

Richard Rottenburg: Introduction.

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Introduction

Richard Rottenburg

Where are the modern Sudanese institutions for the reconciliation of interests and for the prediction of future threats to the well-being of the population?

Even on the basis of limited historical documentation, most scholars agree that herders and farmers of the sub-Saharan belt have always emerged simultaneously and built common socio-economic systems in which their different forms of livelihood stand in a complementary relationship to one another. In principal, this coexistence is no more prone to conflict than various other forms of socio-economic complementarity. Empirically speaking, however, there has been a dramatic rise in conflict across the sub-Saharan belt since the early 1980s, and there is a tendency to represent the diverging economic interests of farmers and herders as the main cause for this deplorable development. Often, changing ecological conditions, especially declining average rates of precipitation and the processes of desertification that have made themselves noticeable since the early 1980s, are said to trigger the increasing divergence of the socio-economic interests of farmers and herders.

Since 2003, when the situation escalated in Darfur, the debate on farmer-herder conflicts has been dominated by this most dramatic and catastrophic case. In this context, one can often detect a specific pattern of argumentation, which may be summarized as follows:

The conflict began during the mid-1980s, when a ferocious drought and famine plagued the Sudan and the whole Horn of Africa. It killed more than a million people and innumerable livestock. Since then, the pastoralists of Darfur have clashed repeatedly with the farmers of the region. Both sides began to arm themselves, which presented no difficulties in those years and in that part of Africa. The ongoing violence and fighting began when some Darfurians launched an attack on government military facilities near El-Fasher in March 2003.

As in most comparable cases, other tensions and conflicts in the respective area and in the world at large were linked to this burning issue. The factor that has contributed most significantly to escalation in Darfur is the callous divide-and-rule policy by the Khartoum government of Omar al-Bashir. By 2003, Sudan's army was exhausted from twenty years of war in the south. Perhaps more importantly, the army had suffered a number of strategic blows at the hands of the parties forming the national government, first, the National Islamic Front and, then, the National Congress Party, which distributed the state's monopoly on violence

not only to the regular army but also to special Security Forces and so-called People's Defense Forces. Under these circumstances there was no Sudanese army left to control Darfur, nor was it the intention of the Khartoum government to exercise such control. Rather than start a new war in the west of the country or embark on separate power-sharing negotiations with those claiming to represent the people of Darfur, Bashir continued with a strategy that the previous government under Sadiq al-Mahdi had chosen in 1985, when the war in the South began to spread to South Kordofan: it tried to suppress the Darfur rebellion by subcontracting the military task to the Janjawid. The Bashir government armed the militias, reinforced them with convicts, and strengthened their Arab supremacist ideology. This ideology was first introduced to the region in the late 1980s, when Gaddafi tried to realize his vision of an "Arab belt" across Chad and Sudan. When the Darfur conflict erupted, many of Gaddafi's well-trained legionnaires were still in the area. Armed and espousing ideas of Arab supremacism, many of them became Janjawid commanders.

At that point, all parties began to describe the conflict in racial terms: Arabs against Africans. This fit well into a Western discourse about Islamic threats to democracy in Africa and about the global terrorism that was attributed to Islamic fundamentalists and the Arab world. The racial rhetoric also fit well into a global discourse concerning the rights of indigenous peoples and the need to intervene in national affairs if indigenous peoples were victimized by dominant groups. The second US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the US presidential election of November 2004 lent further international significance to the Darfur crisis and reinforced the interpretation that evil Islamic Arab intruders were abusing innocent, indigenous Africans (who, in this case, were also Muslims). The fact that in April 2004 the United Nations commemorated the 10th anniversary of the genocide of Rwanda and regretted its abstinence in that situation – with Bill Clinton apologizing to the people of Rwanda – also helped to turn Darfur into the case that attracted the most media attention ever given to such a catastrophe. The classification of the humanitarian disaster as genocide by Colin Powell in September 2004, and – much more importantly – the non-occurrence of an intervention that would be necessary according to UN regulations in case of genocide further heated the public debate and made Darfur into one of the main test-cases of the "New World Order" after the end of the "Cold War." Last but not least, the discovery of oil in Southern Darfur offered a strong incentive for those fighting for power-sharing with Khartoum.

Much of the current debate about Darfur's status as a paradigmatic example of the herder-farmer conflict is about the relative importance of and the interrelationship among these various factors. Few analysts would insist on a mono-causal explanation. Yet within the broad agreement on multi-causality there is still ample space for disagreement. Different accentuations have far reaching implications. The four papers of this special volume try to determine the specific weight

to be given to the various factors causing the dramatic shift from cooperation to conflict between farmers and herders in Darfur and Kordofan. It seems particularly illuminating to deal with Darfur and Kordofan in one and the same volume, because this directs our attention to one common feature that is less visible when focusing on either of the two cases separately: the post-colonial Sudanese governments, from the first to the most recent, have not been able to preserve, develop and improve those modern state institutions which are indispensable for the peaceful negotiation of diverging interests pursued by different parts of the population.

In other words, empirical research indicates that the causes for the escalation of local low-scale conflicts between farmers and herders into national and even regional conflicts, with uninhibited violence and gross human rights violations, are not related to the distinction between nomadic and sedentary life forms and their respective interests. Rather, they are, to a large extent, related to the failure of modern state institutions, to misguided national policies, and to the state's distorted development strategies that disregard the interests and priorities of both the farmer and herder communities. This "failing", though, is at least partly brought about intentionally by the ruling minority in Khartoum in order to preserve its power and to obscure its appropriation of revenues from oil exports, which have been unaccounted for since 1999 and which were based on production levels of 520,000 barrels per day in 2007. In Sudan, the leaders of the ruling minority have manipulated and damaged fundamental institutional structures of the state, and they have done so intentionally, as the previously mentioned example of the security forces indicates. The resulting situation is now completely out of control, and it is certainly not shaped by the rational interests of any of the parties involved.

If the complex reasons for the escalation of conflicts between farmers and herders in South Kordofan between 1985 and 2002 and in Darfur since 2003 need a label, the authors of these papers seem to suggest that such conflicts should not be called "resource conflicts", "oil conflicts", "ethnic conflicts", "racial conflicts", "conflicts of interests between farming and herding", or "climate conflicts". The label should rather be "conflicts caused by institutional failure".