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Sudan: The Philosophy of a Revolution

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

For just over two years the Republic of the Sudan has been ruled by a type of government which is rapidly becoming the norm for this part of the world -- the regime of hitherto non-political army officers who reluctantly enter the political arena in order to protect a threatened national unity by dispelling disorder, corruption and short-sighted party strife. This is, of course, the "official definition" of such regimes. There is an opposition view which goes something like this: The army officers, possessing the ultimate political weapon -- force, capitalized on a moment of weakness in parliamentary democracy to seize power claiming only the restricted mandate to purge corrupt elements in the system before returning rule to democratically-elected political leaders. However, the army never returns to the barracks. The old soldiers just will not fade away.

Whichever interpretation one prefers, he can certainly agree on the existence of an undeniable pattern -- Sudan, United Arab Republic, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan. So much so that one is pushed to ask if these military regimes spring naturally out of circumstances common to this region. Or has some new, indigenous ideology prepared the ground? With these broad questions in mind I would like to make a few marginal comments about the Sudanese situation.

The pre-revolutionary parliamentary system in the Sudan had not been a complete failure. Parliament had been able peacefully to defeat one government and install another, a free, fair general election had taken place in February 1958 (the first election of 1954 was under international supervision), and the day to day problems of government were handled with reasonable efficiency.

However, with the passing months it became more and more evident that the whole apparatus of parliament and ministers was serving no real purpose, resolving no conflicts, advancing no programs. As the Sudanese would say, it was just kilam farigh (empty words). In a manner reminiscent of the French Fourth Republic, the Sudanese politicians could not provide any stable government presenting a clear choice of alternatives to the populace. First, there were the Southern representatives making up about a quarter of the total. These fell into two general categories -- either confused new-comers with no local strength in their own right, and thus the prey to threats and bribes; or a few leaders who did have some local support or at least struck a responsive chord, but whose position was basically that of sterile opposition to anything Northern.

Then in the North, party organization wavered shakily between two

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conflicting systems, one based on Muslim sectarian loyalties (dying, but still strong), and another stemming from the more modern idea of party according to socio-economic differences (evolving, but still meaningless to most of the country). As a result, anomalies abounded. The two religious parties, having cooperated in the elections, found after victory they were unable to agree on the formation of a government. Every possible combination of groups -- even a national government representing all parties -- was rumored. The government finally formed in early 1958 satisfied no one and was obviously a stalking horse.

Then in late 1958 while the opposition party and certain cabinet ministers were apparently arranging with Egypt the downfall of the government, Prime Minister Abdullah Khalil quietly worked out with top military officers the 17 November "coup." The coup was usually reported as arising from fear of foreign (Egyptian) interference in Sudanese affairs. Although this factor existed and certainly served as catalyst, there was a more basic cause. Each political party at that juncture represented, not a threat, but a study in futility. It was only natural that some force move in to fill that vacuum.

It was a peaceful revolution from the beginning. There was not a single incident on the day of the take-over, and since then the only political prisoners have been those army officers implicated in later abortive coups (including five hanged after the third attempted coup). Parliament and political parties were quickly dissolved, and constitutional authority was vested in a Supreme Council for the Armed Forces consisting of Lt. General Ibrahim Abboud as president and six other ranking officers. (Abboud's titles in addition to President of this council are Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Commander in Chief.) Also established was a Council of Ministers composed of the above seven officers plus five civilian ministers.

The creation of both a Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and a cabinet (in which the former had a seven to five majority) would seem to be an unnecessary duplication. It reveals, I think, the ad hoc nature of the revolution. The officers were thinking in terms of existing institutions -- at that time a five member Supreme Commission was formal head of state, and a Council of Ministers served as actual executive immediately responsible to Parliament. In fact, the Army thought at first of exercising less direct control and considered appointing a Supreme Commission of all-party "elder statesmen" (the parallel with the early days of the Egyptian 1952 revolution is interesting). However, this idea did not win acceptance, and the above double-barreled system of army control resulted.

Still, however unplanned, the continued existence of a formal head of state in addition to a political executive might prove convenient some day should the Army decide to increase civilian political participation. They could, if willing, turn over the entire cabinet to civilian ministers while maintaining a sort of ultimate veto power from their position on the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces. More on this later.

Thus, after the revolution the Army dominated the top (in addition a military governor stood behind the regular civilian governor in each province), but most officers remained in the barracks. Although politicians were ousted, the civil service remained intact. (Recently,

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the director of the Labor Department was expelled from the service for leading a demonstration against the government's policy of resettlement for the population of Wadi Halfa, which the Aswan High Dam will cause to be submerged, and his deputy later resigned in protest. These two positions were filled by army officers, but this is the only instance known to me where an army officer has actually replaced a civil servant.) In this restricted sense, the army coup was somewhat like a parliamentary change of government in which the daily administration remains in the same hands.

How did this new government handle matters? It would take a fairly biased observer not to admit that the first two years showed considerable improvement. The army officers had the strength and discipline to take necessary, even if sometimes unpopular, decisions. A Nile waters agreement was signed with Egypt on terms not unfavorable to the Sudan. This was something no political government had been able to do. Ironically, the more pro-Egyptian politicians when in power shied away from agreement fearing that terms overly-favorable to Egypt would spell political ruin at home, while the anti-Egyptian politicians were usually too much at loggerheads with their neighbors to the north to make negotiation feasible. (I have no illusions about Abdel Nasser, having seen him from the vantage point of two states -- Sudan and Tunisia -- at times exposed to his attacks. Still, I think the Sudan's best defense against Egyptian encroachment is to have a government making a sincere effort to get along with its neighbor. Egypt is usually disarmed by this tactic, and if not she can count on unified opposition to her interference from all Sudanese. The former Umma government was so openly anti-Egyptian as to create a pro-Egyptian reaction in some Sudanese circles.)

In the same manner the Military Government took the firm steps necessary to get Sudanese cotton selling on the world market. Through a comedy of errors the former head of the Sudan Gezira Board (the huge government controlled cotton scheme) had overpriced Sudanese cotton,



President Abboud with Marshall Tito

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gambling on the hope that the post-Suez political situation would effectively remove Egyptian cotton from Western markets. The would-be fleecer got badly fleeced, and Sudanese foreign reserves plummeted. The Army sold cotton at prevailing prices, and in many other ways made life easier and more predictable for the world of commerce. Their realism, plus good luck in subsequent crop years, paid off. Foreign reserves, down to LS 20,000,000 (the Sudanese pound is valued at \$2.88) at the time of the revolution, reached a new high of LS 60,000,000 in 1960.

At the same time many more public works are under way. Much of this is due to the grants and credits of the U.S. and other governments, but even here the ability to get things moving instead of just talking can justifiably be claimed by the military regime.

Finally, the government has been able to maintain public order in all parts of the country (and after the Congo experience, one is not quite so likely to take this sine qua non for granted), and it is probably a little bit more popular with the masses than any group since independence. This latter assertion would be vehemently challenged by most opposition politicians, but I am convinced of its accuracy both from a random sampling of old friends, servants, taxi-drivers and small businessmen and from the following general deduction. Essentially every government, to be popular, must convey an image of which the populace can be proud, and the Sudanese idea of good government is strongly influenced by the half-century old British model -- of a strictly impartial, apparently effortlessly efficient group that did not air its differences in public. Though the Sudanese masses could applaud the efforts of their political leaders in securing independence, they could hardly have felt any great pride in the confusing game of parliamentary musical chairs that prevailed from 1956 to 1958.

Still, the regime is now moving into a phase where it is likely to start losing popularity. It can not continue indefinitely the role of reluctant patriot who stepped in only to set aright a temporary crisis. It must either retire gracefully, or seek to institutionalize its position -- a course which can never find quite so much support as the original coup in time of troubles. (A third alternative postponing the day of choice by continually finding or even helping to create new "crises," domestic or foreign, is happily not being considered.) The politicians are aware of this fact, and they are now beginning to put out feelers and apply pressure. A case in point was the recent petition for a return to civilian rule, signed by almost everyone of importance except leaders of Sayyid Ali Mirghani's former Peoples Democratic Party.

Also, the regime, even if reasonably popular with the masses, enjoys neither great popularity nor prestige with the top civil service and with Khartoum University (both staff and students). (In an unnecessarily clumsy step the Government recently moved to bring the University more directly under its control.) Cynics may smile and see the problem in terms of a struggle for the top jobs, but to the extent that this observation is valid it is a truism. A major problem facing any society is effective use of its elites, and in the Sudan the top leadership -- civil service, teachers and professional men -- has received its training at Khartoum University. This group down through the years was a representative sample of the best qualified men from the Northern Sudan, and it is fair to say that the modern political history of the Sudan is the story of these "old boys" writ large. Now suddenly, after having gotten one rival corporate body (British administrators) out of the way, they find themselves quite effectively controlled by a new group (the Sudanese Army).



"Popular with the masses"? — One of the Army ministers receiving a visiting delegation

What then is the reaction of a Sudanese with a bit of experience and training in law, education, public administration, medicine, or agriculture when comparing his qualifications with those of his army colleagues? What, he will ask, in this army officer's background makes him better prepared to rule? The fact that they are all Sudanese with kinship and religious ties really makes it only worse. For the Khartoum University graduate who can well remember how many were turned away in the competitive examinations for entry, it is a real jolt to find that he might have been luckier to have been less bright and joined the army.

The pathos in this state of affairs is that the total educated elite (and here we would, rightly, include both military and civilian) is so woefully small in proportion to the job to be done. In fact, it is debatable whether the Sudan (and similar states at this level of socio-economic development) can afford the luxury of having "ins" and "outs." The job demands that every competent citizen be fully engaged.

Thus, the most pressing problem facing this regime is, I would suggest, to give this trained civilian elite a feeling of real participation in the government of their country. (I said earlier that army officers have replaced very few civil servants. This is true, but the power to make further encroachments lies completely in army hands, and in any case, positions taken by the army start from the top down.)

This need not mean an immediate return to parliamentary government. Such a move (certainly not in the offing in any case) would probably be a mistake. Ideal, perhaps, among the feasible moves, would be a steady increase of civilian all-party participation in the Council of Ministers with the army maintaining a kind of indirect control from the Supreme Council of the Army. However, there is no evidence that the present army ministers would seriously consider such a retreat.

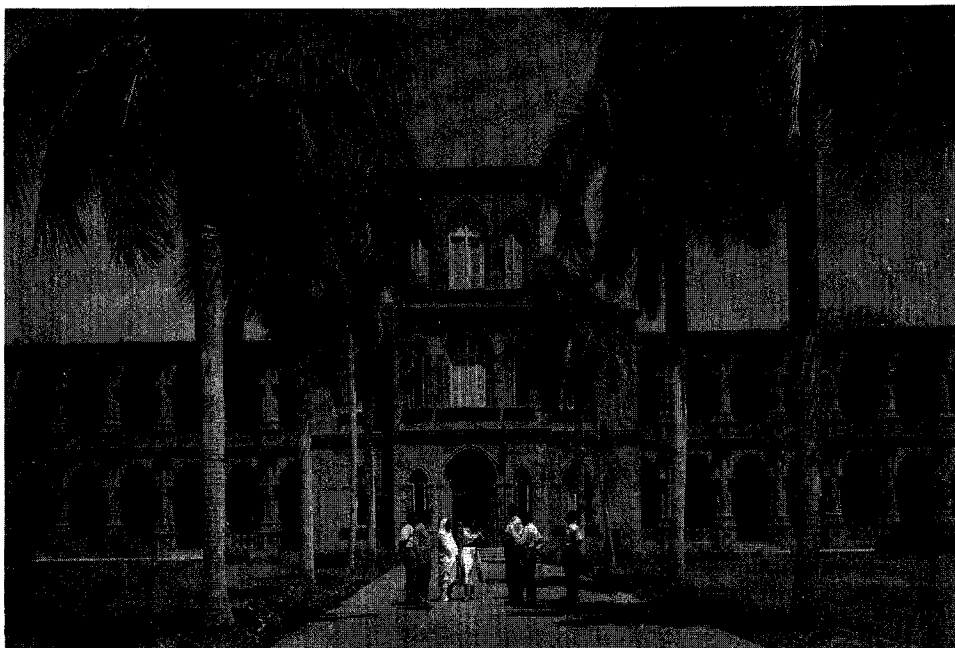
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Suppose the army just sits on its hands, what then? Obviously the politicians and discontented civil service can not eject the officers by force, but they can intrigue with junior officers in the army. There have already been three unsuccessful coups. Although all were rather amateurish, this is an ominous sign. It is to be hoped the politicians will resist this temptation, no matter how great the provocation might seem, for surely nothing but chaos can result from a chain of coups. If, on the other hand, the former political parties take a more cautious approach, continually putting forward positive ideas for change and improvement and slowly working to win over opinion, both among the ruling army officers and the public, then they could eventually achieve some sort of peaceful transition to at least partial civilian-rule. This, however, would require an element of discipline that has been notoriously lacking in the past. It would seem more likely that the initiative must come from the government, if a peaceful solution is to be found.

However, if one thing is clear about this military regime, it is the absence of long-range plans and fixed ideas. To give now a partial answer to the questions raised at the beginning of this letter, there was no philosophy pre-dating the revolution. What sort of initiative can be expected from such a regime?

Actually without much fanfare a new departure which could lead to modus vivendi has been developing for some months. I refer to the recent Provincial Administration Act which was based on the findings of a committee set up as early as June 1959. The very existence and composition of this committee was significant. Presided over by Chief Justice Abu Rannat, and containing only one army officer among its six distinguished members, the committee was given the broadest possible terms of reference. In short, here was a subject where the army officers did not know the answer, wanted to find out, and did not try to "pack" the committee in order to insure an acceptable result. This is encouraging.

This new legislation is designed to achieve effective local government,



Khartoum University - Better to have joined the Army?

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and thus, it is hoped, channel the efforts of concerned persons into participation at that level. Although implicit in the wording of the committee's report and of the legislation is the idea of junking alien ideas of government and returning to home-grown institutions, this is first cousin of the many British attempts in scores of colonies to divert nationalist agitation into participation in local government. "Gas and water" home rule never satisfied the nationalists vis-a-vis their foreign rulers, but in this different situation there is some hope. For one thing there has been no suggestion that the local government experience should serve as a training ground for eventual central government representation (as was usually implicit in the British efforts with their colonies). Rather, the long-term aim is bona fide decentralization, and neither plans nor promises have been offered concerning the pattern of future central government institutions. In other words, he who would scorn participation at the local level in order to wait for more imposing tasks at the national level might well miss out all around.

The legislation also has all the caution of its British prototypes. Members of the local councils may be appointed or elected, and it is expected at first that all will be appointed. The same holds true for province councils which will include in their membership the chairmen of the several local councils.

This is the restrictive, cautious side of the program. More daring is the manner in which the governor and his several district commissioners will be shorn of executive powers in order that it be distributed to (1) the councils and (2) the several specialists representing central government ministries in the provinces -- health, agriculture, education, etc. The philosophy behind the committee's recommendations is revealing. The present system, it is claimed, has its roots in Turkish and later Anglo-Egyptian rule, and was based on "the determination of the foreign ruler to establish and maintain his power and control." Now however, that the Sudanese rule themselves;

"...a different attitude is adopted. Its foundations are development, public services and above all the prosperity of the people. Security is no longer an end in itself, but a means to the stability which enables those responsible to achieve these objectives."

Admittedly, the committee recommended that, for the time being, the Province Military Governor act as chairman of the Province Council. This hardly looks like a "withering away" of military control. Still, the act itself merely refers to a "Government Representative" to be appointed by the Supreme Council, thus leaving the door open for civilian appointments.

Such an apparently conservative approach to local government might give the civilian elites a real feeling of participation and provide an avenue for eventual disengagement by the army. Conceivably, the bright young graduate with special training in agriculture or education or public health, trying out his views and having them adopted by the local council, can succeed where his older brothers addressing petitions in Khartoum have failed. For if the trained civilian can be given the chance to do an important job, if a mentality develops which gives more prestige to the technician than to the administrator (be he civilian or military), if -- in short -- it becomes genuinely accepted that "security is no longer an end in itself," then there is hope for a satisfactory solution to the problem of power in the Sudan.

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However, truth is not always best served by optimism. We began with two general questions. One has been answered. The Sudanese army coup did not grow out of a previously prepared philosophy. The second question was whether army rule might be a "natural" development. We have leaned over backwards to avoid such a conclusion, but what is the heritage of political institutions upon which the Sudan must now build its future government?

There is first the centuries old tradition of tribal society in which a tribe manages to give its obedience, but not its allegiance, to a stronger outside force as long (and only as long) as that force exists. Then there is the Sudan's experience with government in modern times which starts with the Egyptian occupation in 1823. Few would care to challenge the view that both this Egyptian occupation and the Mahdist state (1884-98) which followed it were basically types of "army rule." Even under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium there was as late as 1924 the "White Flag revolt" of certain officers and cadets in the Sudanese Defense Force. On the other side of the coin, the period of training in modern civilian self-government goes back only to the mid 40's -- or possibly the late 20's if one wants to be very generous in his interpretation of "native administration." Finally, when looking at the immediate environment we find that the Sudan's neighbors include Egypt, Ethiopia and the Congo.

Given these stern facts, it can be seen that much indeed depends upon the Sudanese character -- on their reputation for realism, common sense and genuine social democracy. Here lies the main hope.

Sincerely,



Leon Carl Brown

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