

Rethinking the Sudanese State: Autonomy, Authority and Fragmentation

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Contested political authority in Sudan: understanding the present by exploring the past

What if we were to cast aside our preconceived notions of Sudan as a unitary state and instead seek to understand the Nile Valley as a longstanding patchwork of contested political authorities? More specifically, in casting the spotlight on Sudan's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century precolonial state system, what might be learnt from historical precedents regarding present and future patterns of state fragmentation? These, ultimately, are the central research questions driving *State Fracture in the Horn: A Comparison between Historical and Contemporary Centres of Power in Sudan*, a research project that aims to deepen understanding of the political conflicts currently afflicting Sudan by reinterpreting the past.

Based on research conducted at Durham University's Sudan Archive and Bergen University's Sudan Collection during summer 2026, the project – which focuses especially on the region's political geography prior to Darfur's formal 1916 inclusion in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan – speaks to crucial issues concerning regional autonomy and economic centres of power. Central in this regard is how we interpret the concept of 'autonomy' – something the project interrogates through such questions as: What does autonomy

mean in different historical contexts? Is it a feature of structural relationships shaped by geography, physical infrastructure, demographics or patterns of trade? Or is it in fact mainly shaped by the political imaginaries and interests of political actors?

In addressing these issues, it is useful to bear in mind historian Richard Reid's warning about the dangers of foreshortening African history – crucially, what today looks like chaos may in fact be an extension of historical patterns rooted in the precolonial era. The implications of such a framing extend beyond Sudan itself, potentially transforming how we view comparable dynamics across the Horn of Africa and beyond.

In practical terms, the research project is separated into two parts: whereas the first looks at the economic impact of Darfur's separation from Sudan, the second uses the historical example of smaller kingdoms like Taqali (1750–1969) to ask what the past can tell us about what a contested Kordofan, the region between the Nile Valley and Darfur, might look like in future.

Darfur's separation from Sudan

The commonly held assumption that Darfur is non-viable as an autonomous economic unit is not supported by the historical data. In fact, the research shows that the monopoly on Darfur's trade by a

centre located around Khartoum is relatively recent. Throughout its history, Darfur has frequently maintained trade routes that have thrived independently of the central Nile Valley (from historic centres like Sennar to the present day centre of Khartoum).

Given the present lack of clarity on Sudan's political future, it is prudent to think of the economic impact of a more autonomous Darfur on both the country as a whole and the wider region. In light of the decline of the oil industry, Darfur is likely to emerge as Sudan's economically and demographically dominant region, with trading links that expand outwards across the Sahel, Sahara, and into central and eastern Africa. It is hard to imagine that the Sudanese state that emerges post-conflict will be as centralised as was the case prior to the war, even if it remains formally unified.

Ultimately, the success of an independent Darfur will most probably depend on its political organisation rather than economic factors. Critical in this regard will be creating political structures that balance Darfur's various constituencies, rather than favouring one group at the expense of marginalising others.

demand autonomy from the central state? And how might these potential secessionist movements impact neighbours like Ethiopia and South Sudan?

The future of Kordofan

Whereas Darfur – as the historical evidence reveals – has long been a rival political and economic centre to the Nile Valley, Kordofan has developed into a contested region with many competing centres of power, particularly in its south. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this has led to the region suffering persistent conflicts of varying intensity.

Against this backdrop, the project uses the historical example of smaller kingdoms like Taqali to paint a picture of what a contested Kordofan might look like in the future. In doing so, it outlines a number of scenarios in which neither the central state in Khartoum nor a partially autonomous Darfur is capable of ruling Kordofan directly, leading to the formation of several new borderlands. In such a scenario, local political entities will likely thrive as both the central government and the Darfur-based authority vie for political and economic control over different parts of Kordofan.

Similar processes have played out in different periods of modern Sudan's history. Drawing on these historic examples, the project will unpack the role of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement - North (SPLM-N) in the current conflict and explore what form the ongoing fracturing of the Sudanese state might take. For instance, what does it mean for combatants in South Kordofan and Blue Nile State to