

**The ‘Indigenous Languages’ in the Current Post-Civil War Interim
Constitution of the Sudan: The Political and the Practical**

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As can be seen from the title, my presentation intends to review the new language policy agreed upon in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (2005) and endorsed in the Interim Constitution of the Republic of the Sudan (2006). This is with the intention to assess the actual gains of the indigenous languages – which 87 out of ca. 125 belong to the Nilo-Saharan family – from this new language policy, in which the roles of the two languages for wider communication (i.e. Arabic and English) are also bluntly emphasized. Reviewing the previous language policies, I will also try to discern the political, social and economical constraints that may militate against the implementation of this policy satisfactorily. My arguments will take into consideration Fairclough’s (1989) remark that, “language is certainly involved in power, and struggles for power”.

The article on ‘Language’ in the Interim Constitution (based on CPA) reads as follows:

- 1. All indigenous languages of the Sudan are national languages and shall be respected, developed and promoted.*
- 2. Arabic is a widely spoken national language in the Sudan.*
- 3. Arabic, as a major language at the national level, and English shall be the official working languages of the national government and the languages of instruction for higher education.*
- 4. In addition to Arabic and English, the legislature of any sub-national level of government may adopt any other national language as an additional official working language at its level.*
- 5. There shall be no discrimination against the use of either Arabic or English at any level of government or stage of education.*

For the implementation of this new language policy, a ‘Commission for Developing and Promoting the National Languages’ was established under the auspices of the President of the Republic, whose objective, *inter alia*, is “Endeavoring to develop and promote the national languages through initiatives to be taken by the native speakers....”.

With the above points constituting the new language policy, the indigenous languages have now – at least constitutionally – obtained their full rights, and the long debated problem of 'Language' appears to have been theoretically solved. But practically the matter is not as simple as that. After such a long period of hostile relations between Arabic and the indigenous languages – as will be shown below - we need to ask ourselves: To what extent are the speakers of the indigenous languages in the southern part of the country ready to recognize the importance of Arabic and cope with it in official and semi-official national affairs? Likewise, to what extent are the 'Arabists' in the northern part of the country ready to cope with the rights given to the indigenous languages?

My thesis departs from the fact that the subsequent two peace agreements, viz.: Abuja Agreement between the Sudanese government and the main faction of Darfur rebels, and Asmara Agreement between the government and the Eastern Sudan rebels, do NOT include any clause on 'language'. This means that 'language' (and culture) is not among the issues for which the rebels of these two regions carried arms. In other words, the local communities of these two regions can be linguistically and cultural considered as part of the larger northern part of the Sudan. As such, we can easily establish that 'language' (and culture) is an issue of conflict between the Southern Sudan, on the one hand, and the rest (or the northern part of) the Sudan, on the other hand. If the North stands/struggles for Arabic and the South stands/struggles for the indigenous languages, then this means by definition that the actual competition and conflict is between Arabic and the indigenous languages.

In order to understand the genesis and development of the above North/South dichotomy on the issue of 'language and culture', let us make a flash-back and review the previous language policies designed for the Sudan since the Anglo-Egyptian rule (1898-1956) up to CPA.

In my opinion, two periods corresponding to two language policies played a pivotal role in accentuating the above dichotomy:

- a- The period from 1898 – 1945; the (first) colonial language policy.
- b- The period from 1945 – 1972; the colonial/national language policy.

The colonial language policy aimed at complete barring of Arabic language (and Arab-Islamic culture) from the South (and later on the Nuba

Mountains); although at that time Arabic had already developed as sole *lingua franca* in that region. The measures taken for that purpose included:

- The Rejaf (Language) Conference (1928), wherein 6 indigenous languages (later increased to 11) were selected for promotion and use by the Christian Missions as media of instruction and preaching.
- The Law of 'No-Man's Land'; through evacuation of strips of border lands between the North and the South in order to hinder any human contact between the two regions.
- The 'Closed Districts Ordinance' (1930); through tight restrictions on travel from the North to the South and vice-versa.

Through these measures, the two parts of the country were separated by what historians refer to as 'iron curtain'.

It is noteworthy that indigenous languages were opted for education and preaching in the Rejaf (Language) Conference not because the British were keen about promoting these languages, but because the Italian and German Catholic and Protestant missionaries opposed to any attempt of using English, which neither they nor the targeted people knew at that time. So, the above language policy closed the door firmly before Arabic, but without including any measures for developing an alternative *lingua franca*. Therefore, Arabic continued by necessity to play that communicational role and eventually to spread further and further.

After the end of World War II the British colonial policy underwent a drastic change. Accordingly, in 1945 the colonial government in the Sudan decided to make a U-turn in its Southern Sudan language policy, thus opening the door widely for Arabic. The subsequent national governments after the Independence (1956) continued 'pumping' Arabic through teaching curricula with equal force and measures through which it was barred. The same Arabic curriculum taught in the Arabic speaking North was implemented in the South, without considering:

- i- the difference in cultural environments;
- ii- the difference in religions and systems of belief;
- iii- the fact that the southern pupils and students were, until then, pursuing their education through a different system, which necessitated a transitional period and a gradual implementation of the new educational system.

Thus, the change was too abrupt, the dosage was too big, and the measures were too coercive, beyond the toleration of the Southerners.

So to say; the wrong language policies of these two periods, whether against or in favour of Arabic, and the inappropriate means of their implementation were responsible of widening the North/South dichotomy regarding the issue of 'language'.

The three subsequent language policies, including the one under discussion, were designed in/for war-ending negotiations. They were worked out exclusively by politicians without due consultation of language experts. This is why, as noted by K. Jahalla, many of the essential points in these policies were but mere idealistic aspirations which do not stand the actual socio-political and economical reality of the country.

The article on 'Language, Education and Culture' in Addis Ababa Agreement (1972) states that:

- Arabic is the official language of the Sudan.
- English is the main language of the Southern Region.
- Indigenous languages can be used by the regional government in certain executive domains; this includes their promotion and use as media of instruction.

It is to note here that the point concerning the indigenous languages is confined to the Southern Sudan Region to the exclusion of the indigenous languages in the rest of the country.

Indigenous languages at the level of the country at large were given consideration for the first time in the National Dialogue Conference for the Problems of Peace organized by the present regime a few months after its access to power in 1989. In that conference, the resolution on 'Language and Education' states that planning for a language policy and education should be based on the following:

- Arabic is the mother tongue of a large Sudanese community, a means of communication (*lingua franca*) for many Sudanese communities, and the official language of the country since the Independence.
- English has a special position in the Southern Regions, and it is a means of communication with the outside world.
- The government should not take scarcity of financial means as a pretext for barring any indigenous language from being used as a medium of instruction.

- The government should adopt the initiatives of ethnic groups wishing to promote their respective tribal languages and use them as media of instruction for their children.

That was the situation *on paper* regarding the rights of the indigenous languages in 1989. Let us now see what happened on the ground (i.e. in reality) from that time up to the signature of CPA in 2005 (ca. 15 years):

- i. Arabicization of higher education (implemented in all the Sudanese universities, including those of the Southern Sudan, and all the faculties, including those of applied sciences).
- ii. Direct and indirect support of the Arabic language and culture.
- iii. Drastic set-back of English language knowledge even among university graduates.
- iv. Complete lack of any attempt to promote or even to support the promotion of the indigenous languages (regarded as mere '*dialects*').

Now let us go back to the article on 'language' in CPA and compare it with the resolution on 'Language Culture and Education' in Addis Ababa Agreement (1972) and that on 'Language and Education' in National Dialogue Conference for the Problems of Peace (1989):

- To me, the first point (*All indigenous languages of the Sudan are national languages and shall be respected, developed and promoted*) is a kind of rhetoric, which does not include any objective linguistic value; it can even be described as 'confusing'. What does it mean to have about 125 national languages in one country? I have never heard of that. Here, either the legislators do not know the linguistics meaning of 'National Language' or this point stands on top of the Article merely for its embellishment. But if the legislators really used 'National Language' in its proper linguistic sense, this will be an introduction of what I may call 'linguistic havoc'.

- The second point (*Arabic is a widely spoken national language in the Sudan*) had already been stipulated and repeated in all the previous policies (except the colonial language policy).

- By the third point (*Arabic, as a major language at the national level and English shall be the official working languages of the national government and the languages of instruction for higher education*)

English has been recognized for the first time as a second official working language at the national level.

- The forth point (*In addition to Arabic and English, the legislature of any sub-national level of government may adopt any other national language as an additional official working language at its level*) is just a reformulation of what was agreed upon in 1972 and 1989.

- The last point (*There shall be no discrimination against the use of either Arabic or English at any level of government or stage of education*) concerns English in the first place and has nothing to do with the indigenous languages.

So, now the question is: What is the NEW gain of the indigenous languages in CPA? To me, the answer is NOT THAT MUCH. Then who gained what? To me, the answer is: **English**, which has regained its lost status as a medium of instruction for higher education and the status of a second official working language of the national government. On the ground, immediately after the endorsement of the Interim Constitution the government, under pressure of SPLM, took serious measures for setting the third point into action. Likewise, last month the Southern Sudan House of Assembly passed a resolution whereby Arabic is to be replaced – ironically – by English (and not the indigenous languages) as medium of instruction in all the Southern Sudan pre-university education; Arabic is to be taught just as a subject.

Why do the two language parties, i.e. Arabic and the indigenous languages are regarded today as opponents to one another. I think that the routes of this matter go back to the early extremist language policies adopted at the two periods mentioned earlier in this presentation (1898-1945 and 1945-1972), and the inappropriate means of their implementation. The unfortunate result of these policies was/is the erroneous belief among both the elites of the South and the ‘Arabists’ of the North that these two language parties are MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE.

The ‘Arabists’ of the North are haunted by ‘the theory of plot’ against the Arab-Islamic identity of the Sudan, thinking that this identity is targeted by the Christian-Imperial powers. To them, the end of the Christian-Imperial powers is to ‘Africanize’ Sudan on the account of its Arab-Islamic identity, and promotion of the indigenous languages is but one of the avenues leading

to that end. There are others who argue for the curtailing of the indigenous languages from a different perspective; these are the people who believe on 'unity in homogeneity' (in opposition to 'unity in diversity'). For these people, promotion of these languages will hamper the promotion of national unity. However, nobody thinks loudly on the relationship between language and power, although practically this relationship exists, even if not being aware of.

The Southern elites, on the other hand, regard Arabic as container of Arab-Islamic culture; therefore its imposition on them means marginalization of their culture and identity, their assimilation, domination and even 'colonization'. For them, the end result of imposition of Arabic on them is to turn them into 'second class citizens' deprived of identity and eventually of power, which they naturally do not accept after 40 years of struggle against that.

So, 'language' in Sudan is really a political issue related with identity and power. At this juncture, I have to re-emphasize my thesis that language policies legislated in negotiations will remain as mere aspirations on paper. To begin with, both the 'Arabists' in the North and the elites of the South should get rid of their erroneous belief that the two language parties are mutually exclusive. A practical language policy for the Sudan should depart from the conviction that the two language parties can indeed co-exist. Accordingly, language experts (and not politicians alone) should be invited to design a language policy which is liable to implementation on the ground, with due consideration to the ground itself. Factors such as the issue of identity in the war-spoilt relations between the North and the South, and the actual socio-political and economical reality of the country should be taken into consideration.

The Committee for Promotion and Development of National Languages

For the implementation of the new language policy stipulated in CPA and the Interim Constitution, a 'Committee for Promotion and Development of National Languages' was formed under the auspices of the President of the Republic, whose objectives are the following:

- a- Proposing and planning the language policies for the state in the framework of the Interim Constitution.
- b- Endeavoring to consolidate the national unity by safeguarding the Sudanese language heritage.

- c- Endeavoring to trace and record the National Languages and bring out their heritage.
- d- Endeavoring to trace and record the National Languages through initiatives to be taken by the native speakers so that the languages can become tools of thinking, creation and expression.
- e- Expressing concern over endangered national languages and recording their cultural heritage.
- f- Encouraging the translation of the Sudanese oral heritage entrenched and rooted in the different national languages with special attention to the implications that foster shared sentiments and emotions reinforcing the national fabric.
- g- Encouraging the translating of intellectual production from and into national languages.
- h- Furnishing and providing the State with the desired technical consultation and opinion over how to employ their languages.
- i- Disseminating Arabic and promoting its communicative riches as it is the national language with remarkably wide spread.
- j- Promulgating living languages and promoting the communication strategies required for effective use, with special emphasis on the English Language as a language used for performing national and governmental actions, as well as the medium of instruction in higher education institutions, not to mention its role in access to learning, localization of knowledge and openness to the world.

All the above objectives are noble and coherently formulated. But the problem is that the new language policy and the accompanying objectives of the above ‘Commission for Promotion and Development of National Languages’ are based on the Interim Constitution whose life span ends in 2011. The last year (i.e. 2011) will definitely be spent on the preparation and carrying out of the referendum (on self-determination by the South). I do not know what can be achieved on promotion of the so-called ‘national languages’ in the next two years. I am sure that my listeners are not expecting to hear what has been achieved in this regard for the last two years. Well, all that I can say is: a committee for promotion of the ‘national languages’ was formed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, which did not include the head of the Department of Sudanese and African Languages of the Institute of African & Asian Studies, University of Khartoum or any of his students.

However, the determining factor on the fate of the new language policy and the accompanying objectives of the Committee is the REFERENDUM. If the South votes for secession this will be the end of the story. In the case it votes for a unified country, the Commission will need to bear the following comments and challenges in mind:

- Development of indigenous languages is the concern of state governments rather than the central government. The latter is expected to be distracted by bigger problems than promoting and developing indigenous languages. Therefore, if this task is to be undertaken effectively, the presidency should delegate its power in this regard to the state governments together with the budget allocated to it.
- Under the present political and economic conditions, I doubt if development and promotion of indigenous languages can start right ahead. Even when the process starts, it will take a long time before it yields fruits. And this is expected to involve serious problems and challenges:
 - What languages come first? (Definitely not all at the same time)
 - On what basis does the selection rest?
 - What will be the reaction of the speakers of the languages which are left behind?
 - How long do we need to train linguists who are to undertake this task? (Linguistic description, orthography designing, preparing of primers, etc.)
 - How long do we need to train the teachers?