SUDANESE POLITICS

1956-1972

By

John Philips

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society....Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Karl Marx and Frederick Engels
MANIFESTO OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY

Since July 7, 1956, the government of the Sudan had been a coalition of the Umma (Mahdist) party, a conservative Islamic party, and the People's Democratic party, another Islamic party based on the Khatmiyya sect. This coalition was unstable because the Umma party was friendly with the British while the PDP favored Nasser's Egypt.[1]

The issue of accepting American aid to finance development plans provoked tensions in the government. Discussion of the issue in the National Constitutional Committee led the PDP to become less cooperative, and the opposition National United party walked out altogether.[2]

Differences over the issue of regional autonomy for the non-Muslim south and the possibility of making Sayyid 'Abd ar-Rahman al-Mahdi titular head of state also created tensions within the governing coalition. Sayyid Ali al-Mirghani, leader of the PDP, was also a traditional enemy of the Mahdi and as such was opposed to making him the symbol of national unity. Southerners, suspicious of Arabs and Muslims since the days of the slave trade, had already begun the civil war which was an important irritant in inter-African relations until it ended in 1972.

Abdallah Khalil was also worried by the possibility of a coalition between the PDP and the NUP. Such a coalition would

have a parliamentary majority if it enjoyed the support of southerners. It was rumored that Egyptian money was being used to bribe members of parliament to change parties. The leaders of both the NUP and the PDP were in contact with Egypt's President Nasser at this time.

All this chaos among the politicians led many Sudanese to regard formal democracy as a failure. Thus the stage was set for military intervention, which was already enjoying a vogue in the Middle East, thanks to the remarkable success of Nasser's six-year-old government in Egypt.[3]

The senior officers of the army took power early on the morning of November 17, 1958. This was the day before parliament was to have reconvened. They thereby helped to avoid a possible defeat of the government. Parliament was dissolved, all demonstrations and gatherings were prohibited. All newspapers were temporarily suspended.[4] The new government was dominated by the military, but five of its twelve cabinet members were civilians, including one southerner.[5]

Sayyid Ali al-Mirghani welcomed the coup. Sayyid Abd ar-Rahman al-Mahdi was more reluctant. The following March he died and was succeeded as Mahdi by his son, al-Siddiq. The new Mahdi was an implacable opponent of military government. Within a year of the coup almost all the civilian politicians were in opposition to the government. A series of attempted coups showed that even the military were not united behind the policies of their leaders.[6]

Labor unions represented only a small fraction of the Sudan's total population and that only in the north. The largest federation was allied with the World Federation of Trade Unions, a Soviet-dominated organization. It was thus on the fringe of Sudanese politics, which were generally conservative. Nonetheless it was one of the first victims of the military.

On December 3, 1958, all labor unions were declared illegal, as were all strikes. The Sudan Workers' Trade Union Federation, by far the largest workers' organization in the country, had its offices raided, its newspapers shut down and its leaders jailed.[7] Since the civilian government had been trying to declare the SWTUF an illegal organization before the coup, this can be seen as an attempt to accomplish by extralegal means what had proved difficult, if not impossible to accomplish through the courts.

In 1960 unions were again legalized, but under conditions even more restrictive than those of the colonial government. Workers were not allowed to form a union if their employer had

less than fifty workers. White collar and government employees were forbidden to join unions. All unions had to be registered with and approved by the Ministry of Information and Labour. Federations of unions were expressly forbidden. Even unions of workers in more than one firm were declared to be illegal.[8]

This had the effect of excluding the vast majority of Sudanese workers from joining any union at all. But it left the railway workers intact.[9] With a militant, industrial union in a critical sector of the economy, these workers were even more important to the Sudanese labor movement than the United Mine Workers are to the American labor movement. Employers were also forbidden, for the first time, to penalize workers for organizing or joining unions, or to reward those who refused to join.[10] This fact was to strengthen the organizing ability of those unions which still existed.

Severe restrictions were placed on the right to strike. Strikes were expressly forbidden if negotiations, mediation, conciliation or arbitration were going on. They were also forbidden if an agreement or the decision of an arbitration tribunal was still in effect. Political strikes were specifically forbidden. In addition, the president could declare any strike illegal if he felt it endangered the public interest. These restrictions combined to make almost any strike virtually impossible.[11]

Lack of specificity as to what constituted negotiations provided an opportunity for the Railway Workers' Union to declare a strike in June of 1961. Legally the head of state could have declared the strike "harmful to the public interest" but instead, he ordered the union dissolved.[12] This strike was connected with a demand for a return to civilian government, and was thus technically illegal anyway. Nonetheless, it succeeded in having a very unpopular general removed.[13] Opposition was emboldened.

Workers were not the only ones dissatisfied with the military government. The government concluded the Nile Water Agreement with Egypt in November of 1959. This gave the Sudan only about a quarter of the river's annual flow and some compensation for resettling Nubians displaced by the Aswan High Dam. Both the compensation and the water were significantly less than what the previous civilian government had asked for. In addition, many Sudanese engineers had grave reservations about the feasibility of the whole dam project.[14]

Within a few years of the coup, the Umma party, the NUP, the Communists, Muslim Brothers and others had formed an Opposition Front to demand a return to democratic government. On July 7, 1961 twelve prominent politicians associated with this front

sent the government a telegram protesting the alleged government torture of a young Communist who had been jailed previously. Four days later, all these politicians, except the Mahdi himself, were arrested and detained at Juba in the remote south. This was to provoke much opposition among students, workers and the rest of the public.[15]

The government made an attempt to set up mechanisms which would provide limited feedback from the public on political questions. These local, provincial and central councils were so effectively dominated by the government that all parties except the Communists boycotted the central council elections of 1963. This only served to further alienate the people from the government.[16]

A decision to relocate displaced Nubians at a site they had already rejected was seen as evidence of nepotism, misuse of funds and attempted ethnocide by many, especially the Nubians who were disproportionately represented among the educated elite. Nubians led demonstrations that were joined by many discontented workers and students.[17]

In August 1964 the government realized that its repressive policies were ineffective in uniting the country. Therefore, they appointed a twenty-five member commission to study the problems of the south and invited citizens to give their own opinions without fear of reprisals. University students were the first to respond. A floodgate of dissent was opened. Within a few months, this led to the collapse of the government.[18]

A forum on the topic of southern secessionism opened at the University of Khartoum on September 9, 1964. Dr. Hasan al-Turabi, a Muslim Brother, announced that the problem of the south was integral to the whole constitutional framework of the nation. As such, it could only be solved by democratic means. The government belatedly realized its error in tolerating dissent. All further discussion of the southern problem was immediately banned.

It was too late. On the night of October 21 students gathered on campus for further discussions. When police surrounded them to order an end to the discussion, the students refused to disperse. Tear gas from the police was met with bricks, bottles and stones from the students. The police opened fire, killing one student. Thus began the demonstrations that toppled the government.

On October 22 the government closed the university. The staff responded by resigning until a new government took power. Their strike was joined by other professionals. Tens of thousands joined the funeral for the student slain by police. Riots broke out. Armed soldiers and tanks patrolled the streets.

By the next day the opposition was better organized. Professionals, other workers, and the Gezira tenant farmers formed a National Front for Professionals and called a general strike. The Opposition Front joined them in a United National Front to organize demonstrations. By October 25 the strike had shut down shops, government offices and all radio, telephone and rail communications from Khartoum.

The government was dumbfounded. Most of the army was away in the south. Those soldiers who remained were reluctant to shoot down the citizens. On October 26 President Abbud announced the dissolution of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and of the Council of Ministers. The next day he opened negotiations with the United National Front.

Continuation of the riots and the general strike prevented General Abbud from carrying out his intention of forming a new Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Rumors of a coup led to a mass march on the presidential palace. This was contained by soldiers firing into the crowd, killing twenty. On October 29 the government capitulated. All civil liberties were restored. Independence for the judiciary and the university was guaranteed. A caretaker government to prepare for elections was set up with General Abbud as ceremonial president. By the end of November he had resigned. The unsubstantiated rumor of a counter-coup led to the stoning of the Egyptian and American embassies. The rumor seems to have contained little truth, but the response of the people showed they were still alert.[19]

This return to democracy was far from the end of the Sudan's problems. Although two southerners were included in the transition cabinet, leaders of the insurrection still demanded an independent nation of Azania (name given to the southern Sudan by secessionist guerrillas). The main parties contesting the election were still the Umma and National United Parties. The Communist party joined forces with the Peoples' Democratic party. Despite women's suffrage and the eighteen-year-old vote, these parties decided to boycott the elections. They charged that by only carrying out elections in the north (due to the war) the government was playing into the hands of the secessionists. It was even claimed in the American press that they planned to sabotage the elections and seize power for themselves. Sixty seats were set aside for the south, where elections were to be held when conditions permitted.[20]

Saddiq al-Mahdi's Umma party won the election. He planned to set up a conservative coalition government but made overtures to the south. Three of the fifteen cabinet posts and the vice presidency were set aside for southerners. An end to discrimination was promised. Local self-government was also promised in an apparent attempt to appeal to non-Arabs in the north as well

as to southerners. Elections for the south were planned. The Mahdi's new prime minister announced that arms supplies for rebels in the Congo and Eritrea would be cut off. This was an apparent attempt to convince the governments of Ethiopia and the Congo to reciprocate by cutting off arms supplies for the rebels in the Sudan.[21]

All this proved to be wishful thinking. Increasing violence in the south led the prime minister to reject conciliation and send reinforcements to the south.[22] The workers, though under less organizing restrictions than under the military regime, found themselves, once again, a tiny minority in opposition to the government.[23]

Meanwhile, regional and ethnic tensions within the Sudan continued to heighten. In addition to the guerilla war in the south, many non-Arab northerners were becoming dissatisfied with the Arab-dominated government. This government was openly pursuing policies which favored the Arabized, riverain regions of the north at the expense of even other Muslim regions. The fact that such favoritism continued under a deomcratically-elected government only served to discredit formal democracy in the eyes of many Sudanese.

Corruption, nepotism and intimidation were resorted to more and more often by the government. Conflict among political factions over the issue of constitutional changes (especially federalism and the question of formalizing Islamic and Arab dominance) led to new elections. Manipulation of these elections by conservative Arab elements led to the growth of extraparliamentary opposition groups in the north. These non-Arab, extraparliamentary organizations met and united in the spring of 1969. They planned a combined coup and civilian uprising to end Arab domination and to implement a federal constitution. Before this United Sudanese African Liberation Front could move, Col. Jaafar Numeiry and his troops, with the backing of the Communist party, took over the government. Subsequent coup attempts by non-Arab groups have failed.[24]

Numeiry's coup was initially considered to be communist controlled by many foreign observers. Within the next few years it was to prove to be anything but! Although Numeiry relied heavily on the Communist party to establish his power, there was soon a parting of the ways. The reasons for this are to be found in the nature of the Communist party and the class base of the Numeiry regime, as well as in the wider issues of Sudanese politics.

At first glance, the Sudanese Communist party would seem to have been the most influential, stable and certainly the

largest Communist party in the Arab world. Further consideration will show that the CP had no secure class base of its own. It was primarily a parasitic appendage to the working and tenant-farming classes. Its own seeming success, by both emboldening it and frightening its enemies, contributed to its ultimate demise.

The Communist party had emerged from the first military government as an influential part of the revolutionary coalition. The party had influence in both the labor unions and the Gezira Tenant Farmers Union. In addition to strategically important leadership positions in popular economic institutions, the party had eleven seats in the new parliament. This seeming power gave the party much confidence. Its opponents, especially the Muslim Brothers, tried consistently to outlaw the party in flagrant violation of the constitution.

An analysis of the actual class nature of the party itself shows important weaknesses in its position. The eleven Communist seats in the Parliament were all from the special graduate constituencies, which had been created in response to the important role of the educated intelligentsia in the general strike. The Communist party and its supporters were predominantly drawn from the small western-educated elites. One of the major supports for this class was the functions it performed for the working and peasant classes.

Evidence that the members of Communist-dominated unions did not support the political opinions of their union officers comes from more than just election statistics. After the general strike to restore democracy, the CP had a difficult time trying to use unions (ostensibly under its control) for political purposes. Workers failed to support calls for a general strike against the elected government in February 1965. At the same time Gezira tenant farmers continued to cultivate their lands, despite the president of their union urging support for the general strike.

It is obvious, in hindsight, that Communist strength in the unions represented a weak class alliance. The emerging tenant-farmer and wage-worker classes needed educated spokespersons to articulate their grievances. The fact that Communists were ready and willing to speak for the emerging alienated classes disguised the fact that, as professional intellectuals who had often become 'pie-card' union bosses, the Communists had different material interests than the workers and peasants whose grievances they articulated.

But it would be a mistake to conclude that the Communist party did not have influence beyond its numbers. Its organiza-

tional skills, collective intellectual achievements and strategic position in society made it very important in the coup of 1969. Numeiry's coup, though employing populist rhetoric, was widely interpreted as a communist victory even in the Sudan. Right-wing forces under the commander of the Mahdist militia, Imam al-Hadj, attempted to revolt against what they saw as an atheist regime. Numeiry defeated them with air force bombardments. Soon the government announced the nationalization of foreign banks and trading firms, as well as many private estates. The Communist party interpreted all this as a victory. Western nations cut back foreign aid. Eastern bloc nations did not move to take up the slack. Though Numeiry appeared to be isolating his country internationally, he was actually consolidating his power internally, preparatory to acquiring new sources of foreign aid and investment.[25]

With traditionalist forces crushed militarily, Numeiry was free to move against the far left. This would establish him firmly in the center of Sudanese politics where he could build a secure base among the middle peasants, as well as the merchant and entrepreneurial sections of the capitalist classes. Numeiry began by exiling 'Abd al-Khaliq Mahjub, an important Communist party leader, to Egypt on the same plane with the Mahdi.

By overestimating their power, the communists played into Numeiry's hands. Despite the failure of both the Warsaw Pact nations and China to compensate for the aid which Western nations had cut off, the Communist party continued to push the government further to the left. In November 1970 Numeiry dropped the leftmost officers from the ruling junta. At the same time he arrested several members of the CP Central Committee. By May of 1971 Numeiry felt strong enough to dissolve the youth, women's and students' unions, as well as the Sudan Workers' Trade Union Federation--all important organizations which were also communist strongholds.[26]

The Communist party was undoubtedly on the defensive, but still felt a false sense of security. There was no opposition when pro-communist elements took power in a bloodless coup on July 19, 1971. The leaders of this coup did not feel that Numeiry was a serious threat to their power and therefore merely arrested him and his supporters. Three days after the coup, Numeiry, with Egyptian and Libyan support, staged a successful counter-coup. This action was as unopposed as the coup it replaced. Numeiry soon set up the Sudan Socialist Union to organize his own support and give the country a new political formation rejecting both the parties based on Islamic sects and the Communist party.

Numeiry had successfully eliminated the far right, with its base in traditional modes of surplus accumulation. He had

also eliminated the far left, which, in the form of the Communist party, stood for expropriation of surplus by a bureaucratic class through state ownership of production and distribution. The elimination of these two forces left the way clear for private capitalist development of the Sudan. The Sudan became the beneficiary of increasing amounts of foreign aid and investment from such wealthy Arab states as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. This investment went not only into the manufacturing and processing sectors but has also increasingly gone into the agricultural sector.[27] With the growth of OPEC financial power the attempt to turn the Sudan into an 'Arab breadbasket' has accelerated still further.

The Sudan has not seen the kind of labor unrest that has marked South Africa or Poland recently. This is probably not because the workers are happy with government-controlled unions. A more likely explanation is that the expansion of the economy provides workers with ever-improved opportunities. Thus, worker discontent has not become desperate enough to topple the regime or even to seriously challenge it.

Another factor in quieting worker unrest is undoubtedly the end of the civil war. Once he had consolidated power in the north, Numeiry was free to come to terms with the south. The resulting political settlement he negotiated with the Anyanya guerillas has not erased regional tensions in the Sudan. It has allowed the government to concentrate its energies on economic development rather than on military expenditures.

As the economy continues to grow, the working class, the modern fraction of the bourgeoisie (as opposed to the traditional petite bourgeoisie) and the educated intelligentsia can all be expected to grow in numbers and in political power. Any or all of these classes could pose a great threat to the regime if they became antagonistic. This is particularly true of the strategic and important working class. A wave of strikes by salaried professionals and ordinary wage-workers could topple Numeiry just as easily as it did Acheampong in Ghana or Ibrahim Abbud in the Sudan. Numeiry can remain in power only as long as he avoids the serious mistakes these previous dictators made.

Yet the growth of the modern economy and the classes associated with it create inevitable pressures for democratization. Those who, like Saudi Arabia, attempt to modernize the economy but not the political structure may find, as has been the case in Iran, that popular reaction replaces their monarchist regimes with electoral republics which have little interest in modernizing the economy. The tension between the growing capitalist economy, which requires a large working class and 'bourgeois liberties,' and precapitalist state formations, which require

authoritarianism for the immediate expropriation of surplus value, can only grow more acute with time. The emerging classes, both bourgeoisie and proletariat, do not need authoritarianism to maintain their position in society. As they become more powerful they can be expected sooner or later to support democratic transformations of the political structure.[28] Whether these transformations come peacefully or not depends largely on the reaction of those currently holding political power.

Notes

1. Yusuf Fadl Hasan, "The Sudanese Revolution of October 1964," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Dec. 1967, p. 492.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 493.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 493-94.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 495.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 495-96.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 496-97.
7. Joan Davies, African Trade Unions, Penguin, Harmondsworth, England, 1966, p. 141.
8. Omer M. Osman, "Recent Changes in Labour Legislation in the Sudan," *International Labour Review*, Geneva, Vol. LXXXVI, No. 3, September 1962, p. 235-46.
9. Joan Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 141.
10. Omer M. Osman, *op. cit.*, p. 241.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 243.
13. Joan Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 141-142.
14. Yusuf Fadl Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 497-98.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 499
16. *Ibid.*, p. 502-503.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 503-504.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 505.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 505-509, *Newsweek*, November 9, 1964 and November 30, 1964.
20. *Newsweek*, February 1, 1965, p. 32-3, May 3, 1965, p. 48. *Time*, May 28, 1965, p. 40.
21. *Time*, May 28, 1965, p. 40, June 25, 1965, p. 42-44.
22. *Time*, July 30, 1965, p. 24.
23. Joan Davies, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
24. Philip Abbas, "The Growth of Black Political Consciousness in the Northern Sudan," *Africa Today*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1973, p. 29-43.
25. Haim Shaked, Esther Souery and Gabriel Warburg, "The Communist Party in the Sudan 1946-47," in Confino and Shamir, eds., The U.S.S.R. and the Middle East, Israeli University Press, Jerusalem, 1973.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 357-79; Carole Collins, "Colonialism and Class

Struggle in the Sudan," *MERIP Reports*, No. 46, April 1976, p. 3-20.

27. Collins, *op. cit.*
28. Richard Sklar, "The Nature of Class Domination in Africa," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 1979, p. 531-52. See also Karl Marx, The Communist Manifesto, especially the section "German, or True, Socialism."

Luo Music Maker
Hezbon Edward Owiti