



PARTISAN AND HYPOCRITICAL:

THE UNITED STATES COMMISSION FOR INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND SUDAN

**THE EUROPEAN-SUDANESE
PUBLIC AFFAIRS
COUNCIL**

**17 Bedford Square,
London WC1B 3JA ENGLAND**

Telephone: 020 7323 2722

Telefax: 020 7631 4659

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WORKING FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

Partisan and Hypocritical: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and Sudan

One of the vehicles which has been used by the Clinton Administration in its anti-Sudanese campaign has been the federally-funded U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. This body was brought into being by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, passed by the United States Congress. The Act requires an annual report on religious freedom. The Commission published its first report at the end of 1999. It perhaps comes as no surprise that Sudan features among the five countries cited as “countries of particular concern”. The others were China, Iran, Iraq, and Myanmar.¹ The Commission has gone out of its way to focus on Sudan. Indeed, at the March 2000 United Nations Commission on Human Rights meeting in Geneva, Rabbi David Saperstein, the chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and Ambassador Robert Seiple, U.S. Ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, devoted almost all their time on Sudan during their discussions with non-governmental organisations and the press. It perhaps also comes as no surprise that Saudi Arabia was not singled out in the Congressionally-funded Commission’s first annual report on religious freedom. nor was Saudi Arabia, or any other countries apart from Sudan and China, mentioned in the comments of Rabbi Saperstein and Ambassador Seiple during their presentation at the Commission on Human Rights.²

The blatant double standards of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom are central to its usefulness to the Clinton Administration. These double standards were highlighted by the fact that the Commission has also taken a stance, on grounds of “religious freedom” against investment in Sudanese oil projects, while it remains mute with regard to the Saudi Arabian oil industry.³ It is a matter of record that the Sudanese government has on several occasions invited the U.S. State Department’s Committee on Religious Freedom, the Commission’s forerunner, to visit Sudan to assess at first hand the religious situation in Sudan. They never visited.

What is self-evident is that while successful as a propaganda projection, the image of Sudan presented by the Commission, that of an intolerant Islamic regime, is simply not borne out by reality, in theory or in practice.⁴ Dr Hasan Turabi has been seen as the architect of Sudan’s present Islamic model. He was elected speaker of the Sudanese Parliament in 1996. In a 1995 interview Dr Turabi outlined his concepts of Islamic government and society:

What would an Islamic Government mean?...The model is very clear; the scope of government is limited. Law is not the only agency of social control. Moral norms, individual conscience, all these are very important, and they are autonomous. Intellectual attitudes toward Islam are not going to be regulated or codified at all. The presumption is that people are free. The religious freedom not just of non-Muslims, but even of Muslims who have different views, is going to be guaranteed. I personally have views that run against all the orthodox schools of law on the status of women, on the court testimony of non-Muslims, on the law of apostasy. Some people say that I have been influenced by the West and that I border on apostasy myself...I don’t accept the condemnation of Salman Rushdie. If a Muslim wakes up in the morning and says he doesn’t believe any more, that’s his business. There has never been any question of inhibiting people’s freedom to express any understanding of Islam. The function of government is not total.⁵

Respected Africa analyst and commentator Colin Legum has defined some of the differences between Turabi and Islamic fundamentalists:

Turabi’s policies are out of step with other Islamic fundamentalist organisations on a number of important issues. For example, he strongly opposes the idea of a Pan-Islamic movement, which

¹ ‘U.S. Adds Religious Freedom to Old Sanctions’, News Article by Reuters on 23 December 1999.

² ‘Transcript: Amb. Seiple/Rabbi Saperstein on Religious Freedom’, The Office of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State, 31 March 2000, Web site: usinfo.state.gov

³ ‘U.S. Religion Task Force to Scrutinize CNPC’s Stock Offer for Sudanese Ties’, **The Wall Street Journal**, 22 December 1999.

⁴ See, for example, **Religion in Sudan**, Religion File Number 3, The Sudan Foundation, London, 1998. This is available at <http://www.sufo.demon.co.uk/reli003.htm>

⁵ Milton Viorst, ‘Sudan’s Islamic Experiment: Fundamentalism in Power’, **Foreign Affairs**, May/June 1995, Volume 74, Number 3, p.53.

brought him into conflict with other (Muslim Brotherhood) parties in Egypt and elsewhere. He insists that the Sudan has its own national problems which require a particularist approach.

One of Turabi's fundamental breaks with the strict Islamic traditionalists is over the place of women in Muslim societies. As a declared supporter of women's liberation, he insists on their right of equality and their right to full membership of the (Muslim Brotherhood), the only Islamic movement that does so.⁶

Legum also commented on the particular difficulties faced by Islamic leaders in the Sudan in trying to "reconcile the demands for an Islamic state with the interests of the sizeable minority of non-Muslim Southerners". Legum states that:

The solution proposed is that non-Muslims should have the right to live according to their own traditions and desires just as Muslims have the right to live in a system governed by sharia laws within a democratic society.

A significant example of Khartoum's effort to accommodate the interests of Sudan's non-Muslim southerners was the 1991 exemption of the largely non-Muslim southern Sudan from *sharia* law. Even the Clinton Administration has had to admit that *sharia* law was not applied in the south. The American State Department's **Sudan Country Report on Human Rights Practices**, for example, has stated:

Sudan's 1991 Criminal Act, based on Shari'a law, (prescribes) specific "hudud" punishments. The Government officially exempts the 10 Southern States, whose population is mostly non-Muslim, from parts of the 1991 Criminal Act. But the Act permits the possible future application of Shari'a law in the south, *if the local state assemblies so decide*.⁷ (emphasis added)

It was the present Sudanese government, therefore, that exempted southern Sudan from the Islamic *sharia* law introduced by Washington's ally General Nimeiri, and kept in place by the democratically-elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi. The Commission on International Religious Freedom confirmed that southern Sudan was exempt from *sharia* law. The Commission also states that several Christian groups have received permission to build new churches and that the government permits non-Muslims to worship in existing places of worship. The Commission also documented that only one person was known to be imprisoned "on formal religious grounds".⁸ It has to be said that such behaviour does not quite fit in with the Commission's projections of Sudan as an extremist Islamic state, a country of "particular concern".

The liberal model of Islam in Sudan has also been remarked upon by respected commentators such as the veteran American journalist Milton Viorst, **New Yorker** columnist and author of **Sandcastles: The Arabs in Search of the Modern World**. Viorst has written that "Sudan is the only state in our age that has formally opted for Islam as its system of government". He has also compared the Sudanese model to others in the region:

By the standards of other Arab societies, Turabi's concept of Islam is open-minded and tolerant. Though he sees no reason to emulate Western liberalism, few would contradict his assertion that "we do not advocate a very strict form of Islam". The signs are plentiful, in a visit to Sudan, that the Islam practiced there is less strict than that of Egypt, to say nothing of Saudi Arabia. One scarcely sees the hijab, the head-covering that makes many women in Egypt appear so forbidding, much less the Saudi veil. Most Sudanese reflected Turabi's preference for a genial, non-rigorous Islam, more in keeping with Sudan's special experience within the flow of Islamic history.⁹

Viorst has also interviewed the Sudanese head of state Omer Bashir. President Bashir stated with regard to the Sudanese model of Islam that:

Not all groups agree on how we are interpreting the sharia, but we believe there is wide latitude. We have chosen a moderate way, like the Koran itself, and so the sharia in Sudan will be moderate. The dispute over what it requires lies not in the area of private but of public affairs. Unfortunately, there is no model in history for Islamic government. Fourteen centuries have gone

⁶ Colin Legum, 'Struggle Over Sharia', **New African**, March 1992, p.33.

⁷ **Sudan Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1995**, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, United States Department of State, Washington-DC, February 1996.

⁸ **U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Sudan**, Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, Washington-DC, 9 September 1999.

⁹ Milton Viorst, 'Sudan's Islamic Experiment: Fundamentalism in Power', **Foreign Affairs**, 1995, Volume 74, Number 3, pp. 46-47.

by since the prophet, and everyone now has his image of an Islamic state. Some countries confuse traditions - like the suppression of women - with religion, but tradition is not Islam.¹⁰

Professor Tim Niblock is one of the foremost British authorities on Islam and Sudan. He has pointed out two areas in which Sudan's model differs from mainstream Islamist thought. One is the Sudanese Islamists' "explicit acceptance of liberal democracy as the appropriate form of political organisation for Sudan. The advocacy of liberal democracy by the N.I.F. went well beyond the stress which Islamist movements customarily place on the need for shura (consultation)." Secondly, the Sudanese model with regard to women is "qualitatively different from that proposed in most Islamist programmes. The emphasis is on women 'escaping from social oppression' and 'playing a full part in building the new society', rather than on their primary duty lying within the family".¹¹ Even the **New York Times**, a source not noted for its affinity to Islamic models of government, said of Turabi in 1996: "He voices a tolerant version of political Islam - far less conservative than Saudi Arabia's, far less militant than Iran's".¹²

And there is no doubt that the Sudanese model is under attack for its moderate interpretation of Islam. In February, 1994, for example, extremist gunmen opened fire in the al-Thwarah mosque in Omdurman, Sudan. They killed nineteen people and wounded twenty others. **New African** magazine reported that the Muslim extremists involved "showed that they did not think that the government of General Omar Al-Bashir was sufficiently fundamentalist for them. One of the targets on their hit list was Dr Turabi."¹³ The London-based Arabic language newspaper **Al-Sharq al-Awsat** has stated with regard to the threat posed by Islamic extremists to the Khartoum authorities, that the government: "Now...senses that it is under threat from factions that can brook no deviation from their hard-line interpretations of religion, which are incompatible with the requirements and conditions of political activity in any Muslim state on earth. Khartoum has been describing them as 'religious fanatics'...certainly the slaughtering of Muslims in a mosque, as occurred in Sudan, is fanaticism. It is the same fanaticism whose effects we can witness in Egypt and Algeria, regardless of the causes". The newspaper concluded that "Sudan's government and people stand in the same trench as the other countries who live in fear of the extremist organisations".¹⁴

The Commission on International Religious Freedom's apparent concern about religious freedom and Islamic fundamentalism, while useful in attacking Sudan, did not of course extend to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia was not listed as a country of particular concern. This despite the fact that Saudi Arabia is the most fundamentalist country of all. As much has been placed on record in **Foreign Affairs**:

The greatest hypocrisy in the debate over political Islam is the fact that the Americans have fought a war and committed their military and diplomatic power to secure the survival of the most fundamentalist state of all - Saudi Arabia. The Saudi regime's own legitimacy is based on an alliance with the Wahhabi movement, and extremely conservative Sunni sect. The Saudi government is actually more rigid in its application of Islamic law and more repressive in many respects than the one in Tehran. Saudi Arabia has no form of popular representation, political rights are totally denied to women and non-Muslims, and the regime has consistently applied sharia to criminal justice. It has financed a variety of Islamic groups worldwide, including the Hamas...Saudi Arabia, like all the other Arab oil-exporting states of the Persian Gulf, is an absolute monarchy that does not recognize the concepts of civil rights or civil liberties.¹⁵

Not a single church is allowed to exist in Saudi Arabia. Tens of thousands of Christian workers in Saudi are denied any freedom of worship. There are thousands of hudud punishments annually, including executions and amputations, and hundreds of people are currently incarcerated on formal religious grounds. By way of comparison, Sudanese Christians occupy key posts throughout Sudanese political life. They include the Sudanese vice-president, cabinet members, ambassadors, legislators and civil servants. There are hundreds of churches all through Sudan, north and south, and as the Commission itself has stated Christians can worship freely in these churches.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 52-53.

¹¹ Professor Tim Niblock, 'Islamist Movements and Sudan's Political Coherence', in Herve Bleuchot, Christian Delmet and Derek Hopwood, (Editors), **Sudan: History, Identity, Ideologies**, Ithaca Press, Reading, 1991, p.265.

¹² **New York Times** Service, republished in **International Herald Tribune**, 26 December 1996.

¹³ **New African**, December, 1994, p.14.

¹⁴ **Al-Sharq al-Awsat**, London, 8 February 1994; See, also, a typical fundamentalist critique of Sudan's Islamic model, 'Sudan: When a State is Not an Islamic State?', Khilafah, at <http://www.Khilafah.org/graphics/pseudo/countries/issudan.html>

¹⁵ Leon T. Hadar, 'What Green Peril?', **Foreign Affairs**, Spring 1993, p.39.

Sudan may be far from perfect but it has not warranted the particular attention given to it by the United States Commission for International Religious Freedom. It is sadly clear that the Commission has allowed itself to be used for all too obvious propaganda purposes in its "focus" on Sudan. In so doing it has undermined its own credibility, as well as that of the United States Congress and government, with regard to the issue of religious freedoms.