

Harry Cross. *Undoing a Revolution: Sudan and the Politics of Debt*. Hurst & Company: International African Institute, 2025. 216 pp.

A Review by James Morton

This important book challenges the way the West undid Sudan's 2019 revolution by imposing IMF economic adjustment policies on the civilian-led Transitional Government. The heart of the book is its analysis of what happened after Omar Al Bashir was overthrown in 2019 and replaced by a Transitional Government representing a precarious compromise between military and paramilitary forces and disparate civil society groups. It sets out how the West expected Sudan to accept western policies in the Middle East in return for economic support; support which was conditional on the IMF's stringent package of fiscal adjustment policies. The book argues that this undid Sudan's popular revolution and buried its progressive hopes. The International Community must find a better way to support popular revolutions, a way that escapes the orthodoxy of fiscal adjustment and debt repayment.

Starting from his own field research on Sudanese banking and finance, Cross' sources range from the colonial record to the latest literature, published and unpublished, in Arabic and French as well as English. Occasional quotes from Sudanese friends and contacts gives a feel of day-to-day life in Sudan.

In 1958 Nasser commented that the US was using aid and soft loans to replace British imperialism. This was to echo over next 30 years as the Sudan became more dependent on international financial support, always conditional on Sudanese support for western policies. That the Government never met the financial conditions imposed after each round of debt adjustment did not matter. Sudan was the only Arab nation to support Egypt's recognition of Israel, so Western governments continued to provide aid "on a 'drip feed' of liquidity that purchased political influence and loyalty in Khartoum."

The Islamist coup of 1989 ended this deal and "western aid fell off a cliff and Sudan's external accounts collapsed." Economic sanctions were imposed and grew ever stronger. The US designation of Sudan as a State Sponsor of Terrorism put it off limits for international companies and cut it off from international financial networks.

After splitting with National Islamic Front Al Bashir sought a reconciliation, handing Carlos the Jackal over to the French and expelling Osama bin Laden. But any chance of international rehabilitation disappeared with the destruction of the World Trade Centre and the start of the Global War on Terror. Sudan had to find other ways to support its economy. And it did it, demonstrating "innovation and resourcefulness as it reoriented the economy under a state of siege." It drew in investment from the Arab Gulf states and most importantly China. It by-passed financial sanctions through banking networks in the Gulf. With Chinese investment it was finally able to realise its oil resources.

Islamic finance played a key part in the rise of the National Islamic Front. This was not just patronage for NIF supporters. From 1989 onwards credit to small businesses and low-income households resulted in an "economic democratisation (which) consolidated a new business class who identified

with the regime and who operated within national supply chains capable of resisting economic sanctions.” In doing this the National Congress Party built a genuine constituency for Islamic rule.

The Forces for Freedom and Change, the civil society grouping which dominated the transition after Al Bashir's fall, had little contact with this constituency and no wish to represent it. Islamist groups were excluded from the transition process and elections were held back for three years for fear that the voters might give the wrong, Islamist answer. The most influential civilian voices in the transition, many of them anglophone and some in the diaspora, were more attuned to western ideas of root and branch regime change. In a re-run of the de-Baathification error which threw Iraq into chaos they sought to eliminate Islamists from every level of government and the military. In this light the Sudan Armed Forces' participation in the 2021 coup was at least partly defensive, as was Islamist support for that coup.

Srinivasan has argued that western dominance of Sudan's peace processes has created a political class focussed on international actors and out of touch with their national constituencies; what he describes as the 'extroversion and withering of civil politics.'¹⁴ Cross argues the point more forcefully. With elections delayed and diaspora technicians in key positions this offered “a rare opportunity for Sudan's Anglophone elite with links in the West and with international institutions to reform the country in their image, with the influence of both the military and the religious, regional and sectarian constituencies of the provinces temporarily checked.”

However, it was the West's economic demands which played the biggest part in undoing Sudan's revolution: public expenditure cut by 24%, an 85% devaluation and fuel prices increased by 400%. Sudan defaulted on its debts in 1984 but those dating as far back as the 1970s remained on its balance sheet, still gathering interest and charges. Because of sanctions, it could not benefit from the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative to settle its debts with the IMF and World Bank and write down its other debts. To qualify for HIPC, the IMF's conditions had to be met. On top of this Sudan had to get the US to remove its designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism by recognising Israel and paying \$335 million compensation for its alleged involvement in attacks on US embassies. That was around a third of Sudan's foreign exchange reserves.

One can disagree with several points in the book. Most significant is the way Cross seeks to “resist explanations that point to the ‘corruption’ or ‘mismanagement’ of Sudanese politicians, as such explanations typically lack precision and overlook structural factors leading to large debt overhangs.” This is too easy. There is ample evidence that corruption and mismanagement, without inverted commas, are deep rooted in Sudanese governance and politics.¹⁵

However, the book must be judged on its three central arguments. That up until 1989 Sudan's relations with the West were essentially transactional, trading political acquiescence for credit. That the regime which came to power in 1989 was economically resilient and “represented a large constituency

¹⁴ Srinivasan, S (2021), *When Peace Kills Politics, International Intervention and the Unending Wars in the Sudans* (London: Hurst & Co)

¹⁵ De Waal, A (2015), *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press)

concerned with the prosperity, sovereignty and religious integrity of their country.” And finally, that the West undid the popular revolution of 2019 by imposing an immediate return to the pre-1989 way of doing business.

There are few who would disagree with the first point. IMF and World Bank policies were heavily criticised by Sudanese economists and others who argued that the cut-and-paste models of the Washington Consensus took no account of the realities of Sudan's economy.¹⁶ The criticisms were ignored. So long as the Sudanese Government kept to its pro-West line lending continued in the face of repeated economic failures.¹⁷

The second point is much more contentious. The post-1989 Salvation Regime has been described in the most damning terms: ‘a "reign of terror," , " the product of a wide "range of deceits," ... a vehicle for the "violent suppression of other religious systems" and political voices, etc.’¹⁸ In 1999 the regime took a more pragmatic turn, engaging with international mediators to end the war in S. Sudan. However, it remained “economically diminished, unable to normalise Western ties and wracked by conflicts in its peripheries”: a regime dominated by the security forces, with both reformists and Islamists marginalised.¹⁹

That the Salvation Regime outlasted its predecessors by decades might indicate it was rather better than that. This reviewer left Darfur just after the 1989 coup. By 2010 standards of living had changed beyond recognition. Nyala had enough private cars and tuk-tuk three wheelers to form small traffic jams. 20 years earlier there was only a handful of vehicles of any kind. Where not even townspeople had telephones, country women now had mobile phones. That said Cross' analysis does not go very deep. He describes how economic advances from 1999 onwards were based on Sudan's new oil revenues, but his focus is not so much on the economy as it is on finance, in particular the various ways Sudan worked around sanctions. This is not enough to assess what the Salvation regime may have contributed in the way of sustainable, well-distributed economic development. But that would need a separate book.

In 2021 Afrobarometer carried out a national survey of Sudanese attitudes at a time when the Transitional Government was trying to make a reality of The Declaration of Freedom and Change by creating a government led by “*qualified people based on merits of competency and good reputation, representing various Sudanese groups and receiving the consensus of the majority.*” Taken at this more optimistic moment, the survey tells something of the society the Salvation Regime had created.²⁰

96% Muslim and 99% speaking Arabic, Sudan is a homogenous nation. 80% of the adult population have at least primary education. Over 20% are graduates, nearly matching the UK's 22%. Just as many women as men have degrees. Large majorities have radio and television. Perhaps most telling,

¹⁶ Morton, JF (2024), *Double Dutch Disease: Emigration as a Human Resource Curse on Sudan* (Oxford: St Antonys International Review, 19.1 p 134 ff)

¹⁷ Morton, JF (1994), *The Poverty of Nations: The Aid Dilemma at the Heart of Africa: Ch 5* (London: IB Tauris)

¹⁸ Sharkey, H. J. (2010), *The First Islamist Republic: Development and Disintegration of Islamism in the Sudan (Review)*. (Northeast African Studies, 11 (1), 153-155)

¹⁹ International Crisis Group (2016), *Crisis Group Africa Briefing No 119* (Nairobi/Brussels)

²⁰ www.afrobarometer.org/publication/summary-results-afrobarometer-round-8-survey-sudan-2021

78% of Sudanese are on their mobile phone every day. All these statistics would have been unthinkable in 1989. This is not a population held in ignorance by the rent-extracting elite of Khartoum.

The survey reveals a country in distress. Three quarters see Sudan as ‘going in the wrong direction’. Nine out of ten say that their economic situation has got worse. Education, health, crime and corruption are listed but the economy outweighs all of them together as “the most important problem that the government should address.” Only small minorities see politics and ethnic tensions as important.

Most telling, the Sudanese see no contradiction between Islam and democracy. Nearly sixty percent say that Sudan should be “governed primarily by religious law.” In other words, there is broad popular support for the idea that Shari’a law should be part of the Sudanese constitution. This certainly sounds like the constituency Cross describes as “concerned with the prosperity, sovereignty and religious integrity of their country.”

As the sub-title ‘The Politics of Debt’ indicates, Cross’ focus is on his third argument: that it was the West’s imposition of its standard economic prescription which undid the 2019 revolution. There is no doubting that the economic conditions imposed were premature, if not wholly inappropriate. This does not necessarily mean that they were the principal cause of the revolution’s collapse. There were other powerful factors at work. The revolution’s insistence on de-Islamisation and the West’s encouragement of that insistence had ensured there would be support for a counter-revolution. A Core Sudanese Working Group described how things went off track before the dust of Al Bashir’s fall had settled. Instead of organising their bases for early elections, the political parties ‘*worked to invest the postponement of the elections in "cleansing the state" from the "National Congress" supporters and other former regime and Islamist forces.*’ This would endanger any transition from revolution to democratic transformation and a broad national consensus. “*Intuitively, the national agreement should include the groups that were in power, if these groups accept and abide by the democratic principles of the revolution.*”²¹

Western political involvement the Sudanese transition was as misguided as the economic. Rather than support an inclusive transition in an even-handed way, the USA and others tacitly supported the exclusion of Islamist groups. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, regional powers with their own anti-Islamist agendas were encouraged to take part. Instead of helping the Transitional Government to build a national consensus in Khartoum, international mediators concentrated on a Juba Peace Process in which particularist claims from all over Sudan were agreed without consideration of the national interest.²² Armed groups party to that final agreement are still blocking international mediation efforts in February 2026, underlining the futility of the Juba exercise.²³

None of this detracts from the book’s central point. That the West, particularly the US, repeatedly moved the goalposts to ensure that the National Congress Party government could never escape

²¹ Ending the April 15th War and Sustaining Peace in Sudan (2023), unpublished paper cited in Morton JF (2024), *We Need to Talk About Islam - And the Western Blight on Sudanese Politics* (Shaw Sheet magazine, Issue 364 - Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4760052>)

²² Morton – idem

²³ <https://thesudantimes.com/sudan/rift-grows-inside-sudans-democratic-bloc-over-quintet-talks/>

sanctions. And when it finally got the regime change it wanted it moved the goalposts again and set the Transitional Government up to fail by attempting to force the Sudan to settle 50 years of financial accounts before it could draw breath. The case Cross makes for a new approach seems proven beyond any reasonable doubt. Such an approach would include unconditional short-term assistance for any new government installed with popular support and a form of sovereign bankruptcy which would allow highly indebted countries to escape the cycle of adjustment and insolvency tied to political compliance.