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The 1985 *Intifada*: Nimeiri's Self-Destruction?

Jizouli Dafa'llah, the controversial leader of the National Alliance, remarks that by the time the *Intifada* occurred in 1985, the country was 'ripe for change'.¹ This provides a point of comparison with its historic predecessor. Even if we concede the argument that the political parties had to some extent planned the 1964 October Revolution, the downfall of Ibrahim Abboud had never seemed inevitable. In 1985, the macrosocial factors undermining the regime's legitimacy and motivating popular protest were far more significant. The regime faced a far more structural series of crises, brought on by corruption, economic malfeasance, regional recession, famine and impoverishment. Some analysts thus attribute Nimeiri's ouster to the series of austerity measures introduced by the regime directly before the protests. However, economic monocausalism risks neglecting the extent to which Nimeiri's failed political strategies contributed to his decline. Like most African and Middle Eastern dictators, the Sudanese president depended on a series of patron-client networks to legitimate his rule, giving senior generals, bureaucrats and, later on, members of the re-legalized opposition parties, an incentive to help preserve his regime.² Towards the end of his regime – partly as a result of his own deteriorating mental health – Nimeiri's patronage tactics became more and more rash and he moved towards an increasingly personalistic style of rule that left him bereft of allies. It is necessary to situate Sudan's second civilian uprising within the context of the president's failure to manage a system of 'liberalized autocracy' and the tenacity of both party and union-based opposition. In doing so, we can explain why an apparently secular uprising was able to succeed at a time when political Islam was an increasingly hegemonic ideology in the region.

The prelude to the *Intifada*: The emergence of the May Regime

The coup conducted by the Free Officer movement in 1969 was portrayed by its instigators as the child of the October Revolution. It might more accurately be said that it was born out of its failures. The parliamentary regime established by the post-revolutionary elections of 1965 had failed to satisfy the aspirations of the urban intellectuals who had led the uprising. It proved itself incapable of achieving peace in the south; indeed, the civil war intensified in the early months of the second democracy.³ It did not implement any particularly progressive political strategies, the issue of

policy making being overshadowed by the intense personal competition between major northern politicians such as Isma'il al-Azhari, Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub and Sadiq al-Mahdi.⁴ The parliamentary government also abandoned the Revolution's commitment to political liberalism when it outlawed the Sudan Communist Party in December 1965, causing the Chief Justice Babikir Awadallah, one of the heroes of October, to resign in protest.⁵

The prohibition of the SCP by a democratically elected regime convinced many within the party that it was impossible for liberal democracy to co-exist with 'progressive' politics. One faction within the party, led by Ahmad Sulayman, suggested that it should support a coup led by the 'Free Officer' movement in the army.⁶ However, the advocates of a *putsch* were unable to obtain majority support for their position within the Central Committee.⁷ The coup plotters among the Free Officers also formed a narrow minority within the leadership of their organization, and their proposals for establishing a new government at gunpoint were voted down 7-6 in a meeting of senior representatives of the movement.⁸ Regardless, the six members who agreed to the plan decided to go ahead with it, in spite of the continuing opposition of the SCP leadership.⁹

These officers executed their bloodless coup on 25 May 1969.¹⁰ Political parties were banned, leading politicians arrested and senior army officers put on pension.¹¹ The new regime made it clear from the outset that it saw itself as the guardian of the radical legacy of October. It broadcast a revolutionary manifesto declaring that power would be put into 'the hands of workers, peasants, soldiers, intellectuals and national capitalists who are not associated with imperialism'.¹² However, Jafa'ar Nimeiri, who was elected by the Free Officers to head the new regime's Revolutionary Command Council, was no ideologue. According to Mansour Khalid, he was nominated for this position by Faruq Hamdallah precisely because his lack of firm political convictions made him a candidate acceptable to all.¹³ What he did not lack, as the coming years would show, was political pragmatism and a firm desire to monopolize power.

In a sense, the regime's claim that it embodied the political legacy of the October Revolution was justified – at least, if we associate its legacy with the urban radicals who formed the Professional Front. Indeed, a number of former members of the Professional Front joined the civilian cabinet established by Nimeiri the day after the coup.¹⁴ Babikir Awadallah took the post of prime minister.¹⁵ In 1970, Nimeiri answered the demands of the Revolution's urban radicals by abolishing the Native Administration. He also achieved what both the revolutionaries of October and the parliamentary politicians of the second democratic regime had failed to do, which was to bring peace between north and south. In 1972, he signed the Addis Ababa agreement with the south Sudan Liberation Movement, bringing an end to a 17-year conflict and granting regional autonomy to the south.¹⁶

Although Nimeiri abandoned October's commitment to multiparty politics in 1972 when he established the Sudan Socialist Union to act as the sole political party within the country, he did wink at the legacy of the Professional Front by embracing the principle of sectoral representation for professional and labour groups within this one-party system. The new regime assigned seats in the 'People's Assembly' to farmers, veterinarians and individuals from a whole range of relatively minor professions.¹⁷

One of the reasons that his regime survived far longer than Abboud's was that it reproduced the 'corporatist' strategies being pursued by other radical Arab republics such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq during the same period. His state effectively used its power of patronage to 'bureaucratize' associational life and integrate workers' and professional bodies within itself.¹⁸ In this sense, Nimeiri's government was fulfilling the legacy of October, although perhaps not in the manner its architects would have intended.

The limits to the radicalism of the new regime had already become dramatically evident through the course of late 1970 and 1971. In November 1970, Nimeiri fired three pro-communist members of the RCC, and then began to make a number of vituperative public attacks on the SCP, exhorting the public to 'destroy the communist movement'.¹⁹ Under the leadership of Hashim al-Atta, the communist sympathizers dismissed from the RCC responded by staging a coup of their own on 19 July 1971, briefly imprisoning Nimeiri and establishing a new executive body with firm links to the SCP.²⁰ The new government barely survived past the moment of its inception: on 22 July 1971, Nimeiri staged a counter-coup, executing al-Atta and his fellow *putschists*.²¹ The returning president also hanged a number of senior SCP figures whom he accused of participation in the attempted takeover, including Abd al-Khaliq Mahgub and Shafi' Ahmad al-Shaikh.²² The 1971 confrontation and its aftermath are often identified as a watershed in political violence in Sudan. It was the first time that a post-colonial Sudanese government had executed civilians for political opposition to the regime. The visceral and reckless nature of some of the killings was also something new. The police officer who arrested Hashim al-Atta later admitted that he was executed by a *Shawish* who was 'known to be a killer and responsible for many moral crimes'. This *Shawish* opened fire on the would-be president with such sustained ferocity that his body was torn to pieces by the bullets, and the soldiers responsible for removing his corpse struggled to carry it away.²³ The fact that state violence had by the 1970s become so banal goes some way to explaining why it took so long for the legacy of October to be repeated.

In spite of Nimeiri's bloody rift with the SCP, his regime maintained its moderate socialist outlook, and its violence was thus initially directed against the political right. Before 1971, Nimeiri had clashed violently with the *Ansar* at Aba Island in 1970, killing – according to one estimate – over 12,000 *Ansaris* during his aerial bombardment and subsequent invasion of the Mahdi's historic residence.²⁴ Nevertheless, after 1971 the most serious threats to Nimeiri were also posed by the religious right. The Umma Party, DUP and ICF collaborated to form a 'National Front'. This 'National Front' provoked student unrest in September 1973 in an unsuccessful attempt to revive the legacy of the 21 October seminar, and attempted to overthrow the president militarily in 1976 with Libyan support.²⁵ Thus it is worth remembering that although Nimeiri's coup empowered one group of Octoberists, another faction lost out. Both the Imam al-Hadi al-Mahdi, who had issued a famous memorandum condemning al-Qurayshi's killing, and the Muslim Brother lecturer Muhammad Salih Umar, who had been prominent in the seminars leading up to the University Incident, were killed in the struggles against Nimeiri in 1970. This in itself reminds us just how divided the legacy of the October Revolution was.

The economic roots of the uprising

While the May Regime claimed to be preserving the radical legacy of October 1964, from the late 1970s onwards its economic malfeasance and inability to provide basic services began to make this assertion increasingly tenuous. In the early to mid-1980s, economic grievances were considerably more widespread and substantial than they had been in 1964. It is important to understand that this was a factor in the buildup to the 1985 uprising, since it weakens the claim that it was spontaneous in nature. The deteriorating economic situation was partly a result of wider global factors, such as the oil price rises of the 1970s, the slumps in demand for Sudan's raw materials and the pressure applied by the International Monetary Fund to force Middle Eastern and African states to practise economic austerity. However, in Sudan it was also a result of inefficient and corruptly managed economic planning. The mistakes made by the May Regime resembled the flawed development strategies of governments elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa at this time. Its economic planners focused too heavily on oversized and overambitious development projects without guaranteeing access to sufficient capital to see them through, while ignoring existing agricultural projects that would have helped keep the economy afloat.²⁶

Corruption was a significant factor in the mismanagement of Sudan's economy at this time. Senior government officials allocated funding for development projects based on calculations not of their potential benefit to the national economy but the individual rewards that would accrue to themselves as managers of these projects.²⁷ The most notorious of all these officials was Bahieddin Idris, a disgraced former zoology lecturer whom Nimeiri appointed as his 'Minister for Special Affairs'.²⁸ Idris used his position to bypass both his fellow ministers and the Bank of Sudan in arranging contracts with international companies and development corporations which earned significant financial kickbacks for himself but left the Sudanese economy heavily in debt.²⁹ He also helped to develop Nimeiri's relationship with the notorious Saudi businessman Adnan Khashoggi, to whom the president conceded the rights to half the country's mineral resources and oil reserves in October 1984.³⁰

Sudan's external debt climbed from 3 billion US dollars in 1981 to 7 billion in 1984.³¹ As a result, the country became a hostage to the International Monetary Fund, which dictated that its government cut back on public spending, reduce subsidies on basic foodstuffs and orient the economy towards producing export goods.³² The regime began to apply these measures in 1979 and continued to implement them with increasing intensity, provoking a series of urban riots.³³ The economic cutbacks also severely hampered its capacity to deal with the next crisis – the series of drought-induced famines that broke out in the western, eastern and southern peripheries of the country between 1983 and 1985.³⁴ Nimeiri himself refused to acknowledge that the famine was even occurring. Thousands died of starvation and thousands more sought refuge in Khartoum, prompting the president to have his security organs launch *kashas* ('sweeps') to round up these starving men and ferry them back into the famine-stricken rural areas.³⁵

Given that the economic situation had deteriorated sharply before the *Intifada*, it would seem reasonable to conclude that it was this that sparked the protests which

led to the ultimate downfall of the regime. The crisis grew even more severe in the early months of 1985 as Nimeiri announced a 75 per cent increase in petrol prices.³⁶ Long queues emerged at petrol stations, and citizens of Khartoum recall being forced to sleep there overnight just to be able to fill up their cars.³⁷ In the days immediately preceding the outbreak of the uprising on 26 March 1985, Nimeiri announced further increases in the prices of bread and sugar.³⁸ The demonstrators tore up currency notes bearing the president's face, reflecting their disgruntlement at the hyperinflation and the government's agreement with the IMF to devalue the Sudanese pound.³⁹ Some of the slogans they chanted had a specifically economic theme, including 'the World Bank will not rule us' (*lan yahkumna al-bank al-dawli*), and 'One hundred per cent of our hungry people are against Nimeiri' (*mia-mia sha'abna ja'aa didda Nimeiri*).⁴⁰ Six days after the downfall of Nimeiri, a newly freed journalist concluded that the *Intifada* was 'not manufactured by any specific grouping or union ... it was a result of the suffering which citizens in different social and economic and cultural sectors were exposed to, and represented the difficulty of gaining the daily necessities of life and bread'.⁴¹ The fact that the price hikes were introduced just before the *Intifada* suggests that they were one of its direct causes.

Nevertheless, although the corruption of the regime and the deteriorating economic situation provided the essential background to the *Intifada*, these factors alone cannot explain Nimeiri's downfall. Economic protests with very similar causes had broken out at the same time in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Jordan without the governments there being unseated.⁴² Admittedly, famine was not a factor in these countries, but then the groups most affected by the famine – the marginalized populations of the east, south and west – were not those with the power to decide the fate of the regime. As will be seen below, famine migrants from Sudan's rural peripheries played a noticeable, but not a decisive, role in the *Intifada*. To fully understand the causes of Nimeiri's downfall, it is necessary to understand his response to the economic crisis and the reason for his failure as a ruler to implement political strategies that would guarantee his survival.

Nimeiri's malaise and the breakdown of the political order

On 25 March, the day before the popular uprising broke out, the national radio station broadcast a statement by Nimeiri announcing that the people would have to deal with the economic crisis by cutting down on 'frivolous consumption' and cycling rather than driving to work.⁴³ The popular furore that this produced and its significance in provoking the popular uprising highlight two major factors in Nimeiri's political behaviour that aggravated the economic crisis and led to the downfall of his regime. First, as has often been observed, it revealed his increasingly irrational outlook and loss of popular touch. However, the president's former security officials claim he had made these statements to the SSU without ever having intended them for public consumption, and suggest that it was probably the minister of information Ali Shummo who arranged for them to be broadcast. They attribute this to the fact that Shummo, who would later become a minister under the 'Salvation' regime, was a likely Islamic Movement sympathizer aggrieved by Nimeiri's move to arrest

the senior leaders of the Islamic Charter Front 2 weeks earlier. The broadcast was thus indicative of the other major factor in Nimeiri's decline – the breakdown of his relationship with all his potential political allies.⁴⁴ It will be shown here that his increasingly inept political management played an even more critical role in his demise than the deteriorating economic situation.

This breakdown occurred in the context of Nimeiri's increasing paranoia and personalistic style of rule. He increasingly used arbitrary measures against both allies and opponents, with the distinction between these two categories becoming increasingly blurred. This in itself did not herald his imminent demise. Dictators in Africa and elsewhere often switch allegiances and use ruthless methods against former henchmen or supporters as part of a calculated survival strategy. As seen above, Nimeiri was himself a consummate ideological chameleon during the early years of his rule, allying with the SCP in 1969, the southern regionalists in 1972 and, eventually, the ICF and the other right-wing parties in 1977.⁴⁵ However, he lost his survival nous in the later years of his period in power, and this contributed significantly to the collapse of the May Regime. He centred all political power in his own person, and then self-destructed.

To comprehend why this happened, we must appreciate the state of the president's health. As early as 1978, Nimeiri had begun displaying symptoms of severe physical and neurological stress, often entering states of temporary dementia or physical collapse.⁴⁶ At one point this occurred on national television.⁴⁷ In 1979, his American doctors diagnosed a severe blood clot in one of his arteries, which was preventing blood from flowing freely to his brain.⁴⁸ He was forced to return to America for further treatment in 1980 following a minor stroke, prompting speculation in diplomatic and governmental circles that his deputy and army chief-of-staff Abd al-Majid Hamid al-Khalil would be called in to replace him.⁴⁹ Khalid and Qalandar both maintain that Nimeiri himself admitted to a meeting of senior military officers in the same year that the medicines he had been prescribed were affecting his judgement and that he would step down in August 1982 – although, assuming the story is true, he clearly did not keep to his pledge.⁵⁰ Oppositionists were well aware of Nimeiri's mental instability. Ghazi Suleiman recalls rumours that Nimeiri had 'started to greet empty chairs'.⁵¹ In spite of his admission that the medication prescribed by his American doctors were affecting his judgement, he frequently ignored their advice to go to sleep and avoid making any major political decisions immediately after taking this medication.⁵² This infuriated senior aides and American diplomats alike.⁵³

It is important to understand that the decisions Nimeiri made in the later years of the May Regime were not those of a fully rational individual. While he continued to retain traces of the slyness and political guile that marked his earlier years, his strategies were also shaped by rashness, vindictiveness and, often, paranoia. His assault on his former allies began with the SSU. Khalid recalls that in August 1979, he publicly lambasted the SSU at a meeting of its politburo, condemning its 'failure ... to combat the causes of the peoples' sufferings'.⁵⁴ He followed up this tirade by dismissing Abul Gasim Ibrahim, the secretary-general of the SSU and the last surviving member of the old Revolutionary Command Council,⁵⁵ of whose ambitions he had been highly suspicious.⁵⁶ The next incumbent, army commander-in-chief Abd al-Majid Hamid

al-Khalil, survived until January 1982, at which point Nimeiri dissolved the SSU politburo, Central Committee and general secretariat simultaneously.⁵⁷ He replaced them with a 'popular committee' that answered directly to him.⁵⁸

Abd al-Qadir recalls that from the late 1970s, Nimeiri treated the SSU as 'his own private kingdom'.⁵⁹ William Pierce, the chief political officer at the American embassy in Khartoum from 1983 to 1985, recalls that 'He was a survivor essentially ... he had gone through the revolutionary councils and one by one the other partners were weeded out and he had twisted and turned and shaped personalities within his government so that he was the one who knew how to handle things in Sudan'.⁶⁰ In other words, Nimeiri made himself the May Regime – and the May Regime thus became dependent upon his personal survival and stability.

In accruing all power to himself, Nimeiri wrought further destruction on the central organs of state in a policy Khalid refers to as the 'emaciation of the institutions'.⁶¹ Between 1979 and 1982, he marginalized the police leadership and purged the army high command.⁶² In the following year, he employed his presidential powers to summarily dismiss fifty members of the judiciary.⁶³ The only state institution he left untouched was the State Security Organization, which was established in 1978 to combine the functions of internal and external security and which reported directly to his vice-president, Umar al-Tayyib. As will be seen in Chapter 5, the creation of this body further fuelled the resentment of other institutions sidelined by Nimeiri, particularly the army and the police.

The 1977 reconciliation and Nimeiri's alliance with the ICF

Nimeiri compensated for his marginalization of a number of the pillars of the May Regime by embracing a new ally, Hasan al-Turabi's Islamic Charter Front. Having narrowly survived the National Front *coup d'état* in 1976, he resolved that his enemies should be kept closer than his increasingly diminishing circle of friends; thus he signed a reconciliation deal that brought the two main parties within the National Front, the Umma and the ICF, into the government. After this, the Nimeiri system increasingly came to resemble Brumberg's 'liberal autocracy', as Umma and ICF candidates stood for SSU elections and the relics of the multi-party era were incorporated into the one-party system established by the 'May Revolution'. The 'socialist' nature of the May Regime was thus irretrievably diluted as Nimeiri became focused on survival.

The unstable dictator's increasing inability to manage this system of liberal autocracy helps explain his downfall. In the short term, however, his rapprochement with the religious parties helped to guarantee the survival of the May Regime. The ICF, with its links to the new system of Islamic banking and dominant influence within the student movement, possessed sufficient economic and political weight to keep Nimeiri's government stable. But as a long-term survival measure, his increasing empowerment of the ICF was misguided. He might have been able to play the other political groups – the Umma, the DUP, the SSU old guard and the southern

regionalists – off against each other, and was able to do this with the various state institutions. However, the ICF was far too well organized and financially strong for Nimeiri to simply control it, and as soon as he gave the party access to the state, it began to infiltrate the major security services.⁶⁴ Nimeiri could dance with the devil – he would later become fond of referring to the ICF/‘Muslim Brotherhood’ as the ‘brotherhood of Satan’ – but it was always to his tune. His increasing dependence on them quite possibly illustrated the impact of his medication on his decision-making – Abu Rannat even claims that ICF ministers exploited Nimeiri’s fits of malaise to persuade him to push through decisions that suited them.⁶⁵

While he was increasing his reliance on the ICF, Nimeiri burned bridges elsewhere. He severed his ties with his former southern allies in a catastrophic fashion. In May 1983, he announced a plan to divide the autonomous ‘Southern Region’ into three new regions: Equatoria, Upper Nile and Bahr al-Ghazal. The president justified this as an extension of the regionalization measures he had recently undertaken in the north. However, particularly since the move involved the dissolution of the autonomous regional assembly in Juba, it was widely understood by southerners to be an attempt to diminish the independence of southern Sudan by dividing the territory up into smaller and weaker political units unable to resist the power of the centre.⁶⁶ The re-division directly precipitated the formation of a new southern rebel movement, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, by defecting southern units of the armed forces.⁶⁷ The resulting civil war would last 22 years, and turn against him allies whose support had previously been crucial. The decision suited Nimeiri’s alliance with the ICF, which was keen to integrate southern Sudan into the north, but by marginalizing all the other forces on the Sudanese political scene, he was cultivating a crippling dependence upon this party.

In line with his pact with the ICF, Nimeiri pursued a policy of ‘Islamization’ of the law. In 1979, he appointed al-Turabi as attorney-general and tasked him with heading a commission to revise Sudan’s laws in conformity with *shari’a*.⁶⁸ However, the manner in which Nimeiri implemented his ‘Islamization’ programme condemned him to further political isolation. Knowing that giving the ICF full responsibility for the revivification of *shari’a* might guarantee them an unassailably strong position within the state, he dismissed al-Turabi 4 months before the eventual promulgation of the new laws.⁶⁹ ‘Nimeiri didn’t want credit for *shari’a* to go to me’, recalls al-Turabi, in one of his less misleading statements.⁷⁰ Instead, the president turned to an obscure lawyer, Awad al Jeed, and the son of the leader of a minor *sufi* order to which the president had grown close, the judge Nayal Abu Gurun, to help him compose the final draft of the laws.⁷¹ The result was that the ‘September Laws’ of 1983 included some bizarre deviations from classical *shari’a*. Most notably, Nimeiri’s new assistants invented a crime called ‘intention to commit fornication’ (*shuruu fi zina*) and vastly expanded the standard definition of what constituted a *hadd* offence so that between 1983 and 1985 probably well over 100 people had their hands amputated.⁷² Part of the reason so many penalties of this nature were applied was that Nimeiri established ‘Instantaneous Justice Courts’ under his emergency law of 1984; these bypassed the regular justice system and applied penalties with little regard for standard legal procedure.⁷³

Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim has recently contended that the manner in which the new laws were applied reflected Nimeiri's masterly populism, suggesting that Khartoum's urban crowds welcomed the 'instantaneous justice' after years of witnessing Sudan's previous justice system failing to deal with crime in a speedy and efficient manner.⁷⁴ However, many others have suggested that the Sudanese public saw the new measures for what they were, a distortion of Islam.⁷⁵ Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi exploited the popular resentment of the laws and their deviation from classical *shari'a* when he denounced them in front of hundreds of thousands of supporters in Omdurman.⁷⁶ The new laws also mortified the educated elites and urban professionals.⁷⁷ Again, the rationality of the manner of Nimeiri's 'Islamization' of the law is highly questionable. Bill Kontos, who as American ambassador at the time met the president on a number of occasions, admits that 'how much of this fundamentalism Nimeiri believed and how much was calculated cynicism, I do not know', but – with reference to the medication he was taking at the time – argues that by 1983 'Nimeiri was becoming irrational, to put it mildly'.⁷⁸

By implementing these 'Islamization' measures, Nimeiri also undermined himself in another respect. Even though he had attempted to disassociate the ICF from his new religious agenda by replacing al-Turabi as attorney-general, in practice he was forced to rely heavily on the party and its sympathizers to implement the new measures, particularly after his conflict with the existing police and judicial apparatus. The ICF established 'Societies for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice', which, as he admitted in an angry public rant against the ICF later in 1984, began to take it upon themselves to play the role of the police.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, Mukashifi al-Kabbashi, the ICF sympathizer who presided over the High Court of Appeal, used the powers granted to him by the September Laws and the 1984 emergency regulations to pursue a fiercely aggressive policy of 'Islamization'. Under al-Kabbashi's guidance, the Instantaneous Justice Courts indirectly targeted a number of those among Nimeiri's SSU 'old guard' who still remained loyal, such as Khalid Hassan Abbas, Mamoun Awad Abu Zeid and Umar al-Tayyib, by prosecuting their relatives for crimes such as drunkenness and corruption.⁸⁰ It seems that Nayal Abu Gurun and Awad al-Jeed, who Abu Rannat and Abd al-Aziz suggest were closer to the ICF than was known at the time, supported this process.⁸¹ Ibrahim argues that bringing the rich and mighty to heel in this manner was part of Nimeiri's populist strategy – but if any popular credit did accrue from these cases, it would have gone to the ICF, whose members and affiliates serving on the 'Instantaneous Justice Courts' pursued these trials. Nimeiri had, in el-Affendi's words, 'unwittingly unleashed' a 'deluge'.⁸² On the first anniversary of the declaration of *shari'a*, the ICF poured its financial resources into mobilizing a huge demonstration attended by senior Muslim Brother intellectuals from across the Islamic world. This celebratory procession effectively exposed the weakness of the SSU, which was incapable of drawing such numbers to its own rallies at the time.⁸³ Thus Nimeiri had enabled the ICF to undermine his only remaining adherents and radically strengthen its own grip on the state.

Even as the president was beginning to doubt the merits of his allegiance with the ICF, his desire to defend the new laws led him to take a series of vindictive and arbitrary measures against his leftist and secularist critics, which startled the intelligentsia.

His first target was Mahmud Muhammad Taha, a liberal Islamic reformer whose Republican Brother movement was influential in governmental and intellectual circles. In December 1984, Taha and several other leading Republican Brothers issued a pamphlet, 'Either this or the Flood' (*Hadha au al-Tawwafan*), denouncing the September Laws as a violation of Islam.⁸⁴ Nimeiri's response was swift and brutal: he had Taha arrested and in mid-January 1985, following a show-trial, the 76-year-old was executed for 'heresy'.⁸⁵ The judicial murder of Taha was highly detrimental to the president's own survival prospects, since the execution aggrieved a far greater number of parties than it pleased. Numerous senior SSU figures, including Umar al-Tayyib, had tried to talk him out of it;⁸⁶ and even al-Turabi was wary of condoning it.⁸⁷ The decision was widely condemned in the Western media and even brought a denunciation from the US State Department.⁸⁸ It was also the act that persuaded the various professional unions, which would ultimately form the National Alliance (and which had held a decisive meeting at the University of Khartoum following Taha's judicial murder), that Nimeiri should be toppled.⁸⁹

Mansur Khalid, writing in February 1985, correctly predicted that by executing Taha, Nimeiri had 'sealed his fate'.⁹⁰ It is important to acknowledge just how actively the mentally unstable dictator contributed to his own downfall, since this enables us to understand why his regime collapsed during the economic crises of the mid-1980s whereas others in the region did not. Nimeiri had alienated all the major political forces other than the ICF – the army, the police, the judiciary, al-Sadiq al-Mahdi, the Republican Brothers and even his former allies in the SSU. In February 1985, he also incurred the wrath of the Ba'ath Party by charging four of its members with defamation of Islam, which brought more unwelcome attention from the rest of the Middle East.⁹¹ These decisions were foolhardy not just because they united the entire political opposition against him, but also because they left him reliant on a domestic ally capable of becoming a dominant force in its own right; they were, furthermore highly unpalatable to his major international ally, the United States. The consequences of this unwise gambit would become clear following the visit of the US vice-president George Bush to Khartoum in early March 1985.

The external factor: US-Sudanese relations in the buildup to 1985

In contrast to 1964, the policies of international actors, specifically the United States, had a more decisive impact when it came to shaping the political context of the *Intifada*. By the time this erupted, the United States had been a major influence on the Sudanese political scene for over a decade. Sudan had, like other major Arab nations, severed all ties with America following the Arab-Israeli war in 1967, but Nimeiri had re-established these ties in 1972, partly as a result of the rift with the SCP and a peace deal with the partially Christian south.⁹² Following this, Washington began to support a number of agricultural development projects in Sudan and became involved in the negotiation of the country's debt problem.⁹³ From 1980, military assistance was

supplied in the context of the alliance between the two countries against Gaddafi's Libya.⁹⁴ During this partnership, joint military exercises were conducted in Sudan as an extension of 'Operation Bright Star', the US-Egyptian army training programme.⁹⁵ Such was the determination of the American government to employ Sudan as a regional counterweight to Gaddafi and the communist Mengistu in Ethiopia that this support continued – albeit anxiously – even after the outbreak of war in the south in 1983.⁹⁶

The alliance with America was resented by the Sudanese public on a number of levels. As demonstrated above, it led Nimeiri to take a number of privatization measures and to cut back on state spending. It also dictated his diplomatic support for Anwar Sadat's 1979 Peace Agreement with Israel, which had provoked a popular furore all over the Arab world. Moreover, the US partnership led to Sudanese territorial sovereignty being abused in particularly odious ways. For example, in January 1985, Reagan negotiated a deal with Nimeiri to dump American toxic and nuclear waste in the famine-stricken northern Darfur.⁹⁷ A Democratic Unionist Party pamphlet published during the *Intifada* railed against this agreement and asked why the material could not be disposed of in the Nevada desert, complaining that the deposited waste would spread into the main watercourses and cause Sudan to become 'a country of retarded, disfigured cripples' (*dawla min al-mu'aqqin al-mushawwahin al-mutakhallafin*).⁹⁸

The nuclear waste deal was not the most humiliating aspect of the American alliance as far as the Sudanese public was concerned. The period also witnessed a joint operation between the CIA, Mossad, South African intelligence and the SSO, that would be seen as a far more extensive abuse of the country's territorial sovereignty. During what would be referred to as 'Operation Moses', these intelligence agencies used the famine in Ethiopia and eastern Sudan as a cover to transport between 10,000 and 13,000 Ethiopian 'Fallasha' Jews to Israel via al-Azzaza airport in Gedaref, eastern Sudan.⁹⁹ The American and Sudanese governments had hoped to manage the process covertly, but details of the operation were soon leaked by a number of international media organizations, including the *Los Angeles Times*.¹⁰⁰ Umar al-Tayyib, the head of the SSO, would be accused at his trial following the *Intifada* of taking a 150,000 dollar bribe to guarantee the role of the SSO in the operation.¹⁰¹ 'Operation Moses' enraged the politically astute sections of the Sudanese public, who perceived it as a political exploitation of the famine designed to provide manpower for Israel in its war against the population of Palestine.¹⁰²

The impact of 'Operation Moses' and the nuclear waste story should not be exaggerated. Popular disapproval of Nimeiri's regime had already climaxed by the time these scandals occurred. However, one particular decision allegedly taken by the Americans may have played a major role in establishing the conditions for Nimeiri's downfall. It is widely believed in Sudan that when George Bush visited Sudan in early March, he suggested – or perhaps demanded – that Nimeiri remove the ICF from the government.¹⁰³ The usual explanation for this American move is that the United States was anxious about the impact that the 'Islamization' project was having and the growing strength of the ICF.¹⁰⁴

It is difficult to ascertain what exactly Bush said to provoke Nimeiri's decision, if anything at all. However, it is true that his partnership with the ICF, and the partly related policies of re-dividing the south and 'Islamizing' the law, had brought the

president's relationship with his superpower ally to breaking point. In November 1984, the Middle East correspondent of the *Washington Post*, David Ottoway, published a lengthy article based on interviews with senior Reagan administration officials that claimed the American government was so despairing of the situation in Sudan that it did not care whether the Nimeiri regime remained or not.¹⁰⁵ In the same month, an English language intelligence appraisal prophesying the inevitable downfall of the May Regime and predicting a number of potential post-Nimeiri scenarios was, perhaps intentionally, leaked from a Western embassy in Khartoum and found its way to a variety of journalists and army officers.¹⁰⁶ The fact that Nimeiri's Western patrons became so openly critical in the aftermath of his 'Islamization' measures indicated that his domestic and international alliances had become incompatible.

After Bush's visit, Nimeiri immediately moved against the ICF, ordering the SSO to apprehend its senior cadres. It was not an auspicious decision as far as the dictator's survival chances were concerned. If Bush did prompt these measures, then he had effectively forced the Sudanese president to commit political suicide. Having cut off the ICF, Nimeiri was now bereft of allies and, in effect, a political sitting duck. In this sense, the United States had played a major role in destabilizing the dictator, although Nimeiri had already gone most of the way towards bringing about his own downfall. His rash dependence on the ICF alliance had made his political isolation in March 1985 inevitable.

The outbreak of the *Intifada*

Nimeiri's downfall may have been self-inflicted. Nevertheless, it was the political parties, the professional associations and the student unions that determined the manner of his demise and its ultimate consequences. On 26 March 1985, a student demonstration at Omdurman Islamic University was quickly supported by protests at other universities and among the public at large.¹⁰⁷ Nimeiri's State Security Organization was the only body willing to confront the demonstrations, and the manner in which it did so soon provoked further unrest. On 27 March, the doctors of Khartoum hospital arranged a strike to protest against the actions of SSO agents who had been shooting demonstrators dead from close range. Fellow professional groups rapidly joined their protest and began calling for a general strike to topple the regime.¹⁰⁸

The lame response of the government to the demonstrations illustrated just how effectively Nimeiri had undermined his own regime. To the surprise of the military leadership,¹⁰⁹ he left Sudan for the United States the day the *Intifada* broke out, and was thus unable to direct the government response to the protests. The manner in which he departed revealed his diminishing ability to judge the public mood. The American embassy's chief political officer, William A. Pierce, who helped see him off at the airport, recalls:

I'm standing near our car while all of the ambassadors line up and the ministers are out there, and Nimeiry drives up. In the background you can see puffs of smoke coming from the city where cars are burning in the streets. And they stand around

and then Nimeiry comes up. He comes out in dark sunglasses with a turtleneck sweater on, goes and jokes with all of his ministers, and this smoke is coming up behind him, and then he finally gets on the plane and flies off never to come back.¹¹⁰

Flying away at a time of mass civil protest was another self-destructive act – as Nimeiri had subordinated all the major security units to his personal command, officials were left in a state of confusion as to how to respond to the subsequent demonstrations.¹¹¹

In spite of Nimeiri's injudicious exit, a few senior officials, including Khalid Hasan Abbas and Abu'l Gasim Ibrahim, attempted to stage a show of support for him. On 2 April, Abu'l Gasim Ibrahim made a desperate attempt to whip up public support by clinging to the legacy of the October Revolution, reminding the crowds that 'we [i.e. the former Free Officers in the May Regime] were the makers of the October Revolution', accusing the demonstrators of wishing to 'return to obeying the weak ... for this is the history of the sectarians'.¹¹² Abu'l Gasim was, in effect, trying to deter the demonstrators by making what by then was the highly spurious claim that the May Regime was the guardian of the October Revolution. He also warned that they would suffer a fate similar to that of their predecessors in 1964, who had allowed the gains of their uprising to be wasted by permitting the 'sectarian' political parties supported by the *Ansar* and Khatmiyya religious orders to return to power. However, the crowds paid little attention to this speech. Only around 3,000 people attended the pro-Nimeiri demonstration, and it seems that a number of them were coerced.¹¹³ Even the majority of the SSU leadership remained aloof throughout these events, partially out of frustration at the manner in which Nimeiri had emasculated it in the years preceding the *Intifada*.¹¹⁴ All this illustrated the extent to which the president had eradicated his own support base. However, the considerable numerical strength of the anti-regime demonstration that followed on 3 April was just as significant. By 4 April, global media outlets were reporting that 80 per cent of public and private sectors were participating in the general strike.¹¹⁵ It was the sheer social and political breadth of the protests against Nimeiri that would ultimately dictate the nature of the transfer of power.

Nimeiri's self-destruction did not guarantee the return of a democratic regime. Other African dictators of the Cold War era had brought about their own downfall and simply been replaced by other dictators – Amin and Bokassa being good examples. It seemed highly possible in 1985 that such an eventuality might befall Sudan. Many Sudanese believed that the Americans wanted Umar al-Tayyib to take over from Nimeiri.¹¹⁶ The CIA representative in Khartoum, 'Mr Milton', is reported to have intimated to the vice-president that he should replace Nimeiri, and both the Americans and Egyptians appear to have encouraged this by deliberately delaying Nimeiri's return to Sudan.¹¹⁷ However, it is unclear how seriously Umar al-Tayyib considered conducting his own coup. Taj al-Din Fadl, the deputy commander-in-chief of the army, certainly believed that he had. He informed *MERIP* later in 1985 that 'General Tayyib betrayed Numairi from the very start. He minimized the importance of events in Khartoum and discouraged Numairi from returning to the country. He was hoping to take over himself, based on his command of the army and the fact that the constitution named him as interim president in the president's absence'. Taj al-Din

Fadl claimed that it was widely known that al-Tayyib 'had an agreement with the Americans and Egyptians.'¹¹⁸ However, what *MERIP* did not report was that Taj al-Din Fadl possessed a bitter personal grudge against Umar al-Tayyib,¹¹⁹ which may well have caused him to exaggerate this story. Many accounts exist that contradict Fadl's claims. One Sudanese journalist asserts that Umar al-Tayyib was sending desperate messages to Nimeiri in Washington appealing to him to come back to Khartoum, while another suggests that even as late as 5 April, he was pinning his hopes on the president returning to Sudan.¹²⁰

Other sources suggest that Umar al-Tayyib never attempted seriously to take over because he knew that he would never be accepted by either the public or the army.¹²¹ When the army leadership met with him on 4 April to discuss the security situation, they rejected his proposal of a state of emergency outright and several officers even attacked him in a highly personal manner.¹²² Moreover, senior political representatives of the banned political parties began to declare that they would accept no 'forged replacement' (*badila za'ifa*) of Nimeiri's regime.¹²³ The 'Alliance of the Sudanese People' declared that they 'would not accept a new Nimeiri under any garb',¹²⁴ A DUP pamphlet demanded a 'return to liberal democracy'.¹²⁵ The DUP and Umma in particular had always remained relatively committed to the principle of liberal democracy, but they were now in a much stronger position given that Nimeiri's indiscriminate attacks against left, right and centre had united them in opposition to the regime and had furthermore brought them into an alliance with the professional unions.

The fact that the professional unions and the major northern political parties in Khartoum were able to coordinate throughout the uprising enabled them to put forward a common set of demands, the most prominent of which was the return of liberal democracy. Late in the evening of 5 April, six professional unions alongside the Umma, DUP and SCP formed the 'National Alliance for the Salvation of the Nation' (usually abbreviated to the 'National Alliance'), and announced a 'National Charter'. The charter established the following goals:

- (1) Responding to the call of the people as demonstrated in the 3 April demonstration to get rid of the May Regime
- (2) Establishing a three-year transitional government, which has the following tasks:
 - (a) arranging political life in the country in accordance with the 1956 transitional constitution modified for 1964 in keeping with the aims set out in this charter and preserving the reputation of the modern forces in the constitutional institutions via democratic organizations
 - (b) preserving citizens' basic freedoms in terms of freedom of movement, faith, organization in accordance with international documents concerning human rights
 - (c) dealing with the problem in the south on the basis of regional self-rule on a democratic basis in accordance with established principles
 - (d) liberating the country from economic subjection to global imperialism, building a strong social and economic base, dealing with the economic crisis, mobilizing economic resources and fighting famine and desertification
 - (e) having a non-aligned foreign policy, adhering firmly to Arab and African belongings, and pursuing a policy of having good relationships with neighbouring states
 - (f) confirming the principle of democratic governance
 - (g) making the civil service neutral, and getting rid of the

May institutions and dispensing with the parasitic May Regime class (h) ensuring that the country be ruled in the transitional period by a constitution established by a democratically chosen body and that the country resolve the intellectual and political issues by democratic means.¹²⁶

The National Alliance thus articulated the charter to suit liberal and socialist sentiments, through references to human rights and 'liberation from economic subjection to global imperialism', as well as those of the more parochial and socially conservative parties, through the commitment to 'adhere firmly to Arab and African belongings'. All of the signatories could identify with 'getting rid of the May institutions and dispensing with the parasitic May Regime class'. Although it is unclear whether the signing of the National Charter influenced Siwar al-Dahab's decision to 'side with the people', the fact that the demands for a return to liberal democracy were being articulated so clearly and pursued with such broad political support seemed to dictate the nature of the army's response to the *Intifada*. At 9:35 on the morning of 6 April, the army commander-in-chief, Siwar al-Dahab, announced that the army would be taking over the reins of power and deposing not just Nimeiri but the May Regime as a whole. Siwar al-Dahab declared in his famous radio broadcast:

The Sudan Armed Forces have been observing the deteriorating security situation all over the country, and the extremely complex political crisis that has affected the country over the past few days. In order to reduce bloodshed and ensure the country's independence and unity, the armed forces have decided unanimously to stand by the people and their choice and respond to their demands by taking over power and transferring it to the people after a specified transitional period.¹²⁷

This declaration, with its perhaps intentionally ambiguous references to the 'extremely complicated political crisis' and 'deteriorating security situation', was noticeably devoid of revolutionary rhetoric. While Siwar al-Dahab may have used the term 'the people' in an abstract sense, as Jadein observes, he did not declare that the army was standing by the *Intifada*, or its principles.¹²⁸ It is worth considering the character of Siwar al-Dahab at this point. He was widely reputed to be an unambitious man who did not desire a long term in political office. As will be seen in Chapter 5, he was at first unwilling to take action against Nimeiri and did so only under pressure from senior and middle-ranking army officers. However, while he was at first fearful of replacing the president, he was not eager to establish himself as a substitute either. As a token of his commitment to liberal multi-party politics, Siwar al-Dahab immediately abrogated Nimeiri's 1973 constitution, which had acted as the basis for the one-party state.

Religion and nation in the 1985 uprising

The fact that the *Intifada* brought about the abrogation of Sudan's least religiously driven constitution leads us to question the extent to which its protagonists were really secular in outlook. As we have seen, academic commentators tend to attribute the uprising to the same spirit of 'civil' political action and 'secular nationalism' that they

argue drove the independence movement.¹²⁹ Gallab maintains that the strength of the belief in the Sudanese 'civil religion' was 'confirmed by the successful execution of the April 1985 *Intifada* against the Ja'far Nimairi dictatorship.'¹³⁰ Indeed, the 1985 uprising was apparently orchestrated in a very worldly arena. Meetings were held in student unions, professionals' clubs and private houses; the urban crowds – where they needed any encouragement at all – were mobilized through pamphlets and slogans painted on walls, in addition to speeches delivered in public squares.

The fact that the Sudanese public had experienced such recent success in staging a 'civil' uprising helps explain why they were able to repeat this feat in the middle of the 1980s, at a time when political autocracy was the norm in the region and resistance to entrenched regimes tended to come only from the Muslim Brotherhood. Sudanese journalists were quick to identify the importance of the October Revolution as a point of inspiration. The day after Siwar al-Dahab's famous broadcast, *al-Sahafa* observed that the chants that had been sung during the April *Intifada* were the same as those heard in October 1964. 'Return return, o October ...' was a common mantra for the protesters.¹³¹ The fact that Abu'l Gasim Ibrahim had felt compelled to acknowledge it in his speech on 2 April demonstrated just how influential the legacy of October remained.

As was the case with the October Revolution, Sudanese intellectuals and the northern urban public interpreted the April *Intifada* as one more victory in a series of Sudanese 'nationalist' victories. 'National songs' (*anashid wataniyya*) were chanted during the uprising in Port Sudan.¹³² Leaders of the *Intifada* such as Mirghani al-Nasri have even claimed that there is an innate democratic spirit within the Sudanese national identity. More than two decades after the *Intifada*, he stated that 'democracy is one of the features of the Sudanese national character', which he attributed to the fact that the sheer geographic size of Sudan and its numerous open spaces bred a spirit of individual freedom and egalitarianism.¹³³ While this theory might be somewhat romantic in nature, it demonstrates the vigour with which the leaders of the *Intifada* attached themselves to the ideals of nationalism and democracy. Saif al-Dawla Ahmad Khalil, writing in *al-Sahafa* 6 days after the *Intifada*, argued that it was the product of the same national spirit that had 'enabled the Imam al-Mahdi to lead the Sudanese people in the sweeping national revolution [of 1885] ... and which motivated the Khalifa Abdallahi and the masses of the *Ansar* to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of this great nation in the epic witnessed at Umm Diwaykarat and which at the same time was the motive for Abd al-Latif and Abd al-Fadil and al-Qurayshi and Abd al-Hamid Sa'id and the martyrs of April, and April will remain as a fuel for what comes after it'.¹³⁴

There is an ambiguity here. In some respects, these representations went against the grain of the radical Islamist discourses of the latter half of the twentieth century, which insisted that nationalism of any form detracted from the universality of Islam.¹³⁵ In this sense, al-Nasri did represent what Woodward terms the 'spirit of secular nationalism within the intelligentsia', even though he was an Islamist.¹³⁶ However, the discourses of men like Khalil and al-Nasri did not exactly represent an identification with a secular nationalist past, especially since the wars waged by Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi and the Khalifa Abdallahi had been inspired by revivalist Islam. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that al-Nasri and a number of the other professionals who helped

establish the National Alliance believed that Islam should play a significant role in public life (see Chapter 4).

Admittedly, the 'National Charter', although it was penned by the Imam of the *Ansar al-Sadiq al-Mahdi*, contained relatively few Islamist slogans. Nevertheless, religious discourse featured more noticeably in the April *Intifada* than it had in 1964. This was because the late regime had conditioned the response to it. While Nimeiri's *shari'a* was widely condemned for its inaccuracies and distortions of jurisprudential norms, it nevertheless resembled classical Islamic law more closely than any legal system obtaining in Sudan since the downfall of the Mahdist state. Nimeiri and the ICF had placed religion back at the centre of political life, and, as a result, their opponents were forced engage with them in religious terms and criticize them from a religious perspective. El-Affendi argues that as a result of Nimeiri's implementation of *shari'a* in 1983, 'Many debates were sparked on the issues involved, and many turned to the study of Islamic texts. This compulsory Islamic education finally turned the language Ikhwan kept speaking in relative solitude into the language of the majority, and even Ikhwan opponents started citing the classical Islamic texts.'¹³⁷

While el-Affendi himself is sympathetic to the Islamic Movement, it is difficult to deny the accuracy of his judgement. For instance, Mahmud Muhammad Taha, even though he argued that the Quran and Sunna rather than medieval Islamic texts should be taken as the basis for a modern Islamic philosophy, attacked the September Laws on the grounds that they deviated from the principles of classical Islamic jurisprudence by permitting amputation as a penalty for theft of public property.¹³⁸ Sadiq al-Mahdi's denunciation of Nimeiri's *shari'a* incorporated citations from the classical scholar Ibn Taymiyya and the second Caliph.¹³⁹ Even the SCP's underground organ *al-Midan*, while criticizing the abuse of Islam as 'a cover for arriving into power' following the promulgation of the September Laws, acknowledged that 'Islam as a source of legislation and as a general intellectual orientation can inspire the struggle of our people against dictatorship'.¹⁴⁰ In 1980, *al-Midan* cited a number of cases in which vocal members of the Islamic Movement had been shouted down after attempting to air their views in Khartoum's mosques.¹⁴¹ This in itself indicates the party's awareness that places of worship were becoming a more important battleground.

The issue of rebellion against an unjust ruler highlights the extent to which the protagonists of the *Intifada* were divided between secular and religious outlooks. In Sunni Islam, the majority of religious authorities consider forbidden any rebellion against a ruler towards whom *ba'ya* has been sworn. This was why the mainstream of the Muslim Brotherhood were wary of rebellion against Sadat and Mubarak in Egypt, and why Siwar al-Dahab, a pious man, was said to have been wary of betraying his *ba'ia* to Nimeiri.¹⁴² One of the principal exceptions was the scholar Ibn Taymiyya, who was cited in a pamphlet issued by the DUP during the *Intifada* to question the religious legitimacy of Nimeiri's decision to appoint himself as *Imam* of the Sudan.¹⁴³ Taymiyya's arguments were favoured by the militant Islamic movements of the 1980s, although the DUP was a far more conservative party and as such their usage of his writings was probably more opportunistic. Others were less concerned with the religious doctrine concerning *ba'ya*. Fadlallah Burma Nasir, summarizing the attitude of the regional commanders in the Sudanese army who chose to rebel against Nimeiri, argues that

'We all swore allegiance to him, but the question was whether there would be a nation or whether there would not. ... I consider the oath to the nation (*al-Watan*) and not to [particular] people'.¹⁴⁴ This indicates that even in the 1980s, the more secular idea of the national as opposed to the religious community and its *Imam* was still a motivating factor for those who participated in the *Intifada*.

It is perhaps the experience of two civilian insurrections that has enabled the Sudanese public to recapture the spirit of the mid-twentieth century national independence struggle, and ensured that the ideals of secular nationalism have remained prominent in the language of political opposition in Sudan. Nevertheless, it seems that Islamist ideals have become inseparably intertwined with this discourse, and even the most 'secular' of the *Intifada*'s protagonists became aware of the necessity of justifying protest in religious terms. Thus the language of the *Intifada* represented neither a purely 'Islamist' nor a purely secular discourse, but a meshing of the two.

Social composition of the *Intifada*

While the leaders of the uprising were forced to accept the ICF's creation of a pivotal role for religious discourse within the national political arena, the *Intifada* also embraced a large number of the social classes directly marginalized by Nimeiri's *shari'a*. Given that Khartoum had experienced a considerable degree of rural-urban migration during the 21 years following the October Revolution, the urban demonstrations witnessed during the *Intifada* embraced a far wider spectrum of Sudanese society. Although al-Hussein reports that the 27 March demonstrations were led by the students and workers, this does not do justice to the sheer breadth of their composition. Just as in 1964, newspaper reports on the social backgrounds of the dead and injured offer a useful index for analysis. The demonstrators who were killed by SSO bullets during the 27 March protest had both northern Arabic and southern Sudanese names. The two southerners were William Deng Kol, a 20-year-old studying at Comboni College, and Paul Maat, from the suburb of Haj Yousif.¹⁴⁵ The list of injured included Tariq Sa'id, an employee in the water administration in Wad Madani; Abbakr Muhammad Hasan, a mechanic residing in the industrial region of north Khartoum; Bakri Hasan Mustafa, a 16-year-old school student; and Abbud Muhammad Ibrahim, a vegetable seller who lived in the suburb of Mayo.¹⁴⁶ Thus we can see that the demonstrations, from both a social and an ethnic perspective, incorporated a broad section of Sudanese society.

It is noteworthy that a number of the *Intifada*'s martyrs hailed from the economically marginalized peri-urban suburbs of Khartoum such as Mayo and Haj Yousif. These regions, which housed migrants from Sudan's rural peripheries, had mushroomed in size during the decades preceding the April *Intifada*. Khartoum's population rose from about a quarter of a million in 1956 to almost 3 million in 1993.¹⁴⁷ A significant amount of this migration was the result of forced displacement caused by drought, famine and war in the regions.¹⁴⁸ However, it was also due to the fact that the economic policies of the various post-colonial regimes had made urban living far more attractive. As elsewhere in Africa,¹⁴⁹ governments in Sudan have forced rural food producers to

sell their produce at a minimal price to benefit traders supplying the needs of urban populations.¹⁵⁰ In a perverse way, this reflected the legacy of the October Revolution – since the protests that had overthrown Abboud were largely urban in nature, subsequent regimes fearing the same fate tended to focus on providing for the needs of the populations of the towns.¹⁵¹

Northern governing elites have coined a variety of pejorative terms to describe the inhabitants of these urban shanty-towns. They often refer to them as 'vagrants' (*mutasharriddin*), or as *shamasa*, which literally translates to 'the people of the sun'. Ahmad al-Fadaylabi, a social worker, argued in 1985 that the term *shamasa* was first invented by the regime to stigmatize economically and socially marginalized groups. The term, al-Fadaylabi argues, was intended to conjure images of people who 'lived under the sun' (i.e. were homeless), and 'inclined towards chaos', and thus to blur together images of peaceful protesters and unemployed, potentially violent vagrants.¹⁵² The government began to target these groups systematically in the later periods of the May Regime, making a number of attempts to dispatch them back to the rural areas. In 1979, Nimeiri declared that he was launching a campaign of 'public discipline' (*al-indibat al-'aam*), ordering the mass arrest by the police of unemployed people on the outskirts of the capital who would be sent to work on the government's newly established rain-fed agricultural schemes in the countryside.¹⁵³ In September 1981, he commanded the police to launch 'dragnet' operations throughout Sudan's major urban centres, particularly the slums, the purpose of which was to 'clean up the country of criminals and jobless elements'.¹⁵⁴ The banning of alcohol distribution under the newly 'Islamized' legislation of 1983 had caused a great degree of unemployment within these regions, since brewing was a crucial part of the local economy in many of the regions from which the inhabitants of these shanty towns hailed.

Even allowing for the fact that the regime's media organs deliberately exaggerated the role of the *shamasa* in the urban demonstrations in order to stimulate middle class anxiety, it is difficult to deny that they turned out in large numbers during the *Intifada*. One witness recalls that 'the *shamasa* were the salt of the revolution, because they mobilized the street'.¹⁵⁵ Another observes that 'the *shamasa* give *hamas* [passion]'.¹⁵⁶ However, to emphasize the role of the so-called *shamasa* and the unemployed inhabitants of the shanty-towns would be to neglect the fact that a number of the rural migrants who participated were those who worked in small-time jobs in the informal economy of these peri-urban regions,¹⁵⁷ or even those who were engaged in menial work in the mainstream economy of central Khartoum.

In spite of the presence of this new urban social category, the professional elite dominated the leadership of the uprising, as they had done in 1964. As seen above, the National Charter was signed by representatives of three political parties in addition to six professional unions, those of the doctors, lawyers, engineers, bank clerks, University of Khartoum lecturers and insurance brokers. Although a number of the leaders of the *Intifada* genuinely sympathized with the plight of the inhabitants of the shanty-towns, they struggled to forge genuine forms of association with them. 'The mobs participated', recalls Ghazi Suleiman, a member of the Bar Association. 'I led some of the demonstrations, I cry, they cry after me. That is all'.¹⁵⁸ 'There was no conversation between them and others', argues Mahjub Sharif, 'they had no ideas and

no opinions.¹⁵⁹ Almost all of Sudan's communists were classical Marxists, and would therefore have been unable to accept this disenfranchised urban *lumpen proletariat* as a revolutionary class. Thus, in spite of the failure of the regime to exploit the socio-economic chasm between the 'centres' and 'peripheries' of Sudanese society so as to guarantee its survival, the middle class leaders of the civilian insurrection were only able to break this divide in the most superficial of ways. In this sense, although the *Intifada* had embraced a far wider social demographic than the 1964 Revolution, it had reproduced a number of its failures.

The provincial uprisings

Just as the professional elites guiding the *Intifada* failed to establish links with the marginalized urban populations, so also was the *Intifada* not the product of the mobilization of Sudan's rural peripheries. As in 1964, the provincial upheavals of 1985 were a development of the wider insurrection in Khartoum, rather than self-propelled incidents. This was in spite of the fact that provincial discontent was far more widespread at the twilight of the Nimeiri era than it had been in 1964, mainly because of the deteriorating economic situation and frustration that the president's much touted 'regionalization' measures of 1980 had resulted in little practical change in the relationship between the centre and the provinces. There were outbreaks of popular protest in Kordofan in 1980, 1982 and 1984 as a result of increases in bread prices, which saw local SSU offices being set ablaze.¹⁶⁰ In the Darfur 'Intifada' of 1981, over twenty people were killed in protests that eventually forced Nimeiri to back down from his decision to appoint a non-Darfuri, al-Tayyib al-Mardi, as governor of the region.¹⁶¹ The Ba'ath Party's campaign against the 1984 state of emergency saw members arrested in towns as far away from the centre as Dalanj and Babanusa.¹⁶²

Nevertheless, when the provincial insurrections broke out in 1985, they were very much a response to events in Khartoum. There was one partial exception to this. Politicians from Atbara are fond of claiming that the uprising began in their town, since it had witnessed a series of protest rallies beginning on 7 March, two and a half weeks before the main uprising broke out in Khartoum.¹⁶³ This reflects the fact that the *Intifada*, in contrast to the events of 1964, was motivated by a far more widespread series of structural and economic grievances, which affected the country as a whole. However, until the Khartoum uprising that began on 26 March, the demonstrators in Atbara were the loudest in voicing disapproval of the regime's decision to increase the prices of basic commodities.¹⁶⁴ It was not until 2 April that they began to openly call for Nimeiri's ouster.¹⁶⁵

The extent to which the provincial commotions followed from the initial spark in Khartoum is illustrated by the critical role achieved by the Doctors' Union in each of the major northern towns. The main union in the capital sent telex messages to its provincial branches telling them to join in the general strike, and even sent medics to the provinces in person, a number of whom were arrested.¹⁶⁶ The Doctors' Union in Port Sudan began the protests there with a strike on 2 April, and in Kassala, the local demonstrations were also commenced by medical practitioners, who presented

a memorandum to the governor of the eastern region on 4 April announcing that they were initiating an open strike.¹⁶⁷ There was also a large demonstration in Wad Madani, led by representatives of twelve separate unions, which presented a memorandum to the government demanding the dissolution of both the SSU and SSO.¹⁶⁸ There were also major demonstrations in Sinja, Gedaref, al-Fashir, Nyala, Geneina, Kosti, al-Ubayyid and Sinnar.¹⁶⁹ In Darfur, Umma sympathizers probably played a more significant role than professionals.¹⁷⁰ As one Darfuri who witnessed the 1985 uprising in Nyala recalls, the population of the town decided it was against Nimeiri when al-Sadiq al-Mahdi decided he was against Nimeiri.¹⁷¹

Just as in 1964, these provincial upheavals had a substantial impact on the local political fabric. In Port Sudan, the general strike continued for 4 days, between 6 April and 9 April.¹⁷² The unions leading the uprisings formed their own local branches of the National Alliance, which sent delegations to coordinate with the national body in Khartoum.¹⁷³ Even relatively minor towns like Sinkat in eastern Sudan established such bodies.¹⁷⁴ Members of provincial branches of labour and professional unions also gathered together to dismiss individuals planted in the union by the SSU from their memberships.¹⁷⁵ However, this hardly represented a 'regional revolution'. The fact that the Port Sudan branch of the 'National Alliance' established the local graduates' club as its headquarters highlighted the extent to which the educated elites dominated the provincial uprisings.¹⁷⁶ In eastern Sudan, the riverain technocrats and professionals who replaced Nimeiri's former regional government displaced a large number of the local Beja politicians who had served under the May Regime, and further demands for cleansing of the *ancien regime* became intermeshed with 'Arab-Beja' politics.¹⁷⁷ Thus it can be seen that the *Intifada* empowered the same social classes within the provinces that had pioneered the uprising in the riverain centre.

Violence and non-violence in the *Intifada*

It was precisely because the riverain professional classes played such a key role in the *Intifada* that the beleaguered government endeavoured to deter them from joining the protests by trying to instil fears that Nimeiri's eclipse would offer marginalized groups the opportunity to wreak havoc. Throughout the history of the twentieth-century Middle East, governments have attempted to exploit public disorder as an image that inculcates fears of social anarchy.¹⁷⁸ The authorities in Sudan attempted to do as much during the April *Intifada*, seeking to exploit the specific social, cultural and regional divisions within Sudanese society to this end.

As the *Intifada* progressed, the government attempted to employ its media organs to undermine the protesters by accusing them of vandalism, and by stigmatizing the role played by the uprooted migrants. *Al-Sahafa* announced that major acts of sabotage were being conducted by 'vagrants' (*mutasharriidin*) and 'new arrivals' (*waafidiin*) from the countryside. The SSO rounded up and arrested thousands from these marginalized groups, taking them to holding camps in the desert outside Khartoum, where over 800 of them were subjected to summary trials. This represented a strategic effort to deter the educated and affluent classes of Khartoum from participating

in the *Intifada* by conjuring up a misleading picture of violence committed by the marginalized. Al-Fadaylabi argues that these economically peripheral groups made no effort to engage in attacks on property and in fact adopted the slogan 'no vandalism' (*la takhrib*).¹⁷⁹ Police transmissions intercepted by oppositionists during the *Intifada* acknowledged that the SSO were deliberately attempting to misrepresent the peaceful nature of the demonstrations in Haj Yousif, a suburb populated mainly by rural migrants.¹⁸⁰ According to one source, the SSO sent out teams of agents dressed as '*shamasa*', who then set about damaging cars and petrol stations themselves.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, this scaremongering did not seem to dissuade the affluent professional elites who spearheaded the *Intifada* from rallying against the government.

The pacific nature of the protests was one of the most remarkable features of the uprising, since, as observed above, political violence in Sudan was far more extensive and more visceral by 1985 than it had been in 1964. Given the regime's tendency to resort to the use of force as a survival mechanism, it is not surprising that the various opposition parties had decided that Nimeiri could only be brought down by force of arms and resorted to backing armed attempts to overthrow the regime in 1970, 1975 and 1976. Against this background, the relative absence of violence in the 1985 *Intifada* is remarkable. Part of the reason for this was that Sadiq al-Mahdi had demobilized the majority of his *Ansar* fighters after the 1977 reconciliation and committed himself to civil opposition to the regime. The Umma would later claim that they had considered deploying armed party members during the uprising, but had decided against it.¹⁸² In this sense, Joffe's observation that liberalized autocracies are more likely to be overthrown by pacific rather than violent opposition rings true for Sudan.

The SCP, wary of a repeat of the catastrophic showdown between Nimeiri and the party following the 1971 coup attempt, had also committed itself to civilian struggle following the model of October 1964.¹⁸³ An article published by *al-Midan* in 1983 criticized fellow oppositionists who believed that armed struggle was the only way to overthrow the regime, stating that it was necessary for Sudan to 'avoid the tragic experience of Uganda and Chad'.¹⁸⁴ In this context it is worth remembering again that the leaderships of the urban political parties, even the SCP, hailed mainly from the same relatively affluent, well-educated and socially homogeneous northern riverain elite. They therefore had little interest in the kind of violent revolution that might lead to a radical shake-up of the existing social and political order.

The uprising could potentially have turned violent if any of the opposition groups willing to use force to achieve their political goals, such as the Ba'athists or the ICF, had been able to stage a coup attempt, but this did not transpire.¹⁸⁵ There might also have been more bloodshed had Nimeiri been able to return to Khartoum. One of the generals who overthrew him concedes that he still retained a great deal of support within the army and that if he had been able to return, there would have been 'massacres and bloodshed and chaos' (*madhabih wa dima' wa fitna*).¹⁸⁶ However, the army managed to remain relatively united, and the civilian movement repeated the non-violent tactics of 1964. With the exception of a few outbreaks of vandalism in its initial stages, the April *Intifada* proved to be a remarkably pacific uprising, more so than the October Revolution.

The attacks on property that did occur were an extension of the demonstrators' protests against both the corruption of the regime and the programmes of economic privatization it had introduced in the years before its overthrow. During the rally led by the workers of Khartoum's principal industrial region, the protesters burned the Omdurman headquarters of the Wad Nimeiri society, which had become a symbol for the regime's corruption.¹⁸⁷ The same protesters burned the American flag outside the US Embassy, and also smashed the windows at Faisal Islamic Bank.¹⁸⁸ This was simultaneously a protest against the regime's policies of privatization and the leverage exercised by the Islamic Movement during the later years of the regime, since the bank was governed by senior *Ikhwan* politicians whose monopolistic practices had outraged the public.¹⁸⁹ In general, it seems that the buildings mainly targeted were those associated with the extremely wealthy – such as the Meridian Hotel, which was attacked on 27 March.¹⁹⁰ SSU buildings also came under attack in Omdurman and in Port Sudan.¹⁹¹

Besides these actions, the protesters committed relatively few attacks against either persons or property. In Port Sudan, the protesters adopted the slogan '[this is] not vandalism but [civil] disobedience' (*la takhrib bal isyan*).¹⁹² There were no acts of aggression against bars or nightclubs, as these had been closed down following the declaration of *shari'a* in 1983. It is worth remarking that the most notable examples of non-violent protest were associated with non-Sudanese – for instance, it was a Palestinian studying at Omdurman Islamic University who provided a group of student protesters there with a Molotov cocktail, in spite of the union leadership's protests that this would provoke reprisals from the police.¹⁹³ This cameo highlighted the contrast between the relatively civil nature of the protest in urban Sudan and the extremes of political violence witnessed elsewhere in the Middle Eastern region.

Since both the army and the police had from an early stage resolved to take a comparatively passive stance towards the demonstrations, there were no particularly violent clashes between the protesters and either of these forces. As we have seen, the SSO agents took a less compromising attitude towards the protesters and infiltrated the crowds to shoot a number of them dead. As a result of this, angry crowds began to gather outside the SSO headquarters following the collapse of the regime demanding revenge for the casualties, but by the time the army intervened and occupied the building and arrested its personnel, only minor clashes and minor injuries had occurred.¹⁹⁴

Thus it can be said that the regime's scaremongering was precisely that – scaremongering. The violence of the protesters represented a desire to re-balance a moral economy that had been distorted by government corruption and economic malpractice. There was no attempt to 'turn the world upside down,' only to exact revenge against the existing government for its abuses. While the marginalized and displaced from Sudan's peripheries did participate in large numbers in the uprisings, neither the rebel groups nor regionalist movements associated with these parts of the country – which did aspire to achieve a far more substantial change in the social and economic order – played a significant role in determining the nature of the violence.

Conclusion

Superficially, the April *Intifada* appeared to work out as an action replay of the October revolution. As in October, it began with a student demonstration in Khartoum, which led to violent clashes with the security forces. Just as in 1964, the urban professional groups then took up the mantle of protest and declared a general strike, which effectively paralysed economic life throughout the country. In both cases, casualties were limited, especially when compared to the popular insurrections in contemporary North Africa. The events of 1985 also resembled those of 1964 in that the civil unrest began in Khartoum and then spread outwards towards the other major northern towns. In 1985, as in 1964, the professional groups came together with the political parties to sign a 'National Charter', which demanded a restoration of democracy and basic human rights.

However, there were also noticeable differences. While both uprisings adopted anti-imperialist slogans, in 1985 there was a reaction to a much more significant foreign presence in Khartoum. While in October 1964 the demonstrators were attacking a government they perceived as a relic of a faded British colonialism, in 1985 they were protesting against a regime playing a very active role as a military client of the United States. The October Revolution was a purely domestic affair, but in 1985 the Americans helped to shape the course of events by delaying the return of Nimeiri from Washington. However, they did little else to control events. Although the story is plausible, it is difficult to know whether they genuinely came close to implementing a plan whereby Umar al-Tayyib would be installed as Nimeiri's replacement. Umar al-Tayyib himself may or may not have held such aspirations, but what can be said confidently is that he would never have had a sufficiently strong power base to take over by himself anyway. Therefore, while US intervention was a noticeable feature of the 1985 uprising, it was not a defining one.

Another new development in 1985 was the role played by the urban poor as well as rural migrants fleeing war and famine in Sudan's peripheries. The emergence of the '*shamasa*' phenomenon, although it illustrated a broader trend towards urban drift common to other post-colonial African states, also indicated the destructiveness of the regime's economic policy and its antipathy to the inhabitants of Sudan's rural peripheries. However, the impact of these marginalized groups upon the immediate outcome of the uprising was limited. They simply added manpower to an already vociferous protest. The leadership of the uprising was provided by the same elite social groups that had shepherded the crowds in 1964. What is perhaps more interesting is the manner in which the Nimeiri regime attempted to deter the historic inhabitants from demonstrating by depicting the demonstrations as the work of dangerous and uncivilized migrants from the countryside. This perhaps prefigures the current regime's strategy of undermining civilian opposition to the regime by fomenting a highly racialized distinction between the 'Arabs' of the towns and 'Africans' of the countryside. However, in 1985 these marginalized groups seem to have practised very little actual violence, if any at all, and their presence amidst the urban crowds did not discourage the rest of the urban population from joining in the uprising.

Another, perhaps slight, difference was the role played by religion and religious discourse in the uprising. On one level, the ideologies espoused by the protagonists in the 1985 uprising amounted to a rehashing of the slogans of the October events, such as political liberty and economic independence from the West. However, it is important to recognize the manner in which Nimeiri's introduction of the September Laws in 1983 redefined the nature of political debate in Sudan. A number of the political groups opposed to Nimeiri began to adopt religious discourses to criticize his efforts to justify his rule in Islamic terms. Again, this did not have any impact on the immediate outcome of the uprising but, as will be seen in Chapter 7, it proved to be highly significant for its aftermath.

Probably the most important of all the differences between 1964 and 1985 is the nature of the regime toppled. Abboud's regime, while not exactly popular, was nowhere near as personalized or oppressive as Nimeiri's. Moreover, Nimeiri's mismanagement of the economy – although compounded by wider global factors – ensured that his regime provoked the everyday Sudanese citizen in a manner in which his predecessor's had not. This reflected the extent to which the once charismatic president's physical malaise and increasing paranoia had hampered his ability to identify with his suffering people. It was this same paranoia that led the dictator to ruin the foundations of his own regime, marginalizing key institutions such as the army, police, judiciary and even his own political project, the Sudan Socialist Union. In the early stages of his period in power, Nimeiri had been a masterful political chameleon who was capable of playing separate parties, institutions, individuals and social and ethnic groups off against each other. However, from the late 1970s onwards, he marginalized more than he accommodated, and his mental instability undermined his instinctive survivalism. His over-dependence on his relationship with the ICF was politically suicidal, as was demonstrated when the Americans forced him to renege on his alliance with the Islamic Movement in March 1985, leaving him politically isolated.

Nimeiri thus brought about his own downfall, and that of the May Regime, in a way that Abboud did not. It is critical to acknowledge this because it goes some way to explaining why the overthrow of an autocratic one-party regime was possible in an age of advanced facilities of social control and limited international support for pro-democracy movements in Africa and the Middle East. However, what is remarkable about the *Intifada* is not the fact that it removed Nimeiri – it is the fact that it substituted a system of parliamentary democracy in his place. Nimeiri's self-annihilation alone did not guarantee the return of democracy. To understand why there was no simple transition to another military autocracy, we need to acknowledge the resilience of Sudan's political parties and understand the role played by students, professionals and labour activists in the civil protest in Sudan. This will be the focus of the next chapter.