



# CODESRIA



**12th General Assembly**

Governing the African Public Sphere

**12e Assemblée générale**

Administrer l'espace public africain

**12a Assembleia Geral**

**Public sphere(s) in the Sudan: On the light of the  
Comprehensive Peace Agreement 2005 (C.P.A) and Dar Fur  
conflict**

**Hamed Omer Hawi  
Department of Political Science  
University of Juba-Sudan**



CODESRIA

07-11/12/2008

Yaoundé, Cameroun

## Definition of public sphere

Jürgen Habermas published his critical investigation and analysis of the public sphere in civil society, in German in 1962. He wrote *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* describing the evolution from *opinion* to *public opinion* and the socio-structural transformation of the latter. His main intention is to explore the status of public opinion in the practice of representative government in Western Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Habermas' statement on the public sphere has relatively little impact on the Anglo-American debate until the publication of its English translation in 1989.

Habermas defined the public sphere as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. In its ideal form "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state"<sup>2</sup>. Free discussion in the public sphere generates opinions and attitudes which serve to affirm or challenge, therefore, to guide the affairs of the state.<sup>3</sup> I.e. the public sphere is an area, in social life, where people can get together and freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action.<sup>4</sup>

It is "a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgments."<sup>5</sup>

It can be described also as: "a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed".<sup>6</sup>

Habermas' concept of the public sphere thus described a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power. "This area is conceptually distinct from the state: it [is] a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state."<sup>7</sup>

The bourgeois public sphere, which began appearing around 1700 (18th C) in Habermas' interpretation, was to mediate between the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic, and social life contrasted to the demands and concerns of social and

---

1 Marshall Soules, PhD Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere:  
<http://records.viu.ca/~soules/media301/habermas.htm>

2 Marshall Soules, PhD Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere,  
<http://records.viu.ca/~soules/media301/habermas.htm>

3 Marshall Soules, *ibid*

4 From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public\\_sphere#cite\\_note-0](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_sphere#cite_note-0)

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public\\_sphere#cite\\_note-2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_sphere#cite_note-2)

<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public\\_sphere#cite\\_note-7](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_sphere#cite_note-7)

public life. The aim is to overcome private interests and opinions and to discover common interests and to reach societal consensus.<sup>8</sup>

Thus "public sphere" is "conceptual" rather than "physical". It is "not a marketplace, nor is it a coffeehouse, a salon, an organization or a newspaper"<sup>9</sup>, rather, the public sphere transcends these physical appearances as an abstract forum for dialogue and ideologies—free public opinion, a lively debate on multiple levels within society.<sup>10</sup>

But there must be physical or practical examples of social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize themselves against the arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power. Habermas himself often interrupted his theoretical discourse with "talk of coffee houses, newspaper circulation or literary salons". In identifying bodies such as the eighteenth century coffee house as "a bourgeois 'public sphere', an ideal forum within which newspapers and journals were read and discussed in face-to-face groups"<sup>11</sup>, Habermas materializes or gives examples of how the idea can be actualized.

By now we can say that public sphere consist of organs of information and political debate such as newspapers and journals, as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, meeting halls, and other public spaces where socio-political discussion took place.<sup>12</sup>

Habermas claims that public debate can be animated by "opinion-forming associations",voluntary associations, social organizations, churches, sports clubs, groups of concerned citizens, grassroots movements, and trade unions...to counter or refashion the messages of authority. By now we can speak even of websites and internet forums.

---

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Kellner: Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention  
<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>

<sup>9</sup> Sam Hinton, 1998. "The potential of the latent public sphere," at  
<http://www.anu.edu.au/~e951611/papers/potential.html>

<sup>10</sup> Pieter Boeder: Habermas' heritage: The Future of the public Sphere in the network society:  
[http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue10\\_9/boeder/#author](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue10_9/boeder/#author)

<sup>11</sup> Oliver Boyd-Barrett. "Conceptualizing the 'public sphere'," p. 230

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Kellner: Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention  
<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>

For Habermas, the success of the public sphere was founded on rational, critical discourse where everyone has the ability for equal participation and the supreme communication skill is the power of argument.

The public sphere thus presupposes freedom of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to organize and freely participate in political debate and decision-making.

Thus, the success of the public sphere depends upon:

- Domain of common concern.
- The extent of access (as close to universal as possible), Universal access mean that anybody can have access to the space.
- The degree of autonomy (the citizens must be free of coercion).
- The rejection of hierarchy. Disregard of rank or status. I.e. the status of participants is ignored (so that each might participate on an equal footing).
- The rule of law (particularly the subordination of the state).
- And the quality of participation (the common commitment to the ways of logic).
- Rational debate - any topic can be raised by any participant, and it will be debated rationally until consensus is achieved.<sup>13</sup>

That is what is in theory, but in practice, public sphere normally hijacked, even for Habermas, the emergent bourgeoisie gradually replaced a public sphere in which the ruler's power was merely represented before the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored".

In the world of today, there are four things that undermine the public sphere: the state, education, the influence of the mass media and the "change of the public from 'reasoning' to a 'consuming' one".

### **State and the Public Sphere:**

The study of the public sphere centers on the idea of participatory democracy, where public opinion becomes political action. The basic belief is that political action is

---

<sup>13</sup> Rutherford in: Marshall Soules, *ibid*

steered by the public sphere, and that the only legitimate governments are those that listen to the public sphere.

Democracy is government by, of, and for the people. For such a conception of radical democracy to work, to create a genuinely participatory democracy, the citizens must be informed, they must be capable of argumentation and participation, and they must be active and organized to become a transformative democratic political force.

Here the focus should arguably be on education and the media, for schooling and the media play a key role in enabling individuals to be informed, taught to seek information, and, if effectively educated, to critically assess and appraise information, to transform information into knowledge and understanding, and thus to be capable of participating in democratic discussion and deliberation.<sup>14</sup>

Situation in the ground shows that: the state began to play a more fundamental role in the private realm and everyday life, thus eroding the difference between state and civil society, between the public and private sphere.

### **Media and Public Sphere:**

Habermas simply does not theorize the functions of the media within the contemporary public sphere, deriving his model more or less from face-to-face communication and discussion of his time. In the early time in the west, the broadcasting organizations attempted to promote the national culture and in some cases to inform and educate its citizens. In the U.S.A, by contrast, it was big corporations that colonized the public sphere.

The difference between a state-controlled public broadcasting system contrasted to a more commercial model has, of course, itself collapsed in the era of globalization where commercially-based cable television has marginalized public broadcasting in most countries and where in a competitive media environment even public broadcasting

---

14 Douglas Kellner: Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention  
<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>  
on the role of education and the media in democracy see Kellner 1990 and 1998

corporations import popular, mostly American, entertainment, and are geared more toward ratings than political indoctrination, or enlightenment.<sup>15</sup>

Since Habermas, the misuse of mass media undermines the public sphere. For example, *Propaganda* can contribute to *The Formation of Men's Attitudes* and can create one-dimensional citizens; political system can use publicity to create, modify, change or deceive public opinion or, as to Marshall Soules colonization of the public sphere by systems<sup>16</sup>

Also, because of an excess of goods and risks competing for attention, the sphere continues to be a contested arena; the mass media play out a double roll here, raise of awareness, pass of information or means of control.

Thus the techniques of advertising and publicity have invaded and corrupted the public sphere, as the public sphere declined; citizens became consumers, dedicating themselves more to passive consumption and private concerns than to issues of the common good and democratic participation.

Giant corporations have taken over the public sphere and transformed it from a sphere of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity.

In his book Television and the Crisis of Democracy (1990), Douglas Kellner contend that the media, state, and business are the major institutional forces of contemporary capitalist societies, that the media "mediate" between state, economy, and social life, and that the mainstream broadcasting media have not been promoting democracy or serving the public interest and thus are forfeiting their crucial structural importance in constructing a democratic society. Hence, he assumes that the communication media are something like what Habermas calls "steering media,"<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Kellner: ibid

<sup>16</sup> Marshall Soules, PhD Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere, <http://records.viu.ca/~soules/media301/habermas.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Kellner: ibid

In this transformation, "public opinion" shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion, and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls or media experts. Rational debate and consensus has thus been replaced by managed discussion and manipulation by the machinations of advertising and political consulting agencies: "Publicity loses its critical function in favor of state or big companies."<sup>18</sup>

To Habermas, a "great transformation" was happened in functions of mass media for it shifts "the ratio of givers of opinion to the receivers" in favor of small groups of elites, and commodities. For him, the "steering media" of money and power enable business and the state to control ever more processes of everyday life, thus undermining democracy and the public sphere.

The manipulative functions of media in shaping public opinion and strengthening the power of the dominant elites was discussed since the elite theory of Mosca, Parito and Robert Michael<sup>19</sup> and still.

In general, participants acknowledged the existing natural link between media, public sphere and democracy: thus the widest and the most pluralistic public sphere is necessary for democracy to remain alive.

Most Western democracies separate the political system into the Presidency, Congress, and the Judiciary so that there would be a division and balance of powers between the major political institutions. The press was conceived in this system as the "fourth estate" and freedom of the press was provided by most Western democracies as a fundamental right and as a key institution within a constitutional order based on separation of powers in which the media would serve as a check against corruption and excessive power in the other institutions.<sup>20</sup>

Citizens from all over the world are confronted either with tabloid content or with some form of "propaganda" and issues-led activist media. Is it still possible to avoid

---

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Kellner: *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> (Mills 1956).

<sup>20</sup> Douglas Kellner: *ibid*

that? Could an intelligent use of new technologies combined with an alliance between media professional, civil society organizations and institutions lead to the creation of a new type of mass media, which would be open, participatory and democratic?<sup>21</sup> that might be a possible way.

Radio, television, and other electronic modes of communication were creating new public spheres of debate, discussion, and information; hence, activists and intellectuals who wanted to engage the public, to be where the people were at, and who thus wanted to intervene in the public affairs of their society should make use of these technologies and develop communication politics and new media projects. The Internet and new multimedia technology require further development of the concept of the public sphere, broadcast media and computers can be used to inform and enlighten individuals rather than to manipulate them.

### **Public Sphere (s) in the Sudan**

In the business session of CODESRIA 11th general assembly, Maputo, Mozambique, chair man of the session asked attendants from East Africa to go to a specified room to elect their representatives in the executive committee, and he did the same with West Africans, North Africans; and South Africans: asking them to go to their prescribed rooms and to do the same. People are moving here and there except me (from the Sudan) is standing still confusing about which group should I join! Sudan, in terms of culture, Arabic, Islam, geography is close to North Africa. In terms of history, colonialism, English language, communities can be classified as an East African; beside that, Geographically Sudan is in the heart of Africa and has strong soci-economic links with Central African states.

I asked CODESRIA Executive Secretary about how they do classify Sudan? He stood puzzled also. He said: please wait for I will consult my secretariat and the documents! This is exactly the dilemma of/in the Sudan that lets it paralyzed still.

Sudan suffers "a crisis of identity": If you make a survey in the Sudan, you will find those who would say that we are not Africans, we are Arabs, Middle Eastern; you can

find those who can emphasize their Africanity; you can find those who can easily declare that they are neither Africans nor Arabs; they are Muslims and part only of the Islamic World; and you can find those who are loyal to their newly invented concept or identity, the Sudanism; Mazrui speaks of "Afrabia in the Sudan", the mixture of Arabs and Africans as an identity of the most inhabitants of the Sudan, or the Arabic culture in the African land or (The African carriers of the Arabic language and culture).

These are the facts behind the hypothesis that: it would be so difficult to speak of a homogeneous, uniform equitable public sphere in the Sudan. A public sphere that can be open and inclusive to all communities' members in the Sudan.

This is not counter argument to the theory of public sphere and its important role in societal organization, but since the early time many commentators have noted that the 'classic' example of the bourgeois public sphere excluded many groups, such as the working class and women. Hence, rather than conceiving of one liberal or democratic public sphere, it is more productive to theorize a multiplicity of public spheres, sometimes overlapping but also conflicting. These include public spheres of excluded groups.

It is crucial to think about an inclusive public sphere (minorities, vulnerable, country people, young generation) to interact and exchange information which is not controlled neither by the State (which interests do not necessarily take into account civil society ones), nor by private interests subjected to the only rule of maximizing profit (with a consequence on issues addressed and on publics reached), but sometimes, and in some cases this will create problems rather than solutions, conflicts rather than reconciliation is the expected ends, as it was assumed by this paper, to be the case of the Sudan.

Nancy Fraser identified the fact that marginalized groups are excluded from a universal public sphere, and thus it was impossible to claim that one group would in fact be inclusive. Rather than opening up the political realm to everyone, political power shifted to "a repressive mode of hegemonic domination.

However, she claimed that marginalized groups formed their own public spheres, and

they will term this concept or Counter-publics.<sup>22</sup>

History of the Sudan shows that there are many independent, autonomous and self-reliant Kingdoms and Sultanates; they are sometimes competing over land, resources or supremacy and sometimes engaged in types of collaboration as an independent, supreme equal bodies; and whenever there is a central authority, it can succeed or persist only when it recognizes and respect the rights of these components as sovereign entities. These types of confederations witnessed in the history of the Sudan where defeated by the power of colonialism, and the whole are subjected to the centralized rule of colonialism which is unusual and unfamiliar to the habits, characteristics or history of the Sudanese groups. That is why resistance to this rule was sever and persistent until its departure in 1956.

After independence, certain groups which has been collaborating with British colony and secured the privileges of that (Education, Urbanization, bureaucratization ...etc) have inherited colonialism and attempted to control over public sphere and impose their interests, identification and measurements as common and public interests excluding others. This situation was jeopardized by lack of qualifications among other groups (lack of organization, Education, awareness, financial resources, links and relations with other national or international powers).

This policy of domination by one group, marginalization of other components of the Sudan, or the privatization of public sphere leads to grievances and rebellions right after independence in all parts of the country starting in Southern Sudan in a kind of brutal civil war and the appearance of regional or tribal organizations demanding their rights to participation in power or wealth distribution or even just to be recognized culturally. The infection was then spread to Dar Fur (Western Sudan), Eastern Sudan and others; Sudan of today is full of latent conflicts, or manifested but with less degree than what is in the South or in Dar Fur.

The problem comes to its climax, putting the whole country to the bottle neck, by the policies adopted by the current regime (1989 onward). The regime started to

---

<sup>22</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public\\_sphere#cite\\_note-24](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_sphere#cite_note-24)

implement extreme totalitarian, "Islamic" policies, excluding moderate Islamists, non-Muslims, liberalists and others internally; and engaged in hostilities and confrontation with neighboring countries and the international community. Example, the war in the Southern Sudan, fueled by these policies, gained the antagonism of Africanity, Christianity, neighboring countries and the international community.

Internal grievances and call for rights and equality added to sympathy with the rebel in the Southern Sudan made the regime to tighten its iron fist, knocking out any body that proved to be not loyal to the regime, beside its extreme resortion to ethno-politics. The regime become strongly centralized controlling over power and economic resources (discovery of Petrol and the escalation of its price strengthen the ability of the regime to implement its policies); the regime become ethnosized (a certain tribes, localities, and elites controlling every thing); corrupted in terms of recruitment and resources management.

It is true that the majority of the Sudanese populations are Muslims, Arabic culture is overwhelming, but it is also a fact that Sudan is multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-tribal and multi-ethnic. The Sudanese history of autonomy and freedom proved that these identities and communities can not be ignored, suppressed, melted or subjected to one of these parties. I.e. creation of one homogeneous public sphere without sacrificing rights of any of its components is too difficult if not semi-impossible. (The dominant party of today, which alleged representation of general will (Public Sphere) represents only about 20% of the voters in the last general elections of 1986 and comes to power through military coup).

Previous governments in the Sudan attempted to speak of common values or interests; however, practice proved that it is only a rhetoric, wishful thinking or a hegemonic pretext.

In the Sudan, and since most of its population are committed Muslims, the present regime find it so easy to present itself as embodiment or servant of high spiritual morals, subjecting itself to no human or popular accountability, and to no orientation or guidance except from the holly book (the Quran). The regime says that: it wants to implement the Islamic teachings (the Shariaa); Thus, to them, who ever opposes the regime,

opposes the Shariaa, the teachings of God and the will of the Sudanese population; and for that it is justified to be detained, dismissed from office or to be killed. Privacy was used to counter argue accusations from international community to the regime of violating human rights. All these are done under the name of "Public Sphere". The practice proved that they are implementing their will and preserving their interests, yet, the alleged public sphere (Islamic or what ever) proved to be a mask to hide private sphere(s) and exclusion of others.

In a situation of heterogeneous societies, pervasive illiteracy and poverty public sphere will be formed or determined by active members of society or those who are able to usurp power and control over economy, mass media and others, and issues of the public spheres will be determined by these elite. Publics may be repressed, distorted, or deceived, any evaluation of their actual status will proved that it is a rhetorical public sphere.

The idea of an inclusive public sphere which is open to everybody, and that can discuss any issue that affects the population or future generation, is at best, a wishful thinking, because such discussion is forbidden but within the dominant group. For example concerning the most important question of today in the Sudan: shall we collaborate with the International Criminal Court handing up our president to be judged for Dar Fur humanitarian crimes or not? Such a question is not subject to determination by public sphere, government is already has the answer and what is needed is only to rally the public sphere behind.

### **Future prospects**

Traditional notions of privacy are challenged by the "transparency" of digital information and the potential of interactive networks for gathering information, the emergence and convergence of the electronic mass media has radically changed the notion of the public sphere. Its concept transcends these physical appearances, it has survived post-modern critique and it is still very much alive in the network society of today. And this is acceptable whether it indicates the public sphere of a homogeneous societies or public sphere(s) within heterogeneous societies.

Future of electronic networks is with the digital media, which offer exciting possibilities as digital networks enhance and change social structures. In a sense, the public sphere has always been virtual: Its meaning lies in its abstraction. Habermas' classical argument that the public sphere is intermittently threatened by — latent — power structures that attempt to inhibit and control the individual is undoubtedly still correct; Yet at the same time, groups and individuals can indeed accomplish change by communicative action, and digital communications technology may empower them to do so.<sup>23</sup> Either to organize themselves, to acquire the knowledge, to gain collaboration and help from the international community. For example, Sudanese government continuously deny humanitarian crises in Dar Fur, but satellites, Google earth, and humanitarian networks succeeded to expose the situation to the eyes of the whole international community. The regime, instead of looking seriously for a solution to Dar Fur crises, it tends to close websites created by Sudanese Diaspora as public sphere for negotiating their concerns including the website of justice and equality movement ( attacked the capital Khartoum 10 May 2008) because the regime control over internet service providers, but time will prove that this is meaningless.

### **Recommendations**

History of politics in the Sudan proved that, instead of listening to the rhetoric discourse of public sphere, it is better to seek a kind of agreement over few highly generalized principles to be accepted as a minimum requirement for colaboration leaving a large room to the inter-groups to shape and govern their public sphere(s). Only through this we can reach the only possible "unity within diversity", these principles can includes:

1. Recognition of diversities.
2. Commitment to international conventions and standards.
3. Equal citizenship as regardless of religion, race, color...etc as a base for rights and obligations.
4. Recruitment to offices to be according to qualifications and competence not loyalty or tribal measures.

---

<sup>23</sup> Pieter Boeder: Habermas' heritage: The Future of the public Sphere in the network society: [http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue10\\_9/boeder/#author](http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue10_9/boeder/#author)

5. Legitimacy of government to be obtained only through democratic measures.
6. Equal participation in political system.
7. Great autonomy and decentralization.
8. Civil service to be neutral, inclusive and national.
9. Equal distribution of power and wealth.
10. Non-allied and non-biased external relations, so not to provoke polarization among Sudanese identity(s) (Arab, African, Christian, Islamic...).
11. Good relations with neighboring countries due to social overlapping and the inter-connected system of conflicts among the country that share borders with 8 neighboring countries (*it is alleged that whenever an armed Land Cruiser moved from the Sudanese- Chadian borders towards Ndjamená, definitely there is another one marching in the opposite direction towards Khartoum*).
12. Care and protection of minority rights, vulnerable groups, indigenous and local population and cultures.