Understanding how the Sudanese Government Works

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Introduction

Sudan, a vast and historically complex nation in northeastern Africa, presents one of the most dynamic governance landscapes in the continent. Understanding how the Sudanese government works requires not only a grasp of its formal institutions but also an awareness of the country's turbulent political history, evolving legal frameworks, and the social forces shaping its structures. Over the past century, Sudan's government has shifted rapidly between civilian and military control, experienced multiple constitutional interventions, and witnessed both promising democratic beginnings and abrupt authoritarian interruptions. Each phase has left a distinct imprint on the country's present-day systems at every level of government.

This book seeks to demystify how governance in Sudan is organized and exercised—from the highest echelons of national leadership down to the grassroots mechanisms of local administration. We will examine the functions and powers of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and explore the ways in which these structures have been shaped by—and in turn, have influenced—Sudan's complex political realities. Understanding the present government is impossible without grappling with the legacy of colonial rule, the trauma and implications of repeated coups d'état, and the decade-spanning dominance of individuals such as Omar al-Bashir. After the major turning point of the 2019 revolution, Sudan entered yet another era of transitional governance defined by hope, tension, and continued volatility.

A key theme running throughout this guide is the tension between centralization and federalism. Sudan's attempts to devolve power to its eighteen states have met with varying levels of success, often complicated by political crises, conflict, or the economic dependency of regional entities on the central government. The relationship between national directives and regional needs is often fraught, with local governments sometimes serving as lifelines or as mere administrative branches of central authority. Recent years have seen additional pressure on these relationships, as conflict and humanitarian emergencies reshape local and state institutions.

Equally significant are the legal frameworks and constitutional changes that have sought—sometimes successfully, often incompletely—to usher in reforms or consolidate power. Sudan's constitutions and transitional documents are more than legal texts; they are battlegrounds for the country's future, reflecting ongoing struggles between military and civilian rule, the quest for justice, and the aspirations of diverse populations. The legal landscape in Sudan, marked by the interplay of Islamic law, civil statutes, and customary practices, remains fluid and frequently contested.

Finally, no account of Sudanese governance would be complete without acknowledging the pivotal role of political parties, civil society, and activist groups. These actors, operating against a backdrop of oppression and upheaval, have often been the driving force behind protest, negotiation, and reform. Their resilience and adaptability continue to shape the possibilities for a truly inclusive, representative state in Sudan—even as the country contends with renewed conflict and unresolved questions about the distribution and exercise of power.

By guiding readers through the intricate workings of government in Sudan, and highlighting the ongoing dynamics that challenge and define each institution, this book aims to offer a balanced, comprehensive, and accessible overview. Whether you are a student, policymaker, member of the Sudanese diaspora, or simply a curious observer, this guide will provide the foundation necessary to understand one of Africa’s most significant and continually evolving state systems.

CHAPTER ONE: Historical Overview of Sudanese Governance

The land now known as Sudan has a deep and layered history, with forms of governance stretching back millennia along the Nile. Long before modern nation-states were conceived, powerful kingdoms and sultanates rose and fell, each leaving behind traces of their administrative practices and power structures. From the ancient Nubian kingdoms that engaged in complex interactions with Egypt to the medieval Christian states and later Islamic sultanates like the Funj and Darfur, governance was often centered around ruling elites, religious authorities, and control over vital trade routes and agricultural lands. These entities developed systems for collecting tribute, administering justice based on local customs and emerging legal codes, and maintaining armies, though their reach and effectiveness varied across the vast and diverse territories they claimed.

The relatively isolated nature of many regions meant that alongside centralized kingdoms, numerous smaller tribal and local structures maintained their own forms of self-governance, guided by customary laws and the authority of elders or chiefs. This mosaic of political organisation reflected the geographical and ethnic diversity of Sudan, creating a complex tapestry of allegiances and authorities that would interact, sometimes uneasily, with later attempts at more centralized rule.

A significant shift occurred in the early 19th century with the invasion led by Muhammad Ali of Egypt. Seeking resources, particularly gold and slaves, and aiming to build a modern army, the Egyptians conquered the weakened Funj Sultanate and extended their control over much of the northern and central Sudan. This period, often referred to as the Turkiyya (Turkish era), introduced a new layer of administration. While technically under Ottoman suzerainty via Egypt, the rule was effectively Egyptian, albeit with many officials of Turkish or Albanian origin.

The Turco-Egyptian administration attempted to impose a more centralized, bureaucratic system, dividing the territory into provinces and smaller units, often corresponding to existing tribal areas. Khartoum was established as a capital, becoming the center of this new governmental structure. Governors were appointed, and a system of taxation was introduced, often perceived as heavy and arbitrary by the local population. While this era saw some infrastructure development, such as the introduction of the telegraph and steamers on the Nile, it was also marked by exploitation, particularly through the slave trade, and faced significant local resistance due to its foreign nature and perceived oppression. The imposition of formal *sharia* courts, previously less common in many areas, also impacted the existing legal

landscape.

Discontent with Turco-Egyptian rule eventually boiled over, giving rise to a powerful religious and political movement led by Muhammad Ahmad, who proclaimed himself the Mahdi ("the Guided One") in 1881. The Mahdist Revolution was a direct challenge to the foreign administration, fueled by religious fervor and widespread resentment against the perceived injustices and corruption of the Turkiyya.

The Mahdist State, established after the fall of Khartoum in 1885, represented a unique period of indigenous Sudanese rule. Governance under the Mahdi and his successor, the Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad, was deeply intertwined with religious ideology. The state aimed to implement a system based on a puritanical interpretation of Islamic law, with the Mahdi's word holding ultimate authority in both spiritual and temporal matters. A council of emirs was appointed to administer different regions, and a reformed legal system based on Mahdist principles of *sharia* was put in place. While attempting to unify the diverse Sudanese population under a common religious banner, the Mahdist State also faced internal power struggles and external threats.

The Mahdist State's existence was relatively short-lived. Towards the end of the 19th century, the British, who had established a strong presence in Egypt, sought to extend their influence southwards, partly motivated by strategic concerns regarding the Nile and partly by a desire to avenge earlier defeats by the Mahdists. In 1898, an Anglo-Egyptian force led by Horatio Kitchener defeated the Mahdist army at the Battle of Omdurman, bringing an end to the Mahdist State.

The subsequent period saw the establishment of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium in 1899. This arrangement, as the name suggests, technically meant that sovereignty over Sudan was jointly held by Egypt and Britain. However, in practice, Britain held the dominant position, effectively administering Sudan as a British colony, albeit with a veneer of Egyptian partnership. The governance structure was headed by a British Governor-General, appointed by Egypt on British recommendation, who wielded extensive power from Khartoum.

The British introduced a more systematic and expansive administrative structure than their predecessors. They established a civil service, the Sudan Political Service, initially staffed by British military officers and later by British civilians. Provinces were governed by British inspectors and district commissioners, who were aided by Egyptian and, at lower levels, Sudanese officials. The British largely favored a policy of "indirect rule," particularly in the later years of the Condominium. This involved governing through existing or sometimes reinforced local power structures, such as tribal chiefs and religious leaders, especially in rural areas.

The policy of indirect rule had a varied impact. It allowed the British to administer vast territories with a relatively small number of personnel and sometimes preserved local

customs and authorities. However, it also had the effect of solidifying or even exacerbating existing regional and ethnic divisions, particularly between the predominantly Muslim Arabic-speaking North and the largely □□□□□ and Christian African South. A deliberate "Southern Policy" was implemented, which sought to isolate the South from Northern influence, discouraging Arabic and Islam and developing the two regions along separate lines.

This deliberate segregation and differential development created significant disparities in administration, education, and economic opportunity between North and South, laying the groundwork for future conflict. While the North saw investment in infrastructure like railways and the Gezira Scheme for cotton production, the South remained largely underdeveloped and marginalized. The Condominium government also established educational institutions, but again, these were largely concentrated in the North, contributing to the emergence of a Western-educated Sudanese elite that would later spearhead the independence movement.

As the 20th century progressed, Sudanese nationalism began to grow, initially among this educated elite in the North. Political movements and parties emerged, advocating for self-determination and an end to Anglo-Egyptian rule. The desire for independence gained momentum, particularly after World War II, against a backdrop of changing global political dynamics and growing anti-colonial sentiment. Negotiations between Britain and Egypt regarding the future of Sudan intensified, reflecting both their own interests and the increasing demands of Sudanese nationalists. This period of growing political awareness and the push for independence set the stage for the next chapter in Sudan's complex journey towards establishing its own system of governance.

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