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1 INTRODUCTION

The close connection between agricultural marketing and rural politics in Sudan has been made particularly graphic in recent years. The normal contest among peasant farmers, traders, and government over the division of earnings from peasant production has on several occasions given way to the use of force.

Most recently in January 1993, farmers of the eastern region gathered in Gedaref, the largest crop marketing centre in the country, protesting against unfavourable prices of sesame and sorghum as well as the lifting of subsidies on farm inputs and basic consumer commodities. They raised anti-government slogans and burnt government offices and premises owned by the town's prominent crop merchants. The government's reaction was to send in troops to violently repress the movement (*Al-Hayat* 29 January, 1993). Similar 'farmers' riots' took place in eastern and western regions between October 1992 and January 1993.

While the government can claim that military action against demonstrations is a way of enforcing the functioning of markets, it can hardly say the same of another task it has assigned to troops in villages. Faced by urban unrest and the increasing needs to feed its armies and militias fighting in the south, the government in 1990/91 and 1991/92 had its soldiers force peasant farmers in Eastern Sudan to surrender their sorghum stocks to military teams at prices which were less than half the current market prices. The confiscated sorghum was sold at a subsidized price to civil servants in Khartoum. The politics of marketing in this case gave way to the politics of armed extortion.

Where marketing problems have deepened into a profound agrarian crisis that threatens the survival of peasant communities, it is not surprising that the political conflict moves beyond issues closely related to marketing. Community leaders in the Darfur and Red Sea regions are constantly rounded up by the security forces and accused of having promoted 'regional tendencies', an accusation with an ominous ring in a country whose government is locked

in a long-running civil war with 'regionalist' movements in the south of the country.

Direct actions by peasant farmers and by government troops are not entirely new in the political history of Sudan. Early measures of a similar kind were taken by farmers during the economic crisis of the 1930s. However, the pressures on peasant farming in Sudan today are even greater than they were in the 1930s and under those pressures what may be called the normal politics of peasant farming is giving way to a politics of crisis. The purpose of this short article is to show how, in the case of Sudan, the politics of agrarian crisis grows out of, but also differs from, the normal politics of agricultural marketing.

2 THE POLITICS OF AGRICULTURAL MARKETING IN SUDAN

Although Sudan is famous for its large irrigated cotton schemes and its ambitious large-scale projects of mechanized farming, the vast majority of farming people and 70 per cent of all the people in the country earn their living chiefly as small-scale independent peasant farmers relying on rainfall to water their crops.

The politics of peasant farming in Sudan revolves around the essential agricultural markets for land, labour, inputs, crops, and consumption goods. All these markets have a strong political dimension, but those for labour and crops are of special importance for our purposes. Peasant farming households have to decide how to divide the labour power of their members among cash crops, food crops, and wage work off the farm. The earnings from cash crops are vital for peasant farmers, village traders, bigger exporting traders, and the government treasury. The allocation of power and the division of earnings is by no means the outcome of narrowly conceived market forces. They result from a fully fledged market politics.

International forces and fashions clearly have a major impact on Sudan's export economy, but with respect to domestic politics three different scales of

political relations are important. At the largest national level is the institutional structure within which marketing takes place, including the definition and enforcement of contracts to buy and sell crops, land, and labour; the licensing of organizations to undertake market transactions; the setting of levels and mechanisms of taxation; the legislation of price levels; and the designation of market locations. At an intermediate level is the village area in which merchants, government officials, and peasant farmers form social, political, and economic relationships of cooperation and of antagonism. Finally, at the social level most immediate for individual people is the production unit, based usually on marriage and kinship, within which fundamental decisions are made about who does what labour, who purchases and uses what inputs, and who consumes what goods.

3 NATIONAL MARKETING INSTITUTIONS

The organization and regulation of crop markets and marketing have been the major components in the agricultural development policy in Sudan under both colonial and post-colonial governments. Being equally in favour of maintaining the formal structures of the peasant economy, both the colonial and post-colonial states confined their policies towards peasant production to maintenance of smallholder property rights in land and organization and control at the level of the market. The pressures exerted on peasant producers through the power of the market and credit have amounted to a persistent structural bias against peasant farmers that is central to understanding the current agricultural crisis in Sudan.

As one of its first policy steps at the beginning of this century, the colonial state began to regulate agricultural markets. It pursued three purposes. First, to incorporate peasant farming into the new export-oriented colonial economy, mainly by stimulating exports of sesame, groundnuts and cotton. Second, to establish politically viable channels for appropriation of agricultural earnings by dominant or aspiring agrarian and trading classes. Third, to expand state revenue from crop taxation and other levies.

Establishing government-administered markets in the 1920s was a major step in pursuing all three purposes. The colonial government intended 'to put producers in direct contact with the larger merchants and exports, educating producers and expos-

ing them to the values of modern market economy' (see Elmekki 1985: 90). The markets were dominated by a handful of large export companies (mainly European) and the sellers were not producers, but village traders who managed to establish credit relations with producers that gave the traders control of the crops.

The second phase in the evolution of crop marketing was the introduction in the mid-1930s of the crop auction system in the government-controlled markets. The system is still in operation. Producers and village traders bring their crops to government controlled markets where they are weighed and graded. Market officials fix a floor price and licensed traders or their representatives bid on crops, supposedly in a competitive manner. However, traders normally enter into agreements to make no offers to purchase at a price higher than the floor price.

The auction system was (and still is) a mechanism for resolving the conflict over the division of earnings from trade in crops among peasant producers, village traders, oilseed processors, exporting firms, and the state. When the system was introduced, the government believed that competition among exporters would raise the prices paid to village traders who in turn would pass some of the grains to producers. This rationale still governs the operation of government-controlled crop markets in Sudan. However, market theory is subverted in two ways. Collusion among exporters depresses the prices they pay to village traders. And the prevailing *shail* credit system, as explained below, creates a relationship of bondage between village traders and peasant farmers which effectively eliminates competition among village traders for the crops offered by producers. Quantitative studies find no correlation between the auction market prices paid to village traders and the prices the village traders pay to producers (Elmekki 1985).

Neither the position of village traders nor that of peasant producers was affected by the shift in crop marketing policies which followed the establishment of the Sudan Oilseeds Company (SOC) in 1970. The important difference was at the national level; by assigning SOC an export monopoly, the state assumed a central role in the crop marketing process and consequently entered into conflicts with exporters and large crop merchants. While it replaced private export companies, SOC absorbed all the urban crop traders who maintained their same old

relations with village traders. The pre-1970 exporters were not removed from the business; instead they were allocated 42 per cent of the shares in SOC. Yet, they remained uncomfortable sharing the cake with the state bureaucracy and they launched a highly organized campaign against SOC. In 1980 they won the battle and the monopoly concession was lifted by a Presidential Decree.

These policy shifts and power struggles did not touch the structural position of peasant farmers in the marketing and power distribution arrangements. Ironically, both the state bureaucracy and private business used the rhetoric of 'better prices for producers' to justify their policy preferences.

4 THE VILLAGE LEVEL

The market forces which determine the allocation of peasants' surpluses are conjoined with social and political powers of village traders and moneylenders, urban/regional traders, crop exporters, oilseed processors and the state. The relations among the people in these distinct positions define the marketing structure.

Peasant farmers, however, do not immediately see the whole picture. For them village and town traders are the embodiment of all the forces claiming their surpluses. Peasant farmers exchange crops for money with village traders, but the relationship is not confined to that one exchange. A typical village trader runs one or two small village stores, advances loans to peasants, trades in export and food crops either independently or as an agent for an urban trader and owns at least one animal-driven oilseed mill. These small traders were the major vehicle through which peasant production was transformed and incorporated into the market economy and are the main agent for the control of peasant production by the state and non-peasant social forces. In the normal politics of agricultural marketing peasant farmers hold village traders responsible for the scarcity of cash income. The bigger traders and the state are at least partially insulated from direct political conflict with producers. With a deepening agrarian crisis, as will be shown below, the insulation is stripped away and the politics changes.

The terms of exchange between village traders and peasant farmers - both as producers and consumers - are clearly in favour of the former not only because of lack of competition among traders but mainly

because these traders have established a relation of bondage with producers through moneylending. The producers are unable to bargain collectively; each production unit strikes its own deal with the trader, usually involving credit. In general terms, the *shail* is a system of credit in which borrowers mortgage their cash crops to lenders in advance of harvest time. The crop is valued on average at a price as low as 20 per cent of the market price of the crop at harvest time.

The *shail* system has become an integral part of the peasant farmers' subsistence and of the whole crop marketing system in the country. Over 70 per cent of the crops offered for sale in the 'official' crop auction markets are brought by village traders/lenders and the rest is brought by the relatively better-off farmers who are not engaged in crop mortgage. The *shail* borrowing continues as a reproduction requirement for peasant producers and its operation imposes severe pressures on them. By the early 1980s research in Kordofan found that 75 per cent of peasants were indebted to *shail* lenders and 80 per cent of the peasant households explained their indebtedness by urgent need of consumer goods (Saeed 1982: 331).

Despite their structural disadvantage, peasant farmers have a great deal of resilience. They can adapt, sometimes painfully, to considerable swings in market prices. The labour-time of peasant households is allocated to three circuits of activity: a subsistence circuit where a portion of the household's labour power is used for producing food crops; a commodity circuit where labour is used for producing cash crops; and a wage labour circuit where a part of the household's labour-time is offered for sale off the farm, often in seasonal work many kilometres away. Over the years the pressures of rural markets have faced peasant farming units with hard choices, but peasant farming survived through a creative politics of adjusting the allocation of labour. They could send young men (and eventually women and whole families) to work in the cotton schemes and the large mechanized farms. They could assign more land and labour to food crops when cash crop prices went down and more to cash crops when prices for cash crops went up.

Deciding among the three circuits of activity is a difficult and many-sided process involving much more than a calculation of probable income implications. Work tasks are usually tied to gender; power

over land and labour are often in the hands of a senior man. Traditions of gender and power can be challenged or altered, but such change is not easy. The political struggles within production units can be intense.

5 FROM STRUCTURAL DISADVANTAGE TO AGRARIAN CRISIS

The cumulative effects of the structural disadvantage of peasant farmers in the division of benefits from export crop production is a major reason for the current agricultural crisis in Sudan. Their structural position makes it impossible for small-scale farmers to become prosperous expanders of production (see Barker 1989: 107). In recent years peasant producers have been exposed to extreme pressures by the state and merchant and finance capital, and in their response to these pressures they resort to practices which exhaust their labour and land resources and damage their environment. Here are some examples:

- 1 In response to low returns to labour spent in cash crop production, as compared to wage labour, peasant households are allocating more and more of their labour time to off-farm income generating activities. Now migration begins earlier and becomes more frequent; more women, children, young people, and even whole families migrate for wage work. In order to release more labour from farming production units shift labour from cash crops to food crops because food crops require about one half the labour input (Tully 1988: 107). They also reduce the number of times they weed food grains from three to one, even at the cost of lower yields. The new pattern is indicative of the stress phase of migration (Teklu 1991: 5). Unfortunately for the peasant farmers, the supply of off-farm peasant labour is increasing at a time when demand for it is sharply declining as a result of the decline in mechanized farming and cotton production sectors.
- 2 Peasant farmers reinforce the practice of cultivating several plots of land in different locations in order to minimize the risk of high local variability of rains. 64 per cent of the households surveyed in Darfur in 1991 reported planting three plots, 29 per cent planted two plots and only 7 per cent planted one plot because they could not physically move too far from their villages. These results are confirmed by other
- 3 Poor peasant households are forced by economic and political factors to expand into the marginal lands of low unreliable rainfall. Clearing of the savanna in these marginal areas for cropping exposes the land to increased risk of desertification. There is clear evidence of declining productivity in northern Darfur province as the area under millet production has increased threefold since 1975 (El Mangouri 1990: 89). The expansion of areas under peasant farming has been confirmed as one of the main reasons for environmental degradation (see M Horowitz and M Salem-Murdock 1987).
- 4 Overcultivation is another practice with devastating environmental consequences. In all the peasant farming regions land is now cultivated annually without allowing for a fallow period for soil regeneration. Often, after five or six years, the production decreases so much that the farmer is forced to give up cultivating the plot and move to a marginal area (Ibrahim 1987: 223).
- 5 In search of new sources of cash income peasant households undertake extensive wood cutting and charcoal burning. The consequences are most devastating as far as depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation are concerned (see Whitney 1987: 132). It has been estimated by geographers that in the period between 1960 and 1980, the amount of deforestation attributable to wood cutting and charcoal burning rose from nearly 7,500 to 28,000 square kilometres per year in Western Sudan (Whitney 1987: 120).
- 6 Peasant farmers are gradually abandoning sesame and groundnut cultivation and this is what worries the state, merchants and oilseed processors because this trend endangers the accumulation opportunities of these forces. The reduction of dependence on cash crop production is the most radical form of peasant resistance to the power of

the market. While diversification originally meant the combination of food and cash crops now it means diversification of food crops. At least six varieties of sorghum and millet are now sown on many peasant farms.

6 POLITICAL CONFLICT AND COOPERATION AT THE VILLAGE LEVEL

The cumulative economic and ecological pressures on peasant communities are generating new forms of political conflict in villages. Disputes over land and friction between farmers and pastoralists are becoming a commonplace, especially in Northern Darfur. Conflicts are most frequent over land adjacent to villages, but the settlement of these conflicts is gradually getting beyond the control of village sheikhs. In 1991, for example, over half the cases in the court at the town of Millit (North Darfur) involved land disputes. In south Gedaref the most visible tensions occur between the local peasant farmers and the camel herders of the Butana.

Pressures on rural communities also induce new forms of cooperation. Some of the old community-based coping strategies like *zakat* (Islamic tithe), *nafir* (reciprocal work parties) and *karama* (communal feasts) are being developed into new political settings (Elmekki 1992). Increasingly peasant farmers are rethinking their political relations with other social forces. Of most interest here is the way the *karama* meeting is gradually being transformed into a platform not only for expressing the political interests of peasant communities but also for articulating these interests and initiating mechanisms for implementing them into concrete projects. In this process new leadership emerges, new forms of popular participation are developed, and new organizational frameworks are innovated. It seems that the severe hardships associated with the food crisis are not only consolidating communal bonds but challenging the old ideas that peasant communities are economically stagnant and politically passive.

7 A VILLAGE EXAMPLE

In al-Sayyah, a village in North Darfur in late 1991 the predominant issue in the informal *karama* meetings was a development project utilizing a *wadi* (valley stream) running through the village during the rainy season. Because rainfed farming was no longer feasible, the idea was to construct a dam by communal work in order to capture the water for

irrigation. The village community had contacted the regional government, but with no positive response; therefore they decided to proceed on their own. They decided in the meetings to establish a communal project for the production of millet and vegetables. The people who had claims to the land around the *wadi* agreed to transfer their rights to the community. The meetings decided to place the millet crop in a communal granary and to keep the cash proceeds in a village fund. They elected a committee to direct each of these two new institutions. The village women established their own cooperative agricultural project, irrigating land around two shallow wells. They stored the crops as a community reserve and sold the vegetables in the nearby town of Millit, keeping the cash proceeds for communal security. Recognizing a need for technical and financial assistance, one of the *karama* meetings designated a person to contact the ILO's Food For Work Programme and the German GTZ agency for support. Similar initiatives were reported in different parts of the region.

8 THE NEW POLITICS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

The new local organizations and leadership which are emerging in response to the agrarian crisis are often in conflict with the central government, regional government, religious authority, and the organizations affiliated with the National Islamic Front which since 1989 has controlled power at the national level. The most acute conflict is with the National Islamic Front (NIF) because NIF now controls the central and regional government. Many rural leaders hold it responsible for aggravating the food crisis in rural Sudan by denying the existence of famine and by prohibiting relief deliveries. They also associate the NIF with the big grain merchants who have controlled the market since the beginning of the crisis in 1983 by making use of their access to funding from the Islamic banks.

Furthermore, the version of Islam adopted by NIF seems to be too radical to be accepted by rural people in Sudan who adopt the milder and moderate version of the *sufi* orders, especially the Tijjaniyya in Darfur and the Khatmiyya in Eastern Sudan. Finally, the NIF is associated in the popular mind with the practices of the NIF-affiliated relief agencies, especially the Islamic African Relief Agency which since 1983 has used relief to buy support for the NIF. For their part the NIF supporters are trying to establish an alliance with some tribal chiefs and commu-

nity leaders against the growing new rural leadership which they often accuse of being anti-Islamic. They have had little success.

9 CONCLUSION

The neglect of the peasant farming sector by both the colonial and post-colonial states provides the historical context for the current dilemma of peasant communities. The major concern of the colonial state was the attraction of peasant producers to the production of export crops (oilseeds) and to participation in cotton production through supplying seasonal labour. This policy perspective did not change after independence: the peasant farming sector continued to be seen as a labour reserve and a source of cash crops siphoned into the export economy through merchant capital.

In response to market pressures, peasant farmers resorted to a combination of adjustment mechanisms which, under the prevailing economic and political conditions, has brought about a crisis situation. The politics of marketing which used to be about the partition of benefits among producers, traders, and the state has become a matter of community survival and government legitimacy.

Changes within production units, even when undertaken with no intention of affecting wider agrarian politics, can change the conditions of political conflict. One of the crucial changes already noted is the

gradual disappearance of the cash crop circuit. With it vanishes a major opportunity for the state to collect taxes and for the dominant political apparatus to cement its local political alliances. Instead the state resorts to repression and extortion and stimulates new forms of political and economic resistance. The new forms of resistance are bringing peasant communities into direct confrontation with the state.

However, peasant farmers do not emerge as political winners. They face the difficult task of straddling the food and the wage labour circuits. Peasant farmers on the one hand allocate an increasing portion of their land and labour resources to food production. On the other, they have to engage in wage labour because their food crop yields are low as a result of ecological degradation and deterioration in soil fertility. Moreover, their subsistence has become so dependent on the market that they cannot easily exit from the market economy altogether. This is one of the paradoxes of peasant communities under conditions of severe stress: there is no way to exit from the market and there is no way to depend fully on it.

New political forms of resistance are emerging. Peasant farmers try to evade the power of the state and merchant capital by reducing their dependence on the market economy, but they also invent new forms of political action to confront state and class power and new ways to organize production and to use resources.

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