

Reporter's Notebook

Sudan After Nimeiry

For the ruling military council, the warfare in the south remains the most intractable problem. Despite the new regime's conciliatory gestures to the rebels and rapprochement with Libya and Ethiopia, the divisions sown by Nimeiry's policies have yet to be healed, leaving Sudan's future no less uncertain.

BY CAROL BERGER

When former President Gaafar al-Nimeiry was ousted in a bloodless coup on April 6, 1985, the Sudanese had good reason to rejoice, for a nation rich in Arab and African culture had increasingly become shackled by Nimeiry's desperate state security apparatus. The president's routine exploitation of traditional divisions had insured his continued power, but it also left scars on the nation that may take generations to heal.

Over the past year, rampant inflation and the scarcity of basic commodities and fuel had heightened unrest among the nation's urban population. Famine in northern and western Sudan now threatens the lives of more than half a million people. The thousands who migrated to the capital's twin city of Omdurman and urban areas to the south were largely forced to return to their deserted home regions in the months preceding Nimeiry's overthrow. It was left to the city's professionals and educated elite to paralyze the nation's communications and set the scene for the near anarchy which led to the April takeover by Nimeiry's appointed minister of defense, Maj.-Gen. Abdul Rahman Sawar-Dahab.

Nimeiry, who took power in a coup 16 years earlier, appears destined to

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Richard Hoffman/Sigma

Maj.-Gen. Abdul Rahman Sawar-Dahab "took charge only after his generals threatened to take power amid the capital city's growing anarchy"

slip—like so many former despots—into a quiet Egyptian exile. The people of Sudan will be spared his evidently impaired national vision and, as some have described them, his "bouts of religious dementia."

But, like a morning-after hangover, a more cautious, even frustrated air has settled over the country after the spon-

aneous celebrations which followed his downfall. The seemingly intractable problems which faced Sudan under Nimeiry have not abated with his removal.

Since the coup, more than 38 political parties have been registered in northern Sudan, although no more than five will have significant influence. Of the five—Sadiq al-Mahdi's Umma party, the Khattmiyya sect's Unionists, the Communists, the Iraqi-backed Baathists, and the Muslim Brotherhood—the Umma party is expected to gain the largest support from the more than 15 million northern Sudanese.

When the 15-man military council first took power, it pledged that a one-year interim period would be followed by free elections. Given opposing political views in the north, the south's instability, and Sudan's debt of more than \$9 billion, the generals have every reason to delay the transition. High-level Sudanese have few illusions about the possibility of open elections in 1986, and have referred to the timespan as inadequate for a return to any form of democratic rule.

The transition faces its biggest challenge from conditions in southern Sudan. The rebel leader, Col. John Garang, has not budged since his first reaction to the coup, and regardless of his earlier stated goal of overthrowing Nimeiry, his vigilance has not lessened. The new regime, he says, is nothing more than "new Nimeiry-ism." If the military was to hand over power to

northern politicians while the south remained in a virtual state of war, the results could be disastrous.

The predominant attitude among northern politicians, reflecting little understanding of the region, is that the south represents a single interest group. Not surprisingly, many northerners have grown impatient with what they perceive as the poor performance of many southern politicians, and there is a desire to address the problems facing northern Sudan in isolation to the south.

Until as late as 1981, Nimeiry's strongest power base was in southern Sudan. It was there, as the deliverer of peace in 1972, that he achieved the greatest success of his 16-year rule. The bitter civil war which pitted the Muslim north against the Christian-animist south from 1955 to 1972 claimed the lives of untold thousands. The south, where the fighting took place, was denied much-needed development aid and tens of thousands of southerners fled across the border into Uganda and Kenya. Peace came with the granting of regional autonomy and promises of development under the Addis Ababa Agreement. For the black Africans of the south, Nimeiry represented a bridge between the two conflicting cultures.

It was for this reason, as Nimeiry's rule became increasingly oppressive, that many northern Sudanese came to refer to the south as "the rock around our necks." As long as the south was

firmly committed to Nimeiry's leadership, the north would have only a slim chance of removing him. Secret police were stationed throughout the nation but, unlike in the north, the south enjoyed some political freedoms, and the party system continued unofficially.

By his adept handling of political groups in the north, Nimeiry became known as "the juggler" and "the survivor." Countless coup attempts failed to dislodge him. The most serious of these was in 1971 when a Soviet-backed plot erupted into street warfare in Khartoum. The leaders of the coup were duly executed and the once-powerful Communist Party was forced underground. With its intellectuals either imprisoned or killed, the party never recovered.

Shortly after the coup attempt, Nimeiry left his socialist allies and turned to the United States for both economic and military assistance. In the 1980s, that relationship became notably strained as the president pushed through the controversial decrees of southern redivision—removing privileges won under the Addis Ababa Agreement—and the imposition of an Islamic penal code.

The redivision angered the majority Nilotic peoples of the south, while the new penal code jeopardized the religious freedom of all Sudanese. In December 1983, three months after the introduction of Islamic law, the first of several hundred citizens lost his right hand for committing the crime of petty theft.

From late 1983 until only a few months before Nimeiry's ouster, Islamic law was used as a tool to brutally repress political dissent and to further splinter any sense of unity within the urban population. In January 1985, a 76-year-old religious leader, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, was hanged on charges of "heresy." An international outcry over his execution followed. American officials said they had no control over their irrational ally. The country's order had succumbed to the fanatical and excessive dictates of a discredited police force and secret service.

Maj.-Gen. James Loro, from the southern-most Equatorial region, is one of the 15 men now ruling Sudan. But only months earlier, he was commander of the Juba garrison in his home region. His wife was flogged for alleged liquor

possession while in Khartoum. Fearing the general would cause unrest following the beating, Nimeiry ordered him transferred to Khartoum. There, amid the thousands of secret police employed to monitor the lives of students, professionals, government members, and foreigners, he could be kept under wraps. Such transfers to Khartoum became routine in the last years of Nimeiry's rule.

Maj.-Gen. Loro was recently named chairman of the Southern Region's High Executive Council (HEC). Although wholly appointed by the northern regime, the HEC is one step toward including the south in the current post-coup renewal. For many Equatorians, however, a return to central rule from the HEC in Juba is seen as a retrograde step. Rather than reverting to the administrative system used under Nimeiry, they have called for major changes to allow for more local governance.

The continued resistance of rebel leader John Garang should not come as a surprise. The new Sudanese leader, Gen. Sawar-Dahab, was Nimeiry's former minister of defense. His former close relationship with the deposed president concerns not only the militant southern Sudanese, but also Garang's main supporters—Libya and Ethiopia.

In 1981, when southern Sudanese dissidents known as the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) made their first uncertain visits to Tripoli and Addis Ababa, they were well aware that their needs would be exploited by Nimeiry's enemies. But at the same time they would receive arms, training at Ethiopia's main military base, and permission to use a land corridor between Ethiopia and southern Sudan. They hoped to achieve a higher degree of independence from their paymasters later, but that has not happened. Ethiopia, in particular, has wielded a sometimes heavy hand with the southern rebels. Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi says his support for the rebels ended with the overthrow of Nimeiry.

The Ethiopian influence can explain in part Garang's insistence for the past two years that the struggle is one of national liberation and not a purely southern separatist movement. After all, it was the go-ahead from Ethiopia

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that helped Garang's rise to leadership and the eventual liquidation of at least three of his rival southerners. While the southern Sudanese unrest is a convenient wedge between Ethiopia and the Khartoum regime, its value as a national movement has been as a cosmetic means of illustrating the general discontent of both north and south.

Libya was the first nation to recognize the new regime. They, like everyone else, well know that Gen. Sawar-Dahab was an unwilling participant in the coup, taking charge only after his generals threatened to take power amid the capital city's growing anarchy. For Libya, the sudden explosion of political activity comes as a golden opportunity. It is rumored that they, like the Iraqis, have entered Sudan with ample funds for political organizing. For at least the near future, there will be room in the north for a rebuilding of alliances and power bases.

As Nimeiry's successors, the new military leaders will attempt to distance themselves from the overt American support Nimeiry enjoyed. Libya's enthusiastic welcome of the coup ensured this, if only as a short-term measure. The joint military exercises, part of the Operation Bright Star series, that were scheduled to take place between U.S. and Sudanese troops in August are unlikely to be held now. But the U.S. can afford to be patient.

Most observers describe the new regime as "naive" in its haste to normalize relations with Libya and Ethiopia. In the first heady weeks of returning dissidents and reconciliation, one could not ignore the presence of a distinct air of suspicion. Egypt, Sudan's defense pact partner, began disseminating critical information about Libya only days after the celebrated return of Sudanese exiles from Tripoli. While distribution of Qaddafi's *Green Book* began in earnest, Egyptian military sources talked of Libyan arms entering Sudan from both its western and eastern borders. It is an unlikely charge, but indicative of the Egyptian mood—the Libyan influence in Khartoum should be short-lived.

Ethiopia, in fact, poses the greater challenge. Libya is easily discredited. The two countries say all aid to the southern rebels has been cut, but few believe them. Ethiopia remains the big

prize in the East-West competition for influence in the Horn. The U.S. welcomes a rapprochement between Sudan and Ethiopia. The loud criticisms of Ethiopian policy made by George Bush on his pre-coup visit to Sudan have quickly died out. The much-touted "cross-border operation" to provide rebel-held areas in northern Ethiopia

SPLA, already fraught with tribal splits, would further break apart. The inevitable result would be accelerated violence against southern civilians and their displacement by the rebels. If atrocities took place, the northern-led army might feel pushed to wage a counter-attack. But to do that, the army would require support that they currently lack. They



The White House

Presidents Reagan and Nimeiry: "Nimeiry left his socialist allies and turned to the United States for both economic and military assistance"

with food has never quite begun. Many in Sudan wonder how far U.S. policy toward Ethiopia can diverge from U.S. actions.

If real negotiations between the two were successful, they would lead to greater stability in both northern Ethiopia and southern Sudan. But Eritrean and Tigréan rebels in northern Sudan are far less vulnerable to diplomatic shifts than the southern Sudanese based in Ethiopia's Gambela area. The southerners have no known sources of support other than Libya and Ethiopia. The Eritreans and Tigréans, however, rely on a well-established network including North America, Europe, and most importantly, the Gulf states.

The Ethiopians have more to offer than the new regime in Khartoum. The southerners could be starved out, sent back inside Sudanese territory, and left to manage at a time when food shortages are affecting parts of all three southern regions.

Without a base of operations, the

are poorly armed, poorly trained, often underfed, and not surprisingly, demoralized.

The SPLA has warned of a coming offensive. The most likely area of attack is the border region of the Upper Nile. Although the army is in strong force there, so is the SPLA. Whatever victory they achieve could well be pyrrhic however. The SPLA has virtually run out of strategic targets since its devastating series of attacks on the Jonglei Canal project and on oil exploration sites.

Many parts of the Upper Nile and Bahr el Ghazal regions have been reduced to the control of "war lords." Taking advantage of their relative nonalignment, they have in some cases received backing from the national army to harass the SPLA. One can only wonder how the north will respond. Indifference can only lead to the total loss of the vital development projects there and the further breakdown in the lives of southerners. □