

The Colonialist Policy Towards Islam In The Sudan

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Abridged & Translated

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The Sudan, the biggest country in Africa, reaches about one million square klm. in area. The fact that the river Nile runs through it from upper south down to the remotest north accounts for the vast fertile and irrigable lands in the Sudan. These two elements, land and water, mark the great economic weight of the Sudan.

The Sudan's political importance lies in its position as an entrance to the non-Arab Africa and as a back shield against any possible aggression upon Egypt from the south . As the greater part of the Nile runs through the Sudan any threat to its course is but a threat to the stability and security of Egypt.

This strategic weight is not confined to the geographical, economic and political importance but also to the fact that the Sudan has been, over the ages, an acculturation area and a melting pot between the Arab and the African cultures.

These unique characteristics of the Sudan have made it a coveted object of many colonialist powers the last of which was the British (1889 - 1956 A.D.).

During half a century of colonial domination the British adopted several means to secure a tight hold of the Sudan.

Beside their military force they resorted to economic as well as

ideological means. Ideologically they gave much concern to the question of islam in the Sudan. From the beginning they realized how subtle the question of islamic faith was and the threat it represented to their domination of the Sudan. They knew pretty well that their full control of the Sudan could only be fulfilled through a complete subjugation of the Mahdist revolution (1881 - 1889) which was but a religious revolt against the despotic Turkish rule and the colonialist figures that supported it like Gordon.

The British policy towards islam in the Sudan.

For their control of the Sudan the British could not depend only on their military. The vast area of the Sudan could prove the use of force immensely costly and even risky. To secure stability at minimum cost the British had to convince the Sudanese that they had come for their own good and prosperity. The best results, in their view, could be achieved through religious means.

Islam in the Sudan, since the 16th century, has become the religious faith of the majority of its population in the central and northern regions. The religious or Suphi orders (Tarikas) have played a vital part in the spread of islam there.

When Mohammad Al-Mahdi appeared in the 19th Century from among these religious orders he preached a revival of the fundamentals of islamic religion and a return to the holy Quran and Tradition (the Sunna) and the adoption of islamic law (Shari'a) in the running of people's life. His religious teachings won him great number of followers who supported him in establishing an islamic rule. The religious Zeal of the Mahdists was so deep that it was difficult to uproot it even after the miliarty defeat of the Mahdist movement.

The British recognized the vigor of this religious spirit and how cautious they should be in dealing with it. In their view lenience or toughness might give rise to another religious revolt whose results they could not predict. To solve this dilemma, i.e. the recognition and the containment of the religious spirit, the British adopted a unique strategy. They pretended to be pro-islamic while they kept a watchful eye upon the religious institutions and made them devoid of any social and political significance. In other words

their policy was one of restraint and repression of islam. They carried out their strategy in two stages: the pre world war I stage and the post world war I stage.

The pre-war stage

It began since their occupation of the Sudan in 1889. They pretended that they had come only to protect islam and put right the deviations of the Mahdi period. To support their claim they brought with them some religious figures who were at odds with the Mahdi movement. After the fall of Omdurman, the national capital of the Mahdists, Kitchner, the British general and first governor of the Sudan, rallied the leading religious figures, together with the merchants and tribal chiefs, for an audience with Cromer the British consul and actual ruler of Egypt and the designer of the imperialist policy in the Sudan.

In his speech Cromer reiterated the claim that the British colonial rule was not anti-islamic and that they would spare no effort in protecting the religious interests. As governor general kitchner issued a proclamation that the aim of the British conquest of the Sudan was not limited to the restoration of law and order but to secure a revival of the true image of islam distorted by the Mahdist revolution.

To give official shape to their claim the British established the so called «Council of Ulamas» whose role was advisory in religious affairs and without prerogatives to formulate any religious policy apart from that laid down by the colonialist government.

Among the first measures taken by the council was its approval and support of the proclamation issued by the Civil Secretary in 1901 where the government declared that she would not stand against religious activities, so long as they were confined to social and moral teachings and of no political implications. Besides, those activities had to be undertaken on the individual and not the group level.

Secondly, the British stood firm against any sign of a religious uprising in remote urban population centres. To them any religious organisation of any sort was a warning of a revolt. In the 1901 proclamation, mentioned earlier, it was stated that the government policy was to put an end to the

Suphi orders which usually started on a religious basis but often led to political problems. The proclamation called upon district commissioners to put firm control over these religious groups, keep the government in full knowledge of their movements and have any political call suppressed without consulting the administration. If there were no other way but force, the proclamation continued, these groups should be given no quarters and their leaders were not to be allowed to escape to remote areas lest they should gain more political and military strength and, therefore, their defeat become more difficult. Hence the first two decades of colonial rule witnessed merciless campaigns against religious organisations of political aspirations. Official files show that in so many cases bloody measures were taken and sometimes the whole members of a religious group were executed even after their surrender.

The post-war stage

At this stage the British turned to be lenient, came closer to the religious figures and pretended to serve the islamic cause.

The alliance between Turkey and Germany in the war aroused British fears lest it should inflame religious enthusiasm in response to Turkish propaganda that the war was but a religious struggle between moslems and Christians. To invalidate this the British adopted conciliatory measures and appeared as if they were the custodians of islamic interests in the Sudan. The government granted 'robes of honour' to the religious leaders, awarded them honour titles and decorations, and gave parties in their tribute. To approach them closer the British gave those leaders extensive areas of fertile lands in different places including that of 'Al-Gezira Project' in spite of the ban prohibiting individuals to own large areas in that project. The British also facilitated the admission of the children of those leaders into government schools and sent them to England to complete their education.

But in spite of this show of goodwill and respect the British never lost sight of the threat the solidarity of those leaders might represent to their rule. Therefore they proceeded to arouse rivalries between them in order to divide them. Their policy was to enhance the prestige of one of those

figures for a certain time, then replace him by another later on, in other words an application of their policy 'divide to rule'. By so doing they could weaken the islamic political front for a long time.

Area of British anti-islam policy in the Sudan:

It was in the field of education that the religious institutions came to receive the most serious blow. Before the British occupation education in the Sudan was purely religious and undertaken by the traditional religious schools. During the periods of the Funj Sultanate (1505 - 1801A.D.) and the Turks (1821 - 1884) those religious schools 'Khalawee' used to teach the basics of Quranic sciences, islamic theology, Tradition, Jurisprudence, and islamic canonical law (Shari'a). The British policy was to integrate these schools into their plan of secular education where they would become tributaries to the new government schools. According to the new plan the teachers of those religious schools were to receive their monthly payments from the colonial administration. In other words, their means of living became dependent upon the continuity of the colonial rule. In return, the teachers had to attend training courses organised by the department of education. They were also to expect sudden visits by British inspectors from the same department. In this way the traditional educational system has become a tool to materialize the colonial objectives, namely the training of only the necessary number of minor national civil servants to help the administration in running the country.

On the social level the British invalidated the role of the traditional religious institutions through establishing other parallel ones to undertake their job. Religious figures, for example, used to mediate to foster peace between individuals, families, and communal groups in disputes of agriculture, land, and trade or in murder crimes. Under the new regime these problems had to be settled in civil courts and by British inspectors and civil servants and not by the Shaikhs.

In the judicial field the British established canonical islamic courts for personal statutes side by side with civil and criminal courts whose positive laws were derived from the British colonial experience in India.

To weaken the economic base of the moslem community the British

encouraged the use of foreign capital in the development of the Sudanese economy. Major business contracts and licenses for export and import works were confined to British enterprises and to merchants of Greek, Jewish, Indian and Christian Syrian origin. Through this absence of an effective national economic front the Sudanese were by no means capable of exerting any pressure upon the colonial administration and, subsequently, upon the course of political events.

The policy of disintegrating the unity of religious leaders produced the desired effect.

As said earlier they used to favour one leader for a certain time then discard him and have another in his place. It followed that each religious notable tried to win the credit of the British masters at the cost of his relationship with his fellows. Moreover, the colonial authority was intent upon creating a barrier between the youngsters of the religious leaders and their homeland through sending them to England to complete their education in secular schools. As those youngsters were expected to participate one day in the rule of their country it was conformable to the colonialist policy that they be oriented to European culture and basic rules of western government. Through western secular education islamic religious spirit was planned to be weakened.

Conclusion :

To sum up, the British colonial rule in the Sudan adopted a policy of confrontation with islam. Outwardly the British pretended to support and protect islam but in practice they fought it through several means. In remote areas far from urban centres they used direct military force to invalidate the traditional religious institutions through creating administrative substitutes to fill in their places. As for the urban areas the British established institutes and religious councils under their control and made them appear as if they were the authority behind the religious policy in the Sudan. This strategy also took place in the economic, social, political and cultural fields. The British colonialists did their best to frustrate any effort towards the unity of moslem leaders and vigor of islam in the Sudan.