

ABSTRACT

“WE CHANGED THE LAWS”: PRACTICE AND MALPRACTICE IN SUDAN’S ELECTIONS

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Sudan’s electoral history has perhaps been a little atypical for Africa. Here, as elsewhere, the secret ballot came to the fore after 1945 as British officials experimented tentatively with a limited franchise intended to draw ‘responsible’ subjects into a reinvention of the colonial state; limitations on the franchise were rapidly swept away and an election with a secret ballot and adult manhood was a central element in the establishment of a successor state to take over power from departing colonial officials. But in the thirty years after independence, Sudan had an unusually large number of multi-party parliamentary elections - four in all between 1958 and 1986. This was not evidence of political stability. Parliamentary governments were generally short-lived, being overthrown by military coups in 1958, 1969 and 1989; and Sudan has largely been ruled by authoritarian regimes. The ‘second liberation’ of the 1990s had no impact on Sudan, where the military clique who seized power in 1989 have remained in control. But now, for the first time in more than twenty years, Sudan faces multi-party elections; the political process laid down by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005 placed elections at the centre of a political process which was seen, by some at least, as a means to entirely change the political culture of the country and so (as the CPA put it) ‘make unity attractive’ in advance of the referendum for self-determination which has been promised to the south.

This paper will suggest that the history of Sudan’s elections may offer some salutary lessons for those preparing for the national elections as part of the CPA process – elections now scheduled for 2010. Sudan’s election history is not simply a story of contrast between ‘good’ votes under multi-party systems and ‘bad’ votes under authoritarian regimes. While malpractice – in the sense of deliberate cheating to favour a particular candidate or candidates - has sometimes been flagrant under authoritarian regimes, electoral pretence and ‘changing the law’ – practices abetted by an elitist political culture which concentrated on ensuring a proper ‘show’ of elections in the riverain northern centre of the country - have also been widespread in multi-party elections, and have played a part in developing a pattern of political inclusion and exclusion which has had a profound effect on Sudan, making the experience of many would-be voters something very different from the ideal meeting of efficient state and rational citizen.