

# **THE SUDAN**

Unity and Diversity in a Multicultural State

John Obert Voll and Sarah Potts Voll

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Volume 4

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# THE SUDAN

## Unity and Diversity in a Multicultural State

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John Obert Voll  
and  
Sarah Potts Voll

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*Profiles/Nations of the Contemporary Middle East*

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whose own collaboration  
made this collaborative effort possible





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## *Preface*

A general introduction to the Sudan must in some way present both the tremendous diversity within the country and its special character. This double task provided the theme for this book. The Sudan is a country whose special character is that it presents a sense of unity within great diversity. The unity discussed in this book is not a simple concept of harmony. It is, instead, those elements of both shared interests and conflicts that have gradually tied people together into the entity called the Sudan. It is a network of shared experiences and common actions that provide the basis for our Sudanese "identity in profile," a portrait that attempts to provide something more than a dry listing of the "basic" facts about the Sudan.

Because this book is designed primarily for the nonspecialist, we have not adopted a rigorous system of transliteration of words and terms from Arabic into English. We have, rather, tried to use the spellings that are most likely to be encountered by the reader in other information sources, especially newspapers and magazines.

In writing this work, we used a rather strict division of labor. The chapter on the economy is written by the economist, Sarah Potts Voll, and most of the rest has been written by the "generalist," John Obert Voll. We have, however, discussed themes and coverage to a sufficient degree that all sections are at least to some extent jointly written.

We express our appreciation to those who helped to make this collaborative effort possible: to the patient editors of the series and those at Westview Press, who were understanding about our delays; to our children, who helped in many ways; and to Sarah's parents, to whom the book is dedicated.

*John Obert Voll  
Sarah Potts Voll  
January 1985*

### **POSTSCRIPT**

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On 6 April 1985, General Abd al-Rahman Siwar al-Dhahab announced that the armed forces had taken control of the government of the Sudan, bringing to an end the government of Ja'far Numayri and the era of the May revolutionary regime. This significant event took place in the last stages of the publication of this book. As a result, it is not discussed in the text, but it was possible to add this postscript.

The assumption of power by General Siwar al-Dhahab was a climax to a month of rapidly building crisis. The conflict in the southern Sudan continued, with major gains by the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). There was growing dissatisfaction among professional northern Sudanese with Numayri's leadership. The economic problems continued to worsen with no solutions in sight. Late in March Numayri suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood, relieving known associates of the Brotherhood from all government posts and arresting the leadership of the organization. Numayri thus cut himself off from his last well-organized group of supporters, who now joined the opposition.

This growing opposition received a concrete focus when Numayri acceded to pressures from the United States and the International Monetary Fund to impose economic austerity measures. Important government subsidies were stopped and food prices rose sharply. In late March and early April, while Numayri was on a visit to the United States, large-scale riots and demonstrations took place in the Sudan. The Sudanese army faced the prospect of bloody and possibly fruitless confrontations

with the opponents of the regime. In order to avoid this, General Siwar al-Dhahab, who had been named commander in chief and minister of defense only a few days before Numayri's trip to the United States, led the army in taking control of the government, dismissing Numayri and most high-level government leaders, dissolving the Sudan Socialist Union, and announcing the return to civilian government within a few months.

At the time of this writing, within two weeks of the military takeover, it is too early to assess the long-term significance of this event. The leader of the SPLM, John Garang, said that the new government represented "Numayrism without Numayri." Others noted Siwar al-Dhahab's lack of political involvement in the past and thought that a return to multiparty civilian government was probable. However, everyone, participants and observers, recognized that the new government faces many major problems. Although there appeared to be a consensus that Numayri had failed to resolve the issues facing the Sudan, there was no such clear consensus over what path the new government should and could follow to find hitherto elusive answers.

It seems clear from the last days of the Numayri regime that some of the most critical of the issues facing the Sudan remain those involving unity and diversity in a multicultural society. Whatever poets and artists may have achieved, the political leaders of the Sudan have not yet come close to achieving the sense of unity necessary for the multicultural Sudanese society to operate without major strains and conflicts.

J.O.V.      S.P.V.  
*April 1985*





## The Sudan

Source: U.S. Department of State, *Background Notes*, November 1982.

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## *The Basic Profile: Unity in Diversity*

The Sudan is a vast and complex country. The largest in Africa, it is made up of geographically diverse regions and includes many different peoples. Its diversity is so great that it has been said that the various tribal and regional systems "have in common only nominal unity within a formal national government structure."<sup>1</sup> However, from a different perspective, another observer has spoken of the special Sudanese national identity utilizing "the immense resources of its ethnic and cultural diversities."<sup>2</sup>

Whether these diverse elements are resources for a unique Sudanese identity or are so different that such an identity does not exist, they are an important part of a profile of the modern Sudan. Such a profile must portray both the Sudan's diversity and its distinctive character. In the Sudan there are elements of cohesion, despite the many different peoples, cultures, and climates. It is, in fact, this "unity in diversity" that gives the Sudan its special character. The interaction of all of the elements of variety creates the special mood of the Sudan. At times this mood is characterized by conflict, at other times by reconciliation. The distinctive Sudanese context includes both competitive tensions and constructive alliances. The Sudanese identity emerges in modern times as a product of conflict and compromise. The process has not produced a synthesis of cultures and traditions in which all peoples in the Sudan have become or are becoming alike. Efforts to impose uniformity on the Sudanese peoples have created conflict rather than a common identity. Instead,

unity in the Sudan has been possible only when the variety of identities has in some way been preserved and guaranteed. The long-term evolution of a distinctive Sudanese mood and identity involves creating a special synthesis of the many different elements, integrating but not destroying unique characteristics of the various parts of the Sudanese whole.

Outsiders are frequently impressed by the mood of "friendly informality" that usually characterizes the Sudan. A common feeling of openness provides a contrast to more status- and class-conscious societies. Visitors often express surprise at seeing an important businessman or government official greet a hotel waiter warmly as a friend. The diversities within the Sudan make openness to compromise a necessity.

Striking a compromise also involves bargaining, another easily visible feature of the Sudanese context. The methods of the marketplace are reflected in a wide range of social structures. Outsiders also tend to note the common Sudanese habit of creating a diversity of opinion even when there seemed to be general agreement. Factions emerge in a remarkable variety of situations; indeed, one scholar has said that "the element of factionalism is symptomatic of Sudanese behavior."<sup>3</sup> He suggested that this characteristic might be the result of localized personal identifications, with most Sudanese individuals feeling most secure in small groups. Stated another way, part of the special Sudanese mood is that most Sudanese desire to maintain their own special identities, rather than being absorbed into very large-scale groupings.

In this context, the lines of tension may change with startling suddenness or take shapes that seem unpredictable. A leading conservative Islamic leader, long opposed to radical social reform, may become an ally of the Communist party; two leaders whose political rivalry seemed to be a pillar of politics will form a coalition; or a person condemned to death in absentia will negotiate a reconciliation with the government he swore to overthrow. Part of the Sudanese mood seems to be an unwillingness to let one element, group, or person attain a position of too great control or dominance. There seems to be a constant effort to create a balance that will preserve

diversity while maintaining some minimum of cohesion and unity.

This mood of compromise and balance does not mean, however, that there is little conflict. Another dimension of the Sudanese profile is a willingness to engage in open conflict to defend certain basic values. Europeans noted this characteristic of the Sudanese. Rudyard Kipling called the eastern Sudanese tribesman who broke the British military square in fighting in the 1880s a "first-class fightin' man."<sup>4</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century British administrators in the Sudan were warned of the "peculiar susceptibility of the people of this country to religious fanaticism."<sup>5</sup> A contemporary Sudanese novelist, Tayeb Salih, has portrayed this same quality more sympathetically in his short story "The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid."<sup>6</sup> In this story, Sudanese villagers are willing to oppose efforts of government officials with force, if necessary, to preserve a beloved tree next to a holy man's tomb.

The diverse elements in Sudanese life require special balancing abilities. The emergence of the modern Sudan as a distinctive unit and its continuing survival bear witness to the fact that the elements of balancing and compromise have had at least some success, despite major conflicts and bloody wars.

### **THE PHYSICAL CONTEXT**

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The physical geography of the Sudan exhibits characteristics both of unity and of diversity. Some factors lead to various forms of interregional cohesion. However, the most visible elements are those of diversity. The Sudan is a land of great geographical variety. It stretches roughly 1,300 miles (2,100 kilometers) from vast sand deserts in the north to tropical rain forests barely three degrees from the equator in the south. Its greatest east-west width is approximately 1,100 miles (1,750 kilometers). With an area of 966,757 square miles (2,503,890 square kilometers), the Sudan is the largest country in Africa.

The Sudan is located wholly in the Tropical Zone and has no area that experiences frequent temperatures below freezing. At one time both the highest and the lowest temperatures were recorded in the same part of the country, in the town of Wadi