

LOOKING BEYOND THE STATUS QUO
32 YEARS OF USA ENGAGEMENT IN SUDAN
ON ISSUES OF WAR, STATE CAPTURE AND REVOLUTION

BY YASIR ARMAN

32 years of experience have passed since the new waves of the US engagement in Sudan witnessed the rise of the Islamic movement in their coup of June 30th 1989. The Islamists' capture of the state has lasted many successive administrations comprising 8 years of President Bill Clinton, 8 years of President George Bush Jr, 8 years of President Obama, 4 years of President Trump and nearly 4 years of President Biden now. This 32 year era has witnessed war in the marginalised areas of Sudan, with the largest being in South Sudan and civil struggle in the urban areas, including Khartoum. The US policy was based mostly on sticks and carrots, leading to partial piece meal solutions, with the exception of President Bill Clinton who adopted a regime change policy. For the purpose of trying to understand the different periods, and the agendas they encompassed, I would say the first wave started at the independence of Sudan in 1956, lasting till 1969, and the second was from 1969 to June 1989. In the 3rd wave that followed, the Sudan situation has since taken a more central stage in US foreign policy, including being added to the list of states that sponsor terrorism.

I have had the opportunity to be a witness to this 3rd wave in close proximity and despite the many added values of the US foreign policy, two issues remain of concern to many Sudanese intellectuals and leaders. These were pointed out frequently by the late Dr John Garang De Mabior in the many engagements he had with the US policy makers. The first, is that Sudan needs a holistic and comprehensive approach, that addresses the issues of the marginalised areas by changing the policies in Khartoum, and comprehends how the so-called problem of South Sudan, is a problem of Sudan in its entirety, same as Darfur, Eastern Sudan e.t.c. As such, they can only be resolved in Khartoum, the power centre, not in Juba, Alfasher or Port Sudan, by establishing a democratic New Sudan of equal citizenship for all. The second, is the state capture by the Islamists who transformed the Sudanese state into a one-party state, controlled by them, particularly the security sector. The idea to create a joint integrated unit in Naivasha was precisely aimed at addressing this issue.

The US by then, were faced with the adamant position of the Khartoum government who were ready to prolong the wars, rather than solve the issues of the entire country. Therefore, the partial solution was the only offer on the table, leading to the secession of South Sudan, and the failure of the many peace agreements in resolving the issues of Darfur, the two areas and beyond.

Changing the entire government in Sudan through the December Revolution was not on the menu in Washington. Nevertheless, the US positively supported the change that occurred as a result. The December Revolution solved many issues on the benchmark of Washington, by changing the direction of Sudan from engaging in terrorism, genocide, war crimes, humanitarian crises and human rights violation, into the direction of peace, democracy, respect of human rights and the disengagement in terrorism.

The issue of the Sudanese state capture by the Islamist remains a fundamental issue that is underestimated by Washington. Eventually it led to the coup and to the current war. Moreover, if it is not addressed carefully and with the seriousness required, it will prevent Sudan from finding a sustainable long-term solution.

Understandably, Washington today might have a full plate of competing priorities, such as Gaza and its upcoming elections. Yet Sudan is an opportunity given the geopolitical challenges and changes in our region and beyond. Sudan has also been a non-partisan issue in the US congress for a long time and the encouraging **S/RES/2724** adopted by the UNSC, despite the current paralysing division within its members, marks a new international political will towards Sudan. It is worth mentioning the appointment of the US special envoy, Mr Tom Perriello, who has the support of the State Department and the White House.

In the current situation in Sudan, unlike what it has been for the last 32 years, the US is no longer dealing with Khartoum, as it is no longer the capital of Sudan as such. This drastic change in the situation requires a new approach and it is no longer business as usual. Thus, the piece meal partial solution based on a power sharing approach, now more than ever, can no longer deliver a sustainable solution. It is worth considering a concrete review of the 32 year policy, its pros and cons, and the need to adopt a strategic line that would add value, along with the internal and external actors to deliver a sustainable solution.

Sudan now, more than anytime before, needs a single professional army that is non-politicised. The Sudan army is an army of more than 100 years, suffering from state capture by the Islamists, and both current warring parties do not represent a professional Sudanese army. Obviously the RSF is not a substitute for the army and any resolution that does not include the issue of the state capture is unlikely to yield a sustainable result.

The pro-democracy forces, the forces of the December Revolution, are the only forces that can take Sudan towards peace, democratisation and sustainable development that ushers in an end to impunity, terrorism and the violation of human rights, while addressing issues of immigration and development. Allowing the Islamists to continue, is a recipe for war and instability that is not just limited to within the Sudan borders, but outside of it too.

With the US elections around the corner, time might not allow for a fully fledged sustainable solution within the current administration. Yet the issues of how to stop and end the war, which are two faces of one political process remain pivotal. To stop the war, have a long humanitarian cessation of hostilities that is monitored on the ground, open humanitarian corridors, protect civilians, allow displaced people and those refugees willing to voluntarily return to their homes in the rural and urban areas, would be significant steps in preparing the ground to end the war. This would then pave the way for a political process that addresses the root causes and makes a paradigm shift towards a new Sudan of democracy, gender equality and equal citizenship without discrimination.

7th April 2024