

THE SEVEN GENERALS— A STUDY OF THE SUDAN

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A NEW system of indirect rule is to be introduced in the Sudan. In the words of its creators, the purpose is "to make the people participate in their government". The nearest parallel is the 'basic democracy' of Pakistan. It is democracy by permission—by permission, that is, of the seven generals who control the country. They believe, and in this they are sincere, that imported democratic systems are unsuited to the Sudan and something special, something original, must be evolved; but they have found little enthusiasm for their new plans. After two years of dictatorship, their opponents are disgusted that the soldiers have not gone back to their barracks as so often promised; the townsmen, the educated element of Sudanese society, are heartily sick of arbitrary arrest, suppressed opinion, police informers, a controlled press and all that goes with a 'state of emergency'; the administrators, viewing events more dispassionately, see the new scheme as a return to the 1930's, their own powers and their gradual planning of local government equally thrown aside to make way for military authority stronger and more restrictive of liberty than any possessed by British governors in the past. All in all, there is an air of profound gloom about the future.

Yet only five years ago, when Sudan's flag was first hoisted, this seemed a most promising country for the development of democracy. All the necessary attributes were present; a reasonably stable economy with good prospects for advancement, an efficient and uncorrupt civil service, respect for the law, a deep determination to make a success of independence and, most important of all, leadership. In addition there were government and opposition front benches both with experience of rule, so that even Westminster-style parliamentary democracy—not often an easily-assimilated import—seemed workable. What then went wrong? Is dictatorship more suitable to the Sudanese than parliament, direct rule more capable of coping with their problems than democracy? What, too, are the prospects today?

Before surveying the politics of the last five years or attempting to map the future, it is best to describe three basic features of the Sudan. First, of the eleven million Sudanese, the bulk are politically apathetic and unconcerned over who is Prime Minister, be the name Azhari, Abdullah Khalil or Abboud; rather over half are subsistence cultivators or cattle-keepers, and of the rest, the concern of many is limited to the local marketing of their export crops.

Secondly, there has been next to no argument among the various post-independence governments on how to spend the country's money. The Sudan economy is heavily dependent on the sale of the one crop which its soil, climate and water supply make profitable—long-staple cotton. Its sale depends on world market conditions and on the rise and fall in prosperity of the high-quality cotton industry. On cotton sales the Sudan is utterly dependent, not only for the foreign currency needed to buy abroad but also, through government participation in the Gezira and other cotton plantations, for development funds. Thus it is axiomatic that any Sudan government seeks to sell the country's cotton at best, to keep traditional markets sweet and extend interest in new markets, to diversify the economy through the growing of new crops, to encourage industries which can use local agricultural products and, through doing all this, to provide the funds to build more schools and hospitals, to bore more wells and construct more dams and canals so that land and people will develop together.

International relations are the third constant factor and here, although basic policy has remained unaltered, emphasis has in the past varied. The Sudan seeks to take a middle-of-the-road position in the world as a whole, in Arab quarrels and in African affairs. Neutralism is dictated as much by economic reasons—the need for cotton markets and the need of foreign aid for development—as political. Neutralism in the Arab world is conditioned by a desire for friendly relations with President Nasser, coupled with deep suspicion of Egyptian intentions and interference, and in Africa by support for freedom movements coupled with a certain antagonism to the headstrong attitudes of African leaders. The Sudan, as a mainly Arab country, has its own 'African' problem in its southern provinces.

To return, with these three factors in mind, to those enthusiastic days at the beginning of 1956 when the Sudan became independent once more, leadership was then provided by Sudan's

first Prime Minister, Ismail El-Azhari. He was the idol of the towns, of the educated, of the fervent nationalists; he had, after earlier using Egyptian connections and Egyptian aid against the British administration and those that had co-operated with it, astutely guided the country to complete independence; he had done so in the teeth of strenuous Egyptian attempts to discredit him, both by political intrigue among his fellow-politicians and by subversion which led to a mutiny and uprising in the southern provinces. He was no longer thought of as a limb, a puppet of Cairo; he had arrived as a truly national leader.

Within two weeks of independence, however, El-Azhari's powers were curbed and in five months he was out of office. From the time of his downfall until the military took power, from the early days of 1956 to November 1958, national enthusiasm, particularly among the civil servants, evaporated, and never again were there to be the cheering crowds in the streets which his leadership had inspired. His downfall was brought about by a conservative reaction, by the backwoodsmen of parliament, by the guardians of the generally apathetic mass of Sudanese, some of whose votes were necessary for any political party or leader to succeed.

The two principal Islamic religious leaders in the Sudan, El-Mahdi and El-Mirghani, had up to the time of independence conveniently backed each one of the two main political parties and provided them with their bulk votes at election-time. El-Mahdi, staunch for independence from the start, had indeed formed his own political party back in 1945, with his son Siddik (the present Mahdist leader) as its President and a former colonel, Abdullah Khalil, amenable both to Mahdist direction and British persuasion, as its Secretary-General; this was the Umma Party. El-Mirghani, on the other hand, had only given the hesitant support of his followers to the more extreme nationalism of El-Azhari and his colleagues, who came together in 1952 as the National Unionist Party. This was in a much truer sense than the Umma a political party, sprung from the earlier nationalism of the Congress movement, and it never blindly accepted the dictates of El-Mirghani. It was never in any real sense El-Mirghani's party, but it was only with Mirghanist votes in the rural areas that it was able to win an election. Early in 1956, El-Mirghani withdrew his already hesitant support from El-Azhari's National Unionists, and El-Azhari was from that time in the political wilderness.

Mahdists and Mirghanists joined together in a coalition under the uninspired leadership of Abdullah Khalil, a coalition which continued until the army took power. It was a coalition of convenience, lacking alike in united purpose and in that kind of leadership which alone could inspire the enthusiasm needed in a new State. Abdullah Khalil was essentially the sound administrator, not the political leader; and of the powers behind him, El-Mahdi failed to offer alternative inspiration and El-Mirghani, through his followers in the Cabinet, played only a watchful role based on suspicion of Mahdist intentions.

An election in February 1958, carefully based on 'one man, one vote' and equal constituencies, efficiently and impartially organised and participated in by a remarkably high percentage of the people, gave the Sudanese and the world outside a strong belief in Sudanese ability to make democracy work. Sadly at the same time, however, it merely confirmed that a majority of voters took their poll decisions on sectarian rather than political grounds. The more sophisticated in the towns and settled areas voted overwhelmingly for El-Azhari; the bulk of the rural population gave their votes unhesitatingly to the quasi-political expressions of the Mahdist and Mirghanist sects. Once again there were three main parties in the new parliament; once again an uneasy coalition, backed by the backwoodsmen, returned to office.

The 1958 election was the turning-point for Sudanese democracy. The continuance of Abdullah Khalil's loose coalition clearly did not provide either the leadership the country needed to face unpopular economic measures or the unity even to initiate them. While a poor economic situation (caused by a world depression in the cotton industry) grew worse, while the two wings of the government quarrelled with each other on attitudes towards Egypt and the West on the surface and on constitutional questions behind the scenes, while the opposition and the press continued to harry the government for its paralysis and inaction, thoughts turned to the alternative. One possibility was a new coalition, between the Mahdists and the opposition National Unionists, a combination of the prestige of El-Mahdi and the popular leadership of El-Azhari. The idea was attractive to many; but the politicians were slow to implement it, and it was only early in November 1958 that agreement was reached.

The alternative favoured by the then Prime Minister, Abdullah Khalil, was of another sort. He could have no place in the pro

posed new coalition. He believed it too would be fraught with rivalries. He was highly suspicious of intrigue against him by President Nasser, on whom he put most of the blame for his internal difficulties. He also considered that strong direct rule was what his country needed, and in this view he had the encouragement of the West. Who could provide this firm direct rule? Only the Army. In August 1958 news of a possible *coup d'état* by top officers inspired by Abdullah Khalil leaked out, and a *coup* was averted thanks to the advice of El-Mahdi within the Sudan and of friends outside, notably in Ethiopia. In November 1958, when tempers had grown more heated, when political meetings had been banned and the possible democratic downfall of Khalil's government had been put off by the postponement of parliament, the generals acted and parliament, politicians and the constitution were swept aside. The Sudanese had long since lost confidence in Abdullah Khalil; he had lost confidence in the Sudanese people's ability to find an alternative. This alternative, he believed, had to be provided for them. Parliamentary democracy did not itself fail; one responsible for its proper operation had thrown it aside.

How since then has the Army responded to Sudan's needs for government? The *coup* was planned and conducted not with the consensus of a large number of both senior and junior officers, but by a dozen men at the top. The dangers at first seemed to be that it would be a continuance of Khalil's rule and that the younger officers would not stand for this. Both dangers proved true, and it was a year before the new regime settled down to a more independent viewpoint than that which first inspired it. In that year, from November 1958 to November 1959, there were three *coups*, one of them successful, and in all five officers were executed, eighteen imprisoned and about sixty, including two generals, dismissed. Today supreme control is in the hands of seven generals. Of these the sixty-year-old General Abboud is the outward leader, the father-figure and conciliator; General Hassan Beshir, aged 45, has control of the army and is the leading voice in the Supreme Council; Brigadier Magboul, aged 40, the youngest of the seven, is in charge of the Ministry of Interior. The remaining four are light-weights, and all seven combine with six civilians to form the Cabinet—the civilians being little more than the executors of the Council's policy. Having overcome the internal clashes of the Army, having broken away from Khalilist direction and also reached

agreement with President Nasser on the vexed question of the Nile Waters, having also put the economy on its feet again—thanks to a new boom in the world's cotton industry—the seven generals have now turned to plan for the future.

Originally, when they came to power, there was talk of their staying for only two years at the most. To the disgust and against the protests of Siddik El-Mahdi, El-Azhari and the wide following of these two, the generals have made it clear that they intend to retain power for some time to come. They intend to get their new system of indirect rule on its feet and to initiate a seven-year economic plan next July before considering any return to their barracks. Unless they are pushed out, they may well seek to stay for anything up to the end of these seven years.

The system of indirect rule which they are introducing is one which on paper would seem well adapted to the Sudan's needs and state of development. The posts of district commissioner and provincial governor, together with other aspects of centralised control, will be done away with; and in every district—at present they exist in many, but not all districts—there will be councils responsible for a wide range of public services and also for co-ordinating development projects. At a higher level, there will be provincial councils, having some local legislative power and control over a provincial executive of civil servants; at the top there will be an economic council and a development committee and, perhaps, in the future a central assembly. Were all these bodies to be elected, the system would have in it the seeds of a satisfactory democracy. The snag is that "for the time being" all members, even of local councils, will be nominated by the generals after careful screening, while the chairmen of the provincial councils, who will in effect have near-autocratic powers, will be provincial military commanders. The only immediate result of the new system, much heralded as a great new democratic step, therefore, will be to extend military control much wider and much deeper into the ordinary lives of the Sudanese.

The seven-year economic plan has also little new to offer. What needs to be done is commonly agreed upon by all Sudanese, and indeed many of the plans for economic development were laid down long ago by the British administration. What has been lacking is the money to carry them out and, as the money has become available, new productive schemes and new health and education projects have been put in hand. Now all these schemes

and projects have been lumped together and, with the impressive-sounding cost label of £250 million, presented afresh.

What then are the prospects for the Army's continued rule? Their greatest danger is from within the ranks of junior officers, some of whom feel the generals are not doing enough. "Where is the revolution?" they ask. Discipline among these officers has been maintained so far by the dismissal of those not trusted, but this cannot be carried on indefinitely.

On the other hand, the generals have in their support many tribal chiefs who have little interest in politics and, as paid government servants, have duly come to Khartoum to swear their allegiance. A few are genuinely enthusiastic, while the majority merely reflect the apathy of the rural masses. Among the former politicians and the townspeople, and even among the civil servants who are so important an element in ensuring law, order and continuous good government, there is little enthusiasm and much covert opposition.

For two years now, the ordinary basic liberties have been suppressed in the Sudan. That political parties and demonstrations are not allowed under military rule is natural enough. Repression has, however, become all-pervading. The closing down of newspapers, which have avoided anything but the mildest criticism in any case, the careful watch by the police on opinions expressed in public places, the pressures brought on suspected opponents of the regime, the occasional arrests and trials by military courts, the virtual suspension of the rule of law through the operation of a new all-embracing Act which punishes critical words or actions with heavy sentences, the control of the trade unions and now, the latest move, the end of Khartoum University's former independence from government control—all these limits on liberty have spread a growing dislike and discontent which are not off-set by any compensating inspiration to nationalist fervour such as may be found in the United Arab Republic.

No revolt, no nation-wide campaign against military rule seems likely; indeed, with its hot climate and the Islamic patience of its people, such a campaign would be difficult to imagine. However, gone from Khartoum at least is the cheerful atmosphere of free criticism and constructive ideas which many visitors have found so stimulating. As the seven generals lose their initial fervour for reform and sink back into the comfort of office, gloomy acceptance of their rule envelops the capital.