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The ‘Modern Forces’: Students, Professionals and Labour Unions in 1964 and 1985

As seen in the previous chapter, the political parties exercised a considerable degree of influence over the various institutions associated with the ‘modern forces’ – the labour unions, professional associations and student bodies. The communists and Islamists in particular envisioned these bodies as ‘vanguard’ organizations that could shepherd the uneducated majority in Sudan towards a revolutionary ‘new order’.¹ Thus, these institutions have often been understood as a battleground in which communists and Islamists vied for influence.² However, this involves imposing too rigid a dichotomy between the ‘modern forces’ – associated with the communists, Islamists and the oft-ignored Arab nationalists – and the ‘traditional forces’ supposedly represented by the Umma, DUP and NUP. As seen in the previous chapter, these parties were just as capable of acting within the ‘modern forces’.

Establishing a binary division between ‘modernizers’ and ‘traditionalists’ would also risk neglecting the extent to which the protagonists within these institutions represented homogeneous elites with shared institutional interests. It will be seen here that the two uprisings occurred at times when the conflict between communism and Islamism was at its least apocalyptic, and *muthaggafeen* of all ideological hues were able to act in line with a common agenda of opposition to military rule. The fact that such well-institutionalized corporate bodies were involved in the two uprisings might set them aside from the recent Arab Spring, when the amorphous activity of internet bloggers and spontaneous street mobilization was much more prominent. However, while these bodies did attempt to provide institutional leadership to both uprisings, in studying these efforts we should not detract from the spontaneity of the events themselves. The professional activists were often as much responding to the uprisings as they were creating them.

Khartoum University and student mobilization in 1964

Standard narratives of Sudan’s post-colonial political and intellectual history tend to represent the student environment as an arena in which communist and Islamist ideologies confronted each other. Holt and Daly observe that ‘From the 1950s the student body of [Khartoum] University tended towards polarization between the

Brotherhood and the Communists.³ The informal student wings of the Muslim Brotherhood, the 'Islamic Way' (*al-ittijah al-islami*) and the 'Democratic Front' (*al-jabha al-dimuratiyya*), which represented a coalition of communists and Democrats, were at the forefront of the student movement, and in 1964 were the most heavily represented on the Khartoum University Student Union executive committee with four and three seats (out of a total of ten), respectively.⁴

However, it would be fallacious to presume that these student wings simply reproduced the policies of their associated parties. Farouk Eisa, a member of the original executive committee of 1964, observes that while the student political groups were linked to their parent organizations 'at the university level we did not see much influence from outside'.⁵ Fathi Fadl, an SCP and Democratic Front member of the KUSU executive during October 1964, recalls that in this period the political parties 'didn't really practise discipline on the students, they came with lenient advice', noting that the students were held in 'very high prestige', which reflected the fact that university education was still a relatively novel phenomenon in Sudanese society at the time.⁶ Political differences within the student body were to some extent assuaged by the common contempt that members of the educated youth had for the military. As Rabie Hasan Ahmad recalls, there was a general dissatisfaction with the government among the educated classes, or *muthaggafin*, because the military had taken most of the principal ministerial portfolios for themselves.⁷ Thus, students of all political shades shared a mutual interest in replacing the military regime to ensure that their educations would enable them to reach positions of influence in the future.

The new generation of university students tended to be very independent and internationalist in outlook. The majority of the KUSU executive committee had already travelled to either Eastern or Western Europe a number of times.⁸ In the buildup to the famous 21 October seminar, members of KUSU who were pushing for a confrontation with the government were closely following news of the recent student protests against regimes in Japan, Vietnam and Turkey.⁹ In the week before the Revolution itself, the students were inspired by a particularly striking chain of international events, including Harold Wilson's election victory in the UK, the downfall of Khrushchev and China's first atomic test.¹⁰ One ageing graduate commemorating October recently observed that the people of this time always followed the radio in spite of their relatively limited capacity for travel, and 'read Franz Fanon, Jean Paul Sartre, Sayyid Qutb and Salama Musa'.¹¹ Thus the students who contributed to the October protests had a shared sense of acting as intellectual pioneers that transcended their narrow party differences.

The presence of non-Sudanese lecturers at the university also lent the student protesters a certain political sophistication. One student eyewitness recalls that in the week before the fateful seminar Dr Busham Sharma, an Indian political scientist, 'gave a long and convincing talk about the need for students to engage in political activity' to the other lecturers, noting that the Khartoum students were the political leaders of the future and had to apply what they learnt in their classes.¹² The capacity of an Indian lecturer in politics to influence his Sudanese peers reflected the continuing prominence of the 'Third World' republican ideals of leaders such as Nehru and Nasser among the youth of the day. These ideals brought about the emergence of the 'Neutral' movement in KUSU in 1950, which by 1964 had split into three separate groups, 'Free Thought',

the 'Free Students' and the 'Socialist Democratic Congress'.¹³ While the executive committee was headed by a representative of the Islamic Way, it had a vice-president from the Social Democratic Congress, while the larger 40-man Council was presided over by another member of this group, Hasan Abdin.¹⁴

The fact that, in 1964, Nasser's neutralist Third World republican ideals had not yet expired had ensured that neither the communists nor the Islamists reached their full radical potential.¹⁵ The relationship between representatives of these two groups within the executive committee was cordial in a way that would not be possible a generation later. The Democratic Front and Islamic Way students saw each other 'as competitors, not as enemies'.¹⁶ Fathi Fadl states that the political radicalization and culture of violence associated with Ali Uthman Taha's generation of Islamists from the late 1960s onwards was yet to emerge at this point, observing that he himself was a close friend of Anwar al-Hadi, the *Ikhwani* committee member who organized the 21 October seminar.¹⁷ It is worth remembering that there was considerable division within the Brotherhood at this time between the old guard and the student generation, with the former complaining that the latter had adopted 'Shiyu-Islamiyya' (Communism-Islamism) under the influence of their socialist colleagues.¹⁸

It is also noteworthy that Sudan's two ideological parties were not even the dominant political forces in all the student unions in Khartoum. The student union at the Technical Institute, which would contribute significantly to all the demonstrations and meetings that followed the 21 October seminar, was headed by Abd al-Hamid Fadl of the Umma Party. He represented the 'independents', a coalition of the Umma and NUP.¹⁹ This contradicts the commonly made assumption, usually based on analysis of Khartoum University only,²⁰ that the 'traditional' political forces were comprehensively excluded from student politics.²¹

With all this said, it has to be acknowledged that the power struggle within KUSU between the Democratic Front and Islamic Way shaped the policies of the executive committee in the weeks leading up to October. Although the Communists' objection to the 21 October seminar has been cited by some to claim that they were unsympathetic to the October Revolution,²² the truth is somewhat more subtle. After the arrest of Hafiz al-Shaikh and the members of the original KUSU executive committee following their protest to the Minister of Interior on 15 October, the council decided to elect new executive members, while keeping the same level of representation for the Islamic Way, Democratic Front and other student members that had obtained previously.²³

According to Shamouq, the Democratic Front from this point onwards opposed holding another seminar. Indeed, as sources from within the Islamic Movement, including Rabie Hasan Ahmad, have been quick to point out, the Communists issued statements warning against provocation of the regime and 'deflecting the patriotic movement from its goals'.²⁴ There may well be some truth in these accounts, but assuming there is, it would be misleading to interpret this as a lack of commitment to opposing the regime. Instead, the Democratic Front consistently advocated that KUSU should contact the other student unions in Khartoum – at Omdurman Islamic University, the Technical Institute and the University of Cairo (Khartoum Branch) – before taking action.²⁵ While the executive committee agreed both to schedule another seminar and to plan a public demonstration in coordination with the other student

bodies, this decision led to a particularly acrimonious debate within the committee over which of the two actions should be prioritized. The Democratic Front emphasized that the demonstrations should be prioritized, as these would 'link the students to the masses of the street', arguing that holding another seminar might first grant the authorities an excuse to shut down the university, thus making further demonstrations impossible.²⁶

The communist students would probably have had a much greater interest in generalizing the discontent at this time, as they had a much wider base outside the University of Khartoum than the Brotherhood did. They were far more influential among the labour unions, and also controlled the student union at the University of Cairo (Khartoum Branch).²⁷ However, the Islamic Way remained committed to holding the seminar first, and after a tied vote in the executive committee meeting, narrowly succeeded in passing the motion in a heated session of the KUSU general assembly on 20 October.²⁸ Shamouq states that on the morning of 21 October, the Democratic Front did issue a statement opposing the seminar, but this was on the basis that it represented an 'abandonment of the student struggle' and a 'provocation of the police'.²⁹ However, members of the Democratic Front deny that they opposed the seminar once it had been decided upon and observe that by the time it began in the evening of 21 October, the Democratic Front had committed itself to participation. In fact, their representative Babikir al-Haj had already begun to talk by the time the police intervened.³⁰ It seems that once the Democratic Front realized that it would be unable to direct the anti-regime struggle in the manner in which it had hoped, it decided to cut its losses and participate in the seminar. This in itself indicates that the student body was cohesive enough to pursue a single course of action in spite of the ideological differences within it.

While the Islamic Way may have seized the initiative in proposing the seminar, which caused the bloody clashes with the police, the resultant casualty list made the plurality of the students' contribution most visible. Ahmad al-Qurayshi, who after being shot in the head by a policeman became the first martyr of the Revolution, was a member of the Democratic Front, and arguably a communist. His political affiliations became a matter of controversy in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, as a number of parties endeavoured to make political capital out of October's first martyr. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood claimed al-Qurayshi as one of their own at the time,³¹ and some still do today,³² although there is no particular evidence for this and al-Turabi has now switched to arguing that he 'had no party'.³³ The deceased student hailed from Garrasa in the White Nile state, and like most of its inhabitants had an *Ansari* family background. Sadiq al-Mahdi responded to this during commemorations of the Revolution in the second parliamentary period by paying visits to his grave there.³⁴ However, the Umma has never to the author's knowledge tried to maintain that al-Qurayshi himself was a party member, and his Umma-supporting family acknowledge that he was a member of the Democratic Front.³⁵ Nevertheless, al-Qurayshi's brother Abd al-Muta'al and his nephew Abd al-Rahim al-Amin who attended the University of Khartoum alongside him in 1964 and shared a room with his brother in the dormitory, insist that he was only a 'democrat' and not a communist and that he joined the Democratic Front because he wanted to fight against 'dictatorship and totalitarianism'.³⁶

It would make sense that al-Qurayshi's conservative family would prefer to believe that he was not a communist, given the intense political competition between the SCP and *Ansar/Umma* in the White Nile region and the fact that communism was often associated with atheism in Sudan. However, a great number of communists and ex-communists have outlined a coherent and detailed story of al-Qurayshi's Marxist affiliations and role in the party. Taj al-Sirr Mekki, who attended al-Fashir secondary school with al-Qurayshi, insists that they were both part of a secret communist cell there, whereas a number of other communists have argued that al-Qurayshi was a secret liaison between the 'League of Communist Students' (*Rabita al-Tullab al-Shiyu'iyyin*) and the main party.³⁷ They maintain that, having been chosen as part of the SCP's secret organization at the university, al-Qurayshi was required not to practise open political activity, which is why his communist affiliations were not known.³⁸ If this is true, it would make sense that his family was aware that he was in the Democratic Front, but not that he was a communist. It may seem a little convenient that the Revolution's first martyr just happened to be the SCP's liaison at the university, but there is a good deal of coherence in the various communist accounts regarding al-Qurayshi.³⁹ It is also worth noting that Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim, a former student communist who crossed the ideological divide from left to right, still insists that al-Qurayshi was a communist with whom he worked in the Democratic Front.⁴⁰

KUSU's response to al-Qurayshi's martyrdom further illustrated its cohesiveness as an institution. Whether or not al-Qurayshi was a communist, it seems that the student movement in its entirety came out to commemorate his death. The executive committee had sheltered the body overnight and purchased a shroud (*kafan*) and a bed (*angareeb*) upon which to bear the corpse, before students from each of the capital's universities began to gather together to join the silent funeral procession in the morning.⁴¹ Significant as the funeral demonstration was, after this point the role of the unions and political parties probably eclipsed that of the students. Certainly the students helped to generalize the political strike, after KUSU decreed on 24 October that students should travel back to their families in the regions to foment civil disobedience there.⁴² However, no student representatives negotiated with Abboud and they were not represented in the transitional government after it was formed on 30 October, in spite of the Professional Front pushing for student representation.⁴³ Therefore, while the students may have been the initiators of the Revolution, they were not its leaders.

What the students did achieve was to bring the university into the public eye and effect a significant change in the relationship between themselves and urban society at large. Fathi Fadl remembers October causing a 'big boost' in the attitude of the public towards the university, recalling that when he rode shared taxis, his travel companions refused to let him pay.⁴⁴ Hasan al-Turabi refers to the October Revolution as the event that enabled the students of the university to finally breach the divide between the Sudanese public and the higher education institutes, which he claims the British established so that universities would become akin to a *khalwa* (a secluded religious school) for 'elitism and reflection'.⁴⁵ Thus, at least for al-Turabi, October can be seen as the moment in which the Manichaean divide between the Sudanese public and the elite educational institutions established by the British was broken down; Sudanese society

had begun to put the universities to its own use. The years following October would certainly witness a significant expansion in the social base of the Sudanese university system.⁴⁶

At the same time, the clashes between students and police appear to have engendered somewhat more negative transformations in student society. The inimical yet intimate relationship between them seems almost to have provoked the former to mimic the latter. In the buildup to the 21 October seminar, a number of students attempted to stir up the atmosphere at the lunch-break in the university by launching what Shamouq describes as a 'military parade' from the dining hall to the seminar hall, chanting 'left ... right ... left ... right'.⁴⁷ They prepared for the seminar by gathering tree branches, bricks and thick sticks, and even surrounded the location of the seminar with barbed wire in an effort to prevent the police from gaining access.⁴⁸ When the battle between police and students broke out, the students reciprocated a great deal of the police violence, beating policemen up and throwing them off balconies in the student dormitories.⁴⁹ While the students' battle with the police would be heroicized in the aftermath of the Revolution, these experiences can also be seen as prototypical of the violent relationship between communist and Islamist students from the later 1960s onwards.

The secondary schools

While the students of the University of Khartoum held centre stage on 21 October, it was probably the secondary school pupils who added most of the bulk to the demonstrations. They were numerically far stronger, and just as politicized. El Tayeb Mustafa, a secondary school student in the October 1964, recalls that while the political environment in the university was mature, in the secondary schools 'there was *passion*'.⁵⁰ Secondary schools, which catered to students between the ages of 15 and 18, usually represented a Sudanese teenager's first serious induction into the world of politics. As seen above, there was a secret communist cell at al-Fashir secondary school that Ahmad al-Qurayshi, at least purportedly, joined prior to becoming a Khartoum University student. There was often intense competition between the Brotherhood and the communists for the allegiance of new pupils.⁵¹ In spite of this, El Tayeb Mustafa claims that the majority of those who demonstrated in October were members of the 'coca-cola party', that is they were not politicized in any way.⁵²

The school pupils were aware of the importance of the 21 October seminar and a number of them tried to attend it, but were turned away by university students on the basis that they might be hurt.⁵³ Nevertheless, masses of secondary school pupils absconded from their studies to participate in al-Qurayshi's funeral procession the next day.⁵⁴ It was also the school pupils who led the demonstrations that initiated the Revolution in the provinces, since the universities themselves were all located in Khartoum. Secondary students played major roles in sparking the Revolution in towns such as Shendi, Kosti, Wad Madani, Atbara, al-Fashir, Nyala, al-Ubayyid and Port Sudan.⁵⁵ A journalist in Shendi described the secondary pupils as the 'forerunners' (*subbaqat*) of the Revolution there.⁵⁶ The fact that these schools all shared a joint

wireless network certainly helped to facilitate and coordinate the mobilization of these pupils.⁵⁷ Where there were no secondary schools, the provincial uprisings were often begun by the intermediate and primary school students. This was the case in Sinnar.⁵⁸

Observing the role of school pupils enables us to further comprehend the agency of the educated youth in 1964. It was they who initiated and galvanized a number of the protests, especially on a regional level. Nevertheless, the fact that the role of the educated youth during the October Revolution was so significant distinguishes it from other experiences of civil unrest in Africa where the economically marginalized urban youth were a more dominant presence on the streets. It was the privileged access that these school pupils had to modern institutions and modern technology that enabled them to communicate and mobilize so successfully. This illustrates why civil action during the October Revolution was so effective, but also reminds us of its elite nature.

The Revolution matures: The emergence of the professional front

While the youth of the universities and secondary schools helped to provoke the Revolution, and added the manpower, it was those who had already graduated who had the maturity and influence to give it its shape. Initially, their participation was on a spontaneous and individual basis, as professionals who had been present at the seminar visited and notified other professionals, judges obtained permissions for professionals and students to meet, and doctors clashed angrily with the police who attempted to interfere with the treatment of wounded students.⁵⁹ The lecturers and lawyers were the first two groups of professionals to begin to take action as corporate bodies. With the exception of Nadhir Dafa'allah and a number of other senior members of the administration who endeavoured to dissuade the students from staging the funeral procession, the university lecturers participated as a group in the demonstrations. Al-Qurayshi's funeral bier (*na'ash*) was borne by four lecturers.⁶⁰ It was the lecturers who first proposed the formation of a Professional Front on 22 October, and provided the Lecturers' Club to act as its meeting place.⁶¹ The lecturers also submitted their own petition on 24 October, condemning the al-Qurayshi's killing and calling for the military regime to be toppled.⁶² Although it was lecturers from a Muslim Brother background who had stood out in the debates that preceded the Revolution, after 22 October the academic contribution to the protests was more politically eclectic. The lecturers who met with the lawyers to participate in the declaration of the general strike on 24 October included the SCP-affiliated Ali Muhammad Khair, former communist Ahmad Abd al-Halim and independent Mekki Shibeika.⁶³ However, by this stage the Bar Association had really come to be a driving force.

The manner in which the Bar Association intervened in the Revolution illustrated the fact that throughout October 1964, professional and social solidarities often preceded party affiliation. Ostensibly it was leftist in inclination. Three months before October, it had resolved that its members would refuse to cooperate with a judge who

had handed out jail sentences to a number of alleged SCP members.⁶⁴ When the two communist lawyers who acted as their defendants, Farouk Abu Eissa and Ahmad Sulayman, were charged with contempt of court for objecting to the political nature of the trial, the Bar Association formed a 12-man team to defend them. What is interesting is that in spite of the fact that this case was primarily of interest to the SCP, lawmen of all political affiliations volunteered for the defence team. They included the Islamic Liberation Front's Mirghani al-Nasri, NUP man Mubarak Zarroug and Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub of the Umma Party.⁶⁵

It was perhaps this tendency for the professional ethos to supersede party politics that allowed the Bar Association to play such a significant role in mobilizing the anti-regime campaign after al-Qurayshi's death. For instance, on the night of 21 October, it was Uthman Khalid Medawi, a Muslim Brother, who phoned his communist fellow lawman Farouk Abu Eissa to encourage him to attend al-Qurayshi's funeral procession the next morning.⁶⁶ After the funeral procession and the subsequent demonstrations, the chairman of the Bar Association, Abdin Isma'il, hosted a meeting of students, lawyers, judges and lecturers in his office, in which the formation of a 'Professional Front' was first discussed and the idea of a political strike mooted.⁶⁷ It has been claimed by some – although these claims have been frequently disputed – that it was the Ba'athist lawyer Shawgi Mallasi who proposed the strike and the Umma Party man Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub, who had attended the meeting of his fellow party members at the Imam al-Hadi's house on the morning of 22 October, who seconded it.⁶⁸ While these claims remain hugely controversial, it is certainly significant that representatives of these parties were involved at all in the discussions over the political strike. Both these parties identified with nationalist rather than communist political philosophies, which reminds us that the tactic of the general strike could be envisioned as a tool of national liberation as much as socialist revolution, as was the case in Egypt and Syria earlier in the twentieth century.⁶⁹

The methods used by the lawyers and judges to organize the professionals' demonstration of 24 October illustrated the extent to which the social interconnectedness of the riverain professional elite facilitated mobilization against the regime. On the evening of 22 October, a group of lawyers including Babikir Awadallah, Shawgi Mallasi and Abdin Isma'il travelled around those of the various wedding parties occurring in Khartoum that night that they knew their closest colleagues to be attending, obtaining signatures for their memorandum of protest and arranging the procession that would occur 2 days later.⁷⁰ Sudanese weddings are usually attended by hundreds of people, and thus would have provided the perfect cover for this socially interwoven group of professionals to operate within. Sudanese are fond of saying that it is the sheer strength of their society that has limited authoritarianism in their country; the fact that these lawmen were able to utilize social events to garner support for their anti-government campaign was a perfect example of this. It also reminds us of the extent to which the Revolution was organized in 'secular' spaces.

The judges and lawyers led a demonstration from the judiciary building towards the Republican Palace, bearing their memorandum of protest. Critically, the judges also declared that al-Qurayshi's shooting should be treated as an intentional homicide.⁷¹ Although the police, acknowledging the legal authority of the judiciary, dispersed at the

command of judge Abd al-Majid Imam, the army proved more reticent and dispersed the demonstration after allowing a few of its members to present the memorandum to Abboud at the palace.⁷² In the immediate aftermath of this demonstration, Abdin Isma'il, partially in protest at the means used to disperse it, declared a general strike from the roof of the main judiciary building in order to 'continue the struggle against military government'.⁷³

The doctors were the other major union to flex their political muscles at this point, issuing a petition of complaint to match the others. The manner in which the Doctors' Union joined the Revolution further illustrated the extent to which informal social ties helped generate professional mobilization. Farouk Abu Eissa initially called upon Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub to persuade the reluctant secretary general of the union, his cousin and fellow Umma man Abd al-Halim Muhammad, to instruct the physicians to enter the professionals' demonstration. However, when Mahgub's efforts failed, they approached a number of other members of the union including the former communist Taha Ba'asher and Umma man Salah Abd al-Rahman Ali Taha who agreed to bypass their chief and bring the doctors into the anti-regime front.⁷⁴ The doctors also offered their headquarters in Khartoum as a base for the Professional Front for its 26 October meeting, as the Lecturer's Club had begun to attract too much attention.⁷⁵ Others have claimed that the decision to move to this new location was a deliberate ploy by Hasan al-Turabi to exploit the fact that government attention was focused on the leftist lawmen to strengthen Muslim Brotherhood representation within the Front.⁷⁶ However, the collaboration between SCP-affiliated and Umma-affiliated physicians suggests that the doctors' contribution was largely non-partisan.

The predominance of the professionals in the anti-regime movement became clearer as the base of operations shifted to the Omdurman house of Abd al-Rahman al-Amin, a politically neutral civil servant in the ministry of agriculture, on 27 October. Al-Amin names around twenty doctors, lawyers, civil servants and lecturers who were at the forefront of this decisive meeting. He also notes that around fifteen workers' trade union representatives appeared, but states he cannot remember their names 'because I did not know them before'.⁷⁷ Meanwhile, of the five representatives this meeting dispatched to negotiate with the parties gathered at the *gubba*, only one, Shaikh al-Amin Muhammad al-Amin, was present on behalf of a working-class union.⁷⁸ There was no workers' or farmers' representative in the 5-man delegation of the party and professional delegates that met to negotiate with Abboud later that evening.⁷⁹ This indicates that the workers were at this point on the margins of a movement that was centred around a socially interconnected group of professionals.

Workers in the 1964 Revolution

The naming of the body that ultimately came to embody the aspirations of both the professional associations and the labour unions as the 'Professional Front', or *Jabha al-Ha'iat*, is indicative of the dominance of the former within the anti-regime movement. It could be argued that the relatively slow response of the workers' unions indicated their lack of sympathy with the anti-regime movement. For instance, Al-Turabi

contends that the tardy appearance of the Gezira Tenants' Association – which represented the agricultural labourers working on the cotton schemes of the Blue Nile – reflected the lukewarm attitude of its political ally, the SCP, towards the Revolution.⁸⁰ This is somewhat unfair. Not only did the SCP have a significant and, in some cases, dominant presence among the various professional unions as well as workers' unions in any case, but the main reason that the professionals played such a predominant role was also the opportunity granted to them by their proximity to events. The lecturers were closest of all after the Revolution broke out at the university, and the doctors became involved as soon as al-Qurayshi was taken to Khartoum hospital. The judges, civil servants and lawyers all had institutional headquarters in Khartoum, whereas major workers' unions such as the railway union and the Gezira Tenants' Association were principally located in provincial towns such as Atbara farther away from the outbreak of the Revolution.

The over-representation of the professionals did not do justice to the extent of the participation of urban labourers in the Revolution, or their contribution to the struggle against Abboud throughout the 6 years that he was in power. While the professionals probably had a more significant role in the Revolution itself, the trade unions had a more consistent track record of opposition to the November Regime and, indeed, to both the colonial and parliamentary regimes that preceded it. In the late colonial period, strikes launched by institutions such as the Taxi Workers' Union and the Railway Workers' Affairs Association were seen not just as sectoral battles, but as part of the overall battle to paralyse the apparatus of the colonial state.⁸¹

Workers' organizations were also prominently involved in national politics in the early post-colonial period. In the month before Abboud's coup, the labour unions had been at the forefront of the protest against the previous government's acceptance of American aid.⁸² As a result, the Novemberists, who maintained the economic relationship with America that had been developed by their parliamentary predecessors, attempted to demolish the Sudanese labour movement when they came to power. They dissolved all the major trade unions, in addition to the Sudan Workers' Trade Unions Federation (SWTUF), the leaders of which, including its communist secretary general, Shafi' Ahmad al-Shaikh, were arrested.⁸³ They repealed the 1948 Labour Law, replacing it in 1960 with new legislation that sanctioned the re-emergence of trade unions, but with severe legal limits imposed on their freedom of organization.⁸⁴ In 1961, the Sudan Railway Workers' Union, the most powerful of all the Sudanese labour unions, attempted to defy these restrictions by launching a 7-day strike, to which the government responded by dissolving it.⁸⁵

Abboud's regime made a number of efforts to restore its legitimacy among the urban workforce by establishing more pliable trade union leaderships.⁸⁶ On 16 August 1963, it invited 350 delegates representing 43 unions to a 'Conference of Workers' Trade Unions' in Khartoum. This was perhaps inspired by the 'corporatist' strategies of Gamal Nasser, who had in 1961 established a 'National Congress for Popular Forces' to represent workers' and peasants' bodies.⁸⁷ However, Abboud did not have the same radical credentials as Nasser and while the conference was intended to display solidarity between the regime and organized labour, it developed into a vociferous anti-government protest, with the workers demanding that the 1960 act be repealed

and that both the Sudan Railway Workers' Union and SWTUF be re-instated.⁸⁸ The government was forced to back down and allow the re-emergence of the two bodies that it had outlawed, in addition to the modification – although not the cancellation – of the 1960 act.⁸⁹ Following this meeting, workers' representatives took it upon themselves to re-establish the SWTUF and appoint a new executive committee, scheduling 15 August 1964 as the date on which a new conference would be held to bring the Federation back into being.⁹⁰ However, on 13 August, the government intervened once more to cancel it outright, dissolving the newly formed committee and replacing it with a new one that comprised the leaders of the ten largest labour unions.⁹¹ Thus, the workers had a considerably lengthier track record of protest against the regime than the professionals did, right up to the months that preceded the Revolution itself. However, their demands were mainly restricted to economic questions and the issue of labour rights. Unlike the professionals, they had not produced a calculated plan of action to unseat the regime.

Analyses of labour protest in the Middle East tend to observe the role of workers' unions in waging the battle for social and political rights and the preservation of moral economies rather than looking at them as makers or breakers of regimes,⁹² and the Sudanese case probably justifies this approach. However, while they did not plan the October Revolution, the contribution of the workers to the civil protests was significant. Although they did not dominate the protests at the university and professional headquarters, the urban labourers were not completely distant from them either. While the University of Khartoum acted as the cradle of the Revolution, it is worth remembering that a workers' representative, Sayyid al-Tuhami, spoke at the 10 October seminar.⁹³ When Abd al-Khaliq Mahgub attended al-Qurayshi's funeral march on 22 October, he was initially frustrated at the lack of worker representation and thus left the procession briefly to bring in Eid Bayyin Sayyid, a member of the Sudan Railway Workers' Union who would also attend the meeting in Abdin Isma'il's office later in the day.⁹⁴ It was on Friday 23 October that the re-emerging SWTUF first sent a formal representative, al-Haj Abd al-Rahman, to join the professional gatherings and support their plans for a protest against the regime.⁹⁵

Although it is true that up until 24 October the workers had participated only as individuals, after this point they acted as the foot-soldiers of the general strike.⁹⁶ Although the Novemberists had managed to undermine the established union leaderships, leftist influence within these leaderships was too strong to be purged completely.⁹⁷ Moreover, leftists and 'democrats' within the labour movement had managed to establish shadow leaderships under the aegis of what became known as the 'Trade Union Front' (*al-Jabha al-Niqabiyya*), and this body coordinated with the Professional Front and made a major contribution towards the general strike.⁹⁸ The participation of the railway workers in the general strike was particularly significant, since they threatened to cut off the capital from its oil supplies.⁹⁹ Workers in the Posts and Telegraphs Department also played a crucial role in enabling the Professional Front to control communications networks.¹⁰⁰

The Revolution also offered the labour unions the opportunity to overthrow the leaderships that had been manipulated by the Abboud Regime and to hold genuinely open and democratic elections. Following the downfall of the November Regime, eighty-nine separate labour unions participated in new elections for the secretariat of

the Sudan Workers' Federation, and chose Shafi' Ahmad al-Shaikh to be the workers' representative in the 1964–5 transitional government.¹⁰¹ Although al-Shaikh was a communist, Awadallah Ibrahim, who became the president of the new SWTUE, was not a member of the party and his deputy, Mahjub al-Zubayr, was an NUP man.¹⁰² It would thus be fair to say that the workers' bodies created by the Revolution were relatively broad in terms of their political composition, and not simply pawns of the SCP. This further illustrates the point that no one party had a monopoly on the 'modern forces' during the Revolution.

Although the labour unions seized a number of the opportunities provided by the outbreak of the civil protests, the fact that their status within the anti-regime movement remained limited in comparison with that of the professional elite reminds us that the Revolution still had a very narrowly defined leadership. The fact that the majority of these professionals hailed from the comparatively homogenous northern riverain region of Sudan also reminds us that the concept of the 'Modern Forces' excluded a great number of Sudanese. One significant exception to this rule was Abd al-Majid Imam, who led the judges' demonstration on 24 October and was also at the forefront of the march to the Palace on 28 October. Although born in Omdurman, he traced his roots to the Nuba Mountains in South Kordofan, and thus represented something of an outsider figure in the politics of the riverain north. Shawgi Mallasi maintains that shortly before the October Revolution, Abd al-Majid Imam had engaged in a verbal confrontation with his fellow justice Babikir Awadallah at a diplomatic party after hearing the latter remark, 'If the matter was in my hands, I would wipe out all the southerners' during a discussion on the conflict with the Anya-Nya.¹⁰³ In spite of Abd al-Majid Imam being at the forefront of the 24 and 28 October demonstrations, it was Babikir Awadallah who went on to become Chief Justice of Sudan following the uprising. Abd al-Majid Imam would later join the Sudan National Front, a 1970s Nuba Mountains regionalist party that sponsored a coup attempt against Nimeiri in 1975.¹⁰⁴ This reminds us that while the Revolution did empower the youthful, university-educated elite, ethnic considerations informed the manner in which it did so.

Student activism and the April *Intifada*

Just as in 1964, the student unions acted as the initiators of the 1985 uprising. Even Mirghani al-Nasri, the head of the Bar Association during the *Intifada*, acknowledges that campus protesters provided the 'first spark of that uprising ... around which citizens gathered from every side'.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, such is the importance of the student unions in provoking anti-regime dissidence in Sudan that we have to investigate the nature of student politics in the years preceding the uprising to understand why, in spite of the many crises of the May Regime, the students had not toppled it already. This can be explained by the dominance that the ICF exercised over the student unions in the 1970s and early 1980s, and the close relationship between the ICF and the regime after the 1977 reconciliation.

As far as the University of Khartoum was concerned, Nimeiri's 'corporatist' strategy was a dismal failure. After its establishment in 1973, the Sudanese Socialist Union

attempted to set up a branch at the university, but it was unable to impose itself on a thoroughly anti-authoritarian student body.¹⁰⁶ KUSU, under ICF leadership, nearly brought the regime to heel when it instigated the Sha'aban Riots of 1973, but after the 1977 reconciliation, there was a tacit understanding between Nimeiri and the ICF leadership that the regime would allow the Islamic Movement a degree of influence in the government so long as it kept its unruly students in check. From the late 1960s onwards, the ICF had ruled the student unions in Khartoum with an iron fist – or more specifically, an iron rod.¹⁰⁷ Pro-ICF students wielded iron rods in 'campus wars' to impose their agenda and intimidate their opponents, and this new culture of violence went hand in hand with the Islamist dominance of the student union executives.¹⁰⁸

Because of the expansion of the secondary school system, a far greater number of Sudanese students in this period came from Sudan's socially conservative rural peripheries – and they, being simultaneously isolated from the rural 'sectarian' networks and alienated by urban lifestyles, provided a natural constituency for the ICF.¹⁰⁹ This made it possible for the ICF to, in effect, control the universities on behalf of the regime. The 'Islamic Way' even established its own security wing at the university, the 'Information Bureau' (*maktab al-ma'lumat*), which collaborated with the SSO to expose SCP networks in both the universities and secondary schools.¹¹⁰ In 1978, the British Ambassador reported that Hasan al-Turabi had admitted to him that the reason why KUSU had not joined other branches of the modern sector in demonstrating against the regime that year was 'trouble among them would be laid at his, Turabi's door, and he did not want his relationship with Nimeiri jeopardised'.¹¹¹

The quiescence of the students was critical to Nimeiri's survival. Following further economic deterioration and public protest in 1979, the British Ambassador admitted 'Had the students, whom history shows have the power to bring down governments, taken to the streets *en masse* in August, and had it been necessary to call in the army, which is not trained in riot control, there might have been serious bloodshed and the government would probably have fallen.'¹¹² However, attempting to keep the favour of the regime and the student movement was a difficult balancing act for al-Turabi, as he himself admitted.¹¹³ Although the students did not attempt to topple the regime in 1979, KUSU did protest against the visit of Anwar Sadat to the country and Nimeiri's support of the Camp David Peace Agreement between Sadat and Israel.¹¹⁴ Ali Uthman Taha claimed after the *Intifada* that this demonstrated the ICF's opposition to the regime;¹¹⁵ in reality, it occurred in the context of growing disillusionment among the student Islamists at the ICF leadership's alliance with the government. Later in the year, the Islamic Way was defeated in the KUSU elections for the first time in 7 years, by an alliance of other student groups.¹¹⁶

What was crucial about March 1985 was that at this time, all but one of the major student unions, probably for the first time since the beginning of the May Regime, were led by coalitions of student political groups opposed to the ICF. The 'independent' student union at the University of Cairo Khartoum Branch comprised a number of anti-ICF student parties linked to the main political parties – for instance, Muhammad Akasha, the head of the union, represented the DUP.¹¹⁷ In 1984, the ICF lost the student union at Omdurman Islamic University, probably the most socially conservative of all the Sudanese universities, and a long-term stronghold of the Islamic movement, to a similar

independent coalition headed by an Umma Party representative, Muhammad Ahmad Salame.¹¹⁸ KUSU, which had been regained by the Islamists for a period of 4 years after the 1979 defeat, was then lost again in 1984, by a narrow margin, to another opposition coalition incorporating students affiliated to the Umma, DUP, Communists, Republican Brothers, Nasserists and southern political forces.¹¹⁹ The emergence of a 'Congress of Sudanese Students' in 1979, which echoed the old Democratic Socialist student party of the 1950s and 1960s in advocating a centrist and nationalist political agenda, played a significant role in this defeat.¹²⁰ The new union, headed by Umar Digeir, had a series of run-ins with the SSO in the buildup to March 1985.¹²¹

Students were just as affected by the deteriorating economic situation as every other social sector. They were concerned by the lack of potential job prospects upon their graduating and the fact that not enough oil was available to school buses to ferry them in to work. However, the economic circumstances had been bad for a number of years; what was new in March 1985 was that with the exception of the Technical Institute, which was still under the control of the Islamic Way, the student unions were controlled by political groupings that were determined to overthrow the regime. Of these unions, it was the one at Omdurman Islamic University that played the greater role in initiating the protests – Khartoum University students were on holiday at the time, and the University of Cairo union had been undermined by the arrests of leading Ba'athist students before the *Intifada*.¹²² The students of Omdurman Islamic University led the way with their demonstration on 26 March, to be followed by the students of the Institute of Technological Colleges (the old 'Technical Institute') on 27 March and those of the University of Cairo Khartoum Branch on 28 March.¹²³ On 31 March, the SSO raided the University of Khartoum and announced the arrest of a number of 'Ba'athists and Communists'.¹²⁴ While the students did not exactly drive Nimeiri out of power by themselves, these demonstrations provided the context for the parties to begin mobilizing themselves and the unions to launch their campaign of civil disobedience.

Were the demonstrations of 26–28 April campus initiatives or were they planned by the political parties, which acted as 'mother' organizations to the various student political groups? As demonstrated above, Islamist students had refrained from launching demonstrations in the 1970s under orders from their party command, and former Umma Party students at Omdurman Islamic University now allege that they did so again in 1985.¹²⁵ As seen in the previous chapter, the Umma Party asserted after the *Intifada* that it had coordinated with the students of Omdurman Islamic University to provoke the 1985 demonstration. However, the protest that sparked the *Intifada* was, in reality, a product of both party planning and spontaneous student mobilization. In 1984, recognizing the university as a stronghold of the *Ansar* movement and a potential weapon to use against the regime, the Umma leadership chose to appoint three students who had graduated that year, Isma'il Adam Ali, Musa Na'im and Hamad al-Zunari, as heads of the 'Ansar organization' in the university.¹²⁶ These individuals would help in the campaign to capture the union on behalf of the Umma's student wing later in 1984. However, Isma'il Adam Ali insists that the decision to launch the 26 March protest was a spontaneous reaction to Nimeiri's unpopular speech the day before, and while the *Ansar* student leaders visited al-Sadiq al-Mahdi on the same day

to seek his blessing and support, it was not inspired by any direct command from the party leadership.¹²⁷

Nevertheless, the fact that the student organizations that led the civil protests named themselves after, and coordinated directly with, their more mature equivalents illustrates just how potent these parties still were. Given that a considerable degree of political freedom obtained in the university environment at this time, it acted as a sphere in which political forces that had reached a stalemate within the wider national arena could compete to mobilize the same student body that had broken the previous military regime on their behalf. The various non-ICF parties' seizure of the student unions in the period leading up to March 1985 was thus a critical factor in the outbreak of the *Intifada* itself.

The professionals challenge Nimeiri

While the students may have been the initiators, the professional movement once more acted as the spearhead of the protest. However, one key difference regarding professional activism in the April *Intifada* was that by 1985, most of these bodies had already engaged in a number of highly politicized strikes in the years preceding the overthrow of the regime. These strikes began in the late 1970s and became increasingly intense in the early 1980s. They were often connected to the specific interests of the relevant unions, but also reflected a much broader discontent with Nimeiri's mismanagement of the economic and political situation. Their context was the increasing decline of state funding for professional services and the mass migration of qualified professionals to the Gulf, where far greater salaries could be reaped. They also showed the urban elite's distaste for Nimeiri's increasing political tyranny and lack of respect for the law.

There is a degree of confusion as to the origins of the Union Alliance/National Alliance that appeared in 1985. A number of individuals tend to trace its origins to the moment of their initial participation in the union protests and, in general, professionals tend to argue that it emerged later on simply because the professional activism entered its most active phase in the second half of the Nimeiri regime.¹²⁸ Workers' activists tend to trace it back to the Sha'aban Riots of 1973, when the idea of a worker-student alliance was mooted, ironically, by the Islamist KUSU head Ahmad Uthman Mekki.¹²⁹

In 1978, doctors, schoolteachers, government technicians, book-keepers and cashiers all went on strike.¹³⁰ The doctors struck again in the summer of 1979, and at one point the entire Central Committee of the union offered its collective resignation.¹³¹ These initial strikes focused largely on the professional interests of the unions.¹³² In the early 1980s, this began to change. In February 1981, the judges went on strike protesting against the introduction of new regulations that removed some of the service benefits that they had previously enjoyed.¹³³ However, their demands also constituted a direct attack on Nimeiri's regime. During the strike, the judges issued a statement following a seminar held in the University of Khartoum in which they condemned Nimeiri's interference with the principle of the independence of the judiciary and the use of his State Security Laws to bypass the regular judicial process.¹³⁴ However, neither this

strike nor the ones that preceded it were coordinated with other unions and they were, thus, limited in what they were able to achieve.

The first professionals' strike to achieve a real political impact was that by the judges in 1983. Their action was a response to Nimeiri's open criticisms of the judiciary and Bar Association, along with his decision to strip a number of leading judges of their positions.¹³⁵ It persisted for 3 months, and acquired particular support from the university lecturers, the lawyers and the students.¹³⁶ The Bar Association held open seminars throughout the period of this strike, which were attended by members of several professional associations including lecturers, bank clerks, doctors and engineers, and provided an opportunity for vehement criticism of Nimeiri's regime.¹³⁷ The broad support that was offered to the judges ultimately compelled Nimeiri to relent and re-instate a number of those whom he had fired, and to offer them higher salaries and increased benefits.¹³⁸ The impact of this strike was significant in that it created a belief among the professional unions that coordinated action against the regime could force it to back down, and led to a series of meetings throughout the next 2 years with the object of arranging further protests.¹³⁹ Moreover, it was Nimeiri's recognition that he could not rely on the existing legal establishment that led him to attempt to bypass it through his disastrous entanglement with the ICF and the 'Instantaneous Justice Courts'.¹⁴⁰ The strike thus contributed directly to Nimeiri's most self-destructive acts.

The next year, the university professors, judges and doctors all went on strike. The doctors' action in particular was crucial since it led to a re-enactment of the scenario in which Nimeiri first adopted an obstinate stance and then was forced into a humiliating U-turn. When the doctors resigned *en masse* following the president's refusal to acknowledge their pay demands, he threatened to have them prosecuted for high treason if they did not return to work within 72 hours.¹⁴¹ The impasse lasted for over a month as Nimeiri dissolved the union, detained seventeen 'ringleaders' and then declared a state of emergency.¹⁴² At this stage, other professional associations began to approach the doctors and inform them that they considered their strike a national, not a sectoral, one and began to provide them with financial assistance to keep it going.¹⁴³ With the engineers and accountants threatening to join in the action and the World Health Organization declaring its intention to label Sudan a no go zone,¹⁴⁴ Nimeiri was forced once more to back down. He released all the imprisoned doctors and promised them that their demands would be met.¹⁴⁵ The strike was particularly significant in that the doctors claimed it represented not just their own professional demands, but also a political protest against the deterioration level of health services available to the average citizen in the later years of the Nimeiri regime.¹⁴⁶ It shows us that the professional unions had demonstrated their capacity to bring the regime to heel even before they actually helped to overthrow it.

One of the most important points to be understood about the role of the professional unions in Nimeiri's downfall is that no one political party exercised direct influence over any of the professional bodies at this time. This was partially because the ICF, the party that had come closest to achieving intellectual hegemony over Sudan's middle classes, had lost a degree of support among the unions because of its refusal to support the demand for increases in salary.¹⁴⁷ The success of professional activism during the *Intifada* represented a fruition of the cooperation between men who espoused a wide

range of political ideologies, whether they were communists, Islamists, Ba'athists or genuine independents.

The Bar Association was indicative of the ideological diversity of the professional movement. Umar Abd al-Ati, the vice-president of the Association at the time of the *Intifada*, claims that it was controlled by men of independent outlook, who had succeeded in the 1983 elections in gaining control back from those of a more ideological persuasion.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, there were still four 'communists' in addition to the five or six independents, and the head of the union, Mirghani al-Nasri, was a former *Ikhwani* of liberal Islamist persuasions. Mirghani al-Nasri had established the first branch of the Islamic Liberation Movement at Hantoub in 1949, and co-founded the Islamic Socialist Party alongside Babikir Karrar in 1964.¹⁴⁹ It is worth remembering that the Islamic Socialist Party represented itself as more of a liberal and a more 'Sudanese' party than al-Turabi's Islamic Charter Front,¹⁵⁰ which would explain why al-Nasri was able to coordinate with non-Islamists more effectively. Nevertheless, al-Nasri was relatively supportive of the pro-NIF regime installed in 1989 and when he died in 2010, his funeral was attended by Umar al-Bashir and Ali Uthman Taha.¹⁵¹ This suggests that the lawyers' activism during the *Intifada* represented not simply a secularist backlash against the 'Islamization' of the legislation in 1983, but also a broader response from a legal elite frustrated by both Nimeiri's abuse of religion and his efforts to marginalize them.

Men of different political persuasions were all united by their opposition to the political trials staged by Nimeiri in January and February 1985. Ghazi Suleiman, then a leftist, recalls that Mirghani al-Nasri agreed with him that he should take a group of lawyers with him to defend Mahmud Muhammad Taha while al-Nasri himself would defend the Nuba politician Philip Abbas Ghaboush, whose trial was happening simultaneously.¹⁵² Meanwhile, a number of prominent lawyers defended the Ba'ath Party members put on trial by Nimeiri in February, including some with close affiliations to the party.¹⁵³ The political diversity of the union was demonstrated by the wide range of opinions that were expressed within the union concerning the September Laws when they were promulgated by Nimeiri. Al-Ati recalls that members were divided between those who supported the laws, those who proposed that they needed modifications and those who suggested abolishing them outright.¹⁵⁴ Representatives of all these groups demonstrated together when the *Intifada* broke out. The secularist Ghazi Suleiman and Wisal al-Mahdi – Hasan al-Turabi's wife and another member of the union – would stand close to al-Ati when he read out the declaration of the *Intifada* on 3 May.¹⁵⁵

The Doctors' Union was equally ideologically eclectic. Jizouli Dafa'allah, its president, was an independent Islamist who had been a Muslim Brotherhood leader at Khartoum University, but had avoided party politics ever since.¹⁵⁶ The Central Committee of the Doctors' Union was dominated by Muslim Brothers, although *Africa Confidential* claimed that on account of the ability of Jizouli Dafa'allah and 'the nationwide solidarity of the doctors,' it transpired that 'the brothers have wielded little influence.'¹⁵⁷ It may, of course, have been the case that it was Jizouli Dafa'allah's background in the Muslim Brotherhood that made him acceptable to the *Ikhwanis* on the committee. Jizouli Dafa'allah's opponents in the Alliance later insisted that he was chosen as chairman of the union only because the doctors felt a figure more radically

opposed to the May Regime would not have succeeded in obtaining the doctors' demands, but such arguments implicitly acknowledge that the radicals in the union movement understood that they had to co-opt the pro-Islamist faction for their agenda to succeed.¹⁵⁸ Thus, it is important to remember that though the ICF did not participate actively in the uprising, this does not mean that the struggle of the professionals against the regime it had until so recently supported can be seen as a kind of Manichaean duel between secularism and Islamism – a number of non-ICF Islamists of more liberal persuasions played leading roles in the professionals' battle against Nimeiri.

The other significant professional unions that participated in the *Intifada* were led by men of at least nominally independent persuasion. Both Awad al-Karim Muhammad Ahmad of the Engineers' Union and Adlan Hardallo of the Khartoum University Lecturers' Union now deny that they are or ever have been communists, although they do observe that they have been labelled as such by many.¹⁵⁹ It was believed that the executive committee of the Engineers' Union were all linked to the SCP, but Awad al-Karim Muhammad Ahmad insists that only two or three of them were 'real' communists whereas the others were just 'sympathizers'.¹⁶⁰ Moreover, one of the major leaders of the Engineers' Union, Muhammad Ahmad Taha, would become a leading NIF figure in the 1990s.¹⁶¹ This is further indicative of the ideological flexibility of the professional movement.

Part of the reason why there was such solidarity between the various professional unions at the time of the *Intifada* was that, as demonstrated above, they had already cooperated against Nimeiri a number of times before it actually broke out. Nimeiri's official dissolution of the various professional associations following the doctors' strike did not prevent their members from arranging political meetings in the lead-up to the *Intifada*. The relative independence of the University of Khartoum enabled it to act as a centre of opposition, while the other professional groupings contributed to a variety of seminars and symposiums critical of the regime.¹⁶² A particularly important meeting was held in January 1985 after the execution of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, and it is to this meeting that most attribute the real solidification of the various unions into a coherent political front.¹⁶³ Nima'at Malik of the Health Workers' Union also identifies this as the moment in which the slogan of the 'political strike' was transformed into the slogan of 'a strike to bring down the regime'.¹⁶⁴

The Union Alliance was also able to keep on organizing outside the university. The 1984 emergency law did not prevent the organization of social and cultural activities such as doctors' conferences, which provided an alternative space in which professionals could mobilize opposition to the regime.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, at this time it was still common in Sudan for young unmarried professionals to live together in a shared boarding house known as a *mez*. Thus such young professionals had access to an important space in which to organize and express discontent.¹⁶⁶ In Port Sudan, the doctors' *mez* was transformed into the headquarters for the 'Popular Alliance', a local equivalent of the National Alliance.¹⁶⁷ The fact that professionals at this time still hailed from a fairly narrow social and cultural base would have made it easier for political solidarity to develop within these shared accommodations.

What all this demonstrates is that, probably more than was the case in 1964, the various professional unions were all highly mobilized and well prepared for political

activity at the time that the *Intifada* broke out. However, it does not appear that they possessed a well-articulated strategy for effecting the removal of the regime. In spite of all their previous experience of conflict with Nimeiri, their activities during the *Intifada* were relatively knee-jerk and chaotic. The *Intifada* did not break out because the professional unions collectively proposed civil disobedience. The role of the professional unions in the *Intifada* began with the reaction of members of a single union, the Khartoum Hospital Doctors' Union, to the fallout of the students' and workers' demonstrations on 26 and 27 March 1985. The doctors were horrified at having to treat victims of the SSO who had been shot at close range by plain-clothes security men who had infiltrated the crowds.¹⁶⁸ As a result, the Khartoum Hospital doctors launched a 48-hour strike and sent delegates to the Central Committee of the main Doctors' Union under Jizouli Dafa'allah, which declared a general strike.¹⁶⁹ Professional mobilization during the *Intifada* was, therefore, largely spontaneous in nature.

After the declaration of the doctors' strike, the other professionals began to organize themselves in a somewhat frenetic manner. The Doctors' Union and Bar Association arranged a meeting with the other professional bodies that had been active against the regime during the period leading up to 1985. The planning was very spontaneous – Jizouli Dafa'allah had dispatched members of the Doctors' Union to meet the engineers and the lawyers and arrange a meeting at the house of al-Mirghani al-Nasri, but was surprised by a visit from Mukhtar Uthman of the Engineers' Union who informed him that a meeting had already been arranged at the house of the head of the Engineers' Union, Awad al-Karim Muhammad Ahmad, in al-Ushara.¹⁷⁰ This meeting was attended by representatives of five professionals' unions – the lawyers, insurance brokers, doctors, engineers and Khartoum University lecturers.¹⁷¹ It appears to have been this meeting that laid the groundwork for the general strike, although Jizouli Dafa'allah insisted that for the strike to work it would be necessary to call one other professional group to join the fold – the bank clerks, who had the power to cripple the economy. Jizouli Dafa'allah chose to contact their union through its secretary Hasan Muhammad Ali, consulting his own neighbour to get a rough description of where his house was located and then dispatching Muhammad Yasin of the Doctors' Union to Omdurman to find it.¹⁷² When Muhammad Yasin eventually discovered his house in al-Thawra district of Omdurman, he found that Hasan Muhammad Ali had gone to the neighbourhood of Um Bedda, but he followed him to there and arranged for him to attend the next meeting of the various unions, which was at the University of Khartoum the following day.¹⁷³ This further illustrates the impromptu manner in which the professional unions mobilized during the *Intifada*.

The spontaneity of professional mobilization during the *Intifada* was also illustrated by the proceedings of the next important meeting, which occurred at the Bar Association.¹⁷⁴ This meeting was attended by senior professional leaders and also by large numbers of lawyers who had travelled from all over Khartoum and the country at large to be there.¹⁷⁵ Apparently the gathering was so chaotic that between 12 and 15 senior professionals had to adjourn to al-Nasri's office, while his deputy Umar Abd al-Ati physically stood against the door to prevent the other lawyers from entering!¹⁷⁶ It appears to have been at this point that the professional leaders resolved to stage the decisive demonstration in which they would submit their memorandum of protest

to the palace, on 3 April, and first began to form a series of executive committees to lead their nascent political movement.¹⁷⁷ The meeting was then interrupted by SSO agents dispatched by the government to apprehend the senior members of the Bar Association, and it is claimed that Mirghani al-Nasri read out the declaration of the general strike even as the SSO men were entering the building!¹⁷⁸ However, the fact that these security operatives were unable to attach names to faces enabled a number of individuals to escape, including Umar Abd al-Ati. Jizouli Dafa'allah and Mirghani al-Nasri were less lucky.¹⁷⁹ Therefore, although the professional activists of 1985 had possessed more time in which to plan their struggle against the regime, in many ways their plans were executed a lot less smoothly than in 1964, when all but a couple of professional leaders managed to avoid arrest. This was probably a result of the greater efficiency of the state security services in 1985, which hampered the efforts of the professionals to meet openly.

After the detentions, the plans of the professional leaders still at liberty became even more frantic, as they were forced to change their dress and places of sleep to avoid the attention of state security.¹⁸⁰ With the majority of the original leaders of the Union Alliance under arrest or in hiding following the meeting at the Bar Association, the shadow committee met at the Graduates' Club on 2 April to prepare the statement that would be read to the demonstrators.¹⁸¹ The production of the statement was also a somewhat rushed affair – it was written almost in darkness at the Graduates' Club, and then an attempt to print it failed because of lack of electricity, before one member of the shadow committee entered a friend's office and persuaded him to allow him to print 150 copies of the document without explaining what its purpose was!¹⁸²

Meanwhile, also on 2 April, members of the shadow committee took the decision to contact the political parties, dispatching Amin Makki Madani to meet al-Sadiq al-Mahdi in his house in Omdurman.¹⁸³ The fact that Jizouli Dafa'allah later stated that personally he would not have sanctioned this move again demonstrates the impromptu nature of the decision-making, as well as the weakness of party-professional collaboration in the pre-*Intifada* period.¹⁸⁴ This acts as a reminder that the *Intifada*, because of its very spontaneity, left behind unresolved issues that would later come back to haunt its leaders – as will be seen in Chapter 7, the rift between the parties and professionals would undermine the National Alliance throughout the transitional period.

When the professional unions launched their planned demonstration on 3 April, they were again overtaken by events. Their own planned march was dwarfed by the sheer numbers of Sudanese citizens taking to the streets, and as a result the union leaders decided that it would not be necessary to present their memorandum to the palace, and that they would simply read out the declaration to the demonstrators.¹⁸⁵ They were unable to find the individual who had been chosen to read out the speech, and so Umar Abd al-Ati, who happened to be carrying a copy on his person at the time, substituted for him.¹⁸⁶ In the excitement and confusion, and with clashes between police and public threatening to break out, he shortened the prepared statement so as to keep to the main points.¹⁸⁷

By highlighting the frenetic manner in which the professionals executed their plans during the *Intifada*, this study does not intend to undermine their importance

in providing it with a form of leadership. The purpose is to illustrate the fact that the professional unions had no 'grand design' to topple Nimeiri; although the desire to achieve this end existed before March 1985, there was no well-articulated strategy in place. This is amply illustrated by the fact that the 'declaration' of the *Intifada* was written the evening before it was read out to the crowds. The professional unions were reacting to events as much as they were creating them.

The marginalization of the labour unions during the *Intifada*

It seemed that in 1985 the professionals were even more lukewarm about the involvement of the labour unions than they had been in 1964. 'It [the *Intifada*] was led by the educated class', insists Jizouli Dafa'allah, noting that the Sudan Railway Workers' Union, the most powerful of all the labour unions, had not even joined the National Alliance by 1985.¹⁸⁸ This was not because of any natural enmity between the workers and the professionals, or because the workers were not committed to overthrowing Nimeiri. The workers had launched just as many protests and strikes since 1978 as had the professionals. However, Nimeiri and his regime had it within their power to employ far more ruthless and arbitrary methods when dealing with labour agitation, since workers were simply far more replaceable than professionals. In 1980, the Sudan Railway Workers' Union declared a strike, effectively bringing the Sudanese economy to a halt.¹⁸⁹ Nimeiri responded by ordering that all 45,000 members of the union be dismissed from their jobs, and by amending the labour laws to make strikes a treasonable act punishable by death.¹⁹⁰

It was Nimeiri's ability to dominate the labour unions so ruthlessly that made it difficult for the professionals to trust them. He and the SSO had achieved a great deal of success in neutralizing the workers' unions by appointing leaders sympathetic to the regime and planting spies to report any signs of dissent to the security organs.¹⁹¹ Unlike the professional and student unions, the labour unions were tightly controlled by parties linked to the SSU, whose success was aided by the regime's insistence that ballots in union elections be cast openly.¹⁹² The nearest that independent labour leaders came to breaking this stranglehold was in 1979, when a candidate put forward by the Trade Union Alliance – the organization sponsored by the Alliance of the Sudanese People – lost out by only four votes to the SSU candidate.¹⁹³ It was workers pressured by bosses affiliated to the government who were among the few that turned out for the embarrassingly weak pro-Nimeiri demonstration of 2 April.¹⁹⁴

As a result of their vulnerability to manipulation by the regime, the leaders of the professional unions were nervous of bringing the workers' unions into the core of the anti-regime movement. Awad al-Karim Muhammad Ahmad admitted that he was unsure about who precisely in the labour unions he could contact because 'there are many opportunists in the workers' unions'.¹⁹⁵ However, individual contacts were made. Al-Taj Muhammad, the head of the Bus Drivers' Union, attended

the 17 January meeting that followed Mahmud Muhammad Taha's execution.¹⁹⁶ The lawyers, insurance brokers and Khartoum University teachers all developed contacts with independent union leaderships, such as those of the Storekeepers' Union, Agriculture Ministry Workers' Union and Civil Airplanes Workers' Union, throughout February 1985.¹⁹⁷ Part of the reason that the professionals delayed their procession until 3 April was to give the workers' unions time to organize themselves and enter the general strike.¹⁹⁸ However, when it came to the formation of the National Alliance, the workers' unions were conspicuously absent, and it was six professional unions that acted as initial signatories to the National Charter. One leader of the Trade Union Alliance, Hasan al-Tayyib, now claims that the labour unions were invited to the meeting of 5 April, but that the individual who was supposed to lead them to the meeting had vanished.¹⁹⁹ This again illustrates the limitations of worker/professional cooperation.

This is not to say that the urban workforce did not participate in the *Intifada* – it was just that they were not led by the executive bodies of their unions. For instance, in the period leading up to the *Intifada*, workers at the state-owned oil corporations had launched spontaneous protests against the governments' agreements with CHEVRON, without needing any direction from their unions.²⁰⁰ Large numbers of labourers from the industrial region of Omdurman joined the students of Omdurman Islamic University during their procession of 26 March, and were followed by the workers of central Khartoum's industrial region the next day.²⁰¹ Workers at the central electricity board also had a major role in ensuring the success of civil disobedience when they left the board, taking its keys along with them, following the call for a general strike.²⁰² Railway workers played a major role in the demonstrations in Atbara that preceded the *Intifada*, which began with a demonstration by railwaymen demanding that the leadership of their union take a firmer stance against the regime's price rises.²⁰³ However, it appears that they did not coordinate with the professionals in the capital until after Nimeiri's downfall. Abdullah Abd al-Wahhab, the President of the Textile Workers' Union states that this body, as well as other major labour unions such as the Housing Development Workers' Union and Government Vehicles Drivers' Union first entered into the general strike in coordination with the National Alliance at 10 a.m. on 6 April, that is just after Siwar al-Dahab's declaration that the army were 'siding with the people'.²⁰⁴

Just as in 1964, the greater social interconnectedness of the professional class ensured that it was they, rather than the labour leaders, who took the lead in the uprising. This was not necessarily the product of an elitist outlook, but rather reflected that fact that Nimeiri had been more successful in undermining the trade union leaderships and incorporating them to his regime than he had with the professionals. While the urban labour force contributed with just as much vigour to the *Intifada*, bringing transport and electricity to a halt and adding manpower to the demonstrations, it did so in a far more acephalous fashion. This was one reason that the *Intifada* ultimately came to disappoint so many sectors of urban society. The failure of the trade union leaderships to mobilize effectively before Siwar al-Dahab declared the beginning of the transitional period ensured that their political weight during the interim period would be substantially reduced.

Conclusion

The weight of the contribution made by the 'modern forces' to the two uprisings cannot be questioned. In both 1964 and 1985, students acted as initiators, and although the more mature political forces would determine the ultimate fate of the uprisings, the fact that both uprisings were sparked off by protests within universities demonstrates the crucial significance of student activism in the downfall of both regimes. In 1964, the students of Khartoum University represented a pioneering generation heavily influenced by wider trends in international radical thought, and it was their dogged struggle against both the university administration and the ministry of interior that led to the events that galvanized the October Revolution. As a result, the uprising established a link between student life and the wider national political arena that would remain a key theme in Sudanese history up until the present. The university would remain at the centre of political life and the role played by the university-educated in public life expanded considerably – even during the two military regimes that followed October, Sudanese governments would never rely so much on uneducated soldiers for their ministers as they had before it.

The importance of student bodies to opposition politics was demonstrated in the second uprising by the fact that the various parties aligned against Nimeiri had to wait until they controlled all the major student unions in Khartoum before they were able to agitate successfully against the regime. The student body was probably more directly linked to the political parties in 1985 than it was in 1964 and the role of the students in 1985 was more the result of direction by the political parties. The conflict between various political alignments within the student body had become more obvious by the 1980s, and was centred on the competition between the groups sponsored by the ICF and coalitions of the various student bodies supported by the other political parties.

In 1964, the Islamists and their opponents within the student body had pursued subtly different and at times conflicting strategies, but had remained united by their shared feeling of being intellectual pioneers; the campus violence of the late 1960s and early 1970s ensured the breakdown of this relationship of cordial competition, and as a result, student politics in 1985 was dictated far more directly by events in the wider political arena. In this context, it should be observed that student politics during the two uprisings was not purely the product of the clash between Islamism and Communism. Other ideologies emanating from the Middle East, such as Nasserism and, later, Ba'athism, in addition to the notion of 'Third World' neutralism, had their influence. Within the 'other' universities of Khartoum such as the Technical Institute, Omdurman Islamic University and University of Cairo Khartoum Branch, affiliates of the 'traditional' and 'sectarian' parties played a major role in the student unions that mobilized against the regime.

While the students may have acted as instigators, it was the professional associations that provided the leadership for the two uprisings. Their role was comparatively more significant than that of the labour unions. This illustrated the fact that even military rulers could be held hostage by those with ties to the large and inter-connected group of families that constituted the Khartoum elite. While the organized labour possibly challenged the November and May Regimes with more vigour throughout the period

of military rule, it was the professionals who possessed the real capacity to make or break regimes. While the regime could either crush or manipulate workers' unions as a response to dissent, it was harder to pursue such a policy among professional groups, which possessed much more integral links to both the wider Sudanese educated elite and to each other. It was these same links, and the shared professional ethos that bound the doctors, lawyers, civil servants, engineers and university lecturers together, that enabled them to monopolize the leadership of the uprising.

Although the professionals are often seen as representatives of a secular or civil form of politics, advocates of political Islam played just as significant a role in mobilizing the professional unions against the military regime as did their secular or communist colleagues. It must be remembered that Hasan al-Turabi, the most significant figure in the history of Sudanese political Islam, played a hugely significant part in the October Revolution not just as a politician but also as a university lecturer. While the Bar Association leaned towards the left, the very fact that its activists were bound by professional and social camaraderie as much as by party identification ensured that individuals of various political leanings, including the Islamist Mirghani al-Nasri, played a significant role. In 1985 there were fewer 'party' figures in the professional unions, but there were still a number of individuals who were either former members of the Muslim Brotherhood or espoused some form of Islamism – such as Umar Abd al-Ati, Jizouli Dafa'allah and Mirghani al-Nasri. It is fair to say that in both 1964 and 1985, common social bonds and a sense of professionalism prevented ideological cleavages within the professional bodies from hampering their unity in the struggle against the regime – although, as will be demonstrated in later chapters, this happy situation did not persist after the *Intifada*.

In spite of the power they wielded, during both uprisings the professional unions reacted to a political situation that had already developed, mainly as a result of student activism. Even in 1985, when the professional unions had already become heavily involved in the fight against the regime in the years preceding the *Intifada*, their response to it was unplanned and frenetic. Thus, in spite of the enormous influence they wielded and the importance of their role in leading the anti-regime movement, it cannot be said that they conceived or originated the *Intifada*.