

Sudan's Secession and the Future Ahead

A Conversation with Professor Amal Hassan Fadlalla

On July 9 of 2011, Sudan, Africa's largest country, split into two nations. The secession is a result of the longest civil war in world history between the north and the south that dates back to the country's independence in 1956. Fights over power, economic and citizenship rights have cost the country over two million people. In 2005 the international community headed by the United States (during the Bush administration) helped put an end to the war through a peace deal between the two warring parties. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed in the Kenyan city of Nifasha set forth a transitional constitution according to which the country would undergo a general election in April 2010, after which southern Sudanese were to vote for unity or secession. Southern Sudanese recorded a massive vote for secession from the north in the January 9, 2011 referendum.

Professor Amal Hassan Fadlalla, who is working on a current project on Sudanese transnational activism, visited Juba two weeks after the secession. In this article she is interviewed by Professor Omolade Adunbi about this important historical moment.



As an eye witness to the celebrated independence of South Sudan, how would you describe the event of July 9th? And what were the perceptions of Northerners and Southerners of the event?

Well it is interesting to note that I missed the celebration of independence in Juba in part because I was going through the final steps of my initiation as an American citizen. When I arrived in Khartoum I could not find a ticket to fly to Juba. Tickets were extremely expensive and hotels were overbooked despite the fear of violence erupting due to political tension between the northern and southern governments and militias who split from the SPLM (Sudan Liberation Movement) prior to secession. I was in direct contact with many friends and colleagues who managed to go to Juba, who were reporting on the event. I also followed it on Sudanese media.

It was an unprecedented, hyper-emotional moment for Sudanese in both the North

and the South. While most southern Sudanese were joyful, people in Khartoum expressed mixed feelings of sadness and ambivalence. The saddest moment for many was when the flag of the Sudan was lowered and that of South Sudan was raised at the event. Many people I spoke with appreciated the fact that Sudan's flag was not returned to the North but was kept in the South. This political gesture soothed the pain of the split and gave hope that even if borders were redrawn, the historical relations between the two nations will thrive.

I managed to go to Juba two weeks after the event and engaged in conversations with activists and other individuals there. I noticed that the mood had changed from one of jubilation to one that acknowledged the pros and cons of division and the challenges that may face the two nations. I also noticed that people in both the North and the South speak about the split in a careful and diplomatic manner, often mixed with humorous comments such as "nothing

actually happened except the map of the Sudan looks ugly now," or "the only thing that will change is waiting longer to get a passport or visa to cross back and forth."

Many will argue that what we perceive as division within Sudan is a historical divide embedded in colonial policies implemented in many African countries. Do you see this as accounting for the split?

Indeed, the British politics of divide and rule left its mark on Sudan and may be traced to recent problems. The British perceived the North, with its Islamo-Arabic culture, as more organized, civilized, and easy to rule. Northerners were left to govern according to their practices, but the South was depicted as part of the dark heart of Africa with its animist religions, which were ranked lower in the natural scale of being compared to Christianity and Islam. The British believed the black South was in need of civilization through missionaries and the introduction of new laws to bring it to order.

Therefore, the two regions were administered differently. According to the “close district ordinances,” Northerners had to use permits to travel to the South, and Arabic was rejected as the official language there. After independence southern elite demanded self rule which ignited the war between the two regions. The advent of the Islamists to power in 1989, however, was the worst in the history of North-South relations because of the rise of fundamentalism in the Arab region and the Sudanese regime’s adoption of an ideological package that saw *jihād* as the way to assimilate Southerners to the grand Islamic project. Thus, it is possible to locate today’s division in both colonial policies of divide and rule, and postcolonial ideologies of dominance and exclusion.

Infrastructure development was a major challenge for most if not all of Africa at independence. Do you see this as a major issue that will confront both Sudans?

Of course, especially given that Sudan is the largest country in Africa and is also one of the poorest nations in the world. For the South, however, the story is even worse because of over four decades of war and suffering. The discovery of oil in the South has helped both North and South to be able to invest some oil revenue in infrastructure development. Many people I met in Juba mentioned that Juba was like a little village 10 years ago, but now the city is expanding with new roads, hotels, and restaurants. The same is true for Khartoum. But these are the capital cities, and in most African countries the population centers fare better than the rural areas. After the split, however, the North may lose the oil revenue, but negotiations are underway for the South to export its oil through the North for a hefty fee. The problem is that most of the oil is in the Abyie area, a contested region inhabited by Dinka Ngok and Misriya Arab nomads. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended the war between the North and the South and paved the way for the separation of the country did not resolve the Abyie issue. If unresolved, Abyie

may unfortunately ignite violence between the two nations and threaten potential development in both regions.

Many scholars, including you, have argued that splitting of the Sudan was avoidable. Do you still see yourself as aligning with this school of thought or, having witnessed the split, do you now feel it was unavoidable?

I truly believed it was avoidable. There are two factions in the SPLM (Sudan Liberation Movement): the unionists and the separationists. I think the death of Dr. John Garang in a mysterious plane crash after the signing of the CPA in 2005 has a lot to do with the strengthening of the separationist position in the southern movement. Unfortunately the separationist attitude met a very rigid religious fundamentalist regime in Khartoum. The Khartoum regime saw any compromise to establish a secular constitution as a threat to its governing project which is known as the “civilizing Islamic project.” This is why the five years of the CPA implementation were a nightmare in the history of Sudanese politics because they were characterized by constant negotiations and break of negotiations.

During this period the international community, especially the U.S., was heavily present in the Sudan as mediator, and applied pressure to implement the plan. Such interventions generated a sense of vulnerability and fear that a break in negotiations may lead to a return to violence and war, and of course would end any hope of building a southern nation. Most of the elite and activists were hoping that people would revolt against the regime, especially because Sudan is famous for toppling two dictatorships through popular revolutions in 1964 and 1985, and was recently surrounded by the Arab spring. I think the sense of vulnerability, especially in the North, prohibited any attempt of uprising. Secession came as the easy compromise to end the war and fulfill the CPA. Keeping the nation together required a strong secular government with a long-term vision to foster diversity and

multiculturalism. What I see happening in Sudan now is a turn to a hardened sense of ethnic identification enabled by militarized movements rising from the margin, such as in the case of Darfur, Nuba mountains, Blue Nile, and eastern Sudan. I don’t want to be pessimistic, but I can say that such hardened ethnicities may split the country further if a charismatic leadership does not emerge to create a shared vision. If united, such movements may actually unite Sudan again.

In post-colonial Africa, elite interests are often substituted as representing the interests of the people, do you see this as a possible outcome for the newly independent South Sudan?

I don’t want to sound romantic or celebratory about the national project. I see the big nation as a great opportunity to exercise the management of diversity, the promotion of multiculturalism, and the equal distribution of power and resources. There are also global economies that tie African countries and their elites to hegemonic ideologies and unequal terms of economic transactions. South Sudan will be another poor African country linked to such global economies and transnational politics. The South itself has its own history of ethnic conflicts which put a great burden on the emerging class of the majority Dinka ruling elite. From my observation I predict an emerging neoliberal state that might invest more in security and militarization than infrastructure development. The nature of such neoliberal state gives more freedom to NGOs, civil society organizations, and corporate businesses than taking the lead in regulating the economy.

My worry is that the interest of a new emerging national class allied with transnational businesses may fail to



meet the needs of the poor and ethnic minorities. In the streets of Juba I noticed big billboards with pictures of southern Sudanese political leaders together with hotel owners and businessmen. Some billboards are adorned with words such as freedom and independence and sponsored by new cell phone companies. This is not to say that such investments are not needed, but it is important to think about how such investment can be geared towards sustainable development in ways that help all sectors of the population and focus on health, education, housing, and employment.

How will the people of Sudan (North and South) navigate this new division considering that many families, friends, and communities will be separated from each other based on what some scholars might refer to as artificial borders? In other words, how will this new form of imposed citizenship be negotiated by both sides?

A southern Sudanese journalist wrote a very powerful article that stirred heated debate about citizenship. She wrote that it is unfortunate to wake up in the morning to face the bitter reality that you are a foreigner in your own country. This feeling is echoed by many southern Sudanese who lived in the North and have created wide social networks. The saddest moment for me was when I arrived at the airport to take the plane to Juba. It was an exodus scene. Southern Sudanese families were loading their luggage and rushing to go south. They were responding to two calls: the call of the government of South Sudan for them to come back to build the nation and the announcement of the government of Sudan that all Southerners will become foreigners in the North after July 9th. The SPLM leadership in the North suggested dual citizenship for those who were born in or lived longer in the North, but the government of the Sudan refused.

It was also sad to go to some public places in Khartoum and to see the decreasing number of Southerners in the city. To me this is how secession produced a new group of non-citizens and ghettoized

both Northerners and Southerners. I say this because after secession the Islamists' rhetoric about the North as having a monolithic Muslim identity is hardening and creating new tensions among northern elites from Darfur, South Kordofan, Eastern Sudan, and the Blue Nile, who believe that such rhetoric undermines their struggle as ethnic minorities in the country. This is why I see secession as a defeat for both northern and southern elites (and the international community) who failed to agree on a grand project to contain the tensions and struggles arising from the clash of multiple Sudanese identities. Can you imagine saying to African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, or Arab-Americans, "go home where you belong?" As complex as the situation is, this is how simple I consider it sometimes.

While many are advocating for the unity of Africa, it is sad that we are seeing more fragmentation, such as the case of Sudan. Where do you think the future of Africa lies?

This is a big question, but it reminds me of a conversation I had with a Sudanese activist in Juba when I visited the freedom square where John Garang's statue stands in front of the new flag of South Sudan. He said that when he met Dr. John Garang he told him that he was sure of Sudan's unity, but what really concerns him was the unity of Africa as a whole. Dr. Garang's vision was shaped by the decolonization rhetoric of Pan-Africanism as a great force that can unite Africans against colonial and postcolonial hegemonies. The activist then pondered how such a great vision shrank into two divided nations and asked why a great leader like Garang died at such a critical moment. I think fragmentation is the outcome of political hegemonies that fail to take the other into consideration.

This is a real problem for Africa because marginalized ethnic groups are fighting with arms to seek inclusion in or separation from such hegemonic centers. This, however, does not exclude international involvement in African politics. The geographic location of Sudan and its



Amal Hassan Fadlalla (left) and Omolade Adunbi

colonial history, for instance, played an important role in the strong alliances that the Khartoum regime made with the Arab and Muslim world. Those on the opposition, on the other hand, made strong alliances with Western and non-Western secular groups. Therefore, I feel that we have to reexamine the meanings of independence and freedom in the context of multiple hegemonies, political interests, and opposing intellectual visions.

About the Author

Amal Hassan Fadlalla is Associate Professor of Anthropology, Women's Studies, and Afroamerican and African studies at the University of Michigan. She is currently the Women's Studies Graduate director. Professor Amal Fadlalla is the author of *Embodying Honor: Fertility, Foreignness, and Regeneration in Eastern Sudan* (Madison: the University of Wisconsin Press, 2007). Her recent publications appear in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, volume 37, No. 1, 2011; *Urban Anthropology*, volume 38 (1), 2009; and in the School for Advanced Research edited volume *New Landscapes of Inequality: Neoliberalism and the Erosion of Democracy in America*, 2008. She is also the co-editor (with Howard Stein) of the forthcoming book, *Gendered Insecurities, Health and Development in Africa* (Routledge, 2012).

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