The Popular Forces Army

The Popular Forces Army (PFA) announced itself in December 2006 with a statement claiming an attack on an army garrison in South Darfur, the only one of Darfur’s three states with an Arab majority. The first armed opposition group led by and claiming to represent Arabs, the PFA said it would be willing to work with any group that rejected the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA). It said it would liaise with other armed opposition movements ‘until all the demands of Darfur and other marginalized parts of the Sudan are fully realized’. It denounced the ‘janjaweed’ as ‘a minority of mercenaries and hired individuals who ‘do not represent Darfur Arabs and do not embody their heritage, courage and sacrifice for peace and justice’.

Heading the PFA were two university graduates from the Rizeigat tribe: Salah Mohamed Abdul Rahman (‘Abu Sura’), a 50-something member of the Shattiya branch of the Southern Rizeigat and veteran leftist, and 28-year-old Yassin Yousif, a member of the Eregat branch of the Northern Rizeigat. The core of their supporters was initially cattle-herding Baggara from South Darfur who were angered by the government’s failure to pay compensation for lives lost and livestock looted by the Arab militias it had armed.

Claiming 3,000 followers but without a backer to provide them with arms, the PFA adopted a strategy of wooing Arabs away from the government. It attempted to do this through negotiating unrestricted passage along marahil (stock routes) closed by the two main insurgent groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), and by encouraging the re-opening of markets where Arabs and non-Arabs could trade together in the foothills of the SLA stronghold, Jebel Marra.

The PFA was invited to attend a meeting of Darfur movements in Arusha, Tanzania, in August 2007, but was hugely weakened when Yassin Yousif left the group to join the mainly-Northern Rizeigat United Revolutionary Forces Front (URFF). By March 2008, the SLA estimated the troop strength of the PFA at no more than 400 men. By 2010, it appeared to be a spent force, eclipsed by the URFF.

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