

Understanding Sudan

A Teaching and Learning Resource



Was the Black Book Correct? Regional Inequality in Sudan

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Most Sudanese are familiar with the Black Book, an anonymously published work that appeared in the streets of Khartoum in 2000. The book purports to document the ethnicity of every minister in successive national governments, showing that they are overwhelmingly from northern Sudan. The data buttresses the argument that power in Khartoum is held by a small ethnic group of northern Sudanese. The major peripheries of the country—South, West and East—have been excluded from power. The lack of power has resulted in low standards of living.

For the argument to be valid, several implicit assumptions have to be verified. One is whether ministers in national governments actually hold much power. In some countries, these positions are powerless prizes allocated by the strongman dictator to marginalized ethnic groups. Witness, for example, the recent Darfur Peace Agreement that creates a special Presidential appointment of Senior Assistant that is clearly more symbolic than powerful. Another assumption is that regions are deficient in their ministerial allocations because they have a limited supply of competent personnel, and not because they are excluded. The South had few ministers because there were few southerners with the competencies to be ministers, perhaps? A third assumption is that the allocation of ministers actually matters. Perhaps the northern elite looked after the interests of everyone in Sudan, and favored the peripheral areas, even at the expense of their home region.

Alex Cobham, Director of the Oxford Council on Good Governance, assesses this third assumption in a recent academic paper ([“Causes of conflict in Sudan: Testing the Black Book,” QEH Working Paper Series – QEHWPS121, 2005](#))¹. He asks whether it is true that regions disfavored in terms of ministers were also disfavored in the allocations of resources from the central government of Sudan. He goes a few steps further than stating the incontrovertible fact that people in the peripheral regions are poorer than those in the northern region. Because they are poorer, they contribute relatively little to the general revenue of the state. Their allocation of expenditures from the national state, could, in principle, be larger than their revenues, indicating that they are relatively subsidized by the state. Similar arguments are familiar to economists who work on gender issues: girls typically require fewer health resources than boys—they are born healthier on average—and so disproportionate health expenditure on male infants and boys does not necessarily indicate greater well-being. Likewise, a major city that is a center of economic activity is going to draw more public resources than a small village. Finding disproportion then is not de facto evidence of discrimination.

¹ Subsequently published as Alex Cobham. “Causes of Conflict in Sudan: Testing *The Black Book*.” *The European Journal of Development Research* 17, no. 3 (2005): 462 - 480.

So Cobham comes up with three measures that suggest the Black Book argument was essentially correct in its assumption that disproportionate power has led to disproportionate and presumptively discriminatory benefits. The first measure is the “the difference between the (own) revenue and expenditure values” for government, expressed as a percentage of those of the northern region. So, if government expenditures in the West were 120 dinars per person, and revenues were 100 dinars, while expenditures in the northern region were 200 dinars per person and revenue were 150 dinars, the west could be thought of as receiving a “subsidy” of 20 dinars from the central government while the northern region received a subsidy of 50, even though it was wealthier to begin with. Cobham calculates that the subsidy received by the West was approximately 45% of the subsidy received by the North during the 1996-2000 period.

The second measure is that infant mortality in the West (at 122.5 boys and 104.2 girls dying per 1000 births) is strikingly different from infant mortality in the North (100.1 boys and 88.8 girls per thousand births). This large difference in infant mortality is most plausibly linked to large differences in the percent of births attended by a qualified physician. Almost half of all births are unattended in the West, while only about 15% are unattended in the North. There is an enormous gap then in the life chances of infants in western Sudan compared with northern Sudan.

The third measure is education, where again there are large gaps between West and north. For adult literacy, for example, 38% of adults are literate in the West, while more than 76% are literate in the north. For enrolment, rates stand at 66% in the North, and only 40% in the West.

These gaps are also evidence when comparing the North with the South and East. So on government expenditure and basic life outcomes there are large gaps in the allocation of “well-being” across the regions of Sudan. Cobham concludes, “the data support the claims made in the Black Book that the Sudan has been governed to benefit those regions disproportionately at the expense of all others –who account for 80% of the population, or around 25 million people.” The question now is, will the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and Darfur Peace Agreement remedy these historic inequities? Judging by the foot-dragging of the National Congress Party, it appears that inequality will not respond quickly to increased representation. Let us hope that power-sharing turns out not to be an illusion.

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