**What Does Secularism Mean for Sudan?**

**By Didem Özçakır**

North African country Sudan took the decision of separating the rule of law from religion, meaning that their 30-year-old Islamic rule is now at its end. The transition government signed a treaty with Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North in Addis Ababa on the 3rd of September. This treaty states the importance of the place of secularism in Sudan’s constitution. The treaty also recognizes how Sudan is a multicultural nation with several different religions, thus it needs to protect the freedom of religion and conscience of its people for a more democratic and peaceful state.

Sudan’s history is full of war and devastation. The international community saw the creation of the world’s youngest country -South Sudan- in 2011 when the country was separated into two. Sudan was granted independence in 1956, and it has been the ground for endless civil wars ever since, with human rights violations and causalities that constitute one of the biggest humanitarian crises of the post-WW2 world. These crises never got the media coverage it deserved. To understand what secularization means for this African nation now, we should take a brief look at its history.

The first civil war in Sudan took place between 1955 and 1972. South, which has considerable cultural differences from the North, created Anyana, a large secessionist movement, fearing domination from the north, and anticipating independence. After two decades of bloodshed, the Addis Ababa agreement was signed between the Sudanese government and the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (SSLM), in which all the rebel forces were united. Addis Ababa agreement granted the south considerable autonomy.

The second civil war sparked in 1983, after continuous violations of the Addis Ababa agreement coming from the north. Sudanese government officially abolished the agreement and divided the South into three. June 1983 is the date when Sudan is transformed into a Muslim Arab state, under the rule of president Nimeiry. This event was very important as it did not take into consideration the cultural and religious differences between the North and South. It was ignoring all the different religious groups within the country and establishing an authoritarian rule. The September Laws were issued, which was based upon sharia law and included extreme punishments like literally cutting the hand of a stealer.

1989 is the year when Omar al-Bashir seized the control of the country after a military coup. This means the country was under the strict control of al-Bashir and his “Islamic” law for more than 30 years before the decision for secularization on the 3rd of September. All non-religious associations such as political parties and trade unions were banned under his regime. Women were systematically oppressed. Until 2005, Sudan’s history was remarked by the oppression of the South and millions of refugees, for approximately two decades.

In the 2000s, the United States became an official actor in the conflict. It acted as a negotiator between the South and the North. In 2005, The Nairobi Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed. CPA stated that the South would be granted autonomy for six years, after which it would have the right of holding a referendum for independence. This referendum was held in 2011, making South Sudan the youngest country in the world.

Unfortunately, South’s independence did not put an end to all the bloodshed in the region. South Sudan again came to the brink of a civil war, as two different ethnic groups were struggling for power.

The north, which has the official name of Sudan, has another history of conflict. Omar al-Bashir, the authoritarian president of 30 years who banned all the non-religious institutions, was overthrown in April 2019. This was achieved by pro-democracy protests which started after some strict economic measures in December 2018. A transitional military government took his place; however, it was not very successful in establishing peace and order in Sudan. Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) still had much control throughout the country.

The last agreement which had the decision of bringing secularity to Sudan was signed in such an environment. SPLM-N clearly stated that it would only sign a treaty that granted secularism would find its place as a principle in Sudan’s constitution. The declaration was signed by the transitional government of Sudan to establish more order in the country, and it is a real piece of hope for the future, considering how people were lost under Islamic law for decades.

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