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Retribalisation of the Educated Elite in Darfur and the Phenomenon of Tribal Shura Councils; with a Special Reference to the Fur Shura Council

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The programme Assisting Regional Universities in Sudan and South Sudan (ARUSS) aims to build academic bridges between Sudan and South Sudan. The overall objective is to enhance the quality and relevance of teaching and research in regional universities.

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Abstract

The paper documents the formation and development of the Fur Shura council as an example of a new form of urban based voluntary ethnic associations. It attempts to analyze the new phenomenon against the backdrop of staggering processes of state building in Sudan. The paper concludes that in the context of political competition for the resources of the state the educated elite from marginalised areas such as Darfur found themselves entangled in the process of investing on ethnic identification for reasons of political expediency. On the other hand non-democratic regimes found a better chance to outwit opposition forces by adopting the old colonial tactic of “divide-and-rule” by encouraging the retribalisation of educated elite in the peripheral regions.

1 Introduction

One may start by asking a broad question: Why do ethnic loyalties continue to influence the political process in Sudan to the present day? When Sudan gained its independence half a century ago, the modern educated elite who were associated with the struggle for independence perceived a future for their country that is free of the influence of tribal loyalties in public life. Not surprising, they branded native administration as an obstacle to the development of a modern state on the assumption that it promotes “tribalism”. Consequently, the abolition of native administration was high on the agenda of all modernist forces; both in the far right and far left of the political spectrum. This is in line with what other researchers have noticed in many African countries. One would largely agree with what Woods (1994: 466) has stated “following independence Africa’s ruling elites sought to suppress all forms of ethnic affiliation and independent associational activity. They justified their actions on the basis that tribalism and ethnicity were detrimental to national unity and economic development”. The material for this paper is based on extended interviews with key informants and relevant secondary literature on Sudan and Darfur in addition to the author’s lifelong experience as a member of and a researcher on Sudanese society.

Since the early 1990s the general attitude of the people in Sudan towards the issue of expressing tribal loyalties in public space has radically changed (at least in large urban centres where the idea of nationhood was most spread) to the effect that it is no longer considered objectionable for a person to be asked about his/her tribal identity in a government office upon demand of services such as education or health. As a reminder of the changing attitude, a new organizational structure for promoting tribal solidarity and representation has appeared amongst the majority of Darfurian tribes that is known as “*shura council*”. It is a form of voluntary association in which segments of an ethnic group are represented and is expected to act like a tribal parliament that develops strategies and act as a pressure group (lobby) regarding the interests of the group. *Shura councils* have been found by educated elite who operate largely from the national capital; with branches in the state capitals. As such it can be considered an urban phenomenon. It is not however coincidental that shura councils are recognized by the government as legitimate representatives of their people. Many members of these associations are also members of the ruling party and some even hold ministerial office. Such unexpected developments certainly require the attention of researchers who are interested in studying directions of change in the political and social arenas in Sudan.

Anthropologists studying African societies have long noticed the distinctive features of life in the newly formed urban centres in the continent. One of the features that attracted their attention was the formation of ethnic based voluntary associations by migrants. The dominant trend in the literature largely represented by the writings of British social anthropologists in the 1950s and 1960s considers these associations as an adaptive mechanism to the new urban setting by providing basis for solidarity and some sort of social security in the absence of many functions that are supposed to be catered for by modern state and non-state agencies (see Little, 1957, Gluckman, 1958, Parkin, 1966 and Kerri, 1976). This approach or paradigm has been labelled as “instrumentalist”.

Another common paradigm that appeared in 1960s and 1970s was largely advocated by political scientists such as Wallerstein, 1960, and Bates, 1974. It considers ethnic associations as a manifestation of competition for political power. Urban elite from disadvantaged groups would mobilize fellow migrants and their rural populace in order to secure rights or gain privileges accorded by the state. This approach looks at ethnicity essentially as a political resource. The role of educated

elite is instrumental in this kind of processes since they are the ones who understand the workings of modern institutions of governance that sanction political power.

Although the phenomenon of the tribal shura councils under discussion in this paper supports the main assumptions of the above-mentioned approaches, it resonates more with the idea of ethnicity as a political resource. Ethnic voluntary associations did exist in Khartoum since the dawn of independence taking pretty much similar forms to those known in other parts of Africa. Some of them are based on territorial identification with villages or regional areas while others are clearly based on identification with primordial entities such as clans or tribes. Of course in rural areas the two criteria may coincide or crosscut depending on the specific situation. Darfur region has been suffering from negligence, lack of development and marginalization that caused the educated elite to pose questions regarding how the country is run. They formed a lobby group in 1964 under the name of “Darfur Development Front” which mobilised all the people of the region towards a common political goal. Shura councils have appeared very recently (from mid 1990s) and have therefore been largely associated with the ongoing widespread conflict on the one hand and the recognition of a totalitarian regime on the other. Moreover they mobilise people along tribal primordial identities rather than territorial / regional identity (i.e. more exclusionary and divisive). It is important to notice from the outset that this new type of associations has not replaced the old more socially oriented associations but are constantly trying to incorporate them in a manner that retains a certain division of labour between them.

2 Ethnicity and the colonial legacy of African societies

Pre-colonial African societies were organized on basis of “tribes” as political units. Identification with such units was largely based on descent (true or fictive); but also on other criteria such as territoriality, language and religion. When European colonial forces took charge, they manipulated such identity groups to suit their goals of controlling local communities in order to minimize resistance to foreign rule. They moulded them into functional administrative units and recognized traditional chiefs as legitimate representatives entrusted with the task of holding law and order among their people. In British colonies this was part of what came to be known as the policy of indirect-rule.

After the end of the Second World War, there was an expectation that Africa’s modern educated elite who played an important role in the struggle to gain independence for their respective countries from European colonial rule will deliver the goods of “development” and “democracy” as critical components of a modern nation state. The ascendance to power of figures such as Nkrumah of Ghana, Kauanda of Zambia and Nyerere of Tanzania was met with considerable optimism both in Africa and worldwide. Several decades after independence most African countries are still suffering from poverty, political instability and civil wars that are mostly coached in ethnic terms. It is therefore legitimate to ask a basic question: Why have Africa’s educated elite failed so far in their mission; and to what extent can ethnicity be responsible for that failure?

Modernization is a model that educated African elite were eager to introduce to their societies. Accordingly, traditional leaders (i.e. traditional elites) were considered the greatest obstacle in the way of modernization programmes. Members of the educated elite were antagonistic towards traditional chiefs and other native leaders considering them as a part of the colonial legacy that their societies should rid themselves from. Consequently, politics of exclusion was practiced against the traditional

elite in the majority of the newly independent African states. With the advent of independence, the idea of a modern “nation-state” became the only acceptable model according to which educated Africans could imagine the future of their “liberated” societies. Because such a model contradicts with the promotion of tribal identities, most educated elites of the 1960s condemned tribal or ethnic identification especially in urban centres. In Sudan, this theme was clearly expressed in the writings of intellectuals and speeches of politicians before and after independence.

Surprisingly, several decades after independence the educated elite in many African countries have come to accept the idea of identification with their ethnic groups more than ever before. Having allied with traditional leaders, some university graduates are now tribal representatives. In Sudan this trend is very clear when it comes to considering the case of Darfur. Nowadays many groups there try to have educated persons occupying native administration posts within the tribal structure. School teachers, retired police and army officers as well as other categories of retired government employees are now among native administration cadres there. Moreover new ethnic associations known as “shura councils” are being formed in which educated elite play a central role.

In Sudan ethnic groups / tribes have always played important political roles in the context of the state. The old pre-colonial kingdoms of Sinnar and Darfur were based on tribal alliances (O’Fahey and Spaulding, 1974). In fact the state administrative structure itself was couched in ethnic language; for example in Darfur the term **dar** (meaning homeland) was an administrative unit with a reference to the dominant identity group in charge of the territory. The popular Mahdist Revolution that united the various social components in order to resist foreign rule in Sudan and give the country its current shape owed part of its success to the tribal factor as well. The constitution of the army and recruitment of fighters was done on ethnic basis.

Having overthrown the Mahdist rule the new colonial authorities also relied on tribal structures to keep law and order at the peripheries of a modern state. As a result, the modern state structure at the central level became heavily depended on traditional tribal structures at the grassroots level. The policy of indirect rule was a clear expression of recognition of the potential importance of ethnic identities in the political process at the wider level of the state.

It is a well known fact that most states in Africa have been shaped by colonial forces with very little consideration to the history and culture of diverse societies brought together to form a unitary state. Since the lifetime of the newly formed modern states was short enough to allow the process of national integration to bear tangible fruits, it is not surprising to find that most African states witnessed the interference of ethnicity in national politics soon after independence. Where political parties dominated the scene they were also heavily affected by ethnic allegiance. Of course, in every single case of a newly independent African state the educated elite have tried to adopt what they considered the model of a modern nation state with its institutions of cabinet, house of representatives, elections ceremonials, and slogans of democracy. It goes without saying that these concepts rarely took roots in African societies. This is demonstrated by the fact that most countries in the continent are in the tail of indexes relating to good governance, rule of law, freedom of expression and transparency which are prominent characteristics of a modern state. One of the most important features associated with African countries’ poor performance in these indexes is the strong embeddedness of ethnicity in national politics. Although conflicts and civil wars in many African states have been described in terms of the language of ethnicity, it is more realistic to say that such dynamics reflect problems of post-colonial state-building. In the words of one researcher (Osaghae, 2006: 15)

“Yet, ethnicity has been a crucial factor in state construction and failure, and the emergence of ethnic nationalism as one of the arrowheads (or fallouts) of recent and on-going transitions in many countries implies that there is no running away from the problem. Indeed, there are already a number of state reconstruction projects, notably in Rwanda, Burundi, Ethiopia, Nigeria and South Africa, that privilege ethnicity.” Nevertheless ethnicity cannot be considered an independent variable but rather a reflection of more subtle factors underlying political process in these countries. One would agree with the statement by Berman (1998: 310) that “The understanding of ethnicity as socially constructed focuses on it not as a fixed primordial identity but as the protean outcome of the continuous and generally conflict-ridden interaction of political, economic and cultural forces both external and internal to developing ethnic communities.” Thus any understanding of ethnic phenomena in African countries should be situated in the context of state operations in order to be comprehensive .

3 Educated elite in Sudan and the challenge of emancipation from tribal loyalties

When Sudan gained its independence half of a century ago, the modern educated elite who were associated with early nationalist movement and the struggle for independence perceived a future Sudan that is free of the influence of tribal loyalties in public life. Emancipation from tribal loyalties was considered a precondition for promoting national integration. Given the country’s ethnic and cultural diversity, it was thought that the best way to unite the population of Sudan towards a common national identity is to undermine primordial loyalties (i.e. tribal) on the assumption that it becomes an obstacle achieving true national integration.

Early Sudanese nationalists looked towards Arab and Muslim world for a model of national identity around which to unite the country’s diverse population. In its modern form Arabism and Islamism grew stronger during the Anglo-Egyptian rule in the Sudan. Educated Sudanese in the 1920s and 1930s - the majority of whom were from riverian parts of the country - started developing modern nationalism. Sudan Graduates Congress which pioneered the struggle for independence oriented the country’s educational system towards Arab and Islamic culture. With the advent of independence joining the Arab league was the first foreign relations task of the government. The profound effect of Egypt’s influence in this endeavour cannot be overestimated. As stated by Aguda (1973: 177) “Indeed, the predominance of the Arab Sudanese in the country's culture, politics, administration, commerce, and industry makes it de facto an Arab state”. School curriculum, media, art, drama and songs were all utilised to that end. Nevertheless, it is clearly noticeable to any observer of Sudanese society that ethnic/tribal loyalties continue to influence the political process in the country to the present day.

One of the significant features of Sudanese nationalism in the 20th century is the disapproval of the educated elite towards traditional sources of authority. Not surprising, they branded native administration as an obstacle to the development of a modern state. The abolition of native administration was high on the agenda of most modernist political groups. The most serious blows to native administration came in 1964 and 1970. Following the 1964 October uprising a resolution was made by a leftist-dominated caretaker government to abolish the system. However, as the government was short-lived, the resolution was not implemented because national elections brought a conservative government which ignored the resolution. But another radical government ascended to power in 1969 and it was the government that removed most paramount chiefs in northern Sudan from office. Since 1964 the demoralized native administrators have become less effective in carrying out their traditional

role of maintaining law and order and resolving disputes among individuals. They were further weakened by the central government tampering with the native courts under the pretext of the need for separating legal and administrative tasks.

In 1971 Numayri's military regime passed the People's Local Government Act which divided the region into regional, district and area councils. This local administration replaced the native administration and abolished the jurisdiction and administrative authority of the tribal leaders. Some say this re-organization was the first factor that triggered tribal conflicts on a wider scale in Darfur. In southern Darfur province alone, 16 different rural council border disputes and conflicts occurred soon after the implementation of this act. This Act meant that a locality belonging to one tribe could be controlled by another. The government had thus promoted tribal competition. Morton (2004) argues that the weakening of the native administration has contributed significantly to increased conflict in Darfur. The critical weakness in modernizing administration lay in the change of emphasis from their previous judicial role (maintaining law and order) to their administrative role, to which political mobilization has lately been added.

In practice, however, tribal leaders continued to be acknowledged heads of their groups, and the tribe became a political base to promote its members to senior positions in local councils, as well as members of the regional and national assemblies. Ethnic allegiance and increasing polarization are said to have permeated every corner of government office, as members of the group are considered representatives of their tribes hence they are supposed to work for the interests of their tribal folk. This has been a sort vertical ethnic expansion, from the local level to the regional and even national levels.

Prior to abolishing native administration, the Numairi regime had already dissolved all political parties in the Sudan. The vacuum was filled with an emerging new social and political force - the Sudanese Socialist Union and its organizations; the only recognized party by then. These organizations were led by the rural elite such as teachers, small traders, government employees who occupied the scene in Darfur resulting in the emergence of new leadership. This leadership played a critical role in shaping the political scene in Darfur in the years following the promulgation of the Regional Government Act of 1980. They were given responsibility for services in Darfur but with wholly inadequate resources.

In 1987, during the second democratic era, native administration was re-established on a limited scale especially in Darfur and Kordofan. This period was short lived and by 1989 the National Islamic Front seized power in Sudan through a military coup of the National Salvation Revolution "Ingaz" which introduced new policies for dealing with all traditional institutions of authority in Sudan. The policies of the new regime have profound effects on invigorating the role of ethnicity in Sudanese politics as we shall see in the next two sections.

4 The Ingaz regime and the reconfiguration of native administration

The revival of NA in the 1990s was associated with the intentions of the government to increase its popularity by gaining access to supporters at the grassroots level through their traditional leadership much like the original intent of the British to enhance the efficiency of control by using traditional political structures according to what came to be known as “indirect rule”. The Regime had two goals to fulfil: (a) drawing the carpet from under the feet of traditional opposition parties who commanded large following amongst rural population; (b) be able to mobilize “mujahideen” (fighters) to win the war in the south.

In 1992 the ruling group held a private meeting in the village of Na’aima in White Nile State to develop a strategy for dealing with native administration. It ended up in reversing the previously known Islamists’ position on the matter. They decided to utilize it rather than abolish it. This was clear from the fact that the move to reinstate NA came from the Ministry of Social Planning which was headed at the time by Ali Osman M Taha. Native administrators were brought to special training camps and instructed on how to become “missionaries” to spread Islamic teachings and preach their people to improve their practice of Islam. It was a vision of social engineering that motivated the reinstatement of native administrators more than any other considerations. The collection of taxes which used to be one of the most important duties of NA is no longer practiced by them. This stopped since the mid 1990s. However, the security (reporting on insurgency activities ..etc) and political functions (mobilizing supporters for rallies and providing fighters for popular defence forces PDF) continued to exist. This is why many people today say that NA has been too much politicized to the extent that it lost its credibility in many places. NA themselves say that as representatives of their communities they have to adapt to any political conditions in order to secure the interests of their people. This tactical position is known about them for a long time even during previous regimes. In addition to the security and political functions they continued to have diverse judicial roles.

One of the outcomes of the so-called Na’aima conference was to introduce what came to be known as the “Native System” in Khartoum state. The idea is to encourage migrants from Darfur and Kordofan living in Khartoum state to organize in units similar to native administration structure in the rural areas. Thus they have established sheikhs (headmen) and omdas (sectional chiefs) in different neighbourhoods and issued them ID cards so that they have the privilege of dealing with urban municipal administrators and security personnel. The main tasks for the native system personnel is to verify people’s identities in front of security personnel and mobilize fellow “tribes men” to attend public rallies staged by NCP in the Green Square in Khartoum. NCP has created a special secretariat for managing the affairs of native system. The native system is different from native administration mainly because the former is not connected with a given territory and therefore its power base is limited unlike the latter which play a crucial role in natural resource management in the rural areas.

After the advent of Ingaz rule the educated elite in Darfur became more involved in native administration activities because they have discovered a new way for channelling their political ambitions. Alliances were forged between traditional leaders and the educated members of their tribes in order to have access to state privileges in the new era. Ethnic identification has become an important consideration for anyone who hopes to have a role in politics. Competition for tribal representation became the first step for ambitious persons who want to compete for leadership

positions. Of course this is not new in Sudanese politics per se but the outright formal engagement of the state apparatus in such process did not happen since the time of the Mahdist rule.

5 The emergence of new ethnic associations

The decade of 1970s could be considered a landmark for Darfur in terms of the upsurge of ethnic competition over natural resources. The drought has caused a widespread population movement across the region. The semi-nomadic Zaghawa moved in great numbers from the extreme north to the central and southern sandy regions as well as to Jebel Marra and western plains (Abdul-Jalil, 1988). At the same time Arab nomadic groups from Chad entered western Darfur in greater numbers seeking richer pastures for their animals. The traditional homelands of the Fur subsequently witnessed greater population pressure leading to more open competition over natural resources. As a result, the some educated Zaghawa established the first ethnic voluntary association under the name of “Zaghawa Committee for Migration and Resettlement” in order to facilitate the resettlement of their people in Goz Dango and Hufat Al-Nahas in the far southern parts of Darfur. With more of their tribal kin arriving from Chad Arab nomadic groups traditional fur homeland witnessed more pressure on the natural resources leading to more frictions between pastoralists and farmers. In terms of social relations, this has been translated into ethnic tensions between the Fur and the Arabs. This has become the basis for the Arab-Fur conflict that reached its peak in an open warfare between the two sides in late 1980s. Both Zaghawa and Arab population movements can therefore be considered an important factor in the development of awareness among identity groups. This in turn led to more practical actions in the demonstration of ethnic solidarity.

The advent of regional government by Numairi’s regime in 1981 had drastically impacted ethnic relations in Darfur and led to the escalation of ethnic competition not only over natural resources but also political office for the first time. The elections for Darfur region governorship in 1983 show clear ethnic polarization of candidates all of whom were university graduates and previous members of Darfur Development Front. Whereas previously intertribal fights resulting from conflicts over natural resources used to be limited to the specific tribes or clans directly involved in the specific conflict, by the end of 1980s wider ethnic alliances bringing all the Fur against all Arab tribes have been witnessed. It was this period that witnessed the formation of tribal militias among these groups. Another significant development has been the formation of “Arab Gathering” during Sadig Almahdi’s government following the 1987 elections as an ethnic alliance for the promotion of political representation and ambitions of Darfur Arabs.

The new Ingaz approach to popularise its Islamic agenda included a policy for encouraging the educated elite to be associated with their tribal basis in order to influence people at the grassroots level and win them over to support the government. Informants say that in the same meeting that recommended the adoption of the native system the idea for establishing tribal associations under the name of “shura councils” was discussed. Although no formal decision was announced in writing the term “shura” bears the mark of Islamist movements who consider the word to be the “Islamic” version of democracy. Hence the central committee that runs the NCP is called “NCP shura council”.

Since the early 1990s a new organizational structure/institution for promoting tribal representation and tribal solidarity has appeared amongst the majority of Darfurian tribes. The new institution is known as “*shura council*”. In theory, it is a committee in which most segments of a tribe/ethnic group are represented and is expected to act like a tribal parliament that develop strategies and make policies

regarding the interests of the group. The issues handled by *shura councils* are broad based; ranging from water, health and educational services to intertribal dispute resolution and negotiation with the government on administrative and political posts for members of the group. The actual performance of these organizations does not indicate that they operate in a democratic manner or that they even adhere to their stated objectives. They rather operate like elite clubs or secret societies. Under conditions of conflict (as is the case in Darfur) where the government based its counterinsurgency operations on promoting tribal militias it is not surprising that tribal organizations liaise with either the security forces and/or the militias. For this reason data on the actual operations of tribal shura councils hearsay and few formal announcements made by leaders of these organizations. In the next section an example of one such organization – the Fur shura council - will be presented.

6 The formation of Fur Shura Council

When Al-Beshir took power in June 1989 a reconciliation conference between the Arabs and Fur was been concluded in the capital of the region, El-Fasher. The new government put pressure on both sides to sign a hasty agreement. It quickly considered it an early sign of its success. However the peace deal did not last long on the ground because sooner the Fur thought that the new regime was siding with the Arabs. This has disappointed Daoud Bolad who was a leading Fur Muslim Brother, with years in the leadership of the student union in the University of Khartoum while he was studying engineering. Instead of hailing the new regime, Bolad's experience with the Arab assaults against the Fur, and the assumed subsequent alliance between the Arabs and the new NIF government led him to join the SPLA. He led troops from the South into Darfur in order to fight the government. Bolad was captured after a battle in Souther Darfur in late 1991 and killed. Arab militias were reported to have cooperated with government troops in that campaign. As a result Fur-Arab relations seriously deteriorated and the Fur started to feel increased pressure from two sides: the new government and the Arabs.

Perhaps the most important legacy of Daoud Bolad is the emergence of a new awareness among the educated Fur that something has to be done to safeguard the interests of the members of their ethnic group and enhance their solidarity. Some educated Fur who were previously involved in facilitating assistance for tribal militias to defend their land and property against Arab militias started deliberations regarding the formation of a political body to represent them and to neutralise the new regime which was clearly biased against them. They became convinced that the best way to keep the interest of their people was to show allegiance to the government and express support for its programme.

Fur migrants in the national capital used to have a voluntary association under the name of "Sultan Tayrab Society" which used to cater for their needs of social solidarity in a hostile urban milieu. It was lead chiefly by Abulgasim Seif-Aldin and Yousuf Bakheit, both of whom are university graduates and had worked in the Darfur regional government under Ahmed Ibrahim Dreige in early 1980s. A series of private meetings were held and consultations made between Fur elite in Khartoum and Darfur over several months. It was concluded that a fresh association was needed for handling the new challenges that the Fur were facing after the advent of the Ingaz regime. The beginning of 1992 witnessed the inauguration of a high profile new organization in a big public rally staged in Mayo neighbourhood south of Khartoum and attended by the leader of the new regime, general Al-Beshir who took the *baia'a* (oath of allegiance to the ruler according to Islamic traditions) from Fur tribesmen. Many delegates for the congregation arrived from outside Khartoum representing various Fur communities

in Darfur and other parts of Sudan where numerous migrants have settled (e.g. Gazira, Gadaref, Sinnar, New Halfa).

The structure of the new organization is made of a two-tier governing body. The first one is a council of 80 members called Maglis A'ayan Umom Al-Fur (Paramount Council of Fur Notables) that acted like a parliament in which all Fur communities inside as well as outside Sudan are represented. Seats the Fur in Darfur were allocated according to upper level native administration units "dars". Prominent native administration leaders (such as the magdum of Nyala and the Dimingawi of Zalingi) were included as members. Other significant local elite were also included as representatives of larger territorial administrative units. Representative of the national capital were all highly educated professionals some of whom have PhD degrees. The Fur of the diasporas (especially in the gulf) as well as those living in other regions within the country were also represented.

The second level is an executive office with 10 members called Haiat Shura Umom Al-Fur (Fur Shura Council). The leadership of the council (by de facto the leader of the association) was given to Husain Ayoub Ali Dinar; the grandson of the last Sultan of Darfur. Although he did not have a university education Husain was an expedient politician who has been to the parliament several times as an active SSU member during Numairi's rule. When Ingaz took over he quickly joined it as well. His nomination for the leadership of the association was meant to symbolize the glorious past of the tribe and the hope to regain that position. Husain had three deputies; Karam-AlDin Abdul-Mawla (a PhD in business administration and later to become minister of International Cooperation), Salah-Aldin Alfadul (a graduate of Omdurman Islamic University from the leading family of Magdum in Nyala) and Mansoor Abdallah Bakur (the Fur paramount chief in Gadaref). Idris Yousuf (a PhD in electronic engineering) became the secretary general. It is important here to mention that Husain Ayoub insisted that as the president of the Fur Shura Council, his title should be called "Sultan" in order to benefit from the historical connotations that will enhance Fur solidarity. Other members of the council suggested the title of Ameer "prince" but due to Husain's insistence they agreed to address him as Sultan. It is noticeable that the structure of the leadership of the association reflects an alliance between the modern educated elite and traditional leaders of the tribe. It is also worth mentioning that the council and executive committee members included persons who are supporters of the government and others who support opposition parties.

Before the outbreak of the Darfur war, activities of the new association were mainly limited to public relations exercises in the form of newspaper announcements and propaganda during elections and government rallying occasions. Its leaders also tried to influence election results by recommending lists of candidates for the national assembly. Lobbying the government to appoint members of the Fur ethnic group in ministerial and other leading positions was another arena for the operation of the shura council. When the war started the leaders tried hard to influence the events by playing the role of mediators between the government and the rebel movements. Unfortunately the youth who are behind the movements were antagonistic - from the beginning - to traditional leaders and experienced educated elite to the extent that some have been physically liquidated. Influencing the peace negotiations was another arena for the activity of the association. Indeed, it is thought that they have influenced the choice of Al-Tigani Sisi as a leader for the newly formed LJM group in order to replace Abdul-Wahid the SLA leader who remained defiant and non-cooperative with the Fur Shura Council from the start. Currently many leaders of the association are involved in supporting the Darfur Doha agreement in different ways.

As for the evaluation of the performance of the Fur shura council, many ordinary people consider it as a forum for political profiteering. Many of them think that the members are looking after their own individual interests. Some members of the shura councils executive office themselves admitted that had it not been for individual interest seeking behaviour the association could have performed better. After the death of Husain Ayoub the executive office of the Fur shura council was divided on how and who to replace him. Some nominated his deputy Salah-Aldin Alfadul while others nominated his cousin Ibrahim Yousuf Ali Dinar (a university graduate and ex-chief of the customs department). The latter is an NCP member who has won a seat in the parliament in the last elections for a constituency in Khartoum that includes Mayo neighbourhood. One informant specifically referred to the 2010 elections that exposed the internal divisions within the association. For example, Mohammad Yousuf (ex-minister of youth) allied with Abdul-Jabbar Tagere against Kanjoom and Jaafar Abdul Hakam (ex-governor of West Darfur) and the former got elected for the national assembly (parliament) and states council (upper chamber) respectively.

The problem that affected the performance of the Fur shura council has been the internal conflicts between members of the executive committee. This was due to two interacting factors. The first one relates to personal ambitions of the leading members of the association who were not ready to compromise on their interests. The second factor relates to the manipulating tactics of the government and its party - the NCP which played a pivotal role in supporting Ibrahim Yousuf Ali Dinar and Mohammad Yousuf to take over the association in a general conference conducted in El-Fasher in 2008 which resulted in confirming the first as the Sultan and the second as the president. In that conference they elevated the status of Ibrahim naming him as the "Sultan of Darfur" and the office is above the president. Coupled with these developments, the original organizers of the association (Yousuf Idris, Yousuf Bakheit and Al-Amin Mahamoud) have been completely sidelined and lost any influence on the association. Now all leading figures of the Fur shura council are NCP members who carefully coordinate their moves with that of the government regarding its Darfur policies. Although one of the objectives from establishing the association it is to help resolve conflicts within the Fur community and between them and others, one can say that the reverse is true in terms of what the shura council has achieved; increasing tensions between its own members.

7 Political competition and retribalisation of educated elite

The story of the Fur Shura Council is not unique to this ethnic group despite its particularities. In fact it reflects a typical pattern of elite political behaviour using urban-based voluntary associations as political platforms to achieve both communal and more personal goals. Since the mid 1990s several ethnic groups have formed their own shura councils. Examples include more importantly the Zaghawa, Rezeigat, Masalit and Birgid shura councils. The trend is not limited to Darfur ethnic groups for this phenomenon also appeared in Kordofan and eastern Sudan. It is noticeable that no such associations have been formed among ethnic groups in riverain areas. In other words, the phenomenon seems to be limited to areas where citizens claim to be marginalized. Interestingly, the Arabic term "shura" that is used for these associations literally means something equivalent "democracy" although it is not exactly the same. By the same token there is no exact word for democracy in Arabic. Without going into any epistemological argument here it is suffice to mention that the use of the term is part of the culture of Islamist terminology that has been popularised by the Ingaz regime to refer to any

congregation of delegates representing different sections or communities. It stands for a parliament of a kind. Consequently using the term shura indicates that the organization approves of Islamist ideology.

The main question asked at the beginning of this paper is about the factors that influenced the formation of the shura councils. From the example of the Fur shura council - and according to what their leaders admit - the most important factor that encourages people to seek political representation in terms of ethnic associations is the dominance of a totalitarian regime that denies or seriously hampers freedom of organisation to political parties. From the point of view of educated elite from the Fur ethnic group they see that their political rights as citizens have been seriously jeopardised firstly when the government sided with their Arab enemies and secondly when political parties that oppose the government party are not allowed to operate freely. Therefore they thought that the best option for them to defend themselves and preserve their interests is to show allegiance to the regime under an ethnic banner. Indeed the regime itself from the beginning openly demanded allegiance from tribal groups – in the form of an oath - in imitation to what the prophet has done in Medina at the beginning of the formation of the first Muslim state in Arabia.

The second factor that influenced the formation of ethnic associations is the marginalisation of regions such as Darfur, South Kordofan, Blue Nile and Eastern Sudan. It took the form of underrepresentation in government institutions and civil service, disproportional underdevelopment and exclusion from effective leadership positions even within opposition parties. This factor, however, is not a product of the Ingaz regime alone but rather a uniform behaviour of all governments since independence. It is not a coincidence that early regional political groupings in Sudan were formed exactly in these areas in the 1960s: Darfur Development Front, Nuba Mountains Union and Beja Union. Interestingly enough the Ingaz regime did nothing to discourage the ethnicisation of Sudanese political discourse; on the contrary it actually encouraged it in unobtrusive ways. For example, ethnic associations are allowed sometimes to meet in government buildings and under the auspices of an NCP leader. Senior government leaders including ministers, walis (state governors) and president Al-Beshir himself would meet with tribal shura council representatives and discuss matters with them. In the case of the Fur shura council top NCP leaders have intervened in their internal competition as will be shown in the next paragraphs.

Although the main goal of the organizers of the Fur shura council has been to mitigate the conflict between them and other ethnic groups in Darfur (mainly the Arabs), their association has not achieved any significant success in this regard. On the contrary its very foundation started a new race of competition between similar associations established either in reaction to or taking the Fur association as a model. Since the appearance of shura councils in early 1990s in the political landscape, conflict has dramatically escalated in Darfur. This leaves no doubt as to the usefulness of these ethnic associations.

Another significant observation to be made about the Fur shura council is that it has set the scene for open competition between the educated elite and native administration leaders on the one hand and between the educated elite themselves on the other. Mutual criticisms are being directed by educated elite and native administrators against each other. While the former claim that native administrators are traditional and lack capacity to understand national politics at the centre let alone influence it; the latter respond by criticising the former as being selfish and seeking only to fulfil personal ambitions of occupying political posts.

On the other hand, the educated elite themselves entered into fierce competition amongst themselves. During the last parliamentary elections, many of them competed with each other despite what they have professed in original memo which was prepared during the establishing phase. Moreover, after the death of Husain Ayoub in 2008, the executive officers of the Fur shura council disagreed among themselves on how to proceed to appoint a new leader for the association. Since the first deputy (Karam Aldin) had already died by that time, some have nominated Salah Aldin Al-Fadul as acting sultan. Others considered it symbolically important to have one of the grandsons of Sultan Ali Dinar and accordingly nominated Ibrahim Yousuf Ali Dinar as Sultan. The latter is a retired civil servant who used to head the customs department. What is interesting is that he did not grow up in Darfur and does not speak a word of Fur language. His father was among the sons of Ali Dinar who were banished outside Darfur by the British authorities after conquering the sultanate in 1916. He grew up in Kordofan and later in Khartoum. Although both contestants are NCP members the government favoured Ibrahim over Salah Aldin. After much squabbling, Ibrahim managed to establish himself in the new more colourful title of “Sultan Umoum Darfur” (i.e. Paramount Sultan of Darfur). He has also developed the habit of making announcements in newspapers about his activities and new initiatives. His camp has finally succeeded in establishing a new structure for the Fur shura council with the help of the government. Their opponents on the other hand have recently gathered to support the new leader of the Darfur regional Authority after the Doha agreement (Al-Tigani Sisi). They consider that now is the chance for the Fur to occupy some important political posts. In fact the Fur shura council has been an influencing factor behind Sisi’s initiative in the first place arguing that the Zaghawa benefitted from the Abuja agreement and now it is time for them to adopt the new agreement.

The way the educated elite portray political participation and power sharing reflects a rather limited view of the central issues involved in the Darfur war. I have documented elsewhere (Abdul-Jalil, 2009) how school teachers dominated local politics in North Darfur and how they managed to translate the power sharing model into a protocol for the division of political posts on ethnic basis. On the other hand the government in Khartoum has always tried to portray the conflict there as one between “tribes” much like what the colonial authorities did in many parts of Africa. But even if that justification is correct it should have played the role of a neutral arbitrator. In fact intertribal fights due to conflict over natural resources always existed in Darfur but was limited in scale and never produced the sort of calamity the region has witnessed since the early 1990s. The government intended to establish a case for blaming the victim whereby Darfurians are responsible for what happened to them. Accordingly, issues of marginalisation and lack of development are downplayed and ignored. By concentrating on who gets what post the Darfurian educated elite reduce the power sharing protocol of peace agreements to a mere ethnic division of posts which actually help in relieving the pressure from the government. This explains why the government is so keen to promote competition and encourage divisions among Darfurian elite class firstly by encouraging the formation of tribal shura councils and secondly by introducing more administrative divisions in the region. The number of states have been raised to five lately and each of them has increased the number of its localities. This is actually in line with the well known Ingaz strategy of divide-and-rule which they have used in dealing with opposition parties, trade unions and civil society organisations. In the case of Darfur promoting ethnic tensions of all kinds has also been a systematic practice. This can be considered a reinvention of a colonial tradition par excellence.

The feature of elite competition can be considered the most important factor behind the failure of the Fur shura council. Other similar associations don’t seem to have succeeded that much especially regarding conflict transformation or improving state performance. What is seen in Darfur may not be considered unique to the region but rather a variation of a general pattern: mainly that the educated

elite in Sudan in general failed to positively transform political life in the country towards democracy and stability. They have rather become part of the elements responsible of the country's instability. Through involvement in short sighted competitions the educated elite have inhibited the development of national integration based on recognizing the countries immense ethnic, cultural, and religious diversities. The management of diversity is crucial, one presumes, for the success of any modern state within the boundaries of what is left of the historical Republic of Sudan. Although the role of the educated elite has so far been less than expected – to say the least – but nobody expects a modern state to be run without the full participation of intellectuals.

The analysis of the phenomenon under question (mainly politicised ethnic associations) so far points to the fact that it is a symptom of nonconsolidated state power. The process of state building has never been fully achieved and that is why the Sudanese state remains instable or as de Wall calls it “perpetual turbulence”. Although the conditions in Darfur reflect much of the nature of the crises as exemplified by this case of one segment of elite group, any full explanation cannot be reasonably achieved without putting what happens in Khartoum at the centre of the stage. I would therefore largely agree with de Wall (2007: 19) in his conclusion that:

“The analysis in this paper is consonant with most scholarly analysis of Sudan's crisis in presenting the ethnic and ideological factors as products of other processes, notably the strategies adopted by successive governments for managing the peripheries, and the militarisation of society. It differs from most analyses in its emphasis on the importance of *failed consolidation of state power* (emphasis mine). However, the inability of any single elite group, or coalition of such groups, to consolidate its control over the state has not challenged the social, economic, cultural and political dominance of a class of people drawn from a small section of Sudan's national population. Not only has this class been able to survive amid the turbulence of Sudan's national life, but they have become adept at exploiting the weakness of the state so as to be able to prosper. Meanwhile, state managers have become extremely skilled at navigating uncertainty and managing multiple crises.”

8 Concluding remarks

It is clearly noticeable to any observer of Sudanese society that ethnic or tribal loyalties continue to influence the political process in the country to the present day. When Sudan gained its independence half of a century ago, the modern educated elite who were associated with the struggle for independence perceived a future for their country that is free of the influence of tribal loyalties in public life. Since the mid-1990s a new organizational structure for promoting tribal representation and tribal solidarity has appeared amongst the majority of Darfur tribes that is known as “*shura council*”. It is expected to act like a tribal parliament that develops strategies and makes policies regarding the interests of the group. *Shura councils* operate largely from the national capital; with branches in the state capitals playing the role of “lobby” groups negotiating various types of political deals. It is not however coincidental that they are recognized and nurtured by the government. The fact that this institution appeared at the time when conflict in Darfur was beginning to escalate makes it an interesting case for research.

The paper tried to document the case of the Fur Shura Council as an example of this new type of ethnic associations. The paper concludes that in the context of political manipulation of the resources of the state the ruling elite in Sudan found themselves entangled in the process of adopting the old colonial tactic of “divide-and-rule”, hence encouraging the retribalisation of educated elite. The educated elite on the other hand are unable to either defend the interests of their tribesmen or seek to fulfil their ambitions for political office without organizing on ethnic basis. In the contexts of a totalitarian regime with very limited paths for organized political life there is not much they can do. Therefore, one would rather consider the formation of the Fur tribal shura council as the product of a combination of two interdependent factors, staggered process of state building and expedient elite politics.

Finally, despite the fact that the present paper concentrated on the performance of elites I would concur with the following statement made by a Japanese Africanist regarding the role of ethnicity in African states. Osaghae (2006: 10) argues that “This narrow focus of the elite perspective of ethnic management in Africa and elsewhere fails to address the fact that ethnicity breeds on much more fundamental inequalities, injustices and perceptions of relative deprivation, which can neither be reduced to, nor dealt with by, the appeasement of ambitious power-seeking elites. The real danger in placing elite accommodation above all other considerations is that it diverts attention away from the need to reduce or eliminate if possible, the underlying structural factors that foster and provoke genuine ethnic grievances and mobilizations.”

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This paper documents the formation and development of the Fur Shura council as an example of a new form of urban based voluntary ethnic associations. It attempts to analyze the new phenomenon against the backdrop of staggering processes of state building in Sudan. The paper concludes that in the context of political competition for the resources of the state the educated elite from marginalised areas such as Darfur found themselves entangled in the process of investing on ethnic identification for reasons of political expediency. On the other hand non-democratic regimes found a better chance to outwit opposition forces by adopting the old colonial tactic of “divide-and-rule” by encouraging the retribalisation of educated elite in the peripheral regions.