

The Regime of Action Islam in the Sudan

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I am now at home in Khartoum, a city of ubiquitous trivial and serious gossip. It overwhelms you with immense details that dissolve away any picture you may have had of the wood that is real Khartoum. The trees keep changing, the wood, however, remains the same. Since 1989 everything about the putschists in Khartoum has changed, except their most important feature being Jihadist, or as I prefer to call them, Action Islamist.

Broadly speaking, there are three Islamic groups, traditional, political and Jihadist, or better labelled, Action Islam.

Traditional Islam is not party political. A traditionalist can and usually does, join the political party of his or her choice.

Political Islam, however, demands of its followers to join its political party and, often enough does accept the rules of democratic competition and seeks power, usually, through the ballot box.

Action Islam abhors traditional Islam just as much as it abhors populist political activism. It believes only in action.

Now let me elaborate on what I mean by Action Islam.

Action Islam

The victory of the Iranian revolution in 1979 exerted a tremendous impact on the Islamic world. The argument went around then that if a few dedicated Islamists can topple the mighty regime of the Shah, well-organised and disciplined Islamic movements everywhere else could surely aspire to similar success. Few months after the victory in Tehran, a group of over four hundred armed Islamists from 11 nationalities attacked Mecca and occupied the Ka'aba. That first multi-national armed Islamist insurrection was defeated, actually annihilated. So was the fate of other uprisings in Syria, northern African Muslim countries and even in northern Nigeria. Osama Ben Laden was certainly not the first to lead a multi-national armed Jihadist group!

Jihad is action not words, not books, not philosophy. It is do or die, or some silly slogan like that.

1979 is the year, when political Islam began to concede leadership to Action Islam almost everywhere in the Islamic world. The Islamic movement in the Sudan was no exception to the growing trend. Since the beginning of the 1980s, the leadership of the movement began to work diligently towards an armed take-over of power in Khartoum. The politicians around Al Turabi allowed the Actionists around Ali Osman Taha to dictate the future direction of the movement. Most work was henceforth dedicated to the goal of an armed coup. Clandestine recruitment of members of the armed forces was intensified; civilians trained in insurrection and arms were smuggled into the Sudan. The preparations culminated in the June 1989 armed take-over of power in Khartoum, not by the activists of political Islam, but by the rising generation of young eager Jihadists of Action Islam. They are the ones that have been ruling the Sudan since then.

The power struggle between Political and Action Islam

The first few years after the success of the coup witnessed the internal struggle for power between the political and action Islamists. The latter won and Turabi and his followers were brutally thrown out of the ruling party. Theories abound to explain the split up. I sincerely do not believe that personal likes and dislikes played a big role in this very serious conflict. The way that Turabi and his followers went out of their way to convince public opinion in and outside the Sudan that they will henceforth abide by democratic rules and seek power only through the ballot box has strengthened my conviction that the division was mainly about strategy, not tactics. Political Islam, as traditionally understood in the Sudan, had lost the battle to the young adventurous Jihadists, who want change through action, not words. Neither Ben Laden nor Taha are thinkers. They do not write books to persuade. They organise and carry out actions. There in lies the strength and weakness of Action Islam.

Ben Laden is not in power, Taha is. The status quo necessitated that Taha had to tackle the practical problems of ruling a rather unwieldy people. He had to learn to make compromises, a course of actions and attitudes that run against his deep-rooted jihadist convictions. What is the lesson to draw from this fact of political life in the Sudan?

The conclusion to draw is very important indeed. The ruling group in Khartoum will yield some, but only under forceful internal and external pressure. The pressure must be exerted at all levels, at the political, economic, social and moral levels. It must also be unyielding and if possible concerted. I will repeat

myself. The ruling group in Khartoum will yield concessions but only under continuous pressure. They will try everything possible to stay their course and will only deviate from it if forced to do so.

We have seen them time and again resort to all the tricks and lists in their repertoire to dissipate the pressure and later, when forced to accept the inevitable, to dilute their obligations and commitments, even if they are legally bound by them. It took them more than 10 years to sign the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the CPR. Since then they are trying very hard to re-interpret its terms and reduce their burden of obligations. They will never give up attempts to manoeuvre themselves out of commitments. We should, therefore, never discontinue the pressure for peace, democracy and development in the Sudan. We owe it to ourselves and to the suffering Sudanese peoples.

Further intrinsic features of Action Islam in the Sudan

Another important point to stress in relation to the ruling elite in Khartoum is that they may accept compromises forced upon them, but and this is a big but, that acceptance is never final. If they can, they will always go back on it.

Yes, the human rights situation is better today than a few years ago, but this is not final. Yes, the civil war in the South is no longer raging, but let us not deceive ourselves, this state of affairs can change and rather quickly, especially when re-drawing the borders between North and South becomes necessary. The violent clashes between the army and the SPLA in Abyei region is a case in point. In fact, almost all battles fought by the Sudanese army since the 2nd World War have been against the Sudanese people in the South, the Nuba Mountains, Eastern Sudan and now Darfur. We train and arm our own oppressors!

Glimpses of hope

The situation is not all doom and gloom. The fact that I am able to come to Khartoum and to write to you from there attests to the progress made. It is true that security checks the content of all newspapers for critical comments and undesirable pieces of information, but some critique seeps through. Political parties organise meetings and rallies - of course, often supervised and sometimes denied. But parties do function. Even the Communist Party is preparing to hold its 5th Congress on the 24th of this month! The question is, is this a permanent state of affairs? It could be. The situation could even improve and efforts towards peace, reconciliation and economic and social development could go one better, if the regime is kept under constant pressure to change fundamentally or go.

In the past, the Sudanese people got rid of dictators through popular uprisings. This time and due to the special character of the ruling group, the people have resorted to armed struggle and clever anti-regime tactics. True, the regime has not been toppled, but the process of dismantling its excesses is going patiently on. Let us raise our hats to the Sudanese women, who played a big role in this subtle fight for civil transformation through stubborn defiance.

These days, if you walk in the streets of Khartoum, you will see few women wearing *Hijab*, fewer than those in Cairo and even not as many as you may encounter in Edgware Road in London on a sunny afternoon.

More about Action Islam

There is an aspect of Action Islam the Sudanese style I want to highlight here. That aspect is their lust for power. Action always seeks and cherishes results. Action Islam is not strong on ideology. In fact, it privately despises the resort to scholarly dialogue and scientific arguments. Their leaders do not write books or give talks and lectures. Turabi has written several books and has given hundreds of lectures. Taha does not write or persuade. He organises and executes. In this respect, Action Islamists are pragmatists. They fight for results and fight to keep them. They have no last line of ideological retreat. They keep re-defining their goals and objectives, make unavoidable compromises and refine their language to suit their respective audience. Now that they have tasted and enjoyed power and money, they want to keep things that way. There is no misdeed they will hesitate to commit in order to keep as much power and money for themselves as they can! You want ideological concessions; they will give you ideological concessions. But they will fight for every inch of control of the economy and state power. To achieve this, they need a good security apparatus and they have several. But conceding inches in both these areas they have to, provided, of course, the pressure is kept on all the time.

Another aspect worth mentioning in respect to the ruling Action Islamists in Khartoum is the short-termism of their type of capitalist economy and hence of their development policies. The Scottish whisky, Jonny Walker, used to advertise itself with the slogan, “since 1880 and still going strong”. Not so the ruling capitalists of Action Islam. They want the whole cake now. Islamic banks do not approve of interest on loans. They will lend money to transactions that ensure quick returns, preferably in days rather than months. Development projects that require lengthy gestation periods are usually out.

Islamic banking is almost always short-termist. It is definitely not conducive to fundamental economic transformation.

Action Islam is coercive

In the house I reside in in Khartoum, lives a three-year old girl that goes to a nearby kindergarten. Last week, the lady supervising the kindergarten received a letter from the Ministry of Education ordering her to bring ten children above five years old to the demonstration against the Israeli attack on Gaza. The lady was very upset because she had only five children at ages above five. We advised her to take the five and if asked by the organisers of the demonstration to tell them the truth. She took our advice very reluctantly. She said that she was afraid that the authorities might withdraw her kindergarten licence. I am mentioning this sad episode to draw your attention to what might take place in the streets of Khartoum, if and when the International Criminal Court, the ICC, upholds the indictment of Al Bashier. Do not be surprised, if a demonstration of one million people protests the decision of the court, if and when it comes. Totalitarian regimes can and do have many means and ways to force people into the street.

Action Islam and clientelism

The last paragraph leads me to my concluding remark on the nature of the current regime in Khartoum, namely its clientelism. The centrifugal force of the Sudanese state reaches even the remotest villages. The rulers of the country have always been aware of how far this reach can go and how best to exploit it to further their ends. The current rulers are no exception. They divided the country into 26 mini-states and put their people on top. To be a player in any sphere of influence, you have to join the government's party, the National Congress Party, the NCP, which has become a mammoth organisation. The NCP seems invincible and omnipresent. It can and does manipulate country-wide actions and reactions. Yet it has its Achilles heels. *It is a government-funded and government-run institution.* It will fade away once it is separated from its source of energy. Its fate will not be much different from that of a similar party established by Numerei during the 1970s, the Socialist Union (SU). Like the NCP, the SU was everywhere. It also seemed invincible and omnipresent. Yet, when Numerei's regime collapsed, the SU went with it. No body remembers it any more. I have no doubt that a similar fate awaits the NCP.

My rather controversial conclusion of the inherent possibility of the total demise of the NCP does not mean, nor should it lead to the assumption that the Islamic movement in the Sudan will wither with the NCP departure. The Movement will continue to be an effective political force perhaps in the form of

the People's Congress Party, PCP, of Hassan Al Turabi or some similar organisation.

The current is a long and sad chapter in the history of our country. It could be the last of a united Sudan. The possibility of the collapse of the Sudanese state is very real and very frightening. Nobody can foresee if, when and how this might happen and what turmoil, if any, will engulf the country and its peoples.

Let us do something now to mitigate any disastrous developments. The Sudanese people deserve peace, democracy and sustainable development. Help us help ourselves. Keep the pressure on. Keep the pressure on.

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