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Politics and Islam in Contemporary Sudan

Heather J. Sharkey

University of Pennsylvania, hsharkey@sas.upenn.edu

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At the time of publication, author Heather J. Sharkey was associated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Currently, she is a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Politics and Islam in Contemporary Sudan

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Comments

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Abdel Salam Sidahmed. *Politics and Islam in Contemporary Sudan*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. xiv + 249 pp. Index. \$55.00. Cloth.

In *Politics and Islam in Contemporary Sudan*, Abdel Salam Sidahmed traces the role of Islamic discourse among twentieth-century Sudanese politicians. In the process he reassesses Sudanese political history in the Anglo-Egyptian colonial period (1898-1956) but especially in the years after independence. He brings his study into the late 1990s by considering the regime of the National Islamic Front (NIF), which came to power after a military coup in 1989. Comparable in subject to Peter Woodward's *Sudan: The Unstable State, 1898-1989* (1990) and Abdelwahab El-Affendi's *Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in Sudan* (1991), this work aims to provide interpretation and revision in light of the NIF's ascendancy.

Muslims in the Sudan have been debating the role of Islam in politics for years. Though many agree that Islam deserves a central place in the Sudan's legal framework, few have agreed on the proper application of Islamic law, an ideal known as the shari'a. Sidahmed tacitly acknowledges this challenge. He presents Islamism (the call for implementing shari'a) in the Sudan as an act of liberation from Western hegemony, as an affirmation of cultural authenticity, and as the fulfillment of Muslim religious duty. And yet he is dissatisfied with the attempts first of the Nimeiri regime after 1983, and later the NIF regime after 1989, to claim legitimacy through an application of Islamic law. By stifling political expression and criticism, he argues, both regimes lacked a mandate from the people. Their interpretation of the shari'a was, moreover, motivated by political greed and not by pious humanitarian motives. Like many Sudanese today, Sidahmed believes that the shari'a of Nimeiri and the NIF fell far short of the ideal.

Sidahmed contrasts Islamism with secularism, and presents the two as a polarity. In his schema, Islamism is superior and preferable to secularism, although the successful application of the shari'a ideal remains elusive. Sidahmed places the nationalists of the early independence era in the secularist category, notwithstanding their strong identification with Islam in nationalist discourses, because they did not call for staunch Islamic government. At the same time he dismisses those politicians, like NIF leaders, for claiming to enforce the Islamic ideal with their own narrow interests in mind. One therefore wonders whether it is useful at all to label Sudanese politicians according to polarized Islamist/secularist categories. Instead, to recognize the nuances of motives and ideologies among individuals and groups, scholars should be ready to acknowledge shades of secularism, shades of Islamism, and the blurring in between.

Politics and Islam in Contemporary Sudan is intended for cognoscenti, not for newcomers to Sudanese studies. To appreciate some of the author's subtle interpretations, one needs to have solid grasp of modern Sudanese history already in hand. By moving back and forth in time, even in the introductory section intended for historical overview, the book assumes a considerable amount of knowledge. With some restructuring, and perhaps with the inclusion of a list of acronyms and a bibliography, the book could have become more accessible to the general reader. St. Martin's Press could have improved the book with more editing; as it stands, its many typographical errors distract the reader from the substance of the text.

The author touches upon some fascinating topics, including the role of the shari'a in drafting constitutions; the evolution of Islamic banking; and the effect of Sudanese expatriates (mugtaribin) in the Gulf on the Sudanese economy (through their remittances) and on women (by opening public sector jobs to females left behind). Ultimately, however, the book contributes most by adding to the debate about the role of Islam in Sudanese politics. Sidahmed would be the first to agree that Islam holds a strong and emotive position in Northern Sudanese society. Its expression in law and politics will continue to be a source of contention for many years to come.

Heather J. Sharkey
University of Massachusetts at Amherst
Amherst, Massachusetts