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The Politics of Sudan

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Introduction

Sudan's political history is an intricate tapestry woven from centuries of conflict, collaboration, external influence, and the relentless aspirations of its people. The nation has experienced dramatic transformations since gaining independence in 1956, swinging between fragile experiments in democracy and the harsh realities of military rule. As the third largest country in Africa, Sudan's political journey has not only been defined by its geography and vast diversity but also by the profound challenges of forging unity amidst deep-seated regional, ethnic, and religious divisions.

The merging of the predominantly Arab Muslim north and the largely Christian and animist south under colonial administration set the stage for post-independence tensions that would haunt Sudan for generations. The abrupt imposition of a unified state in 1946, without adequate representation for the southern regions, planted the seeds of civil war and marginalized entire populations. These initial decades saw cycles of fragile civilian governments, punctuated by repeated military coups and autocratic rule, as Sudanese leaders grappled with the complex legacy of colonialism and the demands of managing diversity in a turbulent sociopolitical environment.

Over the decades, Sudanese politics has been marked by persistent civil strife, including two protracted civil wars, repeated coups d'état, and one of the world's most tragic humanitarian crises in Darfur. The military's dominant role has seldom been meaningfully challenged, and even periods of relative democracy have proven fleeting and vulnerable to abrupt and often violent interruptions. The formal structures of Sudan's government—including its parliaments, presidents, and courts—have rarely reflected the true locus of power, which has remained concentrated in the hands of a ruling elite and military strongmen.

In more recent years, the aspirations for genuine, inclusive democracy have come to the fore. The 2019 revolution, sparked by economic hardship and sustained by widespread public mobilization, offered a rare window of hope. Vast crowds in Khartoum and beyond demanded a break from the past and insisted on a future shaped by civilian participation and respect for fundamental rights. Yet, even this optimistic moment was short-lived, with the transitional experiment faltering under the weight of entrenched power structures and renewed military intervention.

Today, Sudan stands at a perilous crossroads. The ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, beginning in April 2023, has plunged the nation once again into violence and chaos. As millions are displaced and the humanitarian situation deteriorates, the crises of governance, identity, and equitable resource distribution have grown ever more acute. For Sudan, the political

struggles of today are the latest chapter in a longer story—one in which the past continually shapes and complicates the possibilities of the future.

This book aims to provide a comprehensive guide to Sudan's political system, contextualizing its contemporary challenges within a broad historical framework. By exploring the actors, institutions, regional dimensions, and societal forces that define Sudanese politics, we endeavor to equip readers with a nuanced understanding of this pivotal African nation. In examining the roots of conflict and the prospects for peace, we hope to shed light on the difficult path towards building a stable, just, and inclusive political order in Sudan.

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CHAPTER ONE: A Land Shaped by History: The Foundations of Sudanese Politics

To truly grasp the complexities of Sudanese politics, one must first appreciate the land itself and the deep currents of history that have flowed through it. Sudan, a vast nation at the crossroads of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, is a place where geography is destiny and the past is never truly past. Its immense plains and plateaus, stretching across northeastern Africa, are dominated by the lifeblood of the Nile River and its tributaries. This mighty river system, flowing from south to north, has for millennia dictated settlement patterns, fostered agriculture, and served as a highway for trade and cultural exchange.

The sheer scale of Sudan is staggering. Before the secession of South Sudan in 2011, it was the largest country in Africa. Even today, it remains the third largest. This vastness encompasses a diverse range of environments, from the arid deserts of the north, part of the formidable Sahara, to the savannas and wetlands of the south. This geographical diversity has profoundly shaped the human landscape, leading to distinct regional identities and ways of life that have often been at odds.

The northern regions, particularly along the fertile Nile Valley, have historically been more connected to the civilizations of Egypt and the broader Mediterranean world. The Nile's predictable flooding brought fertile silt, allowing for settled agriculture and the rise of complex societies. This led to the development of ancient kingdoms, like the Kingdom of Kush, whose history is deeply intertwined with that of ancient Egypt. These early states, flourishing along the Nile, built cities, developed writing systems, and engaged in trade, laying the groundwork for later political formations.

Further south, the landscape transitions to vast clay plains, savannas, and eventually, before the division of the country, the immense Al-Sudd swamp. This region, with its different climate and environment, fostered different kinds of societies, often more focused on pastoralism and rain-fed agriculture. The geographical barriers and distances between these regions, coupled with differing environmental challenges and resources, contributed to the development of distinct ethnic and cultural groups.

The very name "Sudan" comes from the Arabic term "Bilad al-Sudan," meaning "land of the blacks," a term used by medieval Arab geographers to refer to the settled African peoples south of the Sahara. This historical label hints at the long history of interaction and, at times, tension between peoples of different origins and cultures within this vast territory. The north, over centuries, saw significant Arab migration and the spread of Islam, while the south maintained a greater diversity of indigenous

African languages and belief systems, with the later introduction of Christianity.

The Nile, while a unifying force in providing life, has also been a source of potential conflict, particularly in the competition for its waters. The need for irrigation in the arid north made control of the river crucial, a factor that would play a significant role in the relationship between Sudan and its northern neighbor, Egypt, throughout history. Dams built along the river, while providing hydropower and flood control, also raise complex issues of water management and regional cooperation.

Beyond the Nile Valley, the west of Sudan is dominated by the Darfur region, characterized by the Marrah Mountains and a history shaped by trans-Saharan trade routes and distinct sultanates. The east, with its Red Sea coast and proximity to Ethiopia and Eritrea, has its own unique historical and cultural connections. These different regions, with their varied topographies, climates, and historical trajectories, have contributed to a complex mosaic of communities, each with its own interests and perspectives.

The environment has also played a direct role in shaping conflict and migration patterns. Periodic droughts and desertification have put immense pressure on natural resources, leading to competition for land and water, particularly in the more arid regions. This environmental stress, intertwined with social and political factors, has been a contributing cause of conflict and displacement throughout Sudan's history.

Migration, both internal and across borders, has been a constant feature of Sudanese life. People have moved for a variety of reasons, including seeking better economic opportunities, fleeing conflict, and responding to environmental changes. Sudan has also historically been a host country for refugees from neighboring nations, adding another layer to its demographic and social complexity. These movements of people have enriched Sudan's cultural tapestry but have also, at times, strained resources and contributed to social tensions.

The interaction of these geographical and historical factors – the dominance of the Nile, the vast and varied landscape, the diverse peoples and cultures, and the recurring environmental challenges – has created a political landscape marked by deep-seated divisions and a constant struggle for unity and stability. Understanding these foundational elements is crucial to comprehending the ongoing political dynamics and the persistent challenges Sudan faces in building a cohesive and peaceful nation.

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