

The First Islamist Republic

Development and Disintegration of Islamism in the Sudan

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Introduction

Earlier than most African countries, the Sudan gained its independence and came to terms with the reality of building a new state. Essential conditions for a promising state—economic, cultural, and political capital—were expected to one day induce reproductions of the experiences of state-building among the place and its people. Yet half a century after the country's independence from the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium rule in 1956, Sudanese attempts at developing a competent system of governance and a stable state—whether by design or by accident—have been a dismal failure. Over nearly the entire fifty-year period, the specialists of violence from both military and civilian ranks have competed with each other in the transfer of different forms of violence from one sphere to the other. This history may explain the genesis of the country's various power groups (particularly the Islamists), their competition for ascendancy, and each one's approach to state- and nation-building.

On 30 June 1989 a military coup led by an unknown brigadier named 'Umar Hasan Ahmad al-Bashir succeeded in toppling the democratically elected government of al-Sadiq al-Mahdi in the Sudan.¹ This coup marked the beginning of the first Islamist republic, which would last until 1999. Although al-Bashir emerged as the leader of the coup, another man, Hasan al-Turabi, the secretary general of *al-Jabha al-Islamiyah al-Qawmiyah* [the National Islamic Front (NIF)], was the primary architect of the first Islamist republic. As it happened, this division of labor was detrimental not only to the Sudan and its people, but to al-Turabi and the Islamist movement as well. This became evident with the collapse of the first Islamist republic in 1999, when al-Bashir and his collaborators removed al-Turabi from his positions of power and initiated the second Islamist republic. To understand the reign of the first Islamist republic and the significance of the transition to the second, and the impact that these developments have had on Sudanese life, we must begin with an examination of the coup that set things in motion.

1 Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi (1935–) Leader of the Umma Party and Imam of the Ansar. The great grandson of Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi who led a successful religiously inspired revolution from 1881 to 1885 against Turko-Egyptian rule in the Sudan. Al-Sadiq came into the political limelight in 1964, when he played a significant role in the broad public discussions that led to and accompanied the October 1964 popular uprising. Two years after the restoration of democracy in 1964, he became the leader of the Umma Party. At the age of 31, he became Sudan's youngest elected prime minister (1965–67). Al-Sadiq was the prime minister of the democratically elected government (1986–89) that was toppled by the al-Bashir coup in 1989. In 1995, al-Sadiq's Umma Party joined the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). In 2000, he left the NDA and returned to the Sudan. Al-Sadiq refused to participate in the government or any form of elections and insisted on a constitutional conference for the restoration of democracy in the country.

The Birth of the First Islamist Republic

On the Friday morning of 30 June 1989, the Sudanese radio kept repeating for hours that a communiqué by Brigadier ‘Umar Hasan would be announced soon. As it turned out, this was the agreed upon code among the organizers of the coup that the coup had succeeded. Before that time, al-Bashir was virtually unknown not only among the Sudanese population, but among the Islamists too. There was nothing extraordinary or exciting about him or his life. He was born in 1944 in the small village of Hoshe Bannaga, in the northern region about sixty miles northeast of Khartoum. He completed middle school in the nearby city of Shendi, before his family moved to Khartoum and enrolled him in Khartoum Secondary High. He supplemented his education and family income by working in an auto repair shop. Upon his graduation from secondary school he was admitted to the military academy where he earned his wings in the Airborne Forces. He holds two masters degrees in Military Science from the Sudanese College of Commanders and the Military Institute in Malaysia. In 1988 al-Bashir was put in command of the 8th Brigade of the Sudanese Army in southern Sudan, fighting the SPLM² insurgency led by John Garang in the Amom area.

It is believed that in 1989 he met with Ali ‘Uthman Muhammad Taha,³ who was then the deputy secretary general of the NIF and a schoolmate from his Khartoum Secondary High days, several times while he was in the south. The two spent the two

2 SPLM, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement, was founded by Dr. John Garang de Mabior (1945–2005) in July 1983. In its founding manifesto, the SPLM emphasized that its primary goal is the creation of a new Sudan united “under a socialist system that affords democracy and human rights to all nationalities and guarantees freedom to all religions, beliefs and outlooks.” After the collapse of the socialist regime in Ethiopia, the SPLM moved its headquarters to Kenya and reduced its socialist rhetoric. The SPLM is structured along the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) military line. John Garang, the supreme leader and his guerrilla movement had been fighting the central government of the Sudan from 1983 to 2005. On 9 January 2005, a peace agreement between the Islamist regime of Khartoum and John Garang was signed in Nivasha, Kenya. John Garang assumed the position of the First Vice-President. In late July 2005, Garang died after the Ugandan presidential helicopter taking him back to the Sudan crashed.

3 Ali Osman Muhammad Taha (1948–) Current vice-president of the republic. It has been understood that Taha was the “architect-in-chief” of planning and carrying out the June 1989 military coup. Ali Osman Muhammad Taha’s ascent to power started in the last NIF general conference in 1987 when he was elected as the deputy secretary general of the party. Before the palace coup against al-Turabi in 1999 he was always associated with his relationship with Hassan al-Turabi and described as his *un homme de confiance*. He has always been perceived, by most Sudanese observers, as a political bureaucrat hand picked and trained by Hassan al-Turabi. Meanwhile, Ali’s own low-key style, his child-like features and his apparent quiet demeanor allow many people to overlook his manipulative, opportunistic, ruthless character. Ali’s ascent to power has resulted from a combination of many factors: (a) the expanding numbers of the younger second generation of the Islamists (b) the frustration of these groups arising from the control of the older generation over leadership positions since 1964 (c) the younger generations disrespect for the democratic process and the impatience of some of these groups to find a shortcut to power through a military coup

weeks before the coup planning to seize the government while pretending to prepare al-Bashir for his upcoming studies at Nasser Military Academy in Cairo.⁴ Al-Bashir and the Islamists called their coup the National Salvation Revolution.

On the night of the coup, several hundred politicians, including leaders of political parties and ministers, as well as senior army officers, trade unionists, lawyers, journalists, and businessmen were detained, and all nonreligious organizations were dissolved. Newspapers were shut down, and only the state radio and TV stations and the weekly army newspaper al-Qwat al-Mussallaha were allowed to operate. Al-Turabi and two of his top party members—Ibrahim al-Sanoussi and Ahmad ‘Abd al-Rahman—were put in detention in Kober prison with other politicians.

The nature of the coup was not at first obvious for most Sudanese. Some thought it was a typical kind of coup, planned and led by nationalist army officers. Governments in some neighboring countries, especially Egypt, welcomed the coup. It took the politicians and trade unionists in Kober some time to make sure that the obscure coup was generated by the NIF even though three of its key leaders were detained with them. Later, it became clear that detaining the leadership of the Islamist movement was part of the plan, so as to camouflage the nature of the coup. It was reported that Muhammad Ibrahim Nugud, the secretary general of the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), who was known for his sense of humor, told al-Turabi, “*baraka Allah fi mn zarah wa khafa*” [“God blesses the visitor who stays the shortest and is not a burden”], implying that al-Turabi should go home and join his coconspirators. Other detained politicians refused to let him lead the group prayer. Of course, al-Turabi not only stayed in prison, but also continued to say that his Islamist party would support this regime if it showed positive signs and would open a path for Islam, but that he would oppose it if it closed that path, regardless of its position on democracy.⁵

Within a few months of the coup, however, it became clear that the Islamists were involved in all stages of the coup, from planning and logistics, to the formation of a civilian and military task force, or a group of coup-makers, who worked together before and during the night of the takeover. At Kober prison, al-Turabi “was not mistreated unlike his brother-in-law Sadiq al-Mahdi who was subjected to a mock execution”,⁶ which was received with outrage and anger among the political detainees and was considered as one proof among many that the Islamists were behind the coup. Another proof, thought the politicians in Kober, was that al-Turabi “was allowed to meet freely with high-ranking NIF officials, including Ali Osman Taha and Ali al-Haj Muhammad. The courtesy shown Turabi produced rumors and aroused speculations among the urban Sudanese of Khartoum and Omdurman that

(d) his organizational skills and his tight control over the Islamists’ secret organization (al-nizam al-sirri) since 1972.

4 J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Revolutionary Sudan: Hasan al-Turabi and the Islamist State, 1989–2000* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2003), 3.

5 Fathi al-Daw, *Al-Sudan wa Siqot al-Agniaa: Sanwat al-Khiyba wa al-Amal [Sudan and the Drop of Masks: Years of Despair and Hope]* (Cairo: Sweeter Press, 2006), 87.

6 Burr and Collins, *Revolutionary Sudan*, 10.

Bashir must be Brother or sympathizer to NIF.”⁷ As the new regime’s performance started to raise broader questions about its political orientation, some members of al-Turabi’s party, especially those in the RCC tried to deny any relationship with the NIF. But certain aspects of the regime’s behavior had yet to direct systematic attention on the coup and the regime’s relationship to the Islamists. By November 1989 things became clearer as some of the younger Islamists began to appear at the forefront and as the regime started to take drastic measures against those who were suspected of preparing to move against the regime. Day by day the regime began to take preemptive measures against the rise of an organized opposition in a direct and oppressive fashion. One of the shocking actions taken by the regime in November 1989 was the execution of Majdi Mahjoub Muhammad Ahmad, Gregis al-Qus and Arkinglo Ajado who were accused of nothing more heinous than dealing in foreign currency. One month later, Dr. Mamoun Hussein, head of the Doctors Association and a prominent unionist, was sentenced to death for leading a physicians strike. These executions were to be understood as political acts of intimidation and an introduction to the new regime’s reign of terror.

Before the end of 1989, the government renewed war efforts in the south and started to build a Popular Defense Force (PDF) according to the Popular Defense Act, which legitimized tribal militia forces and the forcible conscription of male citizens eighteen years of age and older. Simultaneously, the reign of terror escalated with the ongoing arrests of suspected political and trade union activists, who were subjected to torture at unofficial detention centers, known as ghost houses, either to intimidate or to obtain information from them. This reign of terror continued to shadow the first Islamist republic over its lifetime from 1989 until 1999.

On the other hand, the instantaneous convergence of the opposition to the new regime took shape when the detained politicians and trade unionists established the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) as an umbrella organization to coordinate the efforts of all the political entities that oppose the regime and seek a democratic alternative. The NDA is composed of thirteen parties, fifty-six unions and federations, armed factions, including the SPLA, and other groupings and national personalities. Muhammad ‘Uthman al-Mirghani, chairman of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the spiritual guide of the Khatmiyyah *tariqa*, was one of the founding members of the NDA and has been its chairman ever since.

In light of these developments, it is striking that it took al-Turabi ten years to fully admit that he and his party had planned and engineered every single aspect of the coup. After he was stripped of power in 1999, he divulged that he had actually instructed ‘Umar al-Bashir to go to the palace while he went to prison. The experience of the first Islamist republic has traumatized many inside and outside the Islamist movement, not least al-Turabi himself. But this trauma has been reflecting itself in the exhaustion that impaired the political ideas of the leadership of the movement and its cultural and political intelligentsia who continue to reflect and brood on themes of despair.

7 Ibid.

Revolution in the Sudan

In the closing years of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, religiously inspired movements succeeded in assuming power in the Sudan. The first was a rebellion from 1881 until 1885 started by Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Abdullah, who proclaimed himself the *Mahdi* and declared *jihad* against Turko-Egyptian rule in the Sudan. He emerged victorious by defeating the British ruler of the Sudan, Major-General Charles Gordon (1833–85), in the battle of Khartoum. The Mahdiyya, or the Mahdist state, ruled the country until 1898 when the British invaded and retook control of the Sudan, establishing what they called the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. A century later, another *Mahdi*, this time armed with a PhD from the Sorbonne, planned a military takeover with the aim of establishing an Islamist republic.

Hasan ‘Abd Allah al-Turabi was born in the eastern Sudanese city of Kassala in 1932. His family belonged to a famous religious sect and his father was a religious judge. Young al-Turabi had an ordinary Sudanese public education. Later, he studied at Western schools in the United Kingdom and France. Al-Turabi started his political career as one of the Sudanese elite with Islamist activist tendencies. His star began to rise when he actively participated in the October Revolution against the military government of Ibrahim ‘Abbud (1958–64). As Professor El-Tag Fadh Allah, president of the Sudanese International University has rightly noted, al-Turabi’s status as a university professor and the dean of the faculty of law in addition to his family background endowed him with a cultural and social capital that facilitated his path to the fields of power within his Islamist group and Sudanese society at large.⁸

The academic community and most Sudanese would agree that the events of 1885 qualify as a revolution. However, there are very few in the Sudan today, even among the Islamists themselves, who would describe what happened in 1989 as a revolution. William Rose and Eliza Van Dusten published a thoughtful work titled “Sudan’s Islamic Revolutions as a Cause of Foreign Intervention in its Wars: Insights from Balance of Threat Theory”, in which they examined Samuel Huntington and Stephen Walt’s different theories on revolution in relation to these two events in the Sudan. They argue that, the “two prominent theorists have discussed Sudan in its relations with other countries, but only briefly and without serious case study analysis.”⁹ In his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, Huntington implies that the Sudanese Islamist regime is a revolution that might instigate “serious interstate conflict when Sudan seeks to export an Islamic revolution to a non-Islamic or partially Islamic country (like Ethiopia) or, to a lesser extent, when it tries to export its particular version of Islam to other Islamic countries (like Egypt).”¹⁰ In contrast, Stephen Walt, who disagrees totally with Huntington’s clash of civilizations theory and describes it

8 El-Tag Fadh Allah, interview by author, audio recording, Khartoum, Sudan, 30 December 2005.

9 William Rose and Eliza Van Dusten, “Sudan’s Islamic Revolutions as a Cause of Foreign Intervention in its Wars: Insights from Balance of Threat Theory,” *Civil Wars Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2002): 1–64.

10 Ibid.

as “an unreliable guide to the emerging world order and a potentially dangerous blueprint for policy”,¹¹ argues in his book, *Revolution and War*, that “the Sudan is the only other regime [besides Iran] that openly espouses fundamental principles.”¹²

Two important issues arise here. First, Rose and Van Dusten admit that, despite the disagreement of some experts, “More than a simple coup and a military dictatorship were involved in redefining Sudan’s domestic and foreign policy.” Based on their analysis, they assert that, “Sudan’s politics in this period were at least ‘revolution-like’.”¹³ Second, both Huntington and Walt describe Iran and the Sudan as Islamist regimes. This is not an accurate characterization, as will be shown, because the term Islamist usually describes a movement initiated by an educated urban elite connected to public and sometimes Western education. Such a background has led to contrasting approaches to some doctrinal and political orientations between the champions, theorists, and leaders of Islamist movements on the one hand, and the movement of Shi‘ite political Islam that has been initiated by the *Mulahs* or the clergy on the other. While the clergy represent a small faction within all Sunni Islamist movements, we observe the reverse phenomenon among the Shi‘ite movements, where an urban, public school educated elite represents only a small group on the fringes. Thus, while the former is based on the university, the latter is based on the *hawzeh*. Another crucial factor that explains the difference between the two is that while the Sunni Islamist movements’ organizational structure rests on a shared political framework, they do not follow a centralized hierarchy as the Shi‘ites do. Considered in this light, the Islamist State in the Sudan is the first of its kind in the Muslim world.

The period from 1989 until 1999, which Rose and Van Dusten describe as a revolutionary or revolution-like period, witnessed the emergence of a dictatorial polity and totalitarian project that used oppressive means to establish one Islamist model under all conditions. The first Islamist republic displayed patterns of governance so distinctive that its benefactors describe it as an ideology firmly related to al-Turabi’s Islamist ideas and theories of the state. Of course, it is important to make clear the distinction between Islamism as an ideology and Islam as a religious faith. With this in mind, we must first answer the question “Who are the Islamists?”

About the Islamists

There is no single universally accepted label for all the current organized Muslim political groups. It is important to distinguish between what could be attributed to the broad Islamic belief and the current Islamist political movements. The term *al-Islamiyyun* [Islamist], which is widely used to denote a “determined choice of an

11 Stephen M. Walt, “Building Up New Bogeymen,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 106 (1997): 177–89.

12 Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 246.

13 William Rose and Eliza Van Dusten, “Sudan’s Islamic Revolutions as a Cause of Foreign Intervention in its Wars,” 55.

Islamic doctrine, rather than the simple fact of being born Muslim,”¹⁴ is applied to describe current groups and manifestations of Islamic movements, those described as fundamentalists and neofundamentalists. Nikki Keddie argues that the term Islamist “is probably the most accurate, distinguishing belief (‘Islamic’) from movements to increase Islam’s role in society and politics, usually with the goal of an Islamic state.”¹⁵

In the Arab and Muslim Worlds, as well as in the West, some scholars prefer the term ‘political Islam’ because, as Joel Beinin and Joe Stork argue, they “regard the core concern of these movements as temporal and political.”¹⁶ They further explain that these movements use—in a selective manner—the *Quran*, the *Hadith*, and other canonical religious texts to justify their stances and actions. Moreover, they maintain, “today’s Islamic thinkers and activists are creatively deploying selected elements of the Islamic tradition, combined with ideas, techniques, institutions, and commodities of the present and recent past, to cope with specifically modern predicaments.”¹⁷ Another scholar, Bobby S. Sayyid, rightly rejects the term “fundamentalism” because it can only “operate as a general category if it situates itself within the discourse of the liberal-secularist enlightenment project and considers this project to be the natural state of affairs.” Sayyid argues that connecting the term “fundamentalism” with any projects that “assert a Muslim subjectivity... [is] superficial or secondary and prevent[s] the pursuit of other more fruitful lines of enquiry.”¹⁸

Meanwhile, Olivier Roy systematically classifies Islamist groups according to their instance to power. First, neo-fundamentalists (generally the reformists) are those who desire to see the establishment of an Islamic order in terms of its privatization—“Islamization from the bottom up”. For these reformists, social and political action aims primarily at re-Islamizing society through political education and mobilization from the lowest level up, “bringing about, *ipso facto*, the advent of an Islamic state”. The fundamentalists, on the other hand, seek the capture of the state. More revolutionary than reformist, fundamentalists expect the Islamization of society to occur through state power, and so the establishment of an Islamic order necessitates intervention in public affairs—“Islamization from the top down.”¹⁹ This revolutionary pole, however, is far from homogeneous; Fundamentalists are differentiated by the way their thought and actions are territory-bound (local *jihadists*) or global in scale (global *jihadists*). At the outset, however, important common characteristics in the landscape of the groups need to be identified.

First, scholars agree that the Islamists have been advocating a political ideology based on Islam, asserting the primacy of Islam, and calling for an Islamic order.

14 Quoted in Fred Hillday, “Is Islam in Danger: Authority, Rushdie and the Struggle for the Migrant Soul,” in Jochen Hippler and Andrea Lueg (eds), *The Next Threat: Western Perceptions of Islam* (London: Pluto Press with Transnational Institute, 1995), 71–81.

15 *Ibid.*

16 Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (eds), *Political Islam: Essays from Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c.1997), 4.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Bobby S. Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997), 7–26.

19 See Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, for an elaboration of this idea.

Second, as mentioned above, new and old breeds of Islamists share a background of public and sometimes Western education, a characteristic that makes al-Turabi claim that the Islamists are the “only modernity.”²⁰ When seen through the Islamists’ spectacles, modernity is a self-image as well as a political current that appeals to a “superior” form of Islam. Accordingly, the Islamists resent the *ulam*, or the learned scholars who have always been considered as “the official expounders of religious orthodoxy,”²¹ while at the same time they ridicule Sufism and its leaders as the custodians of an “inner or esoteric dimension of Islam.”²² As Roy observes, “they live with the values of the city—consumerism and upward social mobility.”²³ Third, as Bassam Tibi discerns, most Islamist ideologues, politicians, and writers “seem to overlook the distinction between two different traditions of knowledge in Islam: Islamic religious sciences and rational sciences (philosophy and natural sciences).”²⁴ Finally, as Mark Juergensmeyer observes, the Islamists “are concerned not so much about the political structure of the nation-state as they are about the political ideology undergirding it.”²⁵

Insights developed from the Sudanese Islamists’ model of the state and the entire Islamist discourse all illustrate the validity of such an observation. Al-Turabi’s writings and speeches about the state before and after 1989 clearly show a marked change of perspective. In 1983, al-Turabi wrote that “[t]he ideological foundation of an Islamic state lies in the doctrine of *tawhid*—the unity of God and human life—as a comprehensive and exclusive program of worship.”²⁶ He maintained that the “Islamic state” is not secular, not nationalistic, and not an absolute or sovereign entity. He claimed that the “Islamic state” is not a *primordia* because the primary institution in Islam is the *umma*.²⁷ But, after this charade of what the Islamic state is not, al-Turabi failed to indicate what the Islamic state is. During the period of his collaboration with Ja‘far Nimairi’s dictatorship from 1977 until 1985, al-Turabi used to put “greater emphasis on converting society than on gaining political position.”²⁸

20 Hasan al-Turabi, *Islam as a Pan-National Movement and Nation-States: An Islamic Doctrine of Human Association* (London, UK: The Sudan Foundation, 1992).

21 Larabi Sadiki, *The Search for Arab Democracy: Discourses and Counter-Discourses* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 74.

22 Seyyed Hossian Nasr, “The Interior Life in Islam”, *Al-Serat: A Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. III, Nos. 2 and 3.

23 Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 23–6.

24 Bassam Tibi, “The Worldview of Sunni Arab Fundamentalists: Attitudes toward Modern Science and Technology,” in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds), *Fundamentalisms and Society: Reclaiming the Sciences, the Family, and Education* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 73–102.

25 Juergensmeyer, Mark, *The New Cold War: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 6.

26 Hasan al-Turabi, “The Islamic state,” in John L. Esposito (ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 241.

27 *Ibid.*

28 John Esposito and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 92.

In 1982, he told an interviewer that the “state is only an expression of an Islamic society” and that it “is based on consultation or *shura*, that means a democratic society where everybody should participate.”²⁹

Al-Turabi, however, uses the term “fundamentalist” to connote or denote the Arabic term *usuli* (one who follows the basic tenets of Islam as reflected in the *Quran* and the *Hadith*) so often, that the term “fundamentalism” has been thrown at him by his enemies, who use it to label him as a fanatical, anti-modern, right-wing reactionary. One would agree partly with François Burgat that such labels “are clearly not much different from the *a priori* reductionism of certain Orientalists.”³⁰ By contrast, the uncompromising stand of Islamists against all varieties of non-Islamists—from secular to *ulam* to Sufi—makes no room for the Other, who is perceived by al-Turabi and the Islamists to constitute the biggest threat to a Muslim society. The primary goal of the Islamists is to keep secularists at a distance, expelled if possible, or to eliminate them altogether. These mutual hostilities have opened the way for a remorseless and never-ending war of attrition between the Islamists and their opponents in which each side perceives the other as ephemeral. In retrospect, for the past five decades we have seen both sides living in a “state of suspended extinction,” as each has been turned by the other into an object to be eliminated through the coercion of the state apparatus or private violence. As a result, both state and private violence have grown stronger over time, especially during the Cold War, when the governing elite and their rivals continued to fortify their power by taking advantage of the rivalries and competition between the superpowers.

Since the emergence under Hasan al-Banna (1905–49) in 1928 of the *Jamiat al-ikhwan al-muslimin* [the Society of the Muslim Brothers], the Islamist movement has undergone remarkable changes. Among the most consequential has been the evolution of local ideological groups. The Sudanese Islamists are a perfect example, because their model and experience represent a paradigm shift, in so far as al-Turabi and his colleagues and disciples recreated the political space and the ideological conventions of their version of Islamism, molded it, made it their own, put it into practice, and lived its failure. Since the 1940s, the Sudanese Islamists under various names have demonstrated an ability to act within different systems of governance, including multiparty, militaristic, and dictatorial regimes, always seeking the shortest path to power. Hasan al-Turabi’s intellectual and political leadership of the movement spanned a period of more than forty years. Beginning in 1964, he led the movement into a series of transformations, alliances, and collaborations over the years, beginning with the Muslim Brotherhood (1964) and continuing with the Islamic Charter Front (1964–69), the National Islamic Front (1985–89), the National Congress (1998–present), and the Popular Congress (2000–present). For simplicity’s sake, this study will use the term Islamist movement to refer to all of these groups.

29 Ibid.

30 François Burgat, *Face to Face with Political Islam* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 51.

The Islamist State in the Sudan

From the early days of the Islamist state in the Sudan in 1989, its champions and sympathizers saw themselves and their regime as marking a momentous break with the past in the Sudan, in the Muslim world, and in the world at large. The Sudanese Islamists' self-image, which is the essential element of their theoretical and ideological discourse, names them as an inestimable and special entity with a predestined covenant with the future of the Sudan and the entire human race. As Ghazi Salah al-Din al-'Atabani, a former disciple of al-Turabi, once claimed, "we have a constructive model and no one denies it, even our enemies don't deny that we are trying to build a model. Their quarrel with us is they don't like the model."³¹

This self-image and the main themes of the Islamists' ideology were captured in the National Charter for Political Action written in 1987 (see appendix). The Islamists' thesis, as stated in the Charter, was a prelude to and preparation for what would follow: the Islamist alternative. According to the Charter, the movement's "intellectual, spiritual and cultural values [spring] from our subservience to one God and our belief that He is the sole authority in this world and the world after." As the Charter elaborates, these values are "the only guarantee for a righteous society." With this in mind, the Charter outlines an Islamic code of moral behavior in Sudanese public life. Furthermore, *jihad* against internal and external enemies of the "the state, its religious and Islamic affiliation" is endorsed as a religious obligation to defend this "righteous society."

The significant feature of the Charter is not that it promotes a platform for a political party competing for votes, but that it introduces a blueprint for a comprehensive program entailing radical change, and hence it foresees not only an alternative regime, but an alternative society. The fundamental precondition for the existence of both the regime and the "righteous society" it imagines is internal and external (global) *jihad*. When seen through the lens of the events that occurred before and after the coup, the Islamists' ideological discourse—as stated in the Charter—represented the main source of the Islamists' norms and practices after the coup.

The Charter, al-Turabi's ideology, and the overall Islamist discourse reflect two essentially corresponding, though potentially contradictory, predispositions. The first predisposition forms the underlying argument of the entire ideology, the source of its inspiration, and its governing doctrine, which is deeply imbedded in Abu'l-A'la al-Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb's concept of *hakimiyah* [God's sovereignty] as the only legitimate polity. Furthermore, Al-Turabi's notion of *tawhid* and its ensuing articulations are deeply rooted in Qutb's argument that "all creation issuing as it does from one absolute, universal, and active Will forms an all-embracing unity in which each individual part is in harmonious order with the remainder ... Thus, then, all creation is a unity comprising different parts; it has a common origin, a common providence and purpose, because it was deliberately produced by a single,

31 Anthony Shadid, *Legacy of the Prophet: Despots, Democrats and the New Politics of Islam* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2002), 154.

absolute, and comprehensive Will.”³² On a certain level, this view is what Qutb drew from Mawdudi’s concepts of *hakimiyah*, *ubudiyah* [servitude], and *jahiliyah* [ignorance] in order to analyze the human condition of his day. However, nobody more than Qutb within the ranks of the Islamists—including Mawdudi himself—has applied these concepts to an all-encompassing vision about a humanity alienated by subjecting itself to *ubudiyah* as servitude to man and his mundane systems rather than *ubudiyah* as servitude to God. He argued persistently that through *hakimiyah* humans are driven into *jahiliyah* regardless of their material advancement. Qutb thought that *hakimiyah* needs to be established through *jihad*, which he defines as “a universal declaration of the freedom of man on the earth from every authority except that of God”. In his view, the “declaration that sovereignty is God’s alone and that He is the Lord of the universe, is not merely a theoretical, philosophical and passive proclamation.”³³ Thus he concludes that, “establishing of the dominion of God on earth, the abolishing of the dominion of man ... cannot be achieved only through preaching.”³⁴ But conceptions and interpretations of Islamic doctrines and Qutb’s views “as an envelope for a host of fundamental and endlessly proliferating meaning systems”³⁵ is not restricted to one single reference.

Al-Turabi and his disciples dressed both Qutb and Islam in their own ideological straitjacket. After the coup, the Islamists called their venture *al-Mashru‘ al-Hadari* [the Civilizational Project]. In this view, the Islamists’ burden—like the White Man’s burden—is to redeem “Your new-caught sullen peoples, / Half devil and half child.” At the heart of this project lies what the Islamists called *al-da‘wa al-shamila* [the comprehensive call]. Through the prism of this policy, the Islamist state perceived the Sudanese not as worthy citizens with civil and human rights, but as mirror images of individuals and groups owned by the state who must be brought into the civilizational project kicking and screaming in order to construct the “righteous society.” Consequently, the Islamists forged an elaborate apparatus of coercion, religious indoctrination and conversion, political mobilization, and various forms of local *jihad* carried out by the paramilitary PDF in order to transform the Sudan into a model of an Islamist state. This was the essence of the first Islamist republic.

Ironically, the main constraint to the convergence of the official, the public, and the private spheres emerged from Islam itself, which the Islamists had meant to be an empowering force for the Sudanese regime and their political system. In this regard, Islam proved to be a constraining element for the Islamists and their state project. The Islamists’ discourse, the method by which they shaped their scheme of action, and their regime’s mode and sphere of operations have thrown the project into a seemingly endless progression of crisis. Here, the Sudanese experience provides an interesting example of the difference between the dynamics operating on the level of the political party and those operating on the level of the state’s ideology and

32 Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam*, trans. by John B. Hardie (New York: Octagon Books, 1970), 39.

33 *Ibid.*, 49.

34 *Ibid.*, 66.

35 Daniele Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 34.

discourse. On the level of the political party, before the 1989 military coup and during the tenure of the multiparty system from 1985–89, NIF made itself known through a combination of religio-political discourse and mobilization techniques. The political process in the country was governed, for the most part, by accepted democratic rules that gave each political player similar access to the Sudanese political marketplace. The 1989 military coup suspended these rules and imposed its own set of rules in the name of creating an Islamist polity. The state's ideology and discourse fused Islamism and totalitarianism. The Islamists wasted no time in unleashing a reign of terror in which the state arrogated to itself ultimate power over all aspects of human life.

The second predisposition was to develop a uniform bureaucracy that could help control and monopolize the political, religious, economic, and social markets, thereby forcing the country's existing state bureaucracy to serve the Islamists' ideological and political agenda. Hence, the course and the order of the presentation and practice of the Islamists' polity ushered in after they assumed power in 1989 marked the transformation of the party into a device of domination. In an interview published in the Sudanese *Al-ra'y al-'Am* daily, a leading Islamist intellectual, Hasan Makki, explained how the process pursued by the Islamists after the 1989 coup "turned out to be an authoritarian project aiming to consolidate the power of the Leader or the Guide." He said that "the organizational structure of the [party] took a one-way direction for the control of information and a similar way for the direction of the decision making process to the extent that the party's image became similar to other totalitarian parties."³⁶ This step is significant because it explains al-Turabi's project for a total transformation of the party, the state, and the society to fit into the straitjacket of his totalitarian design.

Organization

The opening chapter provides an examination of the socio-historical background of the formation and development of the modern Sudanese power elite within the last century through the interplay and succession of different events, actions, and reactions that have transformed the Sudan's entire social, political, and cultural development. Chapter 2 explores the earliest emergence of the Islamist movement in the Sudan and its self-perception as a unique movement, separate and different from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. An examination of the influence of the British Imperial system as a distinctive model is explored, and the importance of the Islamists as a civilian political party which backed the military coup of 1989 is discussed. Chapter 3 discusses how new political players emerged in the changing political landscape of the late 1960s and provides a short biographical sketch of three major players. Chapter 4 describes how the development of underground political and economic markets, as well as the introduction of Islamic banking, paved the way

³⁶ Hasan Makki, *Al-ra'y al-'Am* daily, 5 May 2000. See also Dr. Hassan Mekki: "The Dilemma of the Islamists Movement in the cast aside of the Elite", an interview by Dr. Isam Mahgoub El-Mahi, *Al-ra'y al-'Am* daily, Khartoum, 17 May 2000.

for the Islamists to emerge as an invisible corporate entity. In Chapter 5 the historical background, political speeches and writings of al-Turabi and the transformation of the ideology into a total order are examined in relation to totalitarianism as a theory. Chapter 6 addresses *al-da'wa al-shamila* and its connection to local and global *jihad*. Chapter 7 looks at the difficulties al-Bashir faced upon removing al-Turabi from power. Finally, Chapter 8 investigates the transition from the end of the first Islamist republic into the second.

The primary focus of this book is on the Islamist movement in the Sudan within its ongoing engagements and encounters with its local, regional, and global fields of action and interaction. Like any other political movement, in the Sudan or elsewhere, it would be difficult to divorce the Islamist from its intricate pattern of cultural, political, and social relationships. In this regard, this book is intended to explain the Islamist movement as one aspect of a complex Sudanese existential socio-political experience.