

Globalisation in Sudan: Transnational Social Networks and Economic Growth

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Sudan's image has been tainted by civil war and ethnic conflict but it is also in the midst of an economic boom. After being declared uncooperative by the IMF in the early 1990's, it has now been deemed a success by the same organisation. This paper looks critically at this success by focusing on recruitment and employment. As in other countries, there is a preference for social networks to convey information about jobs, but what sets Sudan apart is the transnational nature of these networks. This can be attributed to the dramatic expansion in tertiary education and to the National Congress Party's (NCP) entrance in the economy. In the early 1990's, it established an Economic Security unit and instituted a program of political privatisation that favoured party members. Fearful of the political role played by universities, it increased the number of regional universities nine-fold, "Islamised" the curriculum, diminished the power of the oldest and most powerful university, the University of Khartoum and forced all universities to deregulate and privatise their finances. As a result, the number of graduates swelled while the impersonal information contained in their qualifications lost its ability to signal competence and trust. The market has been ineffective at coordinating education and has led to a skill shortage in key areas like petroleum. As a result, the NCP relies heavily on foreign workers and sends loyal trainees to the countries of its political and economic allies (most prominently Malaysia). It has justified this reconfiguration using a religious discourse that privileges private control over the economy and an Islamic "self-reliance," forcing non-politically aligned companies and individuals to develop coping strategies. While many left the country in the early 1990's, others remained, acquiring fortress-like mentalities to protect their businesses. These firms typically use the transnational social networks of their employees to find new candidates. Sudan is not part of a "globalisation ghetto": its businesses have flourished because of globalisation, but this flourishing has not been shared widely. Political upheaval has scattered Sudan's economic and political elites across the globe, but internally, social mobility has faltered. This paper is based on my doctoral research on "getting a job in Khartoum, Sudan" conducted over 2008-10.