

Peering into the Multiple States of Khartoum, Sudan: The Experiences and Perceptions of Job-seekers.

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Moving through the different ministries of Khartoum one will quickly realise that there is no single Sudanese state. In some places, the state is experienced as an unhelpful bureaucracy but in others, it is experienced from behind a closed door, seemingly effective yet secretive and distant. This paper peers into this “multiple-state” experience from the point of view of university graduates seeking employment. I contrast the experiences and perceptions of workers and job-seekers in different state settings: the Selection Committee (the government body responsible for matching university graduates with civil service vacancies), the National Pension Fund, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Finance, the National Telecommunications Corporation and public-private partnerships between the Sudanese government and Malaysia and Chinese companies. I argue that in order to understand state power in contemporary Africa, one must understand how the line between private and public space is demarcated and maintained by different actors. While the Sudanese private sector is closely associated with family firms and by extension, wider communities or tribes, the civil service resides in the public domain and is vulnerable to public demands for “fairness” and “transparency”. Globalization has re-configured this private-public space and has lent a particular transnational flavour to Mark Granovetter’s concept of “weak ties”. I provide evidence from my interviews and ethnographic work with university graduates and human resource managers in different sectors to illustrate how that the National Congress Party used policies of privatization and *tamkeen* (translated as “empowerment” but understood as preferential treatment of party members) to re-configure its location in the public’s imagination. While many parts of the state correspond to the image of the weak or failed state, other parts reside in very different settings and are perceived quite differently by the public. Both constitute the state’s machinery and both contribute to its place in the public’s imagination. As such, privatization must not only be understood in terms of efficiency and economic management, but also in terms of its effect on the changing moral economy of development. This paper is based on my doctoral research “Getting a job in Khartoum, Sudan”, which I conducted during the years 2008-10.