Political Islam and the Arts
The Sudanese Experience

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The place and definition of art as a human practice have proved to be a thorny problem – in theory and in practice – for Muslim thinkers, old and new, modern and farsighted alike. Many of these problems are well known, but two features of the problem are of special concern to this essay: the relationship between Islamic teachings and the actual human involvement with the arts as an integral cultural activity; and the practical political move taken by the Islamists to tackle this problem. Here, the Sudanese case is significant in many respects. First, it is the first time that the Islamist movement has seized power in a dominantly Sunni, Arab League member state, and it is also an African country that exhibits in its political, social and cultural texture all that has rightly acquired it the description of African microcosm.¹

Sudanese societies, under the present Islamist rule, have come to experience an extreme form of entanglement of the three major components of culture: politics, religion and the arts. In the early 1980s Dr Has san al-Turabi, the Islamist ideologue and leader of the National Islamic Front (NIF), laid the theoretical foundation and suggested the practical guidelines for what he construed as true Islamic involvement in the artistic phenomenon. These guidelines were put into practice by the present government after the military coup of 1989, which brought the NIF to power.

The baseline in Al-Turabi’s discourse on art is the doctrine of unicity, twofold, as the main Islamic principle that determines the place and meaning of beauty and art. Citing the Qur’anic verse, ‘We have decked the earth with all manner of ornaments to test mankind and to see who would acquit himself best’ (18: 7), he describes beauty and art as seductive and distracting from God, and states that we either indulge in them or transcend them. He regards art as a sensuous reaction incompatible with rationality and conscious devotions to God, like rule, economy and sex it is lustful; it is free, unruly and far from being an objective system or a social function that serves the general welfare.

But art, as he puts it, occupies a wide space in modern society and thus should not be ignored. If it is handled properly, he maintains, it can open a door for religiousness enhanced by the magnetic effect of beauty. To solve this problem, Al-Turabi adopts a pragmatist approach. He criticizes the legacy of Islamic jurisprudence on art for being indolent, negative, and tending to repel the artist from religion. The alternative to this jurisprudence, as he perceives it, is what he terms the ‘method of jurisprudence principles’, in the sense that the jurists should not build on absolute legal opinions about special cases. He exemplifies this by the following principles:

- The making of beauty is sanctioned by the Sharia.
- The creation of beauty should be directed to the worship of God.
- Whatever distracts from the worship of God is nullity and if it contradicts worshipping it is forbidden.
- The greatest sins in Islam are polytheism, worship of idols and embodiment of glorification, such as statues of leaders and prominent personalities.

Then Al-Turabi suggests some guidelines for how these principles can be implemented:
- It is possible to unite and blend religious and artistic practices because both of them are symbolic practices aiming at transcending world realities to reach a higher ideal.
- Art can be deployed as an effective ideological vehicle.

In the first stages of Islamic jahil and revolu tion all artistic resources must be deployed for the sake of God.
- Inherited jurisprudence on art is to be reconsidered.
- The present traditional and modern artistic practices are to be re-evaluated because they carry pre-Islamic (jahili) values as well as of Western civilization.
- There should be a creation of the religious artist who would be able to produce ‘true Islamic art’.

Practical measures
The Islamist strategy is to have the entire artistic enterprise monopolized, manipulat ed and transformed into a religious practice. In part one, article 12, under ‘Sciences, Art and Culture’ and article 18 under ‘Religiousness’, the constitution of 1998 affirms the commitment of the state to encourage all forms of art and strenuously seek to elevate society to values of religiousness to be direct ed towards the grace of God in the hereafter.
- A constitutional formulation is, in fact, a codification of administrative measures that were already put into effect by the regime in its first years. The appointment of loyalists to key posts in the artistic and media institutions after the military coup of 1989, which brought the NIF to power, and then accommodation to art after having it ‘purged of non-religious stuff’, hence taking a major risk as they bring the whole project on a bid to transform art into a religious pursuit. And while as predicted they failed to create the ‘religious artist’, they did not anticipate the new aesthetic and political space for art analysis and debate.

Another ideological aspect is that the initial project was entangled in such delicate cultural matters. As predicted they failed to create the ‘religious artist’, they did not anticipate the new aesthetic and political space for art analysis and debate.

Notes
1 Sudan is home to more than 500 ethnic groups, speaking about 132 languages. The country comprises a mixture of Muslims, Christians and followers of African religions.
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