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BOOKSHELF

Anatomy of Misery

How did Sudan implode so catastrophically?

By **GEORGE AYITTEY**

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Peace has eluded Sudan since its inception in 1956. Sudan was technically the first sub-Saharan African country to gain independence from a colonial power, but it immediately descended into civil war, so that Ghana became, for the world at large, the first true post-colonial African state. Britain, upon leaving Sudan, intended to create a separate southern state, to serve as a bulwark against the Islamic north's expansionist tendencies. But Britain dithered and finally threw the south in with the north to form a unitary state.

Immediately the Christian south rebelled against the imposition of Islamic rule by the northern Arabs. The ensuing civil war—ignored by the rest of the world—went on for decades, claiming more than four million lives. And just as a peace deal seemed imminent, in 2004, war erupted in Sudan's western region of Darfur, resulting in a humanitarian disaster—so far, more than a million dead and three million displaced. Amid the chaos, Sudan has intermittently served as a home for radical Islamists, including Osama bin Laden.

Part of the problem is Sudan's wobbly version of democracy. The country has been led by weak coalition governments often vulnerable to strongman takeovers. In 1985, Gen. Jafar Numeiri, who had installed himself through a coup, was himself ousted, in part because of a food crisis that claimed 90,000 lives. Another coalition government was then formed, by the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party. But it proved unworkable and was shoved aside in a coup led by Sudan's current president, Omar al-Bashir. His brutal regime and Arab militia—the *janjaweed*— decimates villages, rapes women, poisons wells and enslaves blacks. Mr. Bashir has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

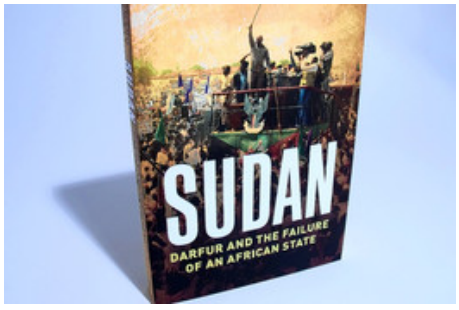
In "Sudan," Richard Cockett, who served for five years as Africa editor for the Economist magazine, hopes to explain "how Sudan came to

implode so catastrophically, and to suggest what the often well-intentioned foreigners who tried to help the country can learn from their collective failure to do much about it." He does so brilliantly in a book that is well- researched, beautifully written and thoroughly absorbing, despite the wrenching tragedies it must chronicle.

As Mr. Cockett makes clear, there is plenty of blame to go around for Sudan's fate, including "meddling Western politicians, over-simplifying activists, spineless African leaders, shamefully silent Muslim countries, land-greedy Arab tribes, myopic Sudanese politicians." Upon gaining independence, Sudan decided to retain the British model of governance—a unitary system that centralized power and decision-making. But the government in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, was often too weak to rule the country's vast territory, which fell prey to the machinations of neighbors—Egypt, Ethiopia and Libya, among others.

Eventually more distant and powerful countries became involved in Sudan's affairs, not least the U.S. in its hunt for terrorists. (Remember that a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory was mistakenly bombed by the U.S. in 1998 in retaliation for the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.) China's role, in recent years, has been callously commercial: pumping oil in the south and blocking United Nations resolutions that would sanction Mr. Bashir's government.

The main culprits, according to Mr. Cockett, have been the members of Sudan's squabbling political class. In their "politicking," Mr. Cockett says, they have pursued narrow sectarian interests and maneuvered to gain political advantage, oblivious of the crises facing the country and the need for a sound democratic order. In 1983, Khartoum announced the imposition of sharia law on the entire country, prompting a rebellion in the south.



SUDAN

By Richard Cockett
Yale, 315 pages, $22

Even as revenues from Sudan's abundant natural resources flow into central-government coffers, Khartoum has imposed a tax, called *diynia,* on horses, camels, cows, donkeys and sheep. The residents of Darfur, now so desperate for help, complain that they get nothing in return from the government for this tax, by way of social services or development. The Beja tribespeople in the east

make the same complaint. Little wonder that the country's citizens are both rebellious and poor.

Mr. Cockett is not happy with human-rights activists in the West, however well-intentioned they may be as they try to respond to Sudan's troubled conditions. He believes that, too often, Western activists have falsely raised the expectations of the Darfuri rebels, and they use the term "genocide" to describe Darfur's disaster—a term that, Mr. Cockett believes, should be applied more restrictively. In Darfur, he sees a "bungled counter- insurgency operation that got wildly out of hand and ended up as ethnic cleansing." Not everyone will agree with this description. In any case, Mr. Cockett's conclusion is unsettling. "The Khartoum government has already won the battle," he says. "If the intention had always been to remove the African tribes from their traditional lands in Darfur, then they have largely succeeded."

In a gallant effort to find an "African solution" for Sudan's crises, Mr. Cockett points to Nigeria's federal system as a model. A true federal system, like that of the U.S., would indeed decentralize power; but Nigeria's is a fake federal system, which rebel groups in the Niger Delta are fighting against for the same reasons that the Darfuris and the Beja tribespeople oppose Khartoum. Perhaps the vehicle used to dismantle apartheid in South Africa would be more appropriate, since at the core of Sudan's problems is Arab apartheid.

But then again, why fault Mr. Cockett for not finding a solution when the mother of all "African solutions"—the African Union—has proved so ineffectual? It sent peacekeepers into Darfur. But when they came under sustained rebel attack on their base, in October 2007, they did what "peacekeepers" do in such circumstances—they fled!

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