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Harry Verhoeven
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PROLOGUE

The Inauguration of the Merowe Dam

“The dam is the project of the century . . . It is the pride of Sudan, the pride of the Arabs and the pride of the world . . . The West is targeting Sudan in order to stop its development projects but we don’t care”. Tuesday 3 March 2009 was yet another blisteringly hot day by the Nile in the Nubian north of Sudan, but it was no mere ordinary date in the twenty year-long presidency of Omar Hassan Ahmed Al-Bashir. The next day, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued a long-expected arrest warrant for Bashir on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur committed by the Sudan Armed Forces, the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) and the allied Janjaweed militia. The first sitting head of state ever to be indicted, the accusations against him included organising acts of murder and extermination against his own population, and the orchestration of a campaign of rape and forcible displacement of civilians as well as the looting of their assets; opposition voices declared Bashir guilty of destroying Africa’s biggest country, promoting ethno-racial hatred and creating widespread poverty. But that was not the sense of the thousands of people who had gathered at the fourth cataract of the Main Nile to witness the inauguration of the most expensive development project in Sudanese history, the world’s longest dam of its kind. In near 50 °C temperatures, an ecstatic crowd danced with the president to Nubian songs, burnt an effigy of ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno Ocampo and chanted slogans describing Bashir as the protector of the Islamic faith.

Surrounded by ministers, relatives and fellow regime heavyweights, Bashir vowed that 3 March 2009 would be remembered as a day of triumph for Sudan and its military-Islamist *Al-Ingaz* (Salvation) Revolution, not as a moment of humiliation. Contrary to what many

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had expected, the choreography of the inauguration ceremony was a far cry from the habitual display of militarism that had for years dominated regime rallies. Bashir himself was not dressed in his characteristic army fatigues or the snow-white jellabia and ammama typical for distinguished Sudanese men, but instead looked like a modern, can-do CEO, wearing a navy blue suit and a cap with the logo of the Dam Implementation Unit, the extraordinary government agency responsible for realising the “Merowe Dream”. On the podium with the head of state were not the generals or mujahedin who fought Sudan’s endless wars and who form the president’s natural social circle, but some of the most senior representatives of Gulf Arab capital: Ibrahim bin Abdulaziz Al-Assaf, Saudi Arabia’s minister of finance; Mansour bin Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, deputy prime minister of the United Arab Emirates and head of the Emirates Investment Authority, the UAE’s sovereign wealth fund; Mohamed Salah Al-Sada, Qatar’s minister of energy; and Abdellatif Yusuf Al-Hamad, chairman of the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development and confidant of the Kuwaiti Emir. More discretely positioned but also involved in the celebrations were top representatives of the Chinese government and the world’s leading dam-building company, Sinohydro, as well as royals and financiers from the Sultanate of Oman, Bahrain and various multilateral Arab development funds.

At this key moment of the ceremony, only one Sudanese person was brought on to the main stage to be feted by Omar Al-Bashir. This was not his influential vice-president, Ali Osman Taha, nor the arch-loyal minister of defence, Abdelrahim Hussein, nor other illustrious Islamists or security officers who constitute Bashir’s comrades in arms. Instead emerged a barely known university drop-out who spent all of his life in Sudan, a taciturn man with no ministerial experience, no track record in the army or NISS and no considerable family wealth. Rather than a ceremonial faux pas, this was a recognition of his personal achievements and a reflection of the wider shift in regime strategy that had been going on for nearly a decade. What he lacked in terms of fame and conventional credentials, Usama Abdallah, the head of the innocuous sounding Dam Implementation Unit, more than made up for in terms of real power behind the scenes. Abdelrahim Hamdi, the revolution’s chief economic ideologue, underlined that “No establishment figure would have succeeded . . . The dam required a forceful outsider. Usama can be very pushy with the president and get away with it”.¹ Simultaneously though, for Hassan Rizzig, one of Sudan’s Islamist historical leaders and the

¹ Interview in Khartoum, July 2013.

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man credited with the recruitment of Bashir into the movement in 1981: “Usama made the dams, but nobody loves him . . . Nobody can ask Usama questions. Nobody knows the secret of the relationship between Usama and the president”.² One of Bashir’s long-serving ministers summarised the importance of the person who has been so crucial in working for what the ruling National Congress Party considers the real “New Sudan”: “Usama Abdallah is the only man who does what he wants in this country. He controls more money than anyone else and commands immense power from the shadows. He is the real face of Al-Ingaz”.³

The inauguration of the Merowe Dam was a highly nationalistic occasion – nomads and farmers were bussed in from across the country, headscarfed girls in military-style school uniforms swore loyalty to the revolution, ministers shed tears when listening to the national anthem – but the event revolved around much more than the self-congratulatory rhetoric of a president under international pressure. Both in terms of its actual content and its symbolism, 3 March 2009 embodied a series of dynamics and ideas equally, if not more, historic in their significance for Sudan than the arrest warrant issued against Omar Al-Bashir the following day. If the atrocities in Darfur represented one part of the Sudanese experience since the military-Islamist takeover now twenty-five years ago, then Merowe has come to stand for another crucial component of the regime’s identity, its *modus operandi* and its ambitions. This book tells that story.

THE ARGUMENT

On 30 June 1989, soldiers commanded by Brigadier Omar Al-Bashir suspended all civilian government activities and, in the subsequent hours and days, they arrested Khartoum’s entire political class in an attempt to save Sudan from economic disaster and civil war. The army had allied itself with a well-disciplined group of Islamists, Al-Harakat Al-Islamiyyah, led by the brilliant, charismatic Dr Hassan Al-Turabi. Turabi organised a coup with a khaki façade to prevent an anti-Islamist backlash in Egypt or America and formed the Al-Ingaz regime, described by Sheikh Hassan himself as the first modern Sunni Islamic Revolution since the Rashidun Caliphate of the seventh century AD. Sudan’s Islamist revolutionary experiment intended to fundamentally overturn traditional developing-country experiences of

² Interview in Khartoum, June 2012.

³ Interview in Khartoum, June 2011.

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ideological confusion, dependence on the outside world and weak state structures. The alliance of Islamists and generals sought to transform Sudan from one of the world's poorest nations into a beacon of Islamic civilisation and prosperity across the Muslim world.

While the revolution's multiple wars, its controversial foreign policy and its "Islamising" of society have attracted significant attention, the transformation of Sudan's political economy by the Al-Ingaz regime has been less well understood. Surprisingly, the centrality of water to Sudanese politics under military-Islamist rule has been ignored. This book thus analyses the efforts of Al-Ingaz at transforming Sudan beyond mosque building, militarisation and the Arabisation of the education system: "Economic Salvation" – the rescue of Sudan's economy through a "hydro-agricultural mission" that will create an "Islamic" middle class – is central to this ideology.

The Salvation leadership has thought long and hard about how to rule Sudan's core and peripheries; in the words of one of the country's leading capitalists: "Al-Ingaz set out to dominate the economy as a whole from the start. These boys set out to take over all major sectors. They sat down, they thought about it and they did it".⁴ Turabi and his lieutenants identified the Nile as Sudan's lifeline and its most important political artery, crucial to Al-Ingaz's ambitions to remake state and society and its own exercise of power over them. The post-2000 hydro-agricultural mission is the backbone of a renewed attempt at Islamist state building after what many considered a false start in the 1990s. Through partnerships with the Arabian Peninsula and East Asia, a hyper-ambitious Dam Programme and an Agricultural Revival (*Al-Nahda Al-Zira'ayah*) intend to entrench Al-Ingaz in power by delivering for those constituencies in Sudan's riverain core deemed paragons of the resurrected nation-state and pillars of continued regime hegemony.

The Merowe Dam, then, is really a deeply political instrument, not merely an expensive infrastructure project as many observers assumed. It is an essential part of the strategy pursued by Omar Al-Bashir, Usama Abdallah and other Al-Ingaz heavyweights to reinvent the regime after the first revolutionary decade led to a military and political impasse and the demise of its supreme leader, Hassan Al-Turabi. After 1999–2000, a vanguard of army officers and Islamists tried to shed their reputation as warmongers and exporters of a fundamentalist revolution and concentrated on the objective of Economic Salvation: engineers and agro-capitalists should become the

⁴ Interview in Khartoum, July 2013.

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faces associated with the resurrected Al-Ingaz, rather than the mujahedin. Together with the pursuit of peace with the rebels of the Sudan's People Liberation Army/Movement in Southern and Central Sudan, the hydro-agricultural mission was and is intended as a cornerstone of a reborn revolution. Under the aegis of the post-2000 Salvation, Sudan's people and regions are supposed to relate differently to each other, and Sudan should develop radically different relations with the outside world: regime ideologues claim that Al-Ingaz is altering the very structure of the Sudanese state and building it in a way that allows a new nation to emerge. Massive investment in hydro-infrastructure and irrigated agriculture in the "Hamdi Triangle" are envisioned to give Sudan a stronger productive basis and to diversify away from the petrodollars that have sustained rising government expenditure since 1999. New economics will spawn political continuity: the mission intends to entrench the regime in power for another generation by delivering services and economic growth. The envisaged "substantial minority" of politically crucial beneficiaries, dixit the influential former Minister of Finance Abdelrahim Hamdi, is situated (mostly) around the Nile; military-Islamist state builders claim that, in order to craft a revitalised Sudan, their mission must be embedded in specific geographies of power.

This quest is explicitly described as "civilisation", in that development (interpreted as equating to the hydro-agricultural mission's outputs: dams, irrigation channels, electricity connections, etc.) will pacify Sudan's historically extremely violent fault lines of class, race, region, religion and tribe. It was no coincidence that Omar Al-Bashir, when talking about the "neo-colonial" ICC during the Merowe Dam inauguration, did not utter any martial metaphors as a riposte to the hostile West. Instead of militaristic rhetoric, which typified his speeches on similar topics in the 1990s, he tellingly vowed that "we will respond to all these [ICC] decisions with new development projects". He cited a long list of other major civilisational projects in the pipeline that would unite the country, including roads, electricity connections, cheaper power tariffs, a breathtaking expansion of wheat cultivation and more dams. All of these were to be initiated, paid for and controlled by Usama Abdallah and his Dam Implementation Unit: water as the central node of a whole range of state-building activities.

On that excruciatingly hot day by the Nile in March 2009, the Al-Ingaz leadership felt more comfortable and optimistic than at any point since the days of utopian revolutionary euphoria in the early 1990s. Despite the ICC arrest warrant and the looming deadline of the January 2011 self-determination referendum for Southern Sudanese, the vaults of Al-Ingaz

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were more full with dollars than ever before. Western isolation of Sudan had failed to engender regime change. And arguments about an Islamist “competence agenda” – even if people disliked the socio-political policies of the Salvation, its management of the economy gave unprecedented numbers of Sudanese unprecedented opportunities – had gained traction across large swathes of the population, as would be borne out a year later when Bashir cruised to victory in the April 2010 vote without needing much of the rigging that so often characterises African elections. Regime stalwarts boasted that this was *tamkin* in practice – economic and social empowerment of the people. Al-Ingaz explicitly linked its hydro-agricultural mission, of which Merowe is the jewel in the crown, to the rebirth of Sudanese agency in the international system: “What has been achieved in the field of water . . . in the life of National Salvation exceeds what was achieved in a century . . . Sudan managed to regenerate itself – like [the]Phoenix – from among demise and demolition . . . What were [in 1989] fantasies have now become living realities”.⁵ This is more than self-indulgence; the Dam Programme is considered by many Al-Ingaz leaders to be their most popular and effective policy: the main campaign poster Bashir relied on to get himself re-elected showed the president in front of the Nile’s roaring waters flowing through Usama Abdallah’s biggest dam.

Five years on from 3 March 2009 however, immense amounts of Nile water have evaporated from the Merowe reservoir, and so have much of the hyperbole and ambition that characterised the zenith of the hydro-agricultural mission. Giving the Al-Ingaz Revolution a second breath by re-launching the agenda of Islamist state building through a hyper-ambitious Dam Programme and an Agricultural Revival has failed to keep the country united; South Sudan has seceded, whilst war rages in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile. Urban centres have experienced years of recession. Rather than enjoying a dam-induced transformation of agricultural and industrial productivity, Sudan has been unable to escape the clutches of the curse that oil so often proves to be, both when it flows generously and when the black gold no longer brings petrodollars to incumbent governments. The argument of a Salvation “competence agenda” today only provokes cynicism among ordinary farmers, industrialists and civil servants. The dams as *tamkin* appear as a poor joke; with electricity tariffs surging, general inflation soaring, agriculture in the doldrums and corruption spiralling, only a minority has been empowered by the hydro-agricultural mission.

⁵ National Media Production Center 2005.

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While the complex geopolitics of the Horn of Africa, Southern secessionism and a range of other external factors have undoubtedly contributed to the sinking of the wildest dreams of the Al-Ingaz elites, the chief reason for failure is endogenous to the logic of the hydro-agricultural mission and its centrality in Salvation politics. As this book will argue, Usama Abdallah and the DIU have been reproducing the very weaknesses and paradoxes of state-building in Sudan that have historically led to sprawling violence, a contestation of national authority and a problematic relationship with the international system. The hydro-agricultural mission builds on long-established ideas about and patterns of development, political order and water policy in the region. As such, it mixes grand universalist notions of bringing civilisation to impoverished peripheries and growing urban centres with more parochial drivers such as patronage, tribalism and personal enrichment. Much as the latter three sap the former and may ultimately undermine regime survival after having helped to assure it for years, they are not unfortunate accidents. State failure has always nurtured many winners in Sudan. The hydro-agricultural mission is no exception to that. Al-Ingaz espouses very particular ideas about what “civilisation” is; about whom it should benefit; about how power is to be wielded, materially as well as discursively; and about what kinds of violence, structural and physical, are acceptable. This book dissects the political and ideological roots of those ideas, analyses the specific ways in which they have been operationalised and demonstrates their functionality to some and dysfunctionality to many others in Sudan.

SITUATING THE BOOK

Water, Civilisation and Power in Sudan tries to make several contributions to academe. Firstly, I argue that the lens of hydropolitics provides a unique insight into the logic of power under the Al-Ingaz regime. Sudan’s generals and Islamists have always objected to being labelled “coup plotters”, claiming revolutionary objectives. The idea of Islamic revolution is taken seriously here: I analyse Islamist efforts at material and immaterial transformation of Sudanese society through the development of a particular political economy of water and associated visions of hydro-engineering civilisation. The water-agricultural nexus has spearheaded its modernisation offensive in the last fifteen years, a key battlefield for the regime’s frontal assault on the old Sudan, which it has sought to destroy since 30 June 1989. Based on years of privileged access to regime protagonists, Sudan’s water bureaucracy and key international rivals-cum-partners,

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I argue that ideas of water, civilisation and power are crucial to understanding how Sudan's longest serving regime since independence builds coalitions in Khartoum and the peripheries to stay in power; how the Salvation sees itself and brings together pragmatic politics, default Sudanese tactics and revolutionary ideology in its *modus operandi*; how Sudan's military-Islamist coalition has been central to the erosion of the hydropolitical status-quo in the Nile Basin that underpinned Egyptian hydro-hegemony for decades; and how Al-Ingaz attempts to rework its relationship with the international system through the water-agriculture nexus, deriving from it resources and legitimacy essential to regime survival.

A second contribution of this book is to a rich field of enquiry that maps out the relationship between politics and natural resources, or, to be more specific, between state building and elite politics on the one hand, and ideas and practices of water management on the other. The twenty-first century hydro-agricultural mission of the Al-Ingaz regime is unique, but has to be understood in the historical context of the social construction of environmental paradigms and the political ecology of postcolonial societies. I underline how the military-Islamist hydro-agricultural mission is deeply embedded in the *longue durée* of thinking about water, civilisation and power in the Nile Basin, echoing policy prescriptions and logics of political control and high-modernist development that have been salient for almost 200 years. The argument here highlights the centrality of hydropolitics in the practices and discourses of successive authoritarian states and governments in the Nile Basin. In the past, grand state building projects, predicated on the dream of controlling water to control people, have been characterised by high levels of violence and developmental mirages in the desert. I show why, under military-Islamist rule in Sudan, this experience is being repeated.

The historical dimension of at least 6,000 years of political thinking about the links between control over water, the flourishing of civilisation and the accumulation of wealth and power matter to our understanding of Sudan's Al-Ingaz, but this works the other way around as well. The Salvation experiment yields important insights about similarities and differences between the visions and practices of periods past and present regarding water, civilisation and power. The hydro-agricultural mission is, like the nebulous political doctrine of Islamism itself, a profoundly modern project and links national processes of wealth and power accumulation with local fallouts and global economic dynamics and narratives. While some of its foundational elements go back to Pharaonic times, the

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mission is profoundly enmeshed in the latest wave of globalisation, including political battles over climate, food, oil and land and the global power shift from west to east. My argument is specifically one about state building and the nature of such a project in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Africa: Al-Ingaz as an example of an African elite that goes beyond the mere management of patronage networks and offers a serious state building agenda through a strategic engagement of the global political economy of water, food and energy as it pursues “infrastructural power”.⁶ As such, the book partakes in debates about governing elites and the bureaucratic instruments they use to retain dominance, but also about that most enigmatic of beasts, the African state, and its past, present and future trajectory.

The analysis of the Dam Implementation Unit opens up new avenues to explore contemporary developments surrounding African authoritarian state building projects that fit neither into the liberal model of post-conflict reconstruction nor into neo-patrimonial business-as-usual or state collapse. Elite bureaucracies such as Usama Abdallah’s unit give the impression of being “un-African” institutions, with their power stemming from their exceptional status: they are well endowed, well organised, well versed in sustainable development speak and well insulated against societal pressures, using sophisticated financial instruments and relatively advanced technical knowledge to execute their mandates. The centrality of water, that most vital of resources, to their material practices and symbolic authority both makes their operations immediately and extremely consequential, and helps elevate them to a higher, almost apolitical level. However, the projects they pursue are not separate from the rest of the political system or from the weakness of the state. To the contrary, as supreme products of elite politics, they often compound authoritarian, unaccountable governance, worsen asymmetric patterns of development and further institutionalise violence. Almost always, their capability to shape human and natural realities is overestimated. As institutions are deliberately made central to processes of primitive accumulation, genuinely technocratic concerns are constantly trumped by political-economic considerations. The story of water, civilisation and power in Sudan, then, is a story of illiberal state building in Africa and the many promises and pitfalls that accompany these experiments.

Finally, *Water, Civilisation and Power in Sudan* contributes to wider debates in international society about water, food and energy. Fears about

⁶ Mann 1984.

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Malthusian crunches and rising global commodity prices proliferate in the early twenty-first century. I argue that the widespread idea that environmental scarcity, as an exogenous variable, is the main shaper of societies is both theoretically and empirically misguided. The links between water, civilisation and power highlight not just the endogeneity of environmental processes to political-economic dynamics, but also the violent consequences of a paradigm that is seen by ruling elites as both enlightened science and the route to hegemony, though in reality it has little to do with any meaningful understanding of complex, changing ecological conditions. Sudan's elites continue to pursue state building agendas focussed on processes of power and wealth accumulation around the water-agriculture nexus that reproduce the very societal and environmental problems they claim to be resolving. The bottom line remains what it has always been: politics.

Thus, the story of Sudan's Dam Programme and Agricultural Revival demonstrates that despite all the claims about a "new" politics of resources in Africa, much of what is happening inside the continent and in its relationships with the outside world is a variation on older, deeply problematic themes. Whereas there is little evidence of the water wars and climate change conflicts that environmental determinists have been forecasting, the cornucopian thesis of a "new" Africa capitalising on rising prices for cash crops, minerals and hydrocarbons to become a more autonomous actor is also proving problematic. Rather, the military-Islamist political economy of water shows how the dominant pattern of interaction between major African states and the world economy of the last decades remains very recognisable. Extraversion continues to define the relationship between Africa and the outside world, with African elites as skilful gatekeepers who proactively develop an asymmetric relationship with the global economic system in order to consolidate their grip on power. The very weakness of the state is being reproduced, as this benefits ruling groups more than genuine transformation. Rehashing well-established patterns, African economies are asymmetrically integrated into international flows as key resource providers – water, food, land – while the bulk of their people remain trapped in the outer periphery of global capitalism. Extraversion and its consequences can produce remarkable stability at the national level and ensure state survival, but is often terribly violent at the local level.

The book thus ends with a crucial warning about the climate change era: links exist between poverty, ecological scarcity and violence, but they do not run through any Malthusian-Hobbesian causal chain. Rather, they