

History

Sudan is the largest country on the African continent with an area of 2.5 million square kilometers and a population of 40 million.

The original inhabitants of this area were converted to Christianity (the Egyptian-based Coptic version) - in the sixth century A.D., and then to Islam in the 15th century, when Arabic forces moved into the region. The Egyptians reclaimed control of the provinces of Nubia, Senaar and Kordofan, which make up modern Sudan, in a campaign between 1820 and 1822. In the mid-19th century, Sudan became of interest to the United Kingdom, because of its strategic importance for trade routes to India via the newly-opened Suez Canal, as well as the desire to limit French influence in the West.

Consequently, Sudan came under British and Egyptian control in the 1880s. Local resistance at this time was led by Mahdi Mohammed Ahmed, a figure revered by his people as both a mystic and a holy warrior. The so-called Mahdists defeated a British-led force of Egyptian troops in 1883. This culminated in the death of the British commander, General Gordon, when the Sudanese took Khartoum after a long siege. The Mahdists retained control of Sudan until the British re-conquered the territory in 1898. Anglo-Egyptian rule was established in 1899. In 1914, Egypt itself was made a British protectorate and Sudan was accordingly taken under British rule. When the protectorate was dissolved in 1922, the future of Sudan was left open, as a subject of further negotiations. In 1929, the condominium was restored.

A further Anglo-Egyptian treaty in 1936 allowed Egyptian troops and civilian immigrants to enter Sudan without restriction. After World War II, Sudan became the subject of serious contention between Britain and Egypt. Efforts to co-opt Sudan to Egyptian control in 1951 were firmly resisted by the Sudanese. Then, in 1952, the overthrow of Egypt's King Farouk by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser brought to power an Egyptian government more sympathetic towards Sudan's independence aspirations. In 1952, Britain and Egypt agreed on a constitution for Sudan, allowing free elections and a referendum on independence, which was finally granted in 1956.

In this way, Sudan is characterized by huge regional and socio-racial disparities and divisions between its Arab heritage to the North and African heritage to the South. The two groups are split along linguistic, religious, racial, and economic lines, and this cleavage has generated bitter tensions and clashes.

These tensions resulted in civil wars which have continued to plague the country, and particularly southern Sudan, for 39 of the 50 years since the country's independence. Sudan's first civil war lasted for 17 years (1955-1972) and its second civil war broke in 1983 and ended in 2005. This was the longest running civil war on the African continent, having ravaged much of southern Sudan's social and economic infrastructure. This war was marked by hunger, disease, genocide, death tolls in the millions, and the massive displacement of about 5.5 million Sudanese.

In particular, the women in Sudan have borne the brunt of war. As men and boy children were killed off by their attackers, many women and girls suffered brutal gang rapes by the Khartoum government-backed militias. Most of these women live in the rural areas or in the slums of the rapidly expanding cities. Many of these women are forced to stay in camps for displaced people. Their participation in global development has been severely limited, mainly by their lack of access to education and policy influencing positions in government.

Sudan enjoyed one of the first and most active women's movements in Africa and the Arab world during the 1960s and 1970s. The major pressure group which promoted women's rights in the Sudan was the Sudanese Women's Union. To a wide extent, this movement had accomplished women's demands and would have contributed more if it was not disbanded in 1985 after the end of President Nimeiri's regime. Despite the many legal reforms achieved, many of the changes were only realized in the urban areas of Sudan where literate women were aware of their rights.

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