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# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the role played by Sudanese universities in the country's social and political transformation, past and present. Students and faculty there have historically served as vital voices for political change and community and international engagement, but recent educational policies have severely limited their voices. This report describes these recent policies and their effects and makes recommendations for changes aimed at recovering and expanding the traditional productive role of higher education in Sudan.

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## EDUCATION AND CONFLICT

*Linda S. Bishai*

# Sudanese Universities as Sites of Social Transformation

**The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.**

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## Summary

- Education is an important resource for any country, but it is especially valuable in spreading the values that transform a wartime society into one with a culture of peace.
- Some of the structural inequities besetting the educational system in Sudan today stem from the colonial period and policies set during the early days of independence.
- Efforts to unify the country through an Arabic national curriculum caused resentment and alienation in the non-Arab communities and exacerbated civil conflicts.
- Sudanese universities have historically been the incubators of political change in Sudan, and student unions in particular have retained a tradition of vibrant—and sometimes violent—political activity.
- The education revolution implemented by the current regime in the 1990s overextended Sudanese universities, resulting in an extreme teacher deficit and the degradation of university resources and degrees.
- Various additional policies had the effect of intimidating university students and teachers, changing the atmosphere on campuses and leading to a nonreflective focus on exam results and to little intellectual exchange.
- In the interim period between the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the general election, a new openness allowed universities to begin to revive their historical intellectual traditions. This openness will be vital for securing peace with the South and for eventually reconciling Darfur and the East.
- A productive model has been illustrated by efforts to engage Sudanese universities with their local communities as sites for the development and sharing of public information, culture, and the acceptance of difference.

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***There are now efforts to resurrect the traditional role of the university in the wake of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which ended the long civil war between the central government and Southern Sudan.***

- The international community should advocate creative collaboration, research, and teaching exchanges both to and from Sudan, encourage international conferences involving Sudanese students and faculty, and pay active attention to restoring Sudanese libraries and research facilities.
- Sudanese education officials, university faculty, and civil-society organizations should work together to counter four key educational problems: the lack of exposure to critical thinking and research skills; the lack of vibrant extracurricular life; the alienation of universities from their local communities; and the recurring pattern of violent student activism.

## Introduction

Education is an obviously valuable resource for any nation, but it is particularly so for developing countries and those hoping to escape the cycle of violence and despotism that plagues much of Africa. In the case of Sudan, the history of its educational system mirrors the story of the country's painful transition to independence, its violent attempts to forge a common national identity, and its decades of war and military rule. Sadly, this history is also a story of missed opportunity, inequitable policies, and a self-reinforcing tendency to manipulate higher education as a proxy for a real political process. This report briefly describes the history of Sudanese higher education and the policies of the current regime in the context of the role universities have traditionally served in Sudan as proving grounds for political dissent. There are now efforts to resurrect the traditional role of the university in the wake of the CPA, which ended the long civil war between the central government and Southern Sudan. This complex agreement opened a delicate and critical window of opportunity for Sudan to emerge as a strong, viable, and peaceful democracy.

## Background: Education, Identity, and the Legacy of Colonialism

Sudan's educational disparities today reflect the distinct policies pursued by British governors during the period of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium (1899–1955). The North and the South of the country were administered separately, with the curriculum of the North taking place in Arabic and reflecting its Islamic heritage. Schools in the South were administered entirely by missionaries and thus reflected an English-language course of study. British colonial administrators appeared to believe that the people of the South—isolated from the city of Khartoum by a seemingly impenetrable marshy portion of the Nile called the Sudd—were so backward that education was not worth the investment and would only do irreparable damage to traditional social structures. Access even to the missionary schools was uneven and short, leaving the non-Muslim Southern population marginalized from the Northern Sudanese not only by their differing creeds but also by their lack of trained and educated local administrators who could represent Southern interests in the capital. When Sudan gained its independence in 1956, there was not a single university in the entire South. Even today, due to war and displacement, the literacy rates for Southerners are extremely low, with fewer than half of all school-age children attending school and the great majority of those children attending for just a couple of years.

The British presence in the North of the country was markedly different. The city of Khartoum had an educated and wealthy elite. Already privileged by living in the country's political and economic center, these elites were educated and integrated into the civil service. Gordon Memorial College—which would later become the University of Khartoum—was founded in 1902 to help train Northern elites. The students of Gordon College were drawn primarily from a handful of powerful, mainly Muslim, riverain tribal groups and were meant to replace expensive expatriate administrators. Ironically, this

apparently sensible policy sowed the seeds of Sudanese nationalism as graduates of Gordon College mastered the modern system and visualized themselves as natural leaders to advance Sudan's national cause. Furthermore, it was the training of these elites that gave them—so unlike their compatriots who did not have access to resources and education—a sense of Sudanese, as opposed to tribal, identity. However, these graduates who wanted to be identified as Sudanese had a conception of Sudan that reflected their own Arabized and Islamicized culture. As the powerful ruling class of the nation, their conception of the nation's identity became the dominant cultural narrative. Even as Sudan's first modern university set the stage for a future model of political resistance, it was also setting the stage for an attempt to unify the new nation that would ultimately plunge it into a long civil war.

Well before independence in 1956, there were thoughts about integrating the school curricula of the North and South in preparation for unity. A conference in 1947 recommended using Arabic in schools throughout the South, replacing English and native languages, and in 1954 such a law was finally decreed. By 1957, the new Ministry of Education abolished missionary schools, taking direct control of existing ones. Although it might have made sense to create a common language, these decisions were made in a political context in which the South was excluded and vastly underrepresented in the capital city. In 1958, the new democratically elected government was ousted in a military coup and the military regime began an aggressive effort to Islamize the South. Southern soldiers in the Sudanese army rebelled and the long civil war began. Despite the program of Arabic instruction in primary and secondary schools, English-language instruction and research prevailed nationwide at the university level.

## The New South

Civil war raged in Sudan until 1972 when the Addis Ababa Agreement gave the South a certain degree of autonomy and relative calm. However, in 1983, President Jafaar Numeiri declared the nationwide application of sharia law and also revived efforts to impose the Arabic-language and Islamic-themed curriculum on the South. Once again, the South protested in violent rebellion. This time the fighting would last more than twenty years, until 2005, when Southern leader John Garang signed the CPA with current president Omar el Beshir. This agreement not only gave the South a degree of autonomy but also integrated it officially, for the first time, into the Northern political spectrum through a power-sharing arrangement. In addition, according to the agreement, the South will be given the right to vote for independence from the North in 2011. To bring some meaning to this promise, the Southern states were allowed to form a federated government with a presidency and ministries dealing with education, roads, legal issues, and the long-overdue development of the region.

In Khartoum, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)—the dominant Southern party and force behind the CPA—formed the Government of National Unity with the National Congress Party (NCP) of President Beshir according to the power-sharing terms of the agreement. However, this partnership of former enemies has been problematic from the beginning. Southerners arrived in Khartoum to take up their cabinet offices without any prior experience in national government and with little corresponding support in the entrenched civil service. Although the SPLM has appointed its share of cabinet ministers—including the Minister of Higher Education—the ruling party's extensive network of power, wealth, and influence remains in place, making changes of policy all but impossible. Education policy continues to be an issue because the existing teachers, textbooks, and curriculum have been based on the Arabic-Islamic curriculum.

The new regional government of the South recognizes the imperative for educating its war-torn and deprived population as quickly as possible, but it has also become very important for Southern leaders to change the language and the emphases of the curricu-

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lum to English (the language of the old missionary schools and the development lingua franca) and to include references to traditional Southern culture, rather than Islamic teachings. This process is, in effect, an important part of re-valoring Southern identity and has significant symbolic value. Developing a new curriculum for the South has been official policy from early on in the new post-agreement political landscape, but developing this curriculum, and finding trained teachers in the South who can teach it in English has been a major challenge.

Another critical issue for education in the South is the status of its higher-education institutions. All three of its universities were closed during the civil war and its flagship school—the University of Juba—was moved to Khartoum, where after twenty years it has more than doubled in size and become a nationally significant institution. In 2007, the University of Juba began to move two colleges and a few hundred students to its old Juba campus, but the logistics and cost of relocating this university—to a campus half its required size, with housing requirements left unmet for a great many students and faculty—have proven to be daunting. It is still unclear when and how much of the main Khartoum campus of the University of Juba will be relocated. As a result, the South's leading institution of higher education still operates primarily in Khartoum. Without their teaching and research university in place, Southern Sudanese will be delayed in their efforts to create alternatives to the old policies of assimilation into the Arab-Islamic identity of the North.

Although this brief description seems to indicate that the identity issues between North and South hinge mainly on religious identity and the imposition of Islam, the more important factor has actually been race or, rather, self-proclaimed race, as the Sudanese are a blended population of many tribes from across Africa and the Saharan region. While the majority of the population is Muslim, there is a much more complex calculation about whether a particular person is "Arab" or "African." For example, Sudan is a member of both the African Union and the Arab League. While many today claim that its crossroads culture of multiple tribes and traditions is something to be proud of, the Northern ruling elites consider themselves to be Arab and descendants or relatives of the Prophet with links to a pure form of Islam. Thus, even in the North, Sudanese Muslims who are not from these powerful families still feel socially and politically inferior.

## Islamists and the Education Revolution

Jafaar Numeiri's regime breached the peace agreement with the South in 1983, imposing sharia law regardless of sect, so there was hope for change in the educational system when Numeiri's regime was brought down in 1985. However, the interim military leadership and subsequent democratic coalition government led by Sadiq el Mahdi did not take the opportunity to repeal these laws, particularly as applied to non-Muslims. One of the partners in this coalition was the National Islamic Front (NIF)—a radical party led by Hassan el-Turabi with an agenda that included making Sudan a fundamentalist Islamic state with an Islamized (and therefore pacified) South. Having cultivated a following in secondary schools and universities during Numeiri's time, the NIF dominated student unions in the country by the late 1980s. Student unions were a critical part of Sudan's political spectrum because they served as political-party incubators and as a means of shaping the future voice of the elites. At the apex of political significance was the student union of the University of Khartoum—the erstwhile Gordon Memorial College—which was unquestionably the proving ground for the privileged and predestined and thus the most significant collection of student voices in the country.

Although Sudan has had only three brief bouts with democratic elections, student union elections—with party sponsorship and mentoring—were run each year with all the organization and seriousness of national political parties. The NIF, working in conjunction with Numeiri's security forces, employed violence and intimidation to dominate

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student unions, thus positioning the radical party well for an eventual coup against the government of el-Mahdi in 1989. With el-Turabi as the party's spiritual guide, a military leader, Omar el-Beshir, still president today, seized the presidency. Beshir lost no time in consolidating the party's influence by banning and harassing its critics. On the very day he seized power, Beshir banned all trade unions but exempted the student and religious unions that the NIF already dominated. Given that the party had never gained a majority in national elections, the strategy seemed to rely on controlling educational institutions and indoctrinating or silencing the voices most likely to lead a revolt.

The University of Khartoum represented the spearhead of the new regime's strategic approach to controlling educational institutions. Almost immediately upon taking power, Beshir reconfigured the entire management structure of Sudan's higher-educational institutions. His new policy was dubbed the "education revolution." Given that universities had hosted demonstrations and opposition movements that contributed to the downfall of two predecessor dictatorships, the NIF could not leave academia unattended. NIF members were placed in the Ministry of Higher Education and in the National Council of Higher Education and Science Research, which is responsible for overseeing all higher education policy. Next, Beshir targeted the governance of the University of Khartoum, voiding an academic-freedom act that faculty members had just achieved and abolishing the campus electoral system for university administrators. In its stead, his office appointed party loyalists as vice-chancellors, deans, and department chairs. Finally, Beshir named himself chancellor of all universities and repeated this pattern nationwide.

## Controlling Students and Teaching Staff

Despite the initial quiescence of student unions during the coup, clashes began to break out between NIF students and their opponents, quickly reaching a violent pitch. As the repressive tactics and intent of the NIF became more evident, campus resistance became more intense. In 1990, the NIF slate of candidates lost the Khartoum University Student Union (KUSU) election. This was a blow to the NIF, which had believed its student support to be solid. Protests from the general public against poor economic conditions and high prices for food staples merged with student concerns about the Islamization of the curriculum and the extension of Arabic-language instruction to the universities. NIF losses prompted an aggressive response from the regime. The university was closed during the fall of 1990; during the graduation of 1991, the non-NIF KUSU president was kept from speaking. In July 1991, government security forces got into a scuffle with students on campus and began shooting randomly, and in September NIF-affiliated students seized the KUSU building to protest the union's dissolution of student groups sympathetic to the NIF. This prompted another clash with security forces that resulted in the temporary closure of the university and the injury of thirty-six students. The government-appointed vice-chancellor barred KUSU from meeting in its building on campus and from accessing union funds. Despite these measures, the opposition coalition won the student election again in the fall of 1991. In 1992 student elections were canceled, causing an increase in tension. The announced victory of the NIF student candidate in fall 1993 prompted demonstrations and accusations of election rigging. After protestors damaged university buildings, security forces used tear gas and arrested close to three hundred students.

Similar events occurred on other campuses, most notably on the campus of the prominent Gezira University in the northern city of Wad Medani, where 170 students were arrested after election-related protests. Amid constant clashes among students and security forces, many universities ceased having student union elections at all; the unions that continue to exist face threats and high levels of tension. In 2006, the Ahlia College in Wad Medani went ahead with student elections despite a request by the governor of the province—an NIF party official—not to do so. The dean of the college hired private

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security for the campus and the process went on peacefully, with the non-NIF coalition student representatives being elected into office.

Sporadic violence continues on campuses across the North, especially in Khartoum. On February 9, 2007, a student was killed in clashes between the NCP—the president’s party, created after a falling out with Turabi—and SPLM student factions on the campus of Nilein University. Each side accused the other of responsibility and alleged the use of guns, knives, and Molotov cocktails. Tensions remain high.

In addition to the Arabization and Islamization of the university curriculum, which had continued with English-language instruction and a secular curriculum until the 1989 coup, the NIF influenced the educational process by requiring all male students admitted to university to spend time in Popular Defense Forces (PDF) training camps before they could begin their studies. A national militia force created by President Beshir, the PDF essentially parallels the regular Sudanese armed forces and provides insurance against another coup from the military. In 1990, new students wishing to register to attend university had to do so at PDF camps. Critics of the policy have described PDF camp conditions as extremely harsh. All tendencies to question authority are subdued. One Sudanese writer describes the camp routine as “an exercise in ideological and religious indoctrination, an attempt to convert students into subordinate and obedient species, change their characters, and to enshrine fundamentalist principles into their minds.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to administrators and students, university teaching staff were also affected by the NIF-instituted changes. Traditional standards of academic freedom and merit were redefined to accord with the NIF’s fundamentalist vision and to retain tight control on its public image. These policies largely affected Sudan’s political and intellectual elites, but there was another major reform that remade the face of higher education throughout the country and had long-term negative effects for the competitiveness of the national economy. Shortly after seizing power, Beshir declared the creation of five new universities and a doubling of admissions to the existing universities. This move came despite the fact that Sudan’s university graduates had already been experiencing precipitous drops in employment levels, as low as 17.4 percent in 1985–86. In addition, private education was deregulated, allowing entrepreneurs to open “colleges” as a business venture with little attention to academic standards or proper facilities. These changes were made effective immediately and with little additional overall expenditure for the higher-education budget. With resources stretched so thin, the older universities began to experience decay on their campuses as buildings were not maintained and broken equipment was not replaced. The abrupt shift in language instruction from English to Arabic meant a serious lack of teaching materials in many disciplines that traditionally rely on English publications. It also had an immediate discriminatory impact on students from the East, West (Darfur), and South who were not native Arabic speakers.

The changes were couched in rhetoric about anticolonialism and the return of Sudanese traditions and culture to education. Thus Beshir could claim that his makeover was for the good of the nation—a return to its Islamic values and an egalitarian expansion of access to a valued resource to the public—while at the same time he could control and weaken the natural critics of government power. The strategy has been extremely successful, having helped Beshir maintain power. His rule has lasted longer than any since Sudan’s independence.

## Unintended Consequences

The results of this educational makeover—from primary to university level—have become severe. A recent comprehensive analysis of higher education in Sudan bombards the reader with relentlessly negative statistical indicators. At the primary and secondary school levels enrollment is extremely low. As of 2000, the average amount of schooling among the adult population was only 1.91 years.<sup>2</sup> This has a drastic impact on literacy rates, with a 32 per-

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cent rate of illiteracy for males and a 57 percent illiteracy rate for females in the privileged North.<sup>3</sup> The rate for the war-torn South is much higher. Sudan falls into the lowest possible category for technological achievement in the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report, which comparatively analyzes the number of patents and scientific articles, the spread of communications technology, and the development of human skills, such as engineering graduates and literacy rates, within countries. Sudan is considered "marginalized" in the index, ranking 129 out of 162 countries in the survey.<sup>4</sup>

The creation of so many new institutions of higher education—the number went from seventeen to seventy-seven during the 1990s—resulted in scarcer resources for all, even the country's premier institution and national pride, the University of Khartoum. Threatened with the regime's harsh indoctrination techniques for students and the loss of academic freedom for faculty members, hundreds of professors and eminent intellectuals fled Sudan in the early 1990s. During a two-year period (1992–94) more than one hundred professors left the University of Khartoum; they were replaced with graduate students or other instructors without appropriate qualifications. Some of the architects of the Islamist education policies eventually admitted that they were ruining the universities.<sup>5</sup> An internal investigation by the Ministry of Higher Education in 1996 calculated that the country faced an 80 percent deficit in teaching staff.

Not only are there shortages of teaching staff for an increased number of students, but the physical necessities of higher education—buildings, laboratories, libraries, computers, etc.—have deteriorated to an unacceptable level. This is particularly problematic in the natural sciences, which require expensive equipment and constant updating. One report made by the Library of the University of Khartoum, detailing its holdings in chemistry, found that out of 2,540 books in the collection, many had "torn covers, ripped off pages and books without titles and others unrelated to science, let alone chemistry, and rare volumes destroyed by seeping rain water."<sup>6</sup> Without adequate funds to maintain or upgrade facilities, university campuses have become like workplaces; students no longer have dormitories on campus, few activities take place outside of the classroom, and the universities become empty after hours.

Today's university population was raised under the full impact of the NIF's Islamist policies and therefore does not have the exposure to critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong scholarship that a traditional liberal arts curriculum normally fosters. Their undergraduate experience has largely consisted of preparation for examinations with very little understanding of research methods or thoughtful scholarly debate. Campus life is also lacking, with few activities or groups functioning to enrich life outside the classroom. This sterile environment contributes to the alienation of university campuses from the communities around them.

Students are understandably fixated on obtaining their certification rather than on the process of acquiring and understanding knowledge itself. However, as the volume of students has gone up, most new college graduates face a hostile economic environment, tempting many of them to apply for graduate study. Not surprisingly, graduate-level education within Sudan has also suffered, especially because many of the new entrants have poor English-language skills for the necessary texts at the graduate level. All of the problems that beleaguer undergraduate education become intensified at the graduate level: resources are scarce and of poor quality, teaching staff are inadequate and under qualified, and many of the resulting dissertations are substandard. This situation has circled back to cause pain to the government. Sudan's educational system can no longer produce enough capable elites to help pull the country out of its economic, social, and political malaise.

## Unprepared for Peace

An additional word about the effects of the Islamized curriculum is necessary here. The privileging of Islamic concepts in the learning process of all Sudanese students has had

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the effect of not only marginalizing non-Muslim Southerners but also of hardening their resistance. It has also made it more difficult for the traditionally tolerant Muslim population in the North to relate to the Southerners in their midst in an accepting manner. The curriculum for Sudanese schoolchildren has thus contributed to the long internal conflicts and shaky peace. Schools everywhere inscribe the categories of national insiders and outsiders and create and reproduce powerful social boundaries that guard access to political power. Despite the 2005 peace agreement, for example, Southern schoolchildren living in the North are compelled to study from texts that not only assume a Muslim identity as the default but that also actively encourage the student to become a devout Muslim, equating such devoutness with patriotism and good citizenship.

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These lessons from the Northern curriculum continue to reinforce the image of Southerners as outsiders. Even mathematics textbooks use examples from the Koran. An education official who found such references harmless and not indicative of an attempt to convert non-Muslims cited the following example: "There are five prayers in the day [for Muslims]. Ahmad has already prayed twice. How many more times does he have to pray that day?"<sup>7</sup> A recent study of Sudanese textbooks found that the majority of references to a specific religious identity are to Islam, with Christianity mentioned only in one of the books in the study.<sup>8</sup> Even more worrisome are the frequent references to violence and warfare, encouraging the skills of soldiering as necessary characteristics of a good citizen. In one fourth-grade Arabic-language book, a poem encourages students to become brave fighters:

I have no fear defending my home land  
My flowing song is the tank and the gun  
Shout loudly: welcome death

In a sixth-grade Arabic-language book, students are told that warfare is a duty and that they will be rewarded: "You know what excellent rewards Allah prepares for Muslims for fighting Kufar [non-Muslims]! . . . In the same textbook students are asked to write an essay on how to support the Sudanese government army in its *war*, referring to the civil conflict in the country."<sup>9</sup>

Given the lessons students are asked to learn in their primary years, coupled with the overtaxed higher-education system, it is no surprise that Sudan's current academic situation is noncompetitive and ill-prepared to contribute to the peaceful rebuilding of the country.

## **The Situation Now**

Since the signing of the CPA in 2005, and with the formation of the Government of National Unity—a coalition government in which the SPLM holds a negotiated number of cabinet offices and the vice presidency—the atmosphere on university campuses has softened somewhat. Several distinguished professors have returned from comfortable positions abroad to take up their old posts in the hopes of being active facilitators of change. Many have also returned to positions with independent nonprofit organizations, in which they are more free to undertake research, publish, and engage in soft activism. The government itself appears ready to encourage a reengagement with higher education, and there have been several conferences devoted to the roles of universities and to addressing acknowledged problems. One recent conference at the University of Juba (still in Khartoum) focused on the once-forbidden topic of academic freedom. The conference call for papers read:

Higher Education Institutions can play a major role in disseminating the culture of peace, spirit of tolerance and peaceful-coexistence, facilitating social interaction, guidance and supervision of development and good



governance. However, these institutions can not fully carry out their roles in the absence of academic freedom and university autonomy. . . . The proposed conference will bring together all Sudanese universities' staff, researchers, policy makers, and students and other actors to deliberate and critically engage on key issues and areas of common concern.<sup>10</sup>

This paragraph indicates a remarkable departure from the permitted discourses on the role of the university during the education revolution. It also smartly makes the link between academic freedom and peace and development. Furthermore, the conference was conducted in both Arabic and English—perhaps a nod to the university's assumed future move back to the South, where English is now the official language of instruction. Still, though recent events indicate a more permissive atmosphere regarding political critique, there are few substantial changes in Sudanese public discourse or in the academy. Journalists and human rights activists, for example, continue to be jailed for exposing abuses and corruption, and university administrators continue to reflect ruling-party preferences.

Particular attention is starting to be paid to the development-oriented natural sciences, such as agriculture and engineering. Now that Sudan has a growing oil industry, there is a desire to have native petroleum engineers to oversee the significant foreign investment and presence in the country. But once again, the palpable lack of English-language skills limits the number of graduates capable of benefiting from foreign study and exchange programs that would enrich and upgrade Sudanese degrees in the sciences. Sudan's lapsed language skills also have interesting political and diplomatic ramifications. Sudanese politics has increasingly attracted the attention of international organizations such as the African Union and the United Nations. While diplomacy occurs in any case with translators, the weaker the ability to interface competently in the global lingua franca, the greater the risk of misunderstandings and the less sympathetic the nation's political position may appear. The current shortage of competent language skills has meant that even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has had trouble finding new recruits with appropriately advanced English skills to fill the vacant positions of the Sudanese diplomatic corps.

In this context, there is now an opening—a social and political space—for changes in Sudan's higher-education system. Those who have an interest in fostering the country's transition to a stable and peaceful democracy (and these include both Sudanese and members of the international community) should take note. Sudan's social transformation to peace must be accompanied by a strengthened and vibrant intellectual sector.

## **Breathing Life Back into the Academy**

In the new atmosphere following the peace agreement with the South—while there is a time of transition preceding the general election (2009) and the self-determination vote (2011)—there are possibilities for Sudanese institutions of higher education to regain their prominent role as nodes for social connection, growth, and transformation. It is now possible for universities to try to revive a campus life that not only generates knowledge and love of learning in the students but that also serves the surrounding community and connects the country's elites with the population. This would allow a sense of public service to be generated that could become the foundation for the peaceful democracy envisioned in the CPA. In this model, universities would become active players in civil society, and there would be a relationship of mutual support among teaching staff, students, activists, the press, and professional organizations. Ultimately, the Sudanese government itself would benefit from this thriving civic culture, and certainly it would enrich efforts to secure peace throughout the country.

This vision for Sudanese higher education is described by independent scholar Dr. Mohamed El Amin Ahmed El Tom. He describes the ideal role of the “critical university” as one that fosters a culture of peace.

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The promotion of such a culture has important implications on both teaching and research. The education of school teachers has been a major responsibility of public universities for the past three decades. . . . In a multi-racial and multi-cultural society, such as exists in Sudan, teachers need to be trained “to inculcate the values and attitudes that foster tolerance, create respect for cultural ethnic and religious diversity as well as human rights, and encourage peace.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, universities can assume a critical responsibility in stabilizing a war-torn country, and it is a duty that they should undertake with purpose. The atmosphere of openness and acceptance that takes place on the campus of a “critical university” has a great multiplying effect. Students carry these attitudes into their communities and into public service. Many of them will become teachers themselves and demonstrate these values to another generation. This is the traditional role of a university—to be a great social resource for a country.

***Sudanese universities have begun to host workshops and conferences that are open to groups outside of academia.***

By also engaging directly with society, a university can play an even more powerful role in demonstrating how a diverse community can interact peacefully and productively. Sudanese universities are beginning to accept this role of civil-society actor and have begun to host workshops and conferences that are open to groups outside of academia. They have begun to encourage the use of drama and music to illustrate political lessons. For example, in one workshop on voter education and civic engagement, the mixed audience of academics, students, journalists, human-rights activists, and political-party members were asked to create rules for a mock election. Taking the assignment one step further, they actually wrote and acted out a series of vignettes illustrating the various difficulties that might be encountered at a provincial polling station on Election Day. Not only were the skits amusing, they were also informative for an audience mostly too young to have experienced one of Sudan’s three national elections.

In another example, a college-hosted workshop explored the meaning of social peace by having participants act out how difficult it might be to persuade an uneducated person that s/he should know about the bill of rights in the new interim constitution. Even among the educated crowd of participants, there were many who were not familiar with the guarantees and rights in this constitution required by the CPA. These workshops are important because Sudan’s once-vibrant civil-society sector has been weakened by repressive tactics—many activists and journalists have been harassed or imprisoned. Universities active in public engagement can augment the roles of civil-society organizations from a slightly more secure position.

It is a necessary part of a well-rounded educational institution that concerts, plays, and lectures be open to the public and that students are encouraged to undertake projects in their communities for credit. These ideas are not new to Sudan, but they need to be encouraged actively at this moment in time. Sudanese university students have a long tradition of suffering for using their voices to transform the politics of their country. While direct political confrontation is one possible lesson learned from a university education, the time is ripe for Sudanese universities to cooperate with grassroots organizations and to lead society toward peace by providing open civic resources to the surrounding communities and a model of productive collaboration among Sudan’s different identity groups.

## **Recommendations**

The weakened higher-education sector in Sudan has taken its toll by reducing the ability of universities to contribute to peace and development by graduating globally literate, well-adjusted scholars who can readily adapt to a variety of positions in both public service and civil society and who are prepared to work in Sudan’s diverse regions beyond Khartoum. Fortunately, there are indications that the government wishes to take steps

to reverse the trend. Expanded academic activities such as conferences and workshops on transitions to democracy, the role of political parties, and election management have not been obstructed. Rather, the NCP has sent its own members to participate in these activities, thus building the party's capacity in advance of the impending elections.<sup>12</sup> Opposition parties, including the SPLM, also attend, creating broad party involvement in transitioning to democracy.

Participation in such programs by a spectrum of political actors is a welcome sign and encourages the hope that commitment to the process may follow. This is the ideal moment for the international community to provide a needed boost to Sudan's weakened higher-education sector. Creative collaboration, research, and teaching exchanges both to and from Sudan, international conferences involving Sudanese students and faculty, and active attention to restoring libraries and research facilities are all ways in which international bodies can contribute to both intellectual and concrete capacity building. Such activities currently exist, but there is plenty of room for expansion, especially for universities in Sudan's provincial areas. Student and faculty exchange programs could be made more accessible by special exceptions in current U.S. visa restrictions and sanctions regarding the Sudanese government.

Sudanese education officials, university faculty, and civil-society organizations should work together to develop programs to counter four key educational problems: the lack of exposure to critical thinking and research skills; the lack of vibrant extracurricular life, which can give students the opportunity to experience fully the diversity of their society; the alienation of universities from their local communities; and, critically, the pattern of student activism that repeatedly falls back on violence to achieve its goals.

Growing a nonviolent Sudanese model of civic engagement between universities and their local communities can go a long way toward addressing these issues, whether it is through grants and exchanges to universities for curricula that require practical experience (such as health sciences, teaching, and agriculture) or through helping to create public programs on political issues or the arts. Such programs place higher education in the role of public forum and model community. Some Sudanese universities are already doing exactly this—they should be encouraged and asked to partner with smaller or less-experienced institutions to form networks and exchanges between scholars and students.

Given the importance of implementing the provisions of the CPA and other agreements in the next couple of years, universities can serve as authoritative sources of information on the content and impact of the rights in the interim constitution and the necessary steps leading up to the general elections. Many Sudanese do not have a good understanding of how the political spectrum was transformed in principle by the agreement. Universities should model the intended transformation to a peaceful society by teaching appreciation of diversity and acceptance among Sudan's many ethnic identities and cultures. Finally, student activists must be encouraged to exchange their views and hold union elections in a peaceful manner. With patterns of violence having long been entrenched, this will be a difficult transition, but nonviolent expression of political views must be taught and modeled in the very environment where Sudan's future leaders are being socialized.

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An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), together with additional information on the subject.

## Notes

1. Zaki El-Hassan, "Instability of Higher Education in the Sudan: The Effect of Al-Bashir's Higher Education Policies," *Reports: Education in Sudan* (July 11, 1992), found at <http://www.sudanupdate.org/REPORTS/education/hi-ed.htm> (accessed February 7, 2007).
2. Mohamed El Amin Ahmed El Tom, *Higher Education in Sudan: Towards a New Vision for a New Era* (Khartoum: Sudan Centre for Educational Research, 2006), 10.
3. Anders Breidlid, "Education in the Sudan: The Privileging of an Islamic Discourse," *Compare* 35, no. 3 (September 2005): 247–63, 258.
4. El Tom, *Higher Education in Sudan*, 18–19.
5. Ann Mosely Lesch, *The Sudan—Contested National Identities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 144.
6. M. Abdelmalik and Ibrahim Abu El Gasim (March 1994), as cited in El Tom, *Higher Education in Sudan*, 51.
7. Marc Sommers, *Islands of Education: Schooling, Civil War and the Southern Sudanese, 1983–2004* (Paris: International Institute for Education Planning, 2005), 246.
8. This and the following quotes in this paragraph are from Hala M. Ibrahim, "A Nation in Turmoil: Is Education to Blame? An Analysis of Sudan's National Basic Education Curriculum" (master's thesis, Ohio University, 2006).
9. Ibid.
10. University of Juba, <http://www.juba.edu.sd/conf/index.htm> (accessed February 19, 2007).
11. El Tom, *Higher Education in Sudan*, 93, quoting Goolam Mohamedbhai, *The Role of Higher Education in Developing a Culture of Peace in Africa* (UNESCO, 20003).
12. I am indebted to Professor Peter Woodward for this observation.

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