

THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF SUDANESE POLITICS

Some Tribal and Elite Pressures on the Sudan's Political Structure

by Alan W. Horton

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Despite the journalistic neglect of recent years, the Sudan is as interesting for its own sake as any other country. It was interesting for other reasons when its future was a key issue in the tangled and neurotic relations between Egypt and Great Britain and when independence was finally achieved in 1956. But when it became more important to understand the Sudanese context of events—the military coup d'état of 1958, the two unsuccessful attempts to change the junta's composition in 1959, the growing strife and violence in the Sudanese South—the casual reader abroad lost touch with a land of considerable fascination.

This loss of touch is unfortunate because the Sudan, after six years' insistence on minding its own affairs, is now being prodded by circumstance into a less isolationist position, and the probability is high that the Sudan will shortly be receiving more attention from the international press. Despite the unaligned, stay-at-home attitudes of the present military regime, the forces of tradition and social evolution are heading in directions that inevitably mean a greater involvement with the outside world. The problem of the South, which has so far been only on the periphery of newsworthiness, may soon be the explosive concern of several African states; and the present experiments in guided democracy, symptomatic of a new willingness to take civilian advice on public policy and planning, might even lead to long-term and large-scale economic alignments with particular members of the developed world. When the dramatic aspects of these and other likelihoods are reported abroad, glib interpretations will be tempting as always, but in these instances an effort to understand the Sudanese context, its social stress and cultural strain, will be rewarding—because the prime mover of events is now somewhere in the Sudan rather than London or Cairo. The social profile that follows is an attempt to provide a sketch map of that "somewhere," that source of political conflict and change.

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An immense plain interrupted irregularly by mountain ranges, the Sudan is the biggest country in Africa, its area just short of a million square miles. Though a country of great physical and human variety, surprisingly it does not—with one exception—give the impression of great contrast one would expect. The arid Nile-irrigated north, the western provinces of Kordofan and Darfur, the middle regions south and east of Khartoum, these areas are culturally diverse, but to the visitor from the Mediterranean coast they seem to possess a sameness of desert and savannah and distant hills, of dignity and tradition, of quiet voices and brown skin. One feels, coming from crowded Egypt, a spacious atmosphere of non-clash, some kind of overriding harmony of land and people that soothes the jangled Mediterranean nerves and makes the variety less urgent.

"Except for the South"—how many times one hears that phrase from those who seek to generalize about the Sudan. The three southern provinces are in sharp racial and cultural contrast to the Sudanese north. One crosses a sudden border into black Africa and finds Nuer, Dinka, and Shilluk. Arabic becomes a foreign language; Islam becomes a rarity in a region that is essentially pagan with an overlay of mission-educated Christians. The differing climate and the swamps, the tsetse flies and herds of cattle, all make for a special way of life that is fostered and preserved by abnormally poor communications with the rest of the Sudan. In the last few years, the tensions created by the rival forces of integration and southern separatism have neared the snapping point, and in the dominant north these tensions play an important role as political and social issues. The South is, in fact, the Sudan's great problem, and the way the problem is handled will go a long way toward determining what kind of modern Sudan will ultimately emerge.

Though the northern Sudan is culturally distinct from the Sudanese South and from Egypt, it has within it a considerable diversity.¹ The ecological range is from pure nomadism to the urban extreme of nonindustrial Khartoum, but the small cultivator is most common. The linguistic range is not precisely known. The so-called Beja languages spoken in the Red Sea hills are certainly cousins of Semitic Arabic, and perhaps the Nubian languages spoken along the Nile near the Egyp-

¹ Those unacquainted with the literature on the Sudan should probably start with P. M. Holt, A Modern History of the Sudan (New York: Grove Press, 1961) to which a useful bibliography is appended. The basic geography is given in K. M. Barbour, The Republic of the Sudan (London: University of London Press, 1961).

tian border are the same, but linguists are uncertain about the parentage of tongues spoken by darker-skinned peoples in the Nuba Mountains and in Darfur. There are also a number of unidentified languages used by various Negroid groups near the Ethiopian border and in other, more remote pockets of the land. The linguistic direction of change is that minority languages are slowly giving way to the dominant usefulness of Arabic.

The strongest loyalty of the traditional Sudanese is probably to his family and his tribe.² Hence most Sudanese make careful cultural and linguistic distinctions even between closely related groups. Broadly speaking, each tribe has a geographical area, cultivable or otherwise, that it considers its own—though "ownership" may be the result of relatively recent migration from another part of the Sudan or from outside—and each tribe provides its members with an identity and with a focus for loyalty. Tribal identity is not ordinarily discarded when a tribesman moves from his area into an urban center, and he will probably live in an urban district associated with his own ethnic kind; but tribal loyalty is another matter—in what contexts and to what degree his fellow tribesmen (despite a common identity) can count on his loyalty in centers such as Omdurman and Atbara is uncertain. One supposes, of course, that the educated Sudanese, living perhaps in a relatively affluent district, cares about both tribal identity and tribal loyalty considerably less than his cousin who lives in a poorer, more traditional part of town.

Sometimes tribal loyalties can be affected by religious loyalties—or rather (because we are speaking here not of Islam itself) by loyalties to Muslim religious orders. Some of these sectarian orders, by way of ruling families descended from founding saints, have wielded great power at certain moments in Sudanese history. The best known and by far the largest orders are the Khatmiya and the Ansar, the latter's Mahdist days of 19th-century glory having long been familiar to the West in story and in film. Nowadays, the nature of the loyalty an order can command is difficult to assess. In the unlikely event of conflict between allegiances, tribal loyalties, except in special contexts, would ordinarily be stronger than loyalties to a religious sect (and per-

² Following most literature on the Sudan, I am making no attempt at careful definition or ordering of such concepts as family, subtribe, tribe, people, etc. A group of related, or ethnically similar, tribes is sometimes referred to in the literature as a people—and sometimes as a tribe.

haps loyalties to the nation). Religious orders are, in fact, often constructed with tribal blocks, and splinter orders have had their origins in tribal rather than theological disagreements. In two special instances, what might at first seem loyalty to a religious order is disclosed as strongly political: the Khatmiya and the Ansar, subtly or openly linked to opposing political postures, had important political roles to play during the struggle for independence and before the military coup of 1958, and it remains an axiom of Sudanese politics that each would quickly enter the national political arena if the other threatened to achieve a favored position.

Because Sudanese of diverse loyalties have growing reason to mingle and even to live side by side in the same urban neighborhoods, a social ranking system, doubtless in existence for many decades, has become increasingly convenient. Predictably, the tribe (rather than political or religious affiliation) provides the basis for the system's operation: knowledge of another's tribal connections supplies the ordinary Sudanese with the social identification that regulates many of their personal relations to each other. What are the criteria of social rank? I can make only a few, most general observations. Certainly there is in the top social category a dominant block of northern tribes that are for the most part Arabic-speaking and non-Negroid, and the criteria for membership in that top category seem to be more racial than linguistic. Thus the Nubians and the Beja, both non-Arabic speaking groups, are completely acceptable, but other non-Arabic speakers such as the Funj and even the Fur are excluded from full membership. This is apparently because the Nubians and the Beja are manifestly brown-skinned, non-Negroid peoples; but the once aristocratic Funj, who inhabit an area on the Blue Nile upstream from Sennar,³ are Negroid, and the Fur of the Western Sudan, despite the Arab heritage of their former sultans, are too dark and have too many Negroid characteristics for unqualified admission. And yet the Baggara, a cattle people of southern Kordofan and Darfur, are also dark, and some among them have Negroid characteristics, but the validity of their claim to membership in the top so-

³ The experts disagree on the identity of the Funj. E. E. Evans-Pritchard says (1935): "Everyone is agreed that the term 'Fung' is correctly applied to aristocracies at Sennar and other local centres in Dar Fung but cannot be used to refer to any particular racial type nor to any distinctive language and culture." (In J. A. Hamilton [ed.], The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan From Within [London: Faber & Faber, 1937], p. 85.) Others write of the Funj as if they did in fact have language and culture of their own.



The Nile at Wadi Halfa near the Egyptian border.

The Blue Nile at Khartoum.



cial category is totally sustained by the presumption that Arabic-speakers are of Arab ancestry. Similarly, other tribes and peoples make their separate adjustments to the intertribal social scheme, placing themselves either inside or outside the dominant block in accordance with accepted ranking criteria (whose subtleties and scope are of course much greater than indicated by my suggestions about language and race).

The specialness of the South arises partly from the fact that not all southerners accept their social lot. Placed by northerners at the bottom of the social scale, southerners are increasingly rejecting the ranking criteria of the dominant north and have even compounded their racial and linguistic unacceptability by adopting, with British help during the Condominium, a measure of Christianity. Consciously or otherwise, educated southerners are seeking to establish their own separate ranking system, a social endeavor reflected in a political separatism whose expressions range from a polite desire for federal status to the growing extreme of violent rebellion. The usual Sudanese reaction to separatist sentiment has been to blame both Christianity and the British for fostering a southern sense of apartness, and in a limited way these reproofs are merited, but the basic causes of separatism are lodged deep in northern attitudes that the South finds intolerable.

The criterion of social class exists only in embryo. The visitor from Egypt, a wealthy land organized by centuries of careful class distinction, is surprised to see a hotel waiter embraced warmly by an affluent guest, and with no embarrassment either way; the two men are clearly from the same tribe and hence distant cousins, and it occurs to neither that the affluence of one might affect their relations. The beginnings of a class system may perhaps be seen in the prestige enjoyed by certain families whose urban and national activities date back several generations; chief among them are those descended from the founders of the two big religious orders. These families are decreasingly distinguishable, however, from a growing group of the urban educated who, though they do not yet constitute a social class, feel themselves intellectually responsible for the country's future. The educated may live in the more "Western" parts of Khartoum and Khartoum North, or they may live more traditionally within the high-walled enclosures of Omdurman; but wherever they live, they are seldom more than one generation removed from the kind of tribal living their first and second cousins now practice.

In theory, educated Sudanese are nationally rather than tribally oriented, but they have, not surprisingly, inherited some of the social judgments their grandfathers made. Among more traditional folk, re-

siding outside the towns, the existence of a ranking system for tribes and peoples is of little concern because the system is seldom called into operation; intertribal marriage, for instance, an occasion that forces social comparison, does not often occur. In the poorer urban districts inhabited by folk of traditional mentality, occasions for comparison doubtless occur with considerable frequency, and it is here that the ranking system operates most easily and usefully. Among the educated, however, it must operate subtly; here the strain between old and new social criteria is greatest. The educated believe in citizenship for all, and they find their cousins' narrower tribal loyalties to be matters for amusement or contempt, but they have considerable difficulty in accepting peoples from outside the dominant northern block as their social equals. They are politically dedicated to the idea of nationhood, but in practice the political ideal is limited by the social conviction that leadership must remain within the dominant group.

The position of the educated can be illustrated by their preferences with respect to finding suitable spouses for themselves and for their children. They do not, of course, insist on marrying within the same tribe: even the "clerks only" type of education instituted by the British after the turn of the century produced modern, nationally oriented men. The principal test applied by a father searching for a son-in-law is educational—and as women's education continues to expand, the same test is increasingly applied to daughters-in-law—and within certain limits, the better the education, the more favorable the consideration the prospective marriage partner is likely to receive. But the final test is essentially racial: marriage outside the dominant northern block is a matter for social uneasiness. A northern Sudanese would probably feel uncomfortable about marriage to a member of the Fur, and intensely hostile about marriage to a southerner. The educated southerner, as his sense of racial apartness and southern nationhood grows, is becoming equally hostile to the idea of marriage with "Arabs."

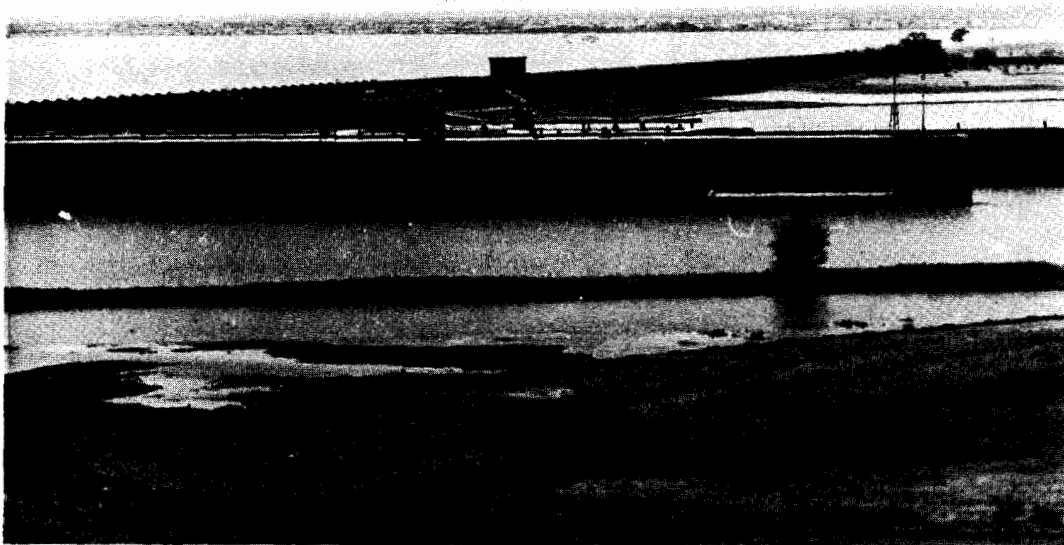
Because the educated are the principal inheritors of influence and power in the Sudan, it is worth learning a great deal more about this group—and yet little is known of the resemblances and divisions among them. The educated constitute an open group: admission to the various levels of membership can be arranged by academic accomplishment, though only limited membership is granted to southerners and some others. The educational foundation of the group is probably the secondary certificate, whose holders constitute the group's majority and fill government offices as clerks and department heads. Building on this foundation, subgroups of more highly qualified persons form educational elites, to whom leadership of the modern Sudan naturally falls.

There are doubtless more than several elite subgroups within the educated whole, but no social scientist has yet identified them explicitly. What seem to be identifiable are two gravitational pulls among them, rival nuclei about which contending elites have gathered; the allegiances commanded by each are far from clear-cut, but the political and social oppositions they represent are understood by, and mean something to, most educated Sudanese. One nucleus is the army officer corps, which took power in 1958, and the other is an unorganized collection of "intellectuals" (this word is not really satisfactory, but no better one comes to mind), who since 1958 have been politically dispossessed. To simplify matters, I shall consolidate these two gatherings of educational elites and refer to each as a single elite—which in the case of the army is close to reality. Still, it is important to understand that this description of how educated Sudanese are socially organized is a considerable oversimplification of complex social phenomena and can be justified only by the hope of greater clarity.⁴

No army is independent of the society from which it is recruited, and the Sudanese army is no exception. The enlisted men come from rural and urban situations of a traditional sort; the officers, who are the core of one of the two elites I am postulating, have shared with other educated persons the experiences of secondary school before going on to their military specializations—and hence share many of the social convictions of other educated persons. Because they have tribal identities (regardless of how seriously they take them), most officers have tribal channels of communication to and from the nonmilitary world, and many have cousins at every level of Sudanese life, including the religious level of the Khatmiya or the Ansar.

⁴ I have not mentioned those privately engaged in agriculture, industry, and commerce; they constitute an elite of a kind, but by and large it is not Sudanese. The core is made up of Syrians, Greeks, persons of Egyptian origin, and other foreign elements having the status of permanent residents. Though some are leaving, there is as yet no pressure on them to leave—except perhaps the pressure of slightly decreased profits. They do not involve themselves in Sudanese politics.

An interesting group now coming into a position of greater influence is the group of "tenants" of the Gezira Scheme, the government cotton development that provides the Sudan with most of its foreign exchange. The tenants, who are all Sudanese, are becoming relatively prosperous farmers and farm managers of the "semiprivate" sector.



The Jebel Aulia Dam on the White Nile.

A Latuka village in the South.



The collective personality of the officer corps is not, therefore, much different from that of other groups of modern Sudanese, and it is difficult to isolate the special characteristics of the military mind. It is frequently said by Sudanese "intellectuals" that army officers are not very intelligent, and it is certain they do not approach problems the way academics do, but such comments are suspect if only because of the exasperated, sometimes jealous, tone in which they are uttered. What seems to distinguish the military elite is not its lack of intelligence but its discipline and its conservative, "father-knows-best" attitude about government. Army officers accept military rank and seniority as the proper measures of a man's right to be in authority. When the army took control in 1958, it was not an unhappy colonel but the Commander in Chief, Ibrahim Abboud, who gave the orders to do so, and President Abboud's rank and seniority are today of more importance to his position than his ability, which is not remarkable. The sense of discipline extends to enlisted men as well; it is apparently unthinkable that there should be an enlisted mutiny such as those which have occurred recently in several countries of Negro Africa. A disciplined one-party government is, of course, a mixed blessing; stability, order, and the power to act are counterbalanced in the Sudanese instance by a tendency to follow through, despite early lack of success, on poorly conceived plans and by a curious inertness and insensitivity about some of the obvious solutions to social problems. These defects are accompanied by paternalistic postures attesting to the regime's belief that the political and economic salvation of the Sudan can occur only by army intercession.

The other elite, which I have had to call "intellectual," is much more difficult to define. Its core might be described as the group that would today be in power if there had not been a military take-over, or it might be described as the group of Western-educated professional people whose social focuses are the university faculties and the upper echelons of the civil service. However, any Sudanese with intellectual pretensions and with a good command of English is probably eligible for an apprentice membership in one of the various groupings (engineers, lawyers, economists, high-level bureaucrats). Included among the intellectual elite are the first modern Sudanese nationalists, the men who in 1938 founded the Graduates' General Congress (in those days most intellectuals were secondary graduates only) and whose early disagreements led to the political formations of later years. Some members of Congress became the parliamentary politicians of the period from 1954 to the coup of 1958; these men were sustained in office and counseled by more professional, less political colleagues of the same elite, and they betrayed their own and their colleagues' future by

confidence-destroying bickering among themselves over their political patrimony. There are still others in the category of the intellectual elite, but more important than an attempt to list them (an unwieldy task at best) is the fact that most Sudanese recognize the category as significant in the national life of the Sudan—and many say the intellectual elite should still be running the machinery of government.

Government by elite is nothing new to the Sudan. P. M. Holt expresses it this way:

In 1954 the control of the administrative machine, which was the traditional and essential institution of government in the Sudan, has passed from a small group of British officials to a small group of Sudanese politicians. In November 1958, a further transfer took place, from the parliamentary politicians to a small group of Army officers.⁵

Holt is speaking of the small groups actually in control; I am speaking of the elites that support those in actual control and from which replacements for top political jobs would naturally be sought. The strain in Sudanese political life is the result of the competition of two elites, one of which, now in stable authority, has recently replaced the other. No important differences of doctrine distinguish them—both encourage the developing private sector to the same considerable degree—and the bitterness and suspicion existing between the two can be principally attributed to the continuing immediacy of their rivalry for national pre-eminence.

The politically dispossessed, those deprived of direct access to power in 1958, are understandably critical of the military regime (and though it allows no public criticism, the regime exerts few pressures against adverse opinions uttered privately in public places). The chief complaints are the lack of freedom of public speech and the regime's passivity in the face of economic and social opportunity. Since 1958, say the intellectuals, the government has become almost incapable of any kind of planning; and the army authorities, unschooled except in military matters, believe in the use of force to impose measures whose only chance of success would be the use of governmental persuasion and compromise. Occasionally one hears joking references to "our return

⁵ Holt, op. cit., see footnote 1, p. 180.

to tribalism," comments on the fact that a high proportion of the inner military circle have Shayqiyya tribal origins, not to mention the foreign minister and the chief justice, perhaps the two most influential civilians of the regime. Then, too, the regime's dealings with the public are not calculated to improve relations between the two elites; they often consist of oversimplified, obviously inaccurate public statements, a puerile propaganda that insults the intelligence of even the moderately educated. Combined with the inability to speak out publicly, this behavior has produced in some circles an enormous frustration. Convinced of their superior qualifications for the job of guiding the Sudan, the intellectuals are daily confronted with evidence of clumsy government but deprived of satisfying opportunities to influence policy.

The army is open to considerable criticism for its handling of the problem of the South, which has been under martial law since 1955, the year of the first mutiny. In 1958 the army, when it imposed martial law on the entire country, initiated a much stricter application in the southern areas, and since 1958 no effort has been made to talk about southern grievances with southern leaders, to reach an understanding on the issue of federal status for the South, or to soothe ruffled feelings. The army considers southern leaders to be "troublemakers" and seeks solutions only within the framework of force or northern dominance. Perhaps the most shortsighted scheme has been an attempt to impose Islam on the South by sending out badly trained northern religious teachers. Though the effort to remove one cause of separatist feeling is theoretically a step in the right direction, it has in this instance been a clear failure, and yet the Department of Religious Affairs continues without thought to go through the same bureaucratic motions.

On most of these counts the intellectual elite would doubtless do better, and hence matters would be in a less aggravated state; but on one important count the attitudes of the two elites are disturbingly similar. The fact is that few northerners see any reason why a southern minority should not ultimately adopt the standards and practices of the majority. This view comes close to guaranteeing the continuance of the present north-south relationship because it implies the continued application of northern social criteria and the retention of southerners at the bottom of the Sudanese social scale. Without a change in northern hearts—and such changes in socio-racial attitudes are ordinarily measured not in years but in decades or centuries—southerners have no psychological recourse but to insist on some kind of autonomy, enough political autonomy, in fact, to ensure the operation of their own separate set of standards and practices. It may already be too late for southern acceptance of federal status (with accompanying pledges of

cultural freedom), but this is the best deal that northerners could now make. At every opportunity southerners are emphasizing their apartness: there is, for example, a widespread refusal to learn Arabic, and a corresponding resolve to continue the use of English! There is little thought of making common cause with northerners also opposing the regime—this would be too close to admitting a common patriotism—but there is an awareness of the politically explosive possibilities represented by culturally kindred tribes across the southern border.

Aside from the inevitability of some kind of southern separatism, what alternatives now confront the Sudan as a whole? It is unlikely, first of all, that there will be a return to the pre-1958 parliamentary period when the intellectual elite was in power and the army merely a nonpolitical stable element. Not only has the army now tasted with approval the wine of political authority, it has also been pleased about its increased status within Sudanese society, and it will insist well into the foreseeable future on a strong voice in the making of public policy. Though intellectuals tend to look back nostalgically at the parliamentary period, the main body of educated Sudanese, the clerkly backbone of the government machine, is less enthusiastic about recovering those politically untidy days of competitive accusation, intrigue, uncertainty, and a suddenly liberated press. For many of the educated, stability and respectability are greater goods than freedom of public speech.

An alternative within closer reach is that the army elite will continue to govern as it has since the coup d'état. This is to say that government will remain somewhat heavy-handed and unimaginative and that a great deal of intellectual talent will go unused. The army officers in power will rely only on their own judgment at times of big decisions, and the basic programs necessary for the country's economic and social development will emerge haltingly in hit-or-miss style. Tight control of the press will persist, and political stability will be deadeningly apparent—unless Ibrahim Abboud should die, with the result of an (improbable) open struggle within the military junta. Measured against most of Africa, the Sudan will continue to be a shining example of what stable government, good educational facilities, and an adequate economy can produce; measured against much of the Arab world, the Sudan will be a land of small-scale education and neglected economic opportunity.

But social situations never remain the same, and some observers claim that a direction of change in the Sudan is already apparent. The most likely alternative now seems to be the gradual development of a working relationship between the two elites. This means, one sup-

poses, a slow lessening of suspicion between the two, an acceptance by both that each stands to gain by mutual accommodation. The intellectuals must recognize that the army, one way or another, is going to retain a final authority that may be delegated to approved civilians but will not be irrecoverably surrendered, and they must come to accept this situation as the framework within which they seek power and influence—a stable framework they themselves cannot provide. The army elite, for its part, must recognize its own limitations by searching out intellectual talent and providing genuinely delegated authority in the area of planning and policy-making, and it must learn to allow, and accept, a useful measure of public debate in the same area. These are not the only prescriptions for the growth of mutual confidence and co-operation; they are mentioned here because they approximate what each elite usually says the other ought to be doing.

The first move in the direction of compromise has, in fact, taken place already—an attempt to institute a Sudanese kind of guided democracy—and on the success of this initial venture depends the enthusiasm with which the army will contemplate future compromise. Under the chairmanship of the chief justice, a courageous and intelligent compromiser who is viewed by some intellectuals as something of a turncoat, a Constitutional Council drew up and published a proposal recommending the next steps toward representative government. The gist of the proposal was the formation of a Central Council, partly elected and partly appointed, that in the two years of its life would compose and approve a new constitution. The Central Council has now been formed, and it held its first business meeting in March of this year—after an earlier formal opening at which the military demonstrated an encouraging sensitivity by appearing in civilian clothes. The Council is made up of some 87 persons, of whom 54 were elected on a basis of six from each province, but the regime is in no danger of being the Council minority; the elected members are most often pliable provincial notables rather than members of the intellectual elite (few persons are in both categories), and it is understood anyway that the price of too outspoken liberality could easily be the Council's dissolution. The constitution that emerges will have military approval and will be little more than a small second step in the direction of nonmilitary participation in government, but for the intellectual elite it will represent an important further opportunity to demonstrate how responsive they are to the realities of a new situation and how co-operative they are prepared to be.

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[Photographs courtesy Public Relations Office, Khartoum.]