

Reflecting on Sudan's Higher Education Revolution under Al-Bashir's Regime

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The history of modern higher education in Sudan goes back to the era of British rule. The University of Khartoum, the mother of higher education in Sudan, was first established in 1902 as Gordon Memorial College (University of Khartoum 2010). Since then, Sudan has witnessed remarkable expansion of its higher academic institutions. This article is designed to present a critical reflection on higher education in Sudan under the government of President Omer Al-Bashir who came to power in 1989 in a military coup that ended Sudan's third democratic period since it gained independence.

Al-Bashir's regime announced a highly ambitious political, economic, and social agenda that aimed at transforming Sudanese society. It was the first time in the Sunni Islamic world that an Islamic movement was successful in reaching power and controlling government. However, this had been achieved through a military coup, which was organized and backed by the Islamic National Front (INF), rather than via ballots.

Al-Bashir's regime conducted a series of national conferences in the early 1990s to address significant changes in Sudan's political institutions, economy, peace process, and higher education. A Conference on higher education was held in the capital city in 1990. The *1990 Higher Education Act* that resulted from the conference deliberations mandated a reform to Sudan's higher education system. This reform was generally referred to as the higher education revolution, and was designed to Arabicize, Islamize, and expand Sudanese higher education in unprecedented ways.

Instead of opting for gradual implementation, the Arabicization of curriculum was a political decision executed in a hasty manner. The academic staff were not consulted about this decision (News from Africa Watch

1992). The government took a decision to make Arabic the official language of instruction in all social, human, and some natural sciences. This change was enforced in the academic year 1990-1991, just one year after Al-Bashir seized power. It has been argued that this process of "Arabization" was introduced without adequate materials available in Arabic, both in terms of textbooks and references. Many of the teaching staff lacked the training for teaching in Arabic.

The higher education revolution also aimed at the Islamization of curriculum in a way that would reflect the country's core policies of promoting Islamic values and norms. The Islamization of knowledge was an intellectual project carried out by some Muslim scholars in the areas of philosophy and social sciences in order to promote an "Islamic worldview" that would reflect deeply rooted Islamic scientific traditions. Most of these scholars were academically trained and had taught at western academic institutions (Al-Attas 1995). The government established a special administration in the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MOHESR) to oversee the project. Courses designed to introduce students to Islamic studies were added to the curriculum. However, this was not what the philosophers advocating the Islamization of knowledge meant to accomplish with their project. The Islamization of knowledge was intended to connect Muslim scholars with both their Islamic heritage and advanced Western scientific knowledge. A similar project had achieved limited success in the development of the international Islamic university in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Unlike Malaysia, Sudan had only a fraction of the financial and academic resources allocated for this project, making the success of such a process in Sudan almost impossible.

The higher education revolution also wished for expanding the higher education in Sudan to meet the needs of the country's economic development and to

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keep up with a growing population. There were five public universities in addition to some public colleges in the country in 1989, and approximately 5,000 enrolled students in the academic year 1989-1990. Four of these public universities were in the north: University of Khartoum, Islamic University of Omdurman, Cairo University in Khartoum, and Gezira University. However, As a result of the violence in southern Sudan, there was only one public university, Juba University, which had to operate in the north for several years in the 1990s due to security concerns. Additionally, Sudan sent thousands of students to study abroad in countries such as Egypt, India, Russia, Iraq, Morocco, and Eastern European countries. Egypt, for historical and strategic reasons, accepted a number of students almost equal to those accepted by all Sudanese public universities before 1989.

Thus it is fair to argue that there was an urgent need to expand Sudan's higher education due to the huge cost associated with sending students abroad, for a developing country like Sudan, and to the growing population. By 2006, there are more than 300,000 students enrolling in Sudan's public universities and colleges as a direct result of the unprecedented horizontal expansions of public universities under Al-Bashir's higher education revolution. However, it was almost Sudan's destiny that such expansions tended to take place during military regimes, more particularly under Numeiri's and Al-Bashir's regimes. Both regimes were at odds in terms of their ideological orientations. Numeiri's was backed by the communist party until the early 1970s. Numeiri's regime expanded higher education in 1975 by establishing two public universities outside the capital city for the first time, the University of Juba and Gezira University, two years after signing a historic peace agreement with the southern rebels that lasted for a decade. Compared to Al-Bashir's expansion of higher education, Numeiri's was well-planned and executed. Moreover, no other regime, whether military or democratic, has enjoyed the decade of enduring peace which allowed Numeiri to concentrate on economic development projects including building new universities. Sudan also received hundreds of millions of US dollars in the form of economic aid from Western and Gulf countries. All such economic help, however, ceased when Al-Bashir assumed control of the Sudanese government.

No University has suffered more severe consequences from the higher education revolution than the University of Khartoum. The university was one of Africa's most renowned academic institutions, with one of the highest admission rates on the continent. In 1989, the school accepted only about 2,000 students out of more than 125,000 who took Sudan's high school certificate exams that year. The institution was closely connected to many highly respected western institutions, with a large number of professors and researchers trained in top British and American universities. Thus, it has remained a dream for many Sudanese families to have their children admitted to this school.

Until the early 1990s, before the full implantation of the policies of the higher education revolution, attending the University of Khartoum tended to impose almost no financial burden on students and their families. Students were fully sponsored by the school, to the extent that those from far regions such as Darfur would live in the dorms year-round. Students enjoyed free healthcare from the university hospital and financial stipends to return home by public transportation at the end of each academic year. The University of Khartoum has actually helped elevate many families from the poverty zone by educating their children. Graduates from the University of Khartoum tended to work and occupy key positions within the public and private sectors, both inside the country and abroad. In short, the University of Khartoum was the best academic institution in the country, and yet it was entirely free.

Under the higher education revolution, however, students at the University of Khartoum lost all of the aforementioned benefits. The government's decision to end students' free education and accommodations has imposed huge negative social costs on students and their families. In order to limit these effects, the government established a Student Welfare Fund to administer the housing and accommodation of public university students. The establishment of this fund was also aimed at relieving public universities from such tasks. However, the task assigned to this fund, especially in early years of its operation, was beyond its financial and administrative capacities. This fund now appears more organized, but many poor families in Sudan are still facing economic challenges sending their children to college.

Critics of the higher education revolution argue that horizontal expansion occurred at the expense of elementary and secondary education (El-Hassan 1992). Most newly established colleges and universities outside the capital city were actually opened in buildings that were formerly high schools. The change in elementary education from 12 to 11 years (from 6+3+3 to 8+3) gave the government an opportunity to facilitate its policies by transforming many high schools into public universities. In many cases, especially in the early years of the higher education revolution, the only innovations added to these buildings in the course of their change into public universities were fresh paint and huge billboards bearing their new names. However, with the discovery and production of oil in the mid-1990s and the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 ending the civil war in southern Sudan, the government was able to initiate limited expansion of the infrastructure at many newly established universities and colleges. The government also increased the number of higher education instructors who were sent abroad to earn their master's and doctoral degrees in the mid- and late 1990s. Unlike their predecessors from the 1960s to the late 1980s, most of these instructors were educated in non-western countries. Hundreds of public university instructors have been sent to Malaysia, a country that enjoys special economic ties with Sudan.

One of the grave mistakes made by Al-Bashir's regime during the beginning of the higher education revolution was the firing of many professors and instructors under a very controversial policy known as *Al-Saleh Al'Am*, which literally means "for the sake of public interests." As a result, the country and top public universities such as the University of Khartoum witnessed the largest "brain drain" since Sudan gained independence. Many professors who once declined attractive offers from Persian Gulf nations and other countries, preferring to remain and work in their home country, began seeking opportunities to work abroad. Distant places, such as Kuala Lumpur, have become a preferred destination and second home for prominent Sudanese scholars.

With the exception of the University of Khartoum, the total number of faculty in Sudan's public higher education institutions was 9299 for the academic year 2004-2005, including all academic ranks from teaching

assistant to full professor (MOHESR 2010). Nearly 26 percent of the total number of faculty is comprised of teaching assistants, and about 40 percent are lecturers, both groups who generally hold only master's degrees. This means that almost two-thirds of the faculty in these institutions did not hold doctoral degrees. There were only six universities with more than 20 full professors and there were 11 universities with fewer than ten full professors. To conclude, the higher education revolution will continue to shape Sudan's higher education for many years to come. The tens of thousands of college students graduated under this revolution will affect in both negative and positive ways the landscape of Sudan's public and private sectors. Although these graduates will help meet demands for job market, their under-academic training will be an issue of a major concern for their potential employers. With their current structures and resources, many Sudanese public universities and colleges are in need of profound reforms and improved financial and human resources to function effectively. Reforms should include improvements in the overall academic infrastructure and student development and academic life. The end of conflict in Darfur and stabilization of the fragile peace between northern and southern Sudan will likely enable the government to allocate additional resources to the public universities and colleges. Two decades since its inception, the accomplishment of the objectives of higher education revolution in Sudan; the expansion of public universities and the Arabicization and Islamization of curriculum, is still far from complete.

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