

# Black Book of Sudan: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in Sudan

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## *Introduction*

Most of the recent literature on the civil war, political turmoil and social upheavals in the Sudan is written in Arabic. At least three reasons explain this tendency. First, Arabic is the official language of the Sudan, the main spoken language among its diverse nationalities and ethnic groups. Second, the Arabisation (*tarib* in Arabic refers to the use of Arabic as a language of instruction) of higher education means that English is gradually losing ground to Arabic. Third, the Sudan Government's orientation courts the Arab World and perceives Arabism as the edifice of Sudanese nationalism, regardless of the fact that the majority of the Sudanese peoples are of an African or Afro-Arab origin. For all three reasons, the Arabic language became dominant even in regions such as Southern Sudan, the Nuba Mountains and Darfur, where Arabism, apparently an ideology of dominance, is resisted and its political designs rejected by peoples of non-Arab origin.

Evidently the discourse of power and the struggle for providing the symbols of a dominant identity cannot be separated from issues such as language and religion. Nor can these issues be separated from the twin domains of wealth-sharing and equitable resource distribution and their discontent. However, this review article does not focus on the common theme of identity politics. Its objective is more mundane, i.e. an attempt to avail to the non-Arabic reader a glimpse of a mysterious new Arabic publication titled *The Black Book: Imbalance of Power and Wealth in Sudan*, which appeared in 2000. The authors of the book have opted to remain anonymous, calling themselves "The Seekers of Truth and Justice". The place of publication has also been withheld. The Black Book, as we will refer to in the rest of this review, has no copyright either.

The mystery of the Black Book is compounded by its impeccable method of

distribution, which was executed with military precision. A once-off distribution of the book took place at Friday prayers in the Capital and in most major cities in the country, thus beating the government's tight grip on information circulation.

According to one source, top officials, including personnel of the Presidential Palace, had their copies on their desks on the same day. Within weeks of its release, the book, now popularly known as *The Black Book*, (*al-kitab al-aswad*) became a topical issue at every venue in the country. Its success in tapping grassroots imagination in a way which is unparalleled by any other literary work in the recent history of the country has made it the envy of every author in the land. The distribution of the book took on a life of its own through spontaneous photocopying. The book has no copyright. Indeed its free duplication constituted the greatest bulk of the distribution as most readers have never seen the original copy of the book. Translation of the book into English for southern Sudanese readers was taking place during the collection of data for this article (Summer 2000) but has yet to see the light of day.

#### ***The main issues***

The authors spell out the aim of their publication in the following passage:

*This publication unveils the level of injustice practised by successive governments, secular and theocratic, democratic or autocratic, since the independence of the country in 1956 to this date. (p. 1; all translations are ours unless otherwise stated).*

The authors then proceed to the distribution of various types of powers among population blocs in the country. Using the 1986 Official Census, Sudan's regional populations are shown in the first two columns of Table 1:

**Table1. Population and Representation (1986)**

Regions	Population	%	Representation	%
Northern	1,026,406	5.4	58	79.5
Eastern	2,222,779	11.8	1	1.4
Central	4,908,038	26.5	2	2.8
Southern	4,407,450	23.7	12	16.4
Western	6,072,872	32.6	0	0

The table reveals that the Northern Region, with a population of 5.4 percent of the total population of the Sudan, provided 79.5 percent of national representation. The figures illustrate the inequitable distribution of regional representatives and the political dominance of the minority Northern Sudanese, who historically dominated the country economically as well.

The authors then move on to examine the Regional status of the occupants of the Constitutional posts for the first five national governments from 1956 to 1964. Given that these are the early governments, we may be tempted to throw the blame on inherited deformed colonial structures. The Northern Region has maintained a representation of more than 50% and occasionally exceeded 70%. Since independence, not a single president came from outside the Northern Region, while many military coups have failed simply because their leaders came from outside the fortunate Region (p. 11) for instance, the 1977, 1980 and 1991 military coups.

An impressive array of statistics has been compiled regarding regional representations in successive governments from 1964 to date. These are as follows: Multi-party democracy

(1964-69), Nimeiri regime (1969-1985), Military Provisional Council (MPC) (1985-1986), second multi-party democracy (1986-1989), NIF/National Salvation 1 (NS 1) (1989-1999) and National Salvation 2 (NS2) 1999 to date. The ministerial representation in these governments is given in table 2.

**Table 2. Ministerial Representation in Governments, 1964-2000**

Gov/ Region	Northern		Central		Western		Southern		Western	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1 <sup>st</sup> Dem.	55	67.9	2	2.5	5	6.2	14	17.3	5	6.2
Nimeiri	79	68.7	4	2.5	19	16.5	9	7.8	4	3.5
MPC	21	70.0	0	0	3	10	5	16.7	1	3.3
2 <sup>nd</sup> Dem.	55	47.4	3	2.6	17	14.7	15	12.9	26	22.4
NSI	120	59	6	3	18	8.9	30	14.9	28	13.8
N52	18	60	1	3.3	2	6.6	4	13.3	5	16.7

The list here refers to Federal (national) Ministers as opposed to State/Wilaie Ministers

The Black Book here gives some credit to the then Prime Minister Sadiq Al Mahdi and his democratic government in 1986-1989 (Table 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> Dem.) for increasing the representation of marginalised groups in the country. This is taken as a testimony that liberal democracy goes some way towards tackling the dilemma of representation (p. 14).

Although the Black Book stresses the domination of the entire Sudan by the Northern Region, it does not take these regions as undifferentiated entities. The most startling element in the thesis is the claim that just three ethnic groups within the Northern Region in effect dominate the country. The authors state that, "This tiny population of the North contains several marginalised ethnic

groups like the Manaseer and the Mahas. The former represents the marginalised — Sudanese — Arabs while the latter the marginalised Nubian tranche. These and others are dominated by just three ethnic groups within the Northern Region, i.e. the Shaygia, the Jaalieen and the Danagla" (pp. 15-16).

The Black Book allots a substantial space to the performance of the current government, perhaps due to its repeated claim to nonsectarianism, justice and equality. Statistics presented, however, reveal a spectacular conformity with the previous pattern of distribution of power prevalent in the Sudan. Regional composition of the Military Command Council at the time of the

takeover of power by the present Government of National Salvation (ONS, 1989) is as follows:

**Table 3. Revolutionary Command Council, (1989)**

Region	No. of Representatives	%
Northern	10	66.7
Eastern	0	0
Central	0	0
Southern	2	13.3
Western	3	20.0

Once the power was consolidated, a return to normal politics became evident in the distribution of ministerial positions (p. 15).

**Table 4. Ministerial Positions of the GNS, 1989**

Region	No. of Representatives	%
North	120	59.9
Eastern	6	3.0
Central	18	8.9
Southern	30	14.9
Western	28	13.8

The recent political demise of Turabi, the spiritual leader of the National Islamic Front (now the Popular National Congress) in December 1999, was a cause of euphoria for the majority of the Sudanese people. The authors of the Black Book, however, see little cause for celebration. The power distribution is evident at the level of the Presidential Palace positions, the Federal ministerial posts as well as State governors. To save space, I will present a summary of the regional distribution of powers at the Presidential Palace combined with computation of Federal Ministers (Table 5).

One would have assumed that the imbalance shown would not feature at the level of State

Governors, Provincial Commissioners and Regional Ministers. The Black Book, however, states otherwise, as shown in Table 6.

**Table 5. Presidential and Federal Ministerial Posts**

Region	Presidential		Federal Ministerial	
	No.	%	No.	%
North	10	83.3	18	60.1
Eastern	0	0	1	3.3
Central	0	0	2	6.6
Southern	2	16.6	4	13.3
Western	0	0	5	16.7

**Table 6. Governors, Commissioners and State Ministers**

Region	Governance		Commissioners		Ministers	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
North	9	69.2	160	51	240	47.
Eastern	2	12.5	13	13	9	1.8
Central	2	12.5	27	27	25	4.9
Southern	Excluded		69	69	160	31.
Western	3	18.8	47	47	71	14.

Using similarly powerful statistical support, the authors arrive at the same conclusion regarding the legislative power in the Sudan. Although the domination of the North has remained a prime feature, the authors concede that liberal democracy and its elected parliaments give marginalised areas a better representation (p. 25). In the case of appointed legislative bodies, the authors conclude that many of those appointed in non-northern regions are in fact of northern origin but have been living in other regions.

#### **Legal system**

The Black Book acknowledges the important role attached to the legal profession in the making of any modern state. It equally praises the history of Sudanese legal profession and its striving for justice and equality. However,

the legal profession has also been subject to the insidious hand of the northern power brokers, as the publication states. In the words of the authors: "the leadership of the legal system at the level of the Minister for Justice and the Attorney General has been controlled by the executive powers, which are characterised by nepotism and discrimination among the members of the nation." (p. 28). Table 7 shows the regional affiliation of heads of the legal system in post-independence Sudan.

**Table 7. Sudanese Attorneys General**

Region	No.	%
North	8	67
Eastern	0	0
Central	3	33
Southern	0	0
Western	0	0

### *The media*

The media too has not escaped the assault of the Black Book. It is described as dominated by the north and playing its tunes. This, as the Black Book claims, is evident at the level of news, art and appreciation of tunes and lyrics and evolution of culture. In short, the media has projected the culture of the north and elevated it to a national culture at the expense of other parts of the Sudan (pp. 28-33). With extreme sarcasm, the Black Book narrates how the Jihad itself did not escape the wrath of the northernisation process: "Examine with us the documentary films on Mujahideen which are produced by the Popular Defence Forces and (National) charity corporations. Look at the pictures and scrutinise the names. Wouldn't you be certain that all the Mujahideen in the Sudan are from the Northern Region? That the defending army and its martyrs who fall every day are equally from the same region? And the weddings of these martyrs are classified in tandem with their corresponding levels of citizenship; first,

second and third." (pp. 32-33). The involvement in "Jihad" and the sacrifice it entails are, however, different according to the Black Book, as shown in table 8:

**Table 8. No of "Martyrs" for a Certain Period for Present Government**

Area	No. of Martyrs
South Darfur	1923
North Darfur	1212
West Darfur	713
Northern	111
River Nile	196
Western Kordofan	1796

Strict control over the media meant that the agenda are determined by the north. Those who wished otherwise are subjected to character assassination, often involving the usual racist card. A number of leaders were quoted as an example of this exclusionary mechanism, including Bolad, Faroug Adam, Au Al Haj and Jar Al Nabi (pp. 33-37).

### *Wealth (mal)distribution*

The Black Book contends that distribution of resources in Sudan has always been skewed in favour of the Northern Region. This pattern has been set in stone by the northern control over public finance in the country: "... The Ministry of Finance has become an estate belonging to the northern Region. Excluding some Board directors inside the Ministry, you would not find 5% of its staff from outside the northern Region. Appointment of staff in the Ministry is primarily reserved for the citizens of the north. Those from other Regions have to be content with tea-making and cleaning services. Even the drivers are recruited from northern school dropouts whose family members are working in the Ministry" (p. 39).

The Black Book concludes that this pattern of employment has its bearings on the approval of government allocations for developmental schemes across the nation, which again favours the northern Region: "No (non-northern) State has ever exceeded 36% of its allocated budget, while actual expenditure of the two northern States has never dropped below 60% of their annual approved allocations. This has left the northern States in continuous position for attracting extra funds originally destined for other States" (p. 39).

In line with this pattern, the Black Book bemoans the liquidation of eight developmental schemes, none of which was in the north: "These schemes were not sold or privatised but simply cancelled despite the fact that they were developmental in nature and had an impact on the life of ordinary citizens of these States ... To date and since independence, not a single scheme has been established in the Western State which is capable of making a primary support of one Province for a period of one month" (p. 43).

Seventeen public enterprises (schemes, corporations, etc.) were privatised in recent years. It is implied in the Black Book that the privatisation of these public amenities was characterised by nepotism, corruption and open defiance of the national interests (pp. 43-44).

Other issues raised in the Black Book, which we are not able to summarise, include topics such as Agricultural Services, Natural Resources, Animal Resources, Industrial Sector, Energy and Water, Transport and Communication, Development and Public Services, Banking and Economic Corporations.

### ***Committee for Distribution of Wealth***

The start of petrol production and export has introduced a new dimension in Sudan's economy. This necessitated formation of what has come to be known as the National Council for Distribution of Resources.

Regional membership of the Council is as follows:

**Table 9. The National Council for Distribution of Resources**

Region	No. of Representatives	%
Northern	19	76
Eastern	1	4
Central	1	4
Southern	3	12
Western	1	4

Needless to say, the Black Book sees the composition of this Council as firmly in line with the pattern of northern domination of the country.

In its last chapter, the Black Book explores the consequences of the alleged "imbalance in the scale of justice", a term used as a subtitle for the publication. It says: "Loss of government credibility has been one of the prime consequences of this injustice. All governments since Independence and up until Al Mahdi's rule of 86-89 (which is the only government which made some efforts towards a better distribution of wealth) have adopted a single path, that of entrenching the power and resources in the north and a small part of the centre. The government of National Salvation, however, has come to affirm the ethnic and regional domination of the north over the rest of the country ..." (pp. 58-59).

### ***Comments and analysis***

The Black Book is certainly very controversial. In the words of Francis Den

(1989), "What is not said is what divides". Success of the Black Book in making a persuasive discussion of what is not talked about made it an instant grassroots topic. Indeed its method of reaching the public is a unique case worthy of being studied by every student of mass media. In many ways, its speed of dissemination has probably surpassed alternative media in comparable settings with strict official control over information. An informant working in a public photocopying office claimed that he had duplicated 11 copies for his friends in five different cities. An owner of a photocopying shop in Khartoum said: "This book came to us from heaven. I made no less than 100 copies for our customers. We sometimes charged them more due to the risk involved in duplicating illegal documents".

The mystique of the Black Book is further boosted by the high level of illiteracy in the Sudan, as most people knew about it and its contents through word of mouth, apparently the most powerful tool of mass media even in the modern world. A company manager in Khartoum (originally from Darfur) declared: "As I was coming out from the mosque, somebody handed me a copy of a book. I threw it in my car and forgot about it. Suddenly everybody started talking about the Black Book. It was three days later when I realised I was one of those who had received a copy. I read it and found nothing new. Well, I had already mastered the contents of the Black Book from my neighbours even before reading it".

Naturally, the Black Book is met with different feelings, ranging from admiration, embarrassment, disbelief, fear, contempt and anger. Wherever one stands, it is hard to think as though the Black Book has never been published. This is clear from the response of most major political players in the country.

Both government and opposition parties, including Turabi's faction, contend that the Black Book raises an important issue of injustice. The mess highlighted in the Black Book is, however, common throughout the policies and actions of all governments and political parties. Hence the criticism is general and so is the responsibility. Indeed every party in the country is now claiming to be the better candidate for setting things right.

Following the demise of Turabi in December 1999, an intense power struggle ensued in the country. The Government as well as Turabi's factions toured the country for support. Delegates who toured the western Regions found that public agenda were mainly dominated by three issues: the western highway project, pay of public servants (in particular teachers), and the Black Book.

Needless to say, the distribution of the Black Book sparked off frantic investigation by the security. It was rumoured that several junior officials were fired from their posts in the Presidential Palace due to the appearance of the Black Book on the desks of top officials including the President. Writers, journalists, academics and publishing houses were subjected to security investigation during which fonts of computer software, typewriters, etc., were checked. The investigation was fruitless and the authors remained unknown.

Turabi declared that he sensed an Islamic touch in the Black Book. Others say the Black Book is the work of frustrated scholars from the western Region. The Sudan Democratic Gazette seems to favour this view. Yet others say this publication must have been done by people who have been close to power and had access to classified information.

Certain observations can, however, be made about the Black Book which may shed some light on its authors. Firstly, the language of the Black Book reflects some sort of an Islamic vision common among the Islamic parties in the country. This is further affirmed by the attempt of the Black Book to read the situation within a clearly defined Islamic Sudan.

Secondly, the grievances of the western Sudan and its leaders seem to be paramount and disproportional to other marginalised regions which the Book tries to defend, including the south. Thirdly, there is a distinct lack of sympathy for the north. This is despite the fact that, following the logic of the book, its numerous ethnic groups are dominated by the "Powerful Three" Northern ethnic groups: the Shaigia, the Jaaliyeen and the Danagla.

Fourthly, confining the Black Book to an Arabic version implies that the South had little or no input in the publication (translation of the book into English is volunteered by some southern readers to make it available for their non-Arabic readers).

Fifthly, the distribution of the Black Book reflects a style of organisation, discipline and execution that is far beyond the competence of organisations other than the NIF. Nonetheless, the Black Book is unlikely to be the product of the mainstream NIF.

#### *Public reaction*

The fact that the Black Book is written in Arabic gave it an immediate public response for the material it contains cannot be ignored by Sudan's tense and severely divided identities. A similar response was echoed earlier in relation to the role of discursive narratives in the making of competing identities in the Sudan. In examining writings of 15 Sudanese authors of various ethnic

origins, Mohamed Salih (1999:29) laments, "caught between ethnic and national identity crises, Sudanese authors who publicly expressed ethnic sentiments were denounced for fear that they might frustrate the nation-building project which embarked violently on creating one nation-state (Arabist in its orientation), one religion (Islam as an ideological inspiration) and one language (Arabic as a dominant discourse), despite the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country. The result was the development of an increasingly agonised intellectual milieu, with split identities which are often privately ethnic and publicly nationalist".<sup>2</sup>

In the process of writing this review we interviewed a very small number of Sudanese across the ethnic divide in order to sample their response to the Black Book. Although the majority of the Sudanese population may not share their views, they give an impression, no matter how partial, of the significance of the book and its ability to engage people in a noteworthy political debate on the nature and structure of Sudanese polity. The reactions of members of the general public are as follows.

A bank official commented on the Black Book as follows: "A man went to the court and was asked to present his case in writing. Being illiterate he commissioned a scribe to write his case. When the case is documented, the scribe said: Let me read it to you to see if you are happy with it. Upon reading the document, the man started weeping. The scribe said: why do you cry? I am only reading what you have just told me. The customer said: I knew I was subjected to injustice but I never knew it was that bad".

The banker continued: This is how I felt in reading the Black Book. We all knew that we were taken for a ride and that we have been discriminated against. I was so angry that I



wanted to go out and beat up the first northerner I met. Well, I might be exaggerating but for the first time, I have the information to prove that we are done" (from Darfur).

Another reader commented: "Now we have the information in front of our eyes and if we say the system is unjust, then we cannot simply be accused of being racists. What we want is plain and simple: a Sudan which is for everybody and in which we are all equal, including the specified three ethnic groups" (from Kordofan).

A woman reader commented: "I like those guys because they wrote from the heart and in a language which we can all follow. They knew what they are talking about and they don't put it in the way you intellectuals do. Not a single politician has been able to dispute what is said so far" (a teacher from Darfur residing in the Central Region).

A taxi driver from the North: "There has never been any justice for you westerners. But you are not alone in that. We in Haifa suffer even more than you. Even the southerners have a better deal than us, despite the Jihad against them. At least you are able to speak out. We are relegated to nothing but cooking for those guys. A cook is a cook even if he works in the kitchen of the (Presidential) Palace."

A politician from Kordofan said: "I thoroughly enjoyed the book. We have always raised the issue of injustice but the Black Book was able to prove it with clear and straight statistics. It occasionally went too far giving ammunition to racists and tribalists. What is the point when the case is already made? The highway, the petrol revenue, Al Obeid Water Project; the injustice is unmistakable."

A security man stated: "I read the book three times. Things shouldn't have been said in this way. We know that the system has never been fair, but we should avoid stirring trouble. Strangely enough, I have never been able to dispute what is said. I thought the government would, but they kept quiet. Even the northern journalists just said the book is racist but stopped there" (from Darfur, living and working in Khartoum).

A lawyer, of mixed parentage (Darfur/River Nile) said: "I was so embarrassed reading the Black Book. Where are all these politicians we admired. Can't they see all this? Having said that, I would like to think that the Black Book got it wrong. How did they manage to find the ethnic origins of all those who are listed? We can establish the ethnic affiliation of the members of this government but can we be sure about those who were in power even before I was born? I think part of the Black Book is cooked, but I cannot prove it. I hope someone else does."

A pensioner from Darfur stated: "It has finally been said loud and clear. We have known this for years and years. Here it is for those who do not know. I cannot imagine any present or future leader able to ignore the contents of this book. I am glad it came out and would love to know who the authors are. They are great."

A civil servant (from Kordofan working in Khartoum) commented: "The Black Book is definitely the work of Turabi and his boys. What did he do when he was in power? He only made it worse. Now he is trying to embarrass the government. We know that that type of printing is only available for Turabi's people. The Black Book is certainly well written and has important information, but the timing is not right. Sudan is now facing war staged by the whole world and we should unite. No, this book doesn't help at all."

Judged by its popularity, the Black Book could certainly be rated as one of the most important political publications in contemporary Sudan. It is unthinkable that any present politician will act as though it has not been published. Indeed it is a publication that would be foolish to ignore. The compilation of the statistics is worthy of note and has given the Black Book a power that is hard to challenge. The main thesis of the Black Book remains intact no matter how many slips are detected in the publication.

The latter part of the Black Book is, however, less organised and often carelessly presented. Some claims are not substantiated and it is not good enough to state points whose evidence lies outside the text, for example in newspaper articles, government decisions, etc. Occasionally, the Black Book relies on anecdotal knowledge. For example, the claim that equipment owned by the Western Highway Project was diverted to the Northern Highway Project is not corroborated by evidence in the Black Book. One may say everybody knows this but still evidence is missing in the publication. Other examples here include treatment of Jar Al Nabi, Farouq and the Governor's house in Al Obeid (the HQ of Kordofan State). Supportive evidence for these claims might be available in newspaper articles and official documents. Nonetheless, lack of presentation of these documents weakens the argument considerably.

In several passages, the book launches into personal vendetta. This should have been avoided. The Black Book also fails to distinguish between government policies and ideosyncratic behaviour and corruption enacted by certain individuals. Surely not every action which went against the alleged marginalised regions or was performed by officials from the north is rooted in

government policies. This point is not fully observed in the Black Book.

Despite this, one has to concur with the main view of the Black Book, that a minority within the northern Region has dominated the Sudan and that a move towards a more inclusive Sudan is wanting. The implications of the Black Book for the current debate on the future of the Sudan are significant and this is what we intend to allude to in the closing pages of this review article.

### *Concluding remarks*

The Black Book touches a raw nerve in the Sudanese identity construction debate by deconstructing the political use of identity politics in cementing the dominant discourse of power. The potency of the discourse espoused by the Black Book is embedded in a politics of difference expressed in an economic reality characterised by inequality and social injustice. It signals a shift in Sudanese conceptualisation of their political reality from an abstract notion of difference based on cultural and ethnic cleavages to tangible material differences projected in the unsettling task of choosing between competing definitions of what informs the genesis of a collective Sudanese identity, if that common identity has ever existed. Behind the glow of the nation-building project and its discontent there exists a tragic tale of social, political and economic exclusion, a tale of a nation divided not only in terms of the constitutive elements of identity politics, but the resonance of the political economy that usurps the cultural meaning of distributive justice.

The fact that the Black Book of the Sudan has come from unknown sources, and is authored by unknown "people" who advocate the grievances of forgotten people says much about the nature of the political space

available to those brave enough to interrogate injustice. It says little about the dominant social forces behind this episode, although these social forces could be regionally and ethnically diverse but working collectively within the boundaries of a dominant discourse that rejects those who fail to keep silent. This is not surprising in situations where the search for identity in conflict-ridden states is an important ingredient in the making of political boundaries which serve to reproduce subjugation or dominance.

In the Sudan, and probably elsewhere, identity construction is not a simple assertion of cultural or ethnic difference. It bestows meaning on the ideology of dominance on which economic difference thrives, while its nature is denied, hence pushed to obscurity. Engaging obscurity and redeeming it from the possibility of deconstructing the myth of community or nation is in itself a very

powerful counter-discourse and a politically informed ideological strand built around the narrators' capacity to unravel the bedrock of injustice. The Black Book of the Sudan has done exactly that and in a discourse proved capable of alienating its opponents. Its consequences would certainly outlive the eternity of its ghost publishers since ghosts are immortal.

### NOTES

1. An article with the same title is published in Sørbo, G. and Ahmed, A.G.M. (eds). (1989) *Management of the Conflict in the Sudan*. University of Bergen, pp. 10-18.
2. Salih, M. A. (1999) 'Other Identities: The Politics of Sudanese Discursive Narratives.' *Identities: The Journal of Global Power and Culture* 2, no. 2.