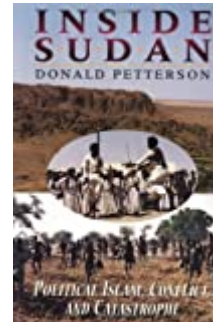


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald Petterson. *Inside Sudan: Political Islam, Conflict, and Catastrophe.* Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press, 1999. xiii + 209 pp. \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-4111-8; \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-3657-2.



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Donald Petterson's *Inside Sudan: Political Islam, Conflict, and Catastrophe* is a very interesting and very disturbing piece of writing. Petterson, a career Foreign Service officer, began his diplomatic service in 1961 and served over the next thirty years in Zanzibar, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Somalia, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, and finally as U.S. Ambassador to Sudan. His lengthy service record in Africa gives Petterson a unique perspective from which to write and gives the reader interesting insights into Foreign Service and State Department actions. Petterson lays out three goals for his book. The first is to "help explain U.S. policy toward Sudan and how it was implemented" during his tenure as U.S. Ambassador (p. x). The second is to "help correct misconceptions about who Foreign Service officers (FSOs) are and what their life abroad is like" (p. x). The third is to "shed some light on the nature of the Islamist government in Sudan, the interminable civil war in southern Sudan, and the suffering of the Sudanese people" (p. xi). As he attempts to achieve these goals Petterson's writing bifurcates into material consciously chosen by the author to cause uneasiness in his readers, and material of an equally disturbing quality which appears unintentional on the part of the author. In both realms the material is enlightening and clearly conveys to the reader the serious difficulties facing the people of Sudan as they suffer the consequences of both domestic and international

political wrangling.

One serious oversight in Petterson's work, especially for scholars of Sudan's history, occurs in the second chapter, entitled "Sudan." In this brief historical section Petterson treats all prior academic research as if it is in the public domain and may be appropriated as his own with no need for attribution to the scholars who produced this knowledge. There is not a single citation or reference to the works he used as his sources for understanding the historical context of the Sudan. While his work is not strictly speaking an historical study, an acknowledgement of the contributions of senior scholars such as W. Adams, M. O. Bashir, R. L. Hill, P. M. Holt, R. S. O'Fahey, J. L. Spaulding, Y. F. Hasan, and others would be in order.

The main body of the book is where Petterson works out his three objectives. His effort at educating his readers about the life of the FSO is honest and informative but only partially successful in eradicating the "cookie pusher" image he dislikes so much (p. x). His descriptions of trips to refugee camps in both northern and southern Sudan, flying in potentially hostile airspace with or without Khartoum's sanction, portray him as a diplomat who is ready to get out from behind a desk and aggressively do his job. Petterson clearly illustrates that FSOs, especially those who take assignments in devel-

oping states, have difficult, and in some cases dangerous, working conditions. Petterson's candidness in other sections of the book, however, undermines his attempt to toughen the FSO image. His soul searching over the appropriateness of morning runs with his security team while other FSOs are told not to go to the Blue Nile Recreation center, his need to organize tennis competitions and field trips to boost embassy morale, and brooding over family separation are at odds with the rough and ready image. Instead of appearing as stoic representatives of the United States doing a tough job in a tough environment, FSOs emerge as bureaucratic ladder climbers who take assignments for the sake of promotion and then loudly suffer throughout their duration.

A considerable amount of Petterson's book naturally deals with U.S. foreign policy concerning the Sudan. Petterson meticulously provides a detailed recounting of his orders from Washington, personal thoughts and suggestions concerning these orders, and implementation of state department policy. Throughout these foreign policy sections, as in the FSO discussions, a surprising two-part picture emerges. At one level the reader observes the workings of the U.S. government, through the State Department, as it deals with what it considers a troubled state with serious shortcomings in the area of human rights and dangerous connections to international terrorist organizations and individuals. In addition, Petterson details how difficult it can be for an ambassador to keep the attention of the State Department (as well as the administration and Congress) focused on a particular country when other diplomatic emergencies compete for its attention. Petterson's description of the on-again-off-again carrot-and-stick pressure of the U.S. government towards Sudan offers a plausible explanation for the abysmal state of U.S. relations with Sudan. Finally, he shows the dangers of reliance on third-party states such as Egypt for intelligence on terrorist groups.

At a second level, the reader observes an interesting dichotomy. Petterson's careful reconstruction of his reports concerning meetings with Sudanese individuals, both in and out of government, such as President Bashir or John Garang, contain physical descriptions—an element pointedly absent when discussing non-Sudanese individuals. For example, Petterson writes, "Bashir is of medium height and medium coloring on the light-brown-to-coal-black scale of indigenous Sudanese. He carried more weight than he needed, yet he looked fit" (p. 14). Of Garang, Petterson writes, "Like most Dinka, he is tall, well over 6 feet, but unlike most Dinka, he is not thin" (p. 59). But no physical descriptions are given

of President Clinton's special representative Melissa F. Wells, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Herman Cohen, or United Nations Operation Lifeline Sudan officer Philip O'Brien. While this observation may seem petty on the part of the reviewer, the similarities between late-nineteenth- and early- twentieth-century Sudan Political Service District Commissioner reports and Petterson's cables are striking. One is left to wonder if the reporting style is simply unique to Petterson or a standard State Department practice with its roots in the racial hierarchy theories of the nineteenth century.

In addition to and intermixed with the foreign policy sections of his book Petterson addresses Sudan's Islamist government, the civil war, and the suffering of the people in the Sudan. In these sections he recounts extensive interaction between himself and high-level officials of Sudan's government, individuals closely linked with the government, and leaders of the various factions opposed to the government in Khartoum. It is in these sections that the reader finds the most dismaying and discouraging material in the book. Petterson depicts leaders in the northern Sudan as blinded by ideology, religion, and the desire for power. His attempts to focus the blame for this blindness on political Islam and Islamic fundamentalism are undercut, however, by his reporting on conversations with non-Muslim leaders such as John Garang (leader of the SPLA-Mainstream) and Riek Machar (leader of the SPLA-United). While Petterson's goal is to convict political Islam of causing many of Sudan's problems, his honest reporting on meetings with both northern and southern leaders convicts all of Sudan's leaders of placing their personal ideologies and aspirations above the welfare of Sudan's people.

Petterson's evidence certainly backs up his statement in the preface that "at the very least, the Sudanese experience gives credence to the thesis that any government based on religious fundamentalism and intent on propagating its religious beliefs will by its nature be tyrannical, intolerant of dissent, and prepared to use any means, including violence against its own people, to maintain itself in power" (p. xi). Unfortunately for the people of the Sudan, the author also illustrates that tyranny, intolerance of dissent, and the use of violence against its own people is not confined to the anti-secular, Muslim leaders of the North but is also acceptable to the Southern leaders who worship the secular god of political power.

The dismal prognosis for Sudan given by Petterson notwithstanding, his book should be read by those interested in the Sudan and those interested in the con-

flicts which convulse the nations of the developing world. Petterson offers insights, directly and indirectly, into the obstacles, pitfalls, and less-than-perfect efforts of diplomats and aid organization representatives. In addition, he clearly lays out the brutal politics of power acquisition and retention in developing states, which numb

their practitioners to the suffering of the citizens of these states. Petterson does not paint a pretty picture, but it is one that must be acknowledged (though not accepted) by those who hope to bring peace and security to Sudan and other developing states.

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