

# Introduction

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Ahmad Karadawi's D. Phil. thesis at Oxford, of which this book is an edited version, is a most revealing picture of policy making and implementation in an African context. Rarely does one see such an intimate portrayal of the inner workings of government, or relations with an international agency, in this case the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, because it is such a close-up, it needs some introduction. Karadawi had himself done much of this in his earlier (1977) unpublished M. Phil. thesis at Reading University, entitled 'Political Refugees in Africa: A Case Study from the Sudan, 1964-1972'. This brief introduction draws heavily on that thesis, as well as adding to the political context both in Sudan and its neighbouring countries.

The huge movements of refugees out of, as well as into, Sudan have their roots in the travails of African states, beginning virtually from the moment of independence. As Karadawi makes clear, the two-way flow of refugees greatly complicated the making of refugee policy, yet the story that follows is primarily concerned with the Sudanese Government side, and its international support. It is thus necessary to touch on the origins of the flows into Sudan with which the government was concerned, and in which Karadawi as a senior official was himself much involved.

The first to arrive were from the Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire). It has been a byword for the misfortunes of African states since its independence from Belgium in 1960 and the assassination of its first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, shortly after. In 1963 the Simba revolt, which claimed descent from Lumumba, led to the establishment of the People's Republic of Kisangani, but by 1964 it had collapsed and by 1965 an official total of over 6,000 refugees had entered southern Sudan. The leaders of the failed revolt were quite well off, arriving with looted gold (and arms, some of which fell into the hands of southern Sudanese rebels), but supplies soon ran out. The Simbas had arrived at a time when

Sudan was itself going through a short spell of radicalism, following a popular revolt of 1964 known as the 'October revolution'. There was thus some sympathy for the Simbas, and the first steps were taken in evolving a refugee policy.

A more serious, if less dramatic, build up of refugees was taking place in eastern Sudan. The incorporation of the former Italian colony and post-war United Nations Trust Territory of Eritrea into Ethiopia had been a matter of controversy in 1952. The Eritrean parliament had eventually voted for it, but there had not been wider consultation such as a referendum, and there were many critics. Over the subsequent decade it had become clear that the so-called federal incorporation was being eroded, with Eritrea brought ever more firmly under the centralised and personalised power of the Emperor, Haile Selassie. From 1962 a revolt began led by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), which in turn was followed by a trickle of refugees that grew as the conflict increased, reaching about 45,000 by 1970.

Developments in Ethiopia in the 1970s were to bring a new chapter in the flow of refugees. There were hopes that the revolution, which began in 1974 and saw the overthrow of Haile Selassie, might herald the coming of peace, but instead the situation worsened. Not only did the war between the Eritreans and the new Ethiopian government intensify, but there were clashes among the Eritreans which saw the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) replace the ELF as the leading group. The EPLF made much headway in the mid-1970s, only for the Ethiopian army, now strengthened by the Soviet Union, to inflict severe reverses at the end of the decade. At the same time a further revolt had broken out in Tigray, on the southern border of Eritrea, led by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, TPLF. By the mid 1980s there were over 600,000 refugees from Ethiopia in Sudan. Eastern Sudan had by far the largest concentration of refugees, and Karadawi selected the region as the focus of his thesis.

Uganda was another neighbour that contributed to the flow of refugees into the south. In the 1960s the flow had been mainly the other way, with thousands of southern Sudanese taking refuge in Uganda from the civil war in the south. However, in 1979, with the downfall of Idi Amin (whose regime had longstanding connections with southern Sudan), up to 200,000 refugees flooded into Sudan. They were taking refuge from the era known in Uganda as 'Obote II', which turned out to be of comparable violence to the Amin years.

In western Sudan as well, there was an intermittent refugee problem with regard to Chadians, though not on the same scale as in the south or east of the country. Chad was as unstable as anywhere in Africa, and groups from the north and east of the country were

prominent in its years of conflict. In the 1970s it was primarily a case of northern and eastern groups fighting to take over the southern-dominated post-independence settlement of President Tombalbaye. And when that was finally accomplished the leading northern contenders, Goukouni Oueddi and Hussein Habre, struggled violently before the latter took power for the rest of the 1980s. As their fortunes waxed and waned, so there were cross border flows of refugees from Chad into Sudan.

While the refugee flows, particularly from Ethiopia, are central to Karadawi's thesis, its theme is government policy. As a background to that, it is necessary to consider briefly the changing character of government, and the agencies of the state responsible for implementing policy.

Karadawi's first work covers the second period of parliamentary government in Sudan (1965-1969), which followed the 'October revolution' a year earlier, and most of the second period of military rule under Gaafar Nimeiry which ran from 1969 until ended by a further popular uprising in 1985. Neither period was particularly stable.

An important aspect of instability was the civil war in the south which had begun in 1955 even before independence the following year, but which really developed from 1962. The inability of successive governments to end the conflict contributed much to instability, though it was not the only cause. Parliamentary government was dominated by two major political parties, the Umma and the Unionists, supported by rival northern Muslim sects, the Ansar and the Khatmiya respectively, neither of which was able to obtain an overall majority. The result was a series of unstable coalition governments, involving segments of the major parties, as well as a variety of smaller parties. Unstable government, combined with a costly continuing civil war, was a recipe for a fresh military intervention which duly came in May 1969.

Yet military rule was itself uncertain. War in the south continued and there were major confrontations, first with an armed Ansar uprising in 1970, and then between pro- and anti-communists in the armed forces one year later. But following that there was a concerted attempt by Nimeiry to create a new political order. A negotiated peace was made with the south in 1972, bringing the latter regional self-government, after which there was an attempt to establish a new secular constitution, build a single party, and establish a national parliament as well as devolved local government. But there were still serious intermittent challenges to Nimeiry's regime, and as a result he pursued 'national reconciliation' with his former enemies in the banned sectarian-based parties. His reconciliation in 1977 helped him to survive, but gave ground to Islamist forces in Sudanese poli-

tics, especially the growing Muslim Brotherhood, which Nimeiry sought to contain by placing himself at their head and introducing Islamic law in 1983. But in so doing he slowly lost the confidence of the south, and civil war developed once more from 1983. Once more political change was in the air and in 1985 Nimeiry fell from power, just after Karadawi's thesis concludes.

Sudan's domestic politics affected its external relations, including those with the neighbouring states which the refugees were fleeing. The brief sympathy for the Congolese Simba has been seen; that for the Eritreans was more widespread. In part this was because the Eritrean movement was perceived as associated with wider Arab containment of Ethiopia, especially since there is a substantial Muslim population in Eritrea. At the same time, eastern Sudan has ties with Eritrea reflecting common ethnic identity, while many on both sides of the border belong to the Khatmiya, which via the Unionist Party had a foot in national politics. Yet overt pro-Eritrean sentiment on the part of the Sudanese government damaged relations with Ethiopia. Thus for most of the period under consideration here, Sudan proclaimed itself bound by OAU resolutions on refugees, and not involved in political support. Following the restoration of liberal democracy in Sudan in 1965, successive governments sought to placate Ethiopia to check the latter's support to southern Sudanese insurgents. This continued after the coup of 1969, and Nimeiry appeared to offer a tacit deal with Ethiopia in 1972, at the time he made peace with the southern Sudanese in Addis Ababa. But it was hard to hold the line against the sentiments in Sudanese politics, and then came the Ethiopian revolution followed by much larger refugee flows. By now Ethiopia was linked to the USSR, while Sudan became allied with the USA, and possible cooperation on cross-border issues such as refugees once more diminished. Indeed, the years from 1976 to 1979 saw an ever more open rift between the Sudanese and Ethiopian leaders, as Karadawi makes abundantly clear.

In comparison, the situation on other borders with inward refugee flows was not so intense. There were few refugees either way while Amin was in power in Uganda, and in the 1980s the overwhelming issue in southern Sudan was the re-opening of civil war, not the question of refugees (though there was some annoyance in Uganda that Amin's henchmen found refuge in Sudan, and some sympathy and help for the new revolt in the south). Chad, meanwhile, was of even less significance, and refugees in western Sudan were linked as much to Libyan as to Sudanese politics.

The state machinery, in which Karadawi functioned for much of his working life, is another dimension of the thesis. Inherited from the

British, it expanded rapidly after independence, though not always with clarity or effectiveness. The Ministry of the Interior held central place in domestic security, and the office of the Commissioner for Refugees was established as a part of this ministry. Its problems with regard both to the ministry, and to the various security bodies established under Nimeiry in particular, are a running theme in the thesis. Decision-making often appears as confused. There are attempts to politicise the civil service, eventually including the top level of the Commission for Refugees itself. In the parliamentary period there were often attempts to accommodate party pressures; while under Nimeiry the emphasis moves towards his close allies in the security agencies, right up to the level of Vice-President.

There were other common problems right across the civil service. The growth in size did not mean greater capacity or efficiency, often the reverse. The growth itself, though underfunded, resulted in thousands of under-employed officials. Inadequate training for many officials contributed to widespread incompetence. There was political interference and sometimes nepotism, which worsened as the years passed. Opportunities for corruption increased in scale and blatancy. Such problems were encountered at all levels of government, and compounded the demarcation difficulties between central, regional and local government which are another strand of this thesis.

As mentioned, the thesis discusses the situation up to shortly before Nimeiry's downfall, and the return to a third period of parliamentary democracy in 1986. But the same circumstances prevailed as in the two previous attempts – unstable coalition government at the centre and civil war in the south – and a military coup occurred once more in 1989. The new military regime was unlike its predecessors in that it firmly espoused a radical ideology – Islamism – with the strong backing of the Muslim Brotherhood/National Islamic Front. It also took a firm grip on the state, especially the armed forces: doubters were purged and a 'popular' militia established. Similar treatment was accorded the civil service and education; and there was a programme of privatisation, generally to the advantage of Islamist businessmen. (Karadawi was one of the many forced out who left the country, in his case residing mainly in Addis Ababa.) The war in the south was more vigorously prosecuted, and now presented as *jihad*.

Throughout the period 1984-1991, the broad picture had not changed dramatically as far as the question of refugees was concerned, particularly in eastern Sudan. There was a considerable upsurge in numbers and media exposure with the famine of 1984-1985, but that in the longer term did little to change the basic situation. Potentially much more significant was the victory of the

Eritrean and Tigrayan movements over the Ethiopian president, Mengistu Haile Mariam, in 1991. Since the EPLF and the TPLF had had good relations with Sudan, there were hopes that the refugee problem in the east could now be solved by repatriation. The task, however, proved difficult. Relations between Eritrea and Ethiopia on the one hand, and Sudan on the other, deteriorated steadily, partly as a result of fears that Sudan saw itself as flag bearer for Islam across Northeast Africa. Allegations were made that Sudan was delaying the return of refugees and using them as pawns in its machinations. However, research among the refugees also suggested that there were complex social, environmental and economic factors delaying voluntary repatriation. For many, it seemed, the situations that they had been able to carve out for themselves in eastern Sudan over the previous decade and longer were more attractive than returning to a war-ravaged Eritrea. In part the continuing preference for Sudan was a result of the work of Ahmad Karadawi and his colleagues, a debt that is readily attested by many Eritreans amongst whom he was a most popular figure. His death has been widely mourned in the areas in which he worked, as well as among his many friends and colleagues around the world.

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