

and most of all re-dreaming with/through our children new possibilities based on privileged hindsight.

TIBEBE ESHETE, *Michigan State University*

NOTE

1. Maimire Mennasemay, "Towards a Critical Ethiopian Theory of Education," in *Education, Politics and Social Change in Ethiopia*, ed. Paulos Milkias and Messay Kebede (Hollywood, CA: Tsehai Publishers, 2010).

The First Islamist Republic: Development and Disintegration of Islamism in the Sudan, by Abdullahi A. Gallab

Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008; pp. 194. \$99.95 cloth.

In this careful and engagingly written analysis of Hasan al-Turabi's decade in power, Abdullahi A. Gallab concludes that the experience of Sudan during the "first Islamist republic" (1989–99) serves as a warning against "ideological entrapments" (p. 167) of all kinds, and leads to the "realization that Islamism, like all other isms, can be and should be contested" (p. ix). Drawing upon extensive interviews with Sudanese Islamists, as well as upon Arabic and English studies, Gallab summarizes the Islamist experiment in dismal terms. He variously calls it a "reign of terror," a "trauma," a source of "despair," "an open-ended system of oppression," the product of a wide "range of deceits," a vehicle for the "violent suppression of other religious systems" and political voices, and a "charade" (pp. 4, 15, 78, 137). In Gallab's account, Turabi emerges as a manipulator and a megalomaniac (albeit a suave one) who entertained the creation of a "personality cult" (p. 112) around him.

The title of this book, *The First Islamist Republic*, signifies three things. It signifies, first, the decade of rule before General Umar Beshir pushed Turabi out of power, thereby revealing the rifts that had been deepening within the upper tiers of the regime and the Islamist movement. Second, the title reflects the contention that this Islamist regime was the first Sunni Islamist regime of its kind in the world. Unlike the

Shi'i Islamism of postrevolutionary Iran, which privileged ayatollahs and Muslim clerics, this Sudanese Sunni Islamism of the late twentieth century favored and mobilized Western-educated intellectuals who regarded themselves as agents of Muslim modernity and who looked down on clerics as obstacles to progress. Finally, the title underlines the argument that this Islamist republic was something new in Sudanese history: it tried to harness political ideology to a kind of totalizing state control over culture and society that was unprecedented in its scope. The most salient features of the "first Islamist republic" may have been its centralizing power, ruthless suppression of dissent, and ambition—but not its religious credentials *per se*.

With regard to Islamic credentials, Gallab argues that the regime failed to set a "moral standard" (p. 78) from the moment the dust settled after the 1989 coup. (Typical of this lack of integrity, Gallab believes, was the way Turabi dissimulated by denying any involvement in the 1989 coup for a decade, only claiming to have played a leading role in its orchestration after his fall from power.) Where, then, was the Islam in this government's Islamism? Rather than promoting the kind of commitment to political ethics, social justice, and civil liberties to which a Muslim humanitarian project might aspire, the regime focused on consolidating power, suppressing dissent, fomenting diversionary internal conflicts in the name of jihad, and making money. Gallab suggests that the Islamists capitalized on Islamic banking and developed corporate ties in ways that enabled them to amass wealth, and later to assert and tighten their political grip. Meanwhile, the Islamist republic set about building its coercive apparatus, most egregiously by institutionalizing torture chambers known as ghost houses. Gallab writes, "If the concentration camps were the 'most consequential institutions' of totalitarianism, as [Hannah] Arendt described them, the ghost houses—'the dwelling of horrors'—would represent the core of this Sudanese regime's totalitarianism" (p. 113).

In every "ism" is an element of idealism, and the Sudanese Islamist movement—like the Sudanese communist and early nationalist movements before it—was no exception to this rule. That surely explains the deep sense of disappointment and bitterness that pervades this book. Gallab identifies himself as an outsider to the Sudanese Islamist movement, but nevertheless conveys the disillusionment of the many former Turabi supporters, or Sudanese Islamists in the diaspora, whom he interviewed. Sudanese Islamists, at their most idealistic, may have

believed that modern, institutionalized Islamic government would offer a cure for Sudan's political ailments—the accumulation of ailments from the colonial and postcolonial periods. Turabi's regime dashed those hopes.

By 1999, the Sudanese Islamist movement, as Gallab presents it, had two other notable features. First, it was a very elite movement, and to the extent that it had ever enjoyed popular appeal, this support was ever diminishing. Even the regime's "Popular Defense Forces," which carried out the war against the SPLA, were unpopular: they were filled with "thousands of unprepared high-school graduates [who] were forcefully conscripted and thrown into war zones in the south" (p. 124). Nor was the religious vision of the movement, to the extent that it had one, inspiring to Muslim outsiders. Gallab suggests, instead, that in the face of state-sanctioned Islamism, Sufi and neo-Mahdist Muslim cultures thrived, making the Islamists look like a fringe group in power. Second, the Sudanese Islamist movement appears to have been a highly parochial movement. In recounting the movement's history, its leaders insisted on both the autonomy and the autochthony of Sudanese Islamism. They denied that the movement was an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood of Hasan al-Banna, and suggested instead that it had emerged in Sudan as a parallel development. Given this emphatically Sudanese consciousness, it is unclear how much the Sudanese Islamist movement and the first Islamist republic can tell us about global Sunni Islamism. Turabi may have liked to style himself as a global Islamist guru (for example, by trying to establish Khartoum as a regular venue for the "Popular Arab and Islamic Conference"), but the dynamics of the movement remained deeply rooted in local conditions.

Turabi steadily insisted on what the Sudan's Islamist state was not. It was not, he claimed, secular, nationalistic, or absolutist. Perhaps Turabi's greatest failure, in Gallab's view, is that he never clarified what an Islamic state in Sudan actually was or should be. Thus Gallab paints a portrait of an Islamist republic in which Islam, itself, was elusive. Questions linger. Is Islamism as a political ideology fully discredited as an approach to governing Sudan's republic? Can a better, more ethically rigorous state Islamism take hold? If not, what ideological source of hope—what "ism"—will inspire Sudanese Muslim intellectuals in the future?