180). In the years following the 1989 revolution, Turabi and the National Islamic Front have had the opportunity of working with the government to have a direct impact on "life here and now."

The emerging political system emphasizes principles within the Islamic framework for political discourse that are not a major part of El-Affendi's presentation. This is more a reflection of the changing situation of the Islamist movement in Sudan than of an inaccurate presentation by the author. In working with "life here and now" since the revolution of 1989, Turabi and Bashir have placed great emphasis on the principles of consultation (*shūrā*) and consensus (*ijmā'*) as they have worked to conceptualize and construct a political system that can avoid the problems of past military and parliamentary regimes in Sudan.

In the index to El-Affendi's book there are only two citations for "consensus" and two for *shūrā*, with one citation overlapping. However, these references point to the basic principles which are important in the emerging Sudanese political system. The effort to make religious thought democratic "became one

of the cardinal elements of Turabi's push to reinterpret Islamic doctrine" (p. 160). In this effort, a reinterpretation of consensus is crucial and, in Turabi's formulation, consensus is not "the consensus of the learned elite but the more popular consensus of the Muslim community enlightened by its more learned members" (p. 160). It is in this context that consultation rather than political competition becomes a crucial operating principle of the new Islamic democracy. The traditional meanings of *shūrā* or consultation can be raised to higher levels of active participation, in Turabi's view, because of the "advances in communications" available to the present generations (p. 170).

In all of these dimensions of idealism and work in existing situations, "Turabi's most cherished idea" is seen as *tajdīd*, the "incessant striving to bring the ever-changing existence under the eternal guiding principles" (p. 170). Turabi's ideas have been challenges to established structures and conceptualizations in Sudanese society and politics. He has represented a profoundly revolutionary tendency within Sudanese Islam. In contrast, however, to most revolutionary idealists, Turabi, like Khomeini before him, has the opportunity and challenge to create structures for the implementation of his ideals in "life here and now."

The situation in Sudan requires radical new approaches, since most of the more standard approaches of parliamentary and military rule have failed to bring internal peace or prosperity. The issues that have to be resolved are the most critical issues of the broader world as well: how can an ethnically and religiously heterogeneous society provide freedom, and how can a society provide a sense of economic well-being, to all of its peoples? The collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, as well as the recent riots in Los Angeles, show that no society has yet resolved all of these issues satisfactorily. The challenge to Turabi's revolution is to provide a clearly Islamic answer that can persuade both Muslims and non-Muslims of its validity. For anyone interested in these profound issues, the book by Abdelwahab El-Affendi is an excellent starting point.

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