In his most recent book, Alfredo Langa Herrero embarks on a challenging journey of writing about Sudan and South Sudan. The author begins by briefly explaining the events that took place from Sudan’s independence in 1956 until the first years after the country’s partition in 2011. Written in a clear language that is accessible for the general public, the manuscript contributes to the understanding of the processes that led to situations of social unrest and armed conflict in Sudan.

The book is comprised of four chapters, each corresponding to a historical period. In them Langa describes and analyses the relevant events that took place in the country before the partition of Sudan into two states and the years following the independence of South Sudan.

The first chapter covers an extensive period that includes references to the ancient history of Sudan and the arrival of Christianity and Islam, as well as developments of relevant historical antecedents, such as the Turkiyya, the Mahdiyya and the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. Afterwards, this chapter approaches the events that led to Sudanese independence in 1956 and the beginning of the First Civil War between North and South. In an ambitious attempt, the chapter also covers the first decade of sovereign Sudan (1956–1969) until the emergence of the presidency of Nimeiri.

In the second chapter, the author approaches the Addis Ababa negotiations between the government of Nimeiri and the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement that brought peace to Sudan in 1972. He then describes the brief eleven-year peaceful period, from the dissatisfaction of the Southern Regional Government with the central government, until the foundation of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the beginning of the Second Civil War in 1983. A popular uprising put an end to the regime of Nimeiri in 1985 and started a brief democratic period under the rule of Sadiq al-Mahdi, the leader of the National Umma Party (1986–1989). The impact of the policies and war strategies for the unfolding of the armed conflict after Nimeiri’s fall are addressed in the end of the chapter.

Chapters three and four deal with Omar al-Bashir’s reign in Sudan since the coup d’état of 30th June 1989. Chapter three addresses the first decade of Bashir’s regime (1989–1999). In June 1989, a group of army officers led by Bashir and supported by the National Islamic Front (NIF) staged a coup to end the government of Sadiq-
al-Mahdi. The new military-Islamist government in Khartoum brought the peace negotiations with the Southern region to a halt and resumed a military initiative in the South, calling for jihad. In 1998, the National Islamic Front split in two after disagreements and power struggles between Omar al-Bashir and Hassan al-Turabi, giving rise to the National Congress Party, heir of the NIF, under the leadership of Bashir. Soon after, Hassan al-Turabi founded the Popular Congress Party with his allies. The internal differences within the Sudan People’s Liberation Army and the fight between different SPLA factions are also concisely examined in the second part of chapter three.

Finally, the fourth chapter briefly discusses Bashir’s regime up to 2017 and some of the key issues and challenges in the country’s recent history. First, the consolidation of Sudan as an oil exporting country. Second, the war in Darfur, the western region of Sudan. The author approaches the humanitarian crisis and the international response and weak initiatives for peace, but misses references to the history of the independent sultanate of Darfur, the development of the conflict in the 1980s and 1990s and the description of the uneasy relationship with the central government. Third, the peace process between the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development. The internal and international efforts culminated in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 that paved the way for the independence of South Sudan in 2011. The author ends with a succinct update on the evolution of the two states, Sudan and South Sudan.

Overall, this short and easy to read book examines pivotal events in Sudan’s distant and recent history to explain its tumultuous present. Nevertheless, this historical review leads the author to conclude his analysis by making some generalisations about the country’s past and present challenges. Such generalisations should be considered with care.

Throughout the book, the approach to relevant historical and political events in Sudan aims to show how “in the country there have been elements present that made the onset of the war possible even before 1956” (p. 131). However, the author resorts to identity-related arguments to explain the emergence of conflict and violence in the Sudanese State, in what is the most controversial aspect of the book.

Although the author emphasises the rich cultural and ethnic diversity that exists in Sudan (together with South Sudan), and considers that dividing its inhabitants “between Muslims and Christians, Arabs and Africans, or Dinka and Nuer would be too simplistic” (p. 12), he later refers to some of these binary oppositions as the “elements that made the development of the war possible even before 1956” (p. 131). In this sense, the author reinforces the importance of the religious components as a factor of domination and makes reference in particular to “the difference between the Arab and the African in Sudan.” That is, to the Arab identity as an “element of supremacy against the African [identity]” (p. 131).

However, the causes of the Sudanese wars are much more complex. While it is true that violence exerted against certain groups was based on ethnic or religious identity, they alone do not constitute an all-encompassing causal mechanism behind the war in Sudan. Religious or ethnic differences between groups are not the only and essential factors in explaining what sparks conflicts in Sudan, as authors such as Roland Marchal, Alex de Waal, Gérard Prunier, Douglas H. Johnson, Francis M. Deng, or Amir Idris among others, have discussed in the literature.
The dichotomy between the North and the South seen as the result of identity differences (ethnic, cultural and religious differences) is not alone capable of responding to the Sudanese dilemma. The characterisation of the North-South civil war as a war between the Islamist Arab North and the Christian African South constitutes a restrictive vision of the Sudanese social reality and an essentialist vision that generates static categories of the two groups.

The formation of different racial, ethnic and cultural identities is a response to more complex dynamics that requires the understanding of successive historical processes, particularly slavery practices in precolonial and colonial Sudan, as well as the influence of the colonial government in the formation of the administrative structure and social aspects of modern Sudan. These elements had a direct influence on the structure of the post-colonial Sudanese State, on the nature of the relations between society and the State, and on inequalities in the area of access to the country’s political and economic resources.

The roots of the serious governance crises that have plagued Sudan right back to Independence can be traced back to the formation of the State: this was grounded on a tension between the central part of the country and the peripheral regions, whose marginalisation from access to the economic and political resources of the country were hence institutionalised. The civil war between the North and the South of Sudan is framed in a wider context, of the marginalisation of the peripheral Sudanese regions, as opposed to the accumulation of power in the central region. One of the manifestations of the generalised pattern of marginalisation of the Sudanese peripheries is the conflict in the western region of Darfur, that intensified since the 1990s and was made visible with the outbreak of armed conflict from 2002–2003, generating an important conflict unresolved to this day.

Therefore, the governance crisis in the country is complex, anchored on the one hand in the existence of a centre-periphery inequality, where political and economic resources accumulate in the centre, to the detriment of peripheral regions, and, on the other hand, in the coercive nature of authority, which does not hesitate to use violence to guarantee political stability.

Throughout the book, the author presents a synthesis of key historical and political developments during the period under review, contributing to expand the literature on African issues, and the very limited corpus of Spanish language Sudanese studies. However, this book is not targeted at scholars or leading policy experts on Sudan and South Sudan. Although he seeks to foster advances in knowledge about Sudan and South Sudan, the author avoids engaging in academic debates that would have added analytical weight. The book represents more of a historical summary of non-extensive previous material than a critical analysis of the main developments that occurred in Sudan. Therefore, it is a book for the general public, where the author outlines the history of the past and present interlocked conflicts in Sudan, attempting to highlight the main elements of the highly complex Sudanese political, economic, and social processes.