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The Armed Forces: Protectors of the People?

During the April *Intifada*, jubilant crowds reacted to the army's decision to refrain from suppressing the civil protests by declaring 'one army, one people' (*jayshun wahid, sha'abun wahid*) and 'the army are protectors of the people' (*jaysh humat al-sha'ab*). It is true that in Sudan the various security forces have remained socially porous, and it was this relative proximity to the public that helped to define the nature of their participation in the two uprisings. However, these enthusiastic chants masked a somewhat more complex state of civil-military relations in Sudan. Commentators on the wider Middle East have observed that in specific regimes, either the military establishment dominates the civilian elite, as in Syria, or the civilians successfully politicize and ideologize the military, as was the case in Ba'athist Iraq.¹ These judgements are easy to make because these regimes remained stable for long periods. However in Sudan, it has proved impossible – at least up until Umar al-Bashir's coup of 1989 – for any one civilian or army faction to dominate a military regime because there have been a considerable number of shifts in the balance of power – in 1964, 1969, 1971, 1977 and 1985. In this regard, Sudan's experience is much closer to that of a number of African states, such as Ghana or Nigeria, which have experienced numerous coups, counter-coups and often short-lived returns to democracy.² Thus, from the 1950s to the 1980s, the various branches of the Sudanese security forces acted as arenas of competition in which a number of political factions vied for influence.

It is often remarked by analysts of military authoritarianism in the Middle East that even where regimes are totally lacking in legitimacy, they tend to maintain control where their security apparatus – including the army, police and intelligence services – remains united and efficient.³ Hence, understanding the divisions between these various factions within the military, in addition to the divisions between the army, intelligence services and police, is crucial to understanding why the two uprisings were able to take the course that they did. At the same time, the fact that none of the major political factions within Sudan were able to fully dominate the military had ensured that the upper echelons of the officers corps could still pursue institutional and non-ideological agendas, and this lingering sense of professionalism explains why the army – like the police – had often been unwilling to act as the coercive arm of the government.⁴ Narratives on the first of the two uprisings tend to highlight the clash between the radicalized junior ranks and the military leadership, which represented the regime. Here we will also focus on the role of a middle category of officers, who to some extent represented the 'official mind' of the military.

The tribulations of the Sudanese police force in 1964

We shall discuss first the role played by the police in the October Revolution, for it was their inability to contain the civil dissent that brought the army into play. The role of the police during the Revolution highlighted two important themes: first, the manner in which police violence was as indicative of weakness and the ineffectiveness of the force's methods of control as it was of a deliberate brutality; and secondly, the manner in which the social porosity of the Sudanese security forces imposed limitations on the state's capacity to use them as agents of coercion.

As we have seen, it was a series of clashes between police and students at the University of Khartoum, culminating in the shooting of Ahmad al-Qurayshi, that led to the outbreak of the Revolution. While the University Incident and its aftermath demonstrated the potential for police violence, it also showed the limitations of the use of the contemporary police as a tool against opposition elements. 'Abd al-Wahhab Ibrahim, a serving officer at the time, argues that the police made a mistake in actually entering the university campus as this inevitably led to them being surrounded by students and then forced to open fire. He claims that the police leadership was divided over whether to enter the university or wait outside and disperse the students if they chose to demonstrate on the streets.⁵ The tear gas that they used simply did not work. Henderson states that most of it 'blew back or was thrown back in their faces'.⁶ Witnesses recalled that the students retreated to the dormitories and waited for the police to run out of tear gas bombs, and then attacked again.⁷

Moreover, the reaction of the urban public to these incidents demonstrated that the police were at this time emancipated neither from society nor from the rule of law. The doctors stated that the wounds they had seen inflicted by the police on the students were as if they had been struck 'in a battle between noble Muslims and Jews callous of heart',⁸ and they refused to treat injured policemen who were instead sent to military wards.⁹ It is likely that at a time when urban Sudanese society was still relatively close knit, this public and religiously tinged stigmatization would have significantly demoralized the police force, which was at this time largely composed of recruits drawn from the same riverain backgrounds as the student protesters.¹⁰ Even more importantly, the judges stated that al-Qurayshi's shooting should be treated as a case of intentional homicide.¹¹

The immediate effect of this moral and legal condemnation of the police by the professional groups and the media was that large sections of the force started to refuse to obey orders to open fire on the public. The force became particularly resentful of the regime's commands after the Ministry of Interior issued a statement blaming the police themselves for opening fire on the students, and insisting that no orders had been issued sanctioning this. Thus a number of policemen, realizing that they would not be supported by the government and would perhaps be liable to prosecution if they were to repeat their use of force, began to refuse to act against demonstrations, and even joined the crowds instead.¹² The police also adopted non-confrontational behaviour in towns such as Port Sudan and Dueim, as the civil unrest spread to the provinces.¹³ They showed their deference to the judiciary by agreeing to disperse when commanded to do so by 'Abd al-Majid Imam, who led the judges' and lawyers'

demonstration.¹⁴ This incident indicated that the officers of the Khartoum Police Force were still sufficiently attached to professional ideals that they could identify with the 'Professional Front'; in many ways, police inactivity during the Revolution was also a product of the shared ethos that bound this movement together.

Senior police officers, like the leading professionals, also hailed from the same socially networked educated elite that dominated political and professional life at the time. The policeman leading the force charged with apprehending the judges' demonstration, al-Qurayshi Faris, would later explain his decision to refrain from the use of force against it with reference to his close connections to political society in Khartoum. Recalling the incident 21 years later, Faris observed that he had shared many communist friends as a school pupil, and that he would frequently call on Hasan al-Turabi to seek his advice in interpreting the law, just as he would attend Sadiq al-Mahdi's mosque in Omdurman to perform the sunset prayer and visit Isma'il al-Azhari to lend him policemen as guards.¹⁵ Mallasi claims that another reason al-Faris proved so malleable was that, while he himself was apolitical, his brother was among the members of the KUSU executive committee who were at the time interned in Kober.¹⁶ He also observes that while he and other senior lawmen were organizing the lawyers' and judges' demonstrations, Lewis Sidra, the Commandant of the Khartoum force, chose to ignore their violations of curfew because Mallasi's father had been a close friend of his in the College of Administration and Police.¹⁷

The active nature of the force's participation in the Revolution could have been exaggerated. While policemen and those nostalgic about the Revolution often recall how members of the force 'joined the people', the extent to which this actually happened is by no means clear. K. D. D. Henderson, a European witness, implies that they were simply overwhelmed by the situation. He states that on Friday 23 October 'the police were thoroughly demoralized and stood by helplessly' as demonstrators hijacked their broadcasting apparatus, sabotaged their vehicles and committed various acts of vandalism.¹⁸ Ageing Khartoumers recall that those policemen who joined in the demonstrations did so in plain-clothes, leaving their uniforms at home.¹⁹ This would seem to indicate that their involvement was as individual citizens rather than as policemen. Meanwhile, some policemen continued to support the army in clashing with demonstrators and killed three more of the latter on the evening of 25 October.²⁰ Nevertheless, it is clear that large sections of the force refrained from further action against demonstrators for fear of legal and public reprisals. Thus, the events that followed the University Incident epitomized the dilemma of the Sudanese policemen, who were socially stigmatized and caught between competing pressures exercised by different factions within the state – in this case, an intransigent military government and an independent judiciary.

Reassessing the role of the Free Officers in 1964

Just as the social proximity of the police to the demonstrating public prevented the force from enacting severer reprisals against the civil protests, it also influenced junior officers within the military who made it clear to their superiors at critical stages of

the Revolution that they would not open fire on the public. Commentators on the Revolution have often pointed to the fact that a majority of the soldiers in Khartoum at the time, like a good number of the inhabitants of the capital itself, hailed from the Shayqiyya ethnic group.²¹ However, there was also a far more political background to the dissent within the military. Even though the junta's emergence in 1958 gave the army a privileged position in Sudanese society, the regime's lack of any identifiable ideology left the junior radicals in the army just as frustrated as the students and young professionals.

Accounts of the October Revolution usually highlight the role of the Free Officer movement, a clandestine political organization within the military inspired by Gamal Nasser's movement of the same name in Egypt. The participation of the Free Officers in 1964 has been closely assessed because of this group's involvement in the coup that brought about the May Regime in 1969. They represented a far more radical break with the colonial past than the military cabal that had managed the 1958 takeover. Jafā'ar Nimeiri, who would become the leader of the Free Officers' Revolutionary Command Council in 1969, was the son of a postman. Like his left-wing co-conspirator Babikir al-Nur, he was educated in one of the *Ahliyya* schools established by nationalists in the colonial period to combat the British tactic of keeping education restricted to the elite.²² In contrast, Abboud's junta seemed to embody the system established by the British. Most of them had been educated at the elite colonial school, Gordon College, and had received medals for fighting against the Italians in Libya and Eritrea on behalf of the British Empire in the Second World War. The father of Hasan Bashir Nasr, Abboud's deputy commander-in-chief and minister of defence, had presided over the Shayqiyya *Umudiyya* at Halfaya al-Muluk in the colonial Native Administration – as such, he was identified with the nobility of Sudan that had allied itself to the British during the Condominium period.²³

In this sense, we might read the Free Officers' contribution to the October Revolution as an extension of the struggle for national independence, and see them as the vanguard agents of a moment of national catharsis in which the privileged social order established by the colonizers was swept away and a newly emancipated social order introduced. There are, of course, telling limitations to this line of analysis. While the majority of the Free Officers hailed from social backgrounds that were, in contrast to those of the existing military elite, humble, they only represented Sudan's immediate social periphery. For the most part, they hailed from the same central riverain regions as the existing military and governmental elite that had emerged during the colonial period, spoke the same languages and represented the same ethnic groups. The Free Officer movement was defined by the same limitations as those of the October Revolution itself – attachment to a narrowly defined vision of the Sudanese nation.

Moreover, in 1964 the Free Officers still represented a relatively minor organization in comparison with what they would later become. The initial movement had come into existence soon after the coup launched in Cairo in 1952 by the Egyptian Free Officers, after whom the Sudanese organization was named. Its members were broadly inspired by Nasser's Arab nationalism, although it did include some left-wing elements.²⁴ However, this nascent movement was effectively liquidated in 1959 by Abboud, who

took severe measures against its members following their participation in Ali Hamid's abortive coup of that year.²⁵ When a second movement arose in the early 1960s, the SCP exercised a more significant influence in it, but not a dominant one.²⁶ Hashim al-Atta, who would lead the pro-communist coup attempt of 1971, was not a member of the movement at the time although his colleague Babikir al-Nur, who would also be executed for his role in the abortive 1971 takeover, was.²⁷ Al-Nur was the SCP's link to the Free Officer organization at the time, and according to Mahgub Bireir, he and Abd al-Khaliq Mahgub had already made plans that it should await a popular uprising and then use its influence among the officer corps to prevent the army from crushing it.²⁸ In 1961, the SCP-linked officers, whose affiliations were not necessarily known to their fellow collaborators at the time, used the party's printing press to establish an underground media organ entitled *Sawt al-Quwwat al-Musallaha*. Editions of this secret newspaper declared that the Free Officers would be 'working with the popular movement to ensure the regime's overthrow'.²⁹ However, Babikir al-Nur was not the dominant figure in the movement at the time. The organization was informally headed by Faruq Hamdallah, who defined the movement as a 'progressive nationalist' organization and believed that its role should be to initiate a coup, which the political parties would then join.³⁰

In spite of the fact that the Free Officer movement was still in the process of formation in 1964, since 1969 a narrative has developed within both Western academic and Sudanese media circles that attributes to it a central role in the Revolution. Niblock, for instance, states that on the evening of 25 October, 'Free Officer elements within the army brought in troops to surround the republican palace, impressing on the members of the SCAF (who were meeting within) the weakness of their position. By the morning of 27 October, the SCAF had dissolved itself...'³¹ Daly also asserts that it was 'plots by junior officers to stage a coup against the army leadership' that 'convinced Abboud that there was no alternative to the resignation of the government'.³² Ahmad Sulayman, writing in one of Nimeiri's media organs during the former Free Officer's period as president, claimed that the Free Officers had surrounded the palace and demanded that Abboud dissolve the SCAF, cabinet and central council, making 25 October the 'decisive day'.³³ Specifically, Colonel Muhammad al-Baghir Ahmad – who would later serve as one of Nimeiri's vice-presidents – is referred to as the man who on 26 October led pro-Free Officer regiments towards the palace and carried a memorandum to Abboud demanding that he resign.³⁴ As seen in Chapter 2, even as the regime brought about by the movement in 1969 was being overthrown by the next civilian uprising, the last remaining Free Officer endeavoured desperately to win over the protesting crowds by observing that they were the makers of the October Revolution.³⁵ Thus, in spite of being accepted to a degree by academic commentators, this narrative was very much intertwined with the propaganda of the May Regime.

After Nimeiri's downfall in 1985, a counter-narrative emerged that challenged various aspects of this account. Six months after the May Regime had been overthrown, Abd al-Rahman Nur Idris wrote an article in *al-Sahafa* criticizing what he saw as an attempt to distort the history of the October Revolution. He alleged that the man who took his detachment to the palace and forced Abboud to dissolve the SCAF was not al-Baghir Ahmad but Mahjub Bireir, who was at that time a *Yuzbashi* in the armoured

corps. Idris also claimed that it was Bireir who played the decisive role in persuading members of the armoured corps not to open fire on the crowds if ordered to do so.³⁶

It is important to focus on the background of Mahjub Bireir, not just because his role at the palace was so central, but also because he has written the most substantial account that the author is aware of on the role of the army during the October Revolution. Bireir attracted a great deal of attention in the Sudanese media in 1985 as a former Free Officer who had opposed the movement's involvement in the 1969 coup, and gave evidence at the trial of those who had participated in it. In spite of having been affiliated with the organization, he eventually clashed with Nimeiri's regime, and would claim that he participated in two attempted coups against it, one of which nearly led to his execution.³⁷ He therefore constitutes something of an 'unsympathetic insider' in the Free Officer Organization. He enjoyed the confidence of both leading Free Officers, such as Faruq Hamdallah, and senior members of the military regime, such as Hasan Bashir Nasr. It was this double affinity that defined his role, and makes his account particularly revealing.

In spite of the assertions of Abd al-Rahman Nur Idris, Bireir, while acknowledging that he was present at the palace, does not attribute a particularly significant role to himself. However, his account does contradict the classic narrative regarding the part played by the Free Officers in many respects. He recalls that on the morning of 25 October, his garrison leader, Umar Muhammad Ibrahim, dispatched him to guard an important meeting of senior military officers being held at the house of Hasan Bashir Nasr. Umar Muhammad Ibrahim and Hasan Bashir Nasr apparently chose Bireir for this mission because of the trust that accompanied the common upbringing of the three soldiers in Halfaya al-Muluk.³⁸ This serves as another reminder that while the Free Officers may not have undergone the same colonial education as the previous generation of army officers, they still hailed from the same narrowly defined geographic sectors of Sudanese society.

It seems that in this case, this social and geographic proximity undermined the impact of generational and political differences. Bireir maintains that when he arrived at Hasan Bashir Nasr's house, Nasr informed him that the SCAF had decided to dissolve itself and 'return power to the people,' retaining Abboud as president for the purpose of maintaining stability.³⁹ Bireir's evidence here corresponds with Cliff Thomson's description of the decisions made at the same meeting.⁴⁰ This suggests that it was *not* any action taken by the Free Officers later in the day that provoked Abboud's scuttling of the November Regime. In support of this, it is worth remembering that there are many other explanations for Abboud's famous decision – for instance, the story that he wept at the death of al-Qurayshi and upon realizing the extent of his unpopularity, or the account that maintains that he abandoned hope when he realized representatives of the Khatmiyya-backed PDP, who he had believed were his main supporters, had attended the meeting at the Mahdi's tomb.⁴¹

Bireir also undermines the claim that it was the Free Officers who surrounded the palace on 25 October. He states that although he was a Free Officer at the time, it was not they, but his garrison commander Umar Muhammad Ibrahim who ordered him to take his armoured regiment to the palace, shortly after his meeting with Hasan Bashir Nasr. Bireir claims that when he arrived at the palace, he spoke on the phone to

Abboud, who had been informed that the purpose of Bireir's mission was to guard the palace and not to attack it.⁴² However, later that morning, a more antagonistic force *did* emerge under another clandestine Free Officer serving in the armoured corps, Rashid Nur al-Din, who was senior to Bireir in rank. This situation seemed to have created a particularly complex crisis of loyalties for Bireir, involving conflicting allegiances towards his president, garrison commander, senior officer, political organization and village background. Unsurprisingly, he appears to have compromised. He maintains that he informed his comrade that Abboud had resolved to dissolve the SCAF, eliciting a sarcastic response from Nur al-Din, who questioned how exactly he had acquired this information from the president and accused him of defending the military regime. Bireir then allowed him to deploy his infantry around his own tanks and take command of the forces present, telling Abboud at the same time that Nur al-Din had come to support his own troops – which he apparently believed. Faruq Hamdallah then arrived at 7 o'clock and, as his senior officer in the Free Officer Organization, instructed Nur al-Din to depart.⁴³ Thus the story about Free Officers 'surrounding the palace' appears, at least given Bireir's evidence, more ambiguous than it does in the classic narratives of the Revolution. His account has been upheld by Mahmoud Qalandar's recent history of Abboud and his downfall.⁴⁴ It does also to an extent correspond with that of the former Novemberist minister Mamoun Biheiri, who recalls that it was unclear to those within the palace whether the force dispatched there on 25 October was there to protect or to threaten them.⁴⁵

Another problematic aspect of the standard 'Free Officer' narrative is the account that emphasizes the role of Muhammad al-Baghir Ahmad, another secret member of the organization, in delivering Abboud a message on behalf of the army demanding that he relinquish power. First of all, it should be observed that al-Baghir was regarded at the time as a man who was very close to the Free Officer movement, rather than an actual member.⁴⁶ Other accounts emphasize that it was Muhammad Idris Abdullah, the head of the infantry school, as well as the director of military intelligence al-Tayyib al-Mardi who alongside al-Baghir informed Abboud that he should surrender power to prevent bloodshed, and threatened to bring in troops from Omdurman to coerce Abboud.⁴⁷ Qalandar suggests that the former, as head of military intelligence, made a particular impact on Abboud by conveying to him the extent of discontent within the army.⁴⁸ Al-Tayyib al-Mardi himself was a member of the Free Officer movement in 1964, although Muhammad Idris Abdullah apparently possessed no links to it.⁴⁹

Bireir's version of this story downplays the significance of the clandestine political movement in the junior ranks. He claims that Muhammad al-Baghir delivered his message not on account of the Free Officers but on behalf of senior members of the army leadership including Hasan Bashir Nasr and middle rankers such as Muhammad Idris Abdullah. This is supported by Qalandar, who suggests that Hamad al-Nil Daifallah, Muhammad Idris Abdullah and Muzammil Sulayman Ghandur all participated in writing it.⁵⁰ Moreover, Bireir recalls that at the same time that al-Baghir delivered his message, Yusuf al-Jak Taha, another senior member of the Engineers' Corps, dispatched a force under Yusuf al-Haj to the palace to accompany him.⁵¹ Muzammil Sulayman Ghandur, another middle-ranking officer who later joined the May Regime, also seems to argue that al-Baghir was co-ordinating closely with the other middle-ranking officers

rather than the Free Officer movement at this time, claiming that the two of them along with Muhammad Idris Abdullah and al-Tayyib al-Mardi proposed to Hasan Bashir Nasr that he take over from Abboud.⁵² He maintains that Hasan Bashir Nasr had no interest in the presidency, and actively supported the ultimatum that al-Baghir delivered, saying 'well done, well done' to him as he handed it over to Abboud.⁵³ Thus it seems that it was the middle-ranking officers and army leadership that most directly influenced the crucial decisions being made in the palace on 25 and 26 October.

Bireir even asserts that leading Free Officers were surprised by the Revolution. He states that on 15 October, he lunched with Faruq Hamdallah who had invited him to join in a coup that would occur on 25 October. This proposed coup would usher in a transitional government jointly led by the Free Officers and political parties, which would after a short period surrender power to the people.⁵⁴ Bireir states that when the demonstration in Khartoum broke out a week later, he asked him about his coup plans, and Hamdallah observed that 'the popular revolution has aborted them'.⁵⁵ Hamdallah then observed that the policy of the Free Officers towards the revolution must be to 'support it so that it achieves its purpose without revealing our own identity and objectives!'⁵⁶ This indicates that while the Free Officers may have helped facilitate the Revolution, they did not initiate it.

The movement's most critical contribution towards the success of the civil protests was the part it played in encouraging army regiments to refuse orders to open fire on the demonstrating public. As soon as the protests first broke out on 22 October, Faruq Hamdallah was ordered to move a force from the armoured corps to close the Blue Nile Bridge. He refused to carry out this order, informing his superior that it would lead to clashes with civilians and inevitable casualties. Discontent quickly spread throughout the armoured corps, where the movement was most strongly rooted.⁵⁷ Bireir admits that one of the reasons that so many NCOs sided with the demonstrators during the uprising was that in the period immediately before the Revolution, the organization had decided to incorporate NCOs into its ranks, as a result of advice by Abd al-Khaliq Mahgub to Babikir al-Nur, the SCP's man in the Free Officer movement.⁵⁸ He attributes the fact that so many NCOs sided with the demonstrators during the uprising to this decision.⁵⁹ The Arab nationalists within the civilian movement also appear to have been confident that their allies within the Free Officer Organization had enough influence within the military to be able to stymie any efforts by the senior officers to use the army to coerce the public. Mallasi recalls that, although the government sent a squadron under Muzammil Ghandur to disperse the lawyers' and judges' demonstration of 24 October, he was always confident that the force would relent as it eventually did because of an 'agreement' he had made with Colonel Hussein Bayumi.⁶⁰ Ahmad Ali Baggadi, who had been observing the Revolution since its very outbreak, argues that the Free Officers were very influential in that they 'refused order to shoot citizens', although their role was limited by the fact that they 'were not very organized at that time'.⁶¹ In other words, the Free Officers appear to have scored their main successes in supporting the Revolution from the bottom up.

Nevertheless, according to Mallasi, before al-Baghir's intervention on 26 October, the Free Officers did briefly plan launching a coup after having become frustrated at the slow pace of the negotiations that were being conducted by the parties and the

professionals.⁶² It seems that they abandoned this after Muhammad Abd al-Halim, the officer whom they had entrusted to communicate the news to the Professional Front, betrayed them and revealed their plans to Awad al-Soghayrun of the army command. However, according to Mallasi, al-Soghayrun simply condemned Muhammad Abd al-Halim and threatened to shoot him if he betrayed his comrades again.⁶³ However, even if we accept the veracity of this account, it is unlikely that this coup plot would have inspired the decision of the military command that the SCAF should be dissolved – the incident would have happened either late on 25 October, or early on 26 October, and the decision had already been made at this stage. However, it might conceivably have given the senior military commanders a further incentive to pre-empt the young radicals.

Mallasi insists that after the coup plans were leaked, the movement broadly supported the Professional Front stance that Abboud should dissolve the SCAF and stay on as president until elections could be held.⁶⁴ In general, however, the Free Officers do not seem to have been able to influence major decisions. Recalling the negotiating team's decision to appoint Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa as interim prime minister, Khalid Hasan Abbas states 'we didn't want it, but we agreed to it'.⁶⁵ Nor does it seem that the junior officers were willing to sanction radical action against the old regime at this time. Zein al-Abdin Abd al-Qadir, the officer whose unit opened fire on the crowds to prevent them from reaching the palace on 28 October, was close to the organization at the time and would join it soon after the Revolution.⁶⁶ However, the fact that he did not prevent his unit from opening fire on the crowds surging towards the palace demonstrated that junior officers were not willing to preside over a radical revolution.

The flaw in the standard Free Officer narrative on the October Revolution is that it assumes that just because men were members of the movement, or in contact with it, they devoted themselves exclusively to its objectives. In practice, men such as Bireir, al-Baghir Muhammad Ahmad and al-Tayyib al-Mardi, in their actions throughout the Revolution, balanced their loyalty to the organization against their loyalty to the military command, and acted in coordination with their seniors and the middle-ranking officers just as much as they did with the junior ranks.

The middle-ranking and senior officers as negotiators in the Revolution

Focusing too exclusively on the part of the Free Officers within the junior ranks risks neglecting the agency exercised by the more senior echelons of the army leadership. The more senior officers did not simply respond to the actions of the young radicals, but rather immersed themselves in their own power struggles and pursued a complex variety of agendas. In particular, it is worth situating the crisis of the November Regime within the context of the breakdown of relations among members of the SCAF. It is worth noting that in the years preceding the Revolution, the British Ambassador had argued that the regime was stable because the ruling generals got on so well.

The military junta was both politically and socially homogeneous in its composition. The generals all hailed from the riverain regions of northern Sudan and had all benefited from elite colonial educations. Moreover, after the retirement of the SCAF's one Umma sympathizer, Abd al-Wahhab, in 1959, the ruling body was dominated by men who hailed from Khatmiyya backgrounds – such as Abboud, Hasan Bashir Nasr and the minister of interior, Muhammad Irwa.⁶⁷ However, the complex political situation that preceded the October Revolution seems to have provoked frictions among senior regime members. The nephew of Muhammad Irwa, Abboud's minister of interior, insists that there were severe tensions within the SCAF at the time of the Revolution and that his uncle fell out with his colleagues in the military regime as a result of the memorandum that had been presented to him by KUSU. He states that, after having detained the KUSU executive committee, his relative retired from the SCAF in protest against its refusal to consider the memorandum and its insistence that he arrest the students.⁶⁸

If we accept that the SCAF had been wracked by internal conflict in the days leading up to the Revolution, it might explain why Abboud, Hasan Bashir Nasr and the rest of the army leadership were so keen to dissolve it at the time. Bireir argues that Nasr saw an opportunity to present himself as the man who shepherded the country towards civilian rule and thus guarantee himself a position as commander-in-chief under the next regime. Sadiq al-Mahdi maintains that Nasr approached him personally even before Abboud did, sending his brother Taha Bashir to propose a bilateral agreement with the Umma Party.⁶⁹ This story would seem to indicate that Nasr was seeking to forge positive relations with a set of relatively conservative civilian rulers so that he could maintain his military position. As seen above, this strategy led him to coordinate with a number of middle-ranking officers to arrange the memorandum that al-Baghir delivered to Abboud. This ploy might also be seen as a product of divisions within the SCAF, as Nasr had begun to vie with another member of the junta for the position of commander-in-chief.⁷⁰ However, Nasr's designs were thwarted when the middle-ranking officers, led by al-Tahir al-Maqbul, confronted him and declared that they would not accept him or any other member of the former regime as their leader.⁷¹

The moves against the SCAF, and then against Nasr, demonstrated the significance of the group of middle-ranking officers who were not members of the SCAF, and yet remained senior to the young radicals who dominated the Free Officer movement. The most important men within this cohort were Major-General al-Tahir Maqbul, Brigadier Yusuf al-Jak Taha, Colonel Muhammad al-Baghir Ahmad, General Awad al-Soghayrun, Muzammil Ghandur, Brigadier Umar al-Hag Musa and Muhammad Idris Abdullah. The role that this batch of men was playing was barely concealed from the public; one journalist recalls witnessing Muzammil Ghandur standing near Abboud and making physical gestures to indicate 'it's all over' as Abboud made his 26 October speech on dissolving the SCAF.⁷²

It was this group that dominated the negotiations over the return to civilian rule and developed links with the various competing factions that included the Professional Front, the political parties and the Free Officer movement. While it was these men that helped forge the compromises that made a peaceful transition possible, they themselves possessed a series of separate and often conflicting agendas.

Their social and institutional backgrounds were more similar to those of the military Novemberists than the young radicals of the Free Officer movement: Umar al-Haj Musa had graduated from Gordon College, the elite school of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium, and was the son of *al-Qa'imaqam* al-Haj Bey Musa, a senior officer in the colonial army; Awad al-Soghayrun, another Gordon College graduate, had served in the Libyan and Eritrean campaigns with the British during the Second World War; and the father of Muhammad Idris Abdullah had studied at Egypt's al-Azhar University and served under the Mahdist *amir* of Darfur.⁷³ Awad al-Soghayrun had even served on the SCAF when it was initially formed in 1958, before returning to regular military service in 1959. While some sympathized with the radical ideals of the Free Officers, others identified more closely with the old guard; some were close to the parties, others to the professionals.

These officers did not simply react to the initiatives of the junior radicals. As early as the evening of 22 October, Muzammil Sulayman Ghandur and Muhammad al-Baghir Ahmad shared dinner with a number of other middle rankers and discussed the fact that 'the time had arrived for a great change', suggesting that they should intervene 'to prevent a war between the government and the people.'⁷⁴ They first began to enter into communications with the younger officers on the night of 23 October.⁷⁵ Qalandar suggests that a meeting between Umar al-Haj Musa, Sharif al-Habib and the younger officers of the armoured corps (in which the Free Officers were heavily represented) was critical in enabling the middle and lower ranks to forge a common position.⁷⁶ However, they also elected to approach the established political parties from the previous parliamentary era. On 27 October, al-Tahir Maqbul and Awad al-Soghayrun – both of whom had attended the meeting at Hasan Bashir Nasr's house on 25 October that decreed the dissolution of the SCAF – visited representatives of the political parties that were gathering at the *gubba*, ostensibly to negotiate on behalf of Abboud. Both these officers were Umma Party sympathizers hailing from *Ansari* backgrounds.⁷⁷ Al-Tahir Maqbul was a major player – it was he who later informed Hasan Bashir Nasr that the army would not accept his leadership, and persuaded Abboud and the rest of the army leadership to place former SCAF members under house arrest.⁷⁸

The fact that two Umma sympathizers acted as Abboud's representatives in these negotiations underlines the fact that factions within the army were hoping to bypass the 'modern forces', within both the army and the professional unions, by approaching the more socially conservative political parties – although when they visited the *gubba*, they were not aware of the fact that the parties had already agreed with the professionals to establish the United National Front.⁷⁹ It is noticeable that two other prominent members of this cohort of middle-ranking officers – Umar al-Haj Musa and Muhammad Idris Abdullah – came from families traditionally affiliated with the Umma.⁸⁰ The likely explanation for this was that the Umma Party had been sidelined within the regime since the radicals Muhieddin and Shennan had forced Abboud to sanction a vote by officers on the membership of the SCAF, which resulted in the expulsion of the three Umma-affiliated generals – Hussein Karrar, Ahmad Abd al-Wahhab and al-Soghayrun himself.⁸¹ These marginalized officers were thus well placed to take on an influential role after the downfall of the mainly Khatmi SCAF.

This, in turn, may help explain why the Umma Party was so influential during the transitional period and parliamentary era.⁸²

Other middle rankers were more hostile to the political parties. At the same time as al-Tahir al-Maqbul and Awad al-Soghayrun visited the *Gubba*, Muzammil Ghandur approached members of the Professional Front as they were gathering on 27 October at Ahmad Al-Amin Abd al-Rahman's house in Omdurman and offered to cut a deal whereby the professionals and the army would share power and thereby close out the political parties.⁸³ This offer appears to have been swiftly rejected, and it is unclear how much support Ghandur had – very little, according to Jafa'ar Karrar.⁸⁴ It appears that Ghandur was being nominated at this time by a number of senior and middle-ranking officers as a potential candidate for the post of commander-in-chief and maybe even that of transitional prime minister, but that he lost support when the middle-ranking officers began to believe he was too close to Hasan Bashir Nasr.⁸⁵ His failure indicates that the professionals were not at this stage wary enough of the more conservative political parties to be prepared to forge alliances with elements in the army sympathetic to the 'modern forces'.

In spite of their differences, with men such as Hasan Bashir Nasr discredited, it was this middle-ranking faction that negotiated with the United National Front to determine the process of transition in Sudan. Indeed, Abu Eissa contends that it was this group of officers that played the greatest role in insisting that the parties and professionals merge into a common front in the first place.⁸⁶ The officers who attended the meetings at the palace with the United National Front were al-Tahir Maqbul, Awad al-Soghayrun, Muhammad Idris Abdullah, Muhammad al-Baghir Ahmad, Yusuf al-Jak Taha and, possibly, Muzammil Ghandur.⁸⁷ As seen above, two of them had played a major role in suggesting to Abboud the manner in which he should dissolve the SCAF. It appears that the demands of these officers at the negotiations were focused mainly on 'preserving stability' within the armed forces at a time when it was fighting against the rebel movement in the south, and particularly on preserving Abboud as commander-in-chief.⁸⁸ Their positions thus represented the institutional interests of the military, and were far more conservative than those of the Free Officer movement.

One reason the army negotiators remained focused on the institutional interests of the military was that this batch of senior and middle-ranking officers did not possess a uniform set of attitudes. Awad al-Soghayrun was among the most senior and most conservative, frequently making objections during the transitional negotiations to nominees affiliated to either the SCP or Muslim Brotherhood.⁸⁹ It was also he who had had Jafa'ar Nimeiri, one of the firebrands of the Free Officer movement, placed under arrest soon after the demonstrations broke out.⁹⁰ However, others were more sympathetic, particularly Muhammad al-Baghir Ahmad and Umar al-Haj Musa, the latter of whom consciously overlooked the secret production of pamphlets by Free Officers within the Signallers' Corps.⁹¹ These officers acted as a bridge between the Free Officers and the army leadership that could allow a compromise to be reached.⁹² Indeed, it was Umar al-Haj Musa who persuaded the UNF to insert a clause within the transitional constitution debarring former regime members from trial for the political acts for which they had been responsible during the November Regime.⁹³ In the transitional period, it would be another pair of senior officers, Baqar Abu Bakr

and Muhammad Idris Abdullah, who would collaborate with the Professional Front to arrest members of the SCAF after they moved against the Free Officers.⁹⁴

It was this cohort of men who would dominate the senior echelons of the military in the parliamentary years. They ensured that Khawwad Muhammad Ahmad, another of the Gordon College generation who had initially served in the November Regime but had also been removed in 1959, was installed as commander-in-chief.⁹⁵ Umar al-Hag Musa became director of the armed forces administration, and Muhammad Idris Abdullah, chief of the general staff.⁹⁶ The new commanders' attitudes towards the Free Officer movement continued to waver between apprehension and sympathy; initially, the new army command attempted to weaken the movement by dispatching the most influential Free Officers to garrisons located well away from the capital.⁹⁷ However, Umar al-Hag Musa ensured that this policy was reversed and later managed to prevent a number of the same men from being prosecuted for their involvement in Khalid al-Kidd's attempted coup of 1967.⁹⁸ The contrasting approaches of these men dictated their fortunes when the Free Officers came into power in 1969; while men like Muhammad Idris Abdullah and Khawwad were pensioned off, Umar al-Haj Musa, al-Tayyib al-Mardi and al-Baghir Muhammad Ahmad all acquired senior positions within the new regime.

To emphasize the importance of these men is not to argue that they created the October Revolution, but to contend that – as was the case in the Libyan, Tunisian, Syrian and Egyptian uprisings in 2011 – the reaction of senior officers within the military was critical to determining whether the anti-regime protests would lead to a peaceful transition to democracy or a more violent suppression of the protests. It was these men that smoothened the passage from the rule of the older generation of soldiers who had inherited the ideals of British militarism to that of the younger radicals imbued with socialist and Arab nationalist philosophies. They facilitated the transition to civilian rule, and yet simultaneously managed to deradicalize the revolution.

The army under Nimeiri and the growth of parallel security organs

In 1964, the military response to the civilian uprising was governed by power struggles within the army; in 1985, it was dictated by conflict not just within the army but also within the 'security forces' at large. An important distinction that can be made between the role of the army and the police in 1964 and in 1985 is that by the time of the latter uprising, Nimeiri had marginalized both of these bodies in favour of his own State Security Organization. The establishment of this body, which merged Nimeiri's previous National Security Organization (NSO) with the intelligence branch of the police, the Public Security Organization (PSO), was the hallmark of a process whereby the president was able to shed his dependence on the police and more directly militarize the security services. One of Sudan's leading generals, the vice-president Umar al-Tayyib, was appointed head of the new security organ. This precipitated a rapid decline in police–military relations. In 1979, Nimeiri established a new pay scale (*taqwim wazifi*)

that effectively placed police officers one pay grade below their counterparts in the army and SSO, making the rank of an 'Amid (brigadier) of the police equivalent to an 'Aqid (colonel) in the army. This led to great disappointment among police officers, and the Supreme Leadership (*al-qiyadat al-'ulya*) of the police and prison service sent a memorandum of protest to the minister of the interior,⁹⁹ who at this time was Abd al-Wahhab Ibrahim, a former head of the then dissolved PSO. The result was a dispute between Ibrahim and Nimeiri, which concluded with the dismissal of the former and the dissolution of the ministry of interior.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, Nimeiri used his presidential authority to emasculate the police leadership, transferring authority over the various branches of the police force to regional governors appointed directly by himself, in addition to a variety of government departments.¹⁰¹ The president was thus able to slowly marginalize the police in favour of the SSO.

Initially, it was only the police force that was marginalized by the establishment of the SSO. Nimeiri seems to have hoped that by appointing Umar al-Tayyib head of the SSO, he would be able to forge relatively close links between security, the regime and the army, since Umar al-Tayyib was a former soldier and had been a long-term friend of the army chief-of-staff Abd al-Majid Hamid Khalil.¹⁰² Nevertheless, in spite of subsidizing the provision of freezers and televisions for members of the armed forces,¹⁰³ he was unable to shelter the army from the widespread economic turmoil the corruption and misguided policies of his regime had brought about. While the relatively privileged army salaries enriched the soldiers themselves, the opposition media outside Sudan was able to observe that these same men were forced to support large families that did not share the same benefits, and suffered greatly as a result of the country's economic stagnation.¹⁰⁴ This was far from being simply opposition propaganda. In October 1980, the British Defence attaché winked at rumours of military discontent, noting 'Money is the root of the problem both for the officers and the other ranks and in this respect SPAF [the Sudan People's Armed Forces] are in no way protected from the effects of inflation (currently running at 30 per cent) by special shops or subsidies.'¹⁰⁵ One senior officer now acknowledges that throughout the early 1980s, military intelligence was publishing daily reports on 'general opinions within the military' (*al-ra'i al-aam al-askari*) that pointed to a 'state of severe agitation' within the military.¹⁰⁶

The Khartoum bread riots of January 1982, during which soldiers were called in to assist in the suppression of student demonstrations, brought Nimeiri's relationship with his top generals to its lowest ebb. On 12 January, the chief-of-staff Abd al-Majid Hamid Khalil, who was also Nimeiri's vice-president, began to attack the regime openly in SSU meetings, condemning its corruption, the brutality with which it had suppressed the recent demonstrations, and its imposition of austerity and privatization measures decreed by the IMF.¹⁰⁷ This was followed up by another meeting between Nimeiri and the entire military leadership, including Abd al-Majid Hamid Khalil, in which the leading soldiers openly attacked the corrupt activities of senior figures such as Bahieddin Idris and Nimeiri's brother Mustafa, and objected to the harsh measures taken against rioters and western Sudanese migrants to Khartoum.¹⁰⁸ The president responded to this challenge by dismissing the entire army leadership, and emasculating the army commanders he replaced them with by cancelling the position of chief of staff and diminishing the authority of the deputy chiefs of staff.¹⁰⁹ Although it cost Khalil

and his companions their jobs, the challenge to Nimeiri does not appear to have been made on any ideological grounds. A British embassy profile of Khalil composed in 1980 claimed that he was 'not thought to have strong political opinions of his own beyond nationalism, anti-communism and loyalty to Nimeiri'.¹¹⁰ Thus, his challenge to the regime indicated the extent to which opposition to Nimeiri within the army was institutional rather than political.

After dismissing Khalil, Nimeiri selected Siwar al-Dahab, a man who reputedly possessed few political ambitions, to run the army on his behalf. He initially awarded him the evidently subordinate position of 'Deputy Commander' (*na'ib al-qa'id*), although he would eventually invest him as commander-in-chief in January 1985.¹¹¹ Throughout the period leading up to the *Intifada*, Siwar al-Dahab appears to have refrained from involving himself in Khartoum's internecine political struggles.¹¹² Meanwhile, Nimeiri replaced Khalil as vice-president with his intelligence chief, Umar al-Tayyib, and army resentment of the SSO continued to develop after this.¹¹³ One factor in the rift between the military and the intelligence services was the conflict between Umar al-Tayyib and Taj al-Din Fadl, who would become Siwar al-Dahab's deputy commander-in-chief in January 1985. Taj al-Din Fadl had originally served as deputy head of the NSO, and had joined the SSO, but a clash of personalities with Umar al-Tayyib forced him to move to the army, where his resentment of the intelligence chief continued.¹¹⁴ By the mid-1980s, therefore, inter-service rivalry between the army and SSO had reached a peak. It was a sign of Nimeiri's deteriorating relationship with the armed forces that he began to provide the SSO with anti-tank weaponry, which the military was astonished to discover when it raided SSO arms dumps in 1985. This seemed to suggest that the dictator had been preparing his principal security organ for a confrontation with the armed forces if it became necessary.¹¹⁵

The SSO not only managed to incur the enmity of the army and the police, but also brought about the hostility of a number of opposition parties in addition to the general public as it had acquired a reputation for corruption, brutality and abuse of power. The most notorious man in the SSO was the head of what came to be referred to as the 'torture unit', Aazim Kabbashi. *Al-Midan*, the underground SCP organ, claimed that Kabbashi had tortured one prisoner by keeping him locked in a cupboard without food for 3 days.¹¹⁶ While *al-Midan* is a partial source, following the *Intifada* the mainstream press organs conducted interviews with a number of individuals who maintained that they had been tortured by the SSO. These interviewees knew about Aazim Kabbashi's torture unit and accused the SSO of whipping detainees, banging their heads against walls and placing them in stress positions.¹¹⁷ The SSO, the officer cadre of which hailed mainly from the riverain core, was reputed to have exercised particular brutality against western Sudanese.¹¹⁸ They also perpetrated acts of torture against members of the Ba'ath Party involved in the famous *muhakama al-fikra*, acts that would resurface and lead to the trial of the officers involved after the *Intifada*.¹¹⁹

Under Umar al-Tayyib, the SSO was also believed to have reached new levels of nepotism. Hasan Bayoumi, a former intelligence officer, maintains that a small cabal known as the *ahl al-thiqqa* ('people of trust') managed to get close to Umar al-Tayyib and persuade him to remove the most qualified officers.¹²⁰ Meanwhile, the transfer of the Ethiopian *fallasha* to Israel (see Chapter 2) was the most extravagant act of

corruption with which Umar al-Tayyib, whose post-1985 prosecutors claimed he had received 150,000 dollars from the American embassy as an incentive, was associated.¹²¹ This further damaged the reputation of the SSO, after news of the transfers was reported in the world media in early 1985.¹²² The images of corruption and brutality associated with the SSO were one of the reasons they provided a focus for popular discontent during the protests – a common chant was ‘death ... to the dogs of security’ (*mawt ... li kilab amn*).¹²³

At the same time as making enemies of the political opposition and general public, in the 2 years preceding the *Intifada* they also managed to enter into conflict with the one political force still supporting the regime, the Islamic Movement. Umar al-Tayyib, a long-time political secularist, never appeared comfortable with Nimeiri's alliance with the Islamic Movement and his conflict with them took a public character in 1984 when al-Mukashifi al-Kabbashi, an Islamist sympathizer who headed the High Court of Appeal, used his position to jail al-Tayyib's brother for corruption and strip him of his assets.¹²⁴ Senior SSO officials frequently complained to Nimeiri about the side effects of his alliance with the ICF. In 1984, they protested to him about the damage that Ikhwan-dominated institutions like Faisal Islamic Bank were doing to the economy through monopolistic practices.¹²⁵ However, it is a testament to the effectiveness of the Islamic Movement's organization that the SSO were, by the admission of former officers, unable to infiltrate it even as it was itself actively recruiting members of the intelligence services.¹²⁶ Thus, the SSO as an institution, just like Nimeiri himself, played a major role in uniting opposition to the regime. They simultaneously provoked the antipathy of the public, the political parties, the police and, crucially, the armed forces.

The genesis of political factions within the armed forces

While Nimeiri's policies were resented by the military on an institutional level, there were also factions within the armed forces that opposed the regime on both ideological and political grounds. After the various failed military coups of the early Nimeiri period, a number of political parties turned to building up their power bases within the army via more gradual methods. The ICF achieved this more systematically and effectively than other political parties, which is unsurprising given the extensive economic resources available to them. It is well known that after Nimeiri's promulgation of the September Laws in 1983, the movement launched a massive drive to recruit police, army and prison officers through the ‘African Islamic Centre’ (*al-merkaz al-Afriki al-Islami*), where they were sent by the government to obtain diplomas in ‘the Islamic call’ and study the principles of *shari'a* and *fiqh*.¹²⁷ On 20 October 1983, over forty officers graduated from this centre in a ceremony attended by Nimeiri, al-Turabi and other senior SSU figures.¹²⁸

Al-Mirghani, a member of the new Free Officers' Organization, which was competing with the Islamic Movement for influence within the military, argues that the Islamists' plan to infiltrate the army began as early as 1977, when the leaders

of the Islamic Movement began to send directives to its members in the secondary schools to enter the Sudan War College, and to university graduates to enter the various technical units, including the medical corps, air corps and financial section.¹²⁹ This is supported by Yasin Umar Imam, then a senior member of the ICF, who acknowledges that from 1978 the Islamic Movement's leadership established a strategy of infiltrating the military with the conscious aim of facilitating a coup.¹³⁰ In 1982, the Movement moved to extend its support base to incorporate the rank and file, using its associated financial institutions and philanthropic agencies to provide new army recruits with loans from Islamic banks and new equipment.¹³¹ These successes in obtaining faithful supporters at all levels of the military hierarchy mirrored the Islamic Movement's success in transforming itself into a mass movement elsewhere in Sudan at the time.

The depth of Islamist penetration of the military was, indeed, a result of direct government policy as much as covert party activity. According to Sa'id and al-Mirghani, it was at the time that Nimeiri announced his 'Islamization' programme in September 1983 that the Islamist presence within the army reached its peak. Indeed, this enabled some pro-Islamists within the military to pursue their political agendas quite openly. Officers sympathetic to the ICF brought *Ikhwanis* into their barracks to preach what al-Mirghani describes as 'religious fanaticism' to their troops.¹³² The government established a new armed forces law that enabled military courts to flog both soldiers and officers found consuming alcohol, which horrified leftists and secularists in an army that had a long tradition of hardcore drinking.¹³³ While many throughout the army would have been open to the 'Islamization' drive – for instance, there are many Hausa, who have been core supporters of the Islamic movement since it started mobilizing a mass popular base in the late 1970s, in the army – others were marginalized. Non-Muslim Nuba and southerners had to be forced to attend the sermons conducted by radical Islamist preachers.¹³⁴ While the Islamists had substantially increased their presence in the military, they did not dominate it.

At the same time that the Islamist cell was beginning to consolidate itself, a new Free Officers' Organization (FOO) was beginning to form within the army to challenge its influence. Unsurprisingly, none of the members of the old Free Officers' group joined this new movement, the majority of them having either died in 1971 or taken up senior positions within the May Regime. The objectives of the new organization, which came into being in earnest around 1976 and then re-appeared in strength in 1983 after a period of inactivity, were similar to those of its elder namesake in 1964 (although not those of 1969). The revivification of the movement almost exposed it to annihilation in October 1983, after a number of its members were uncovered by military intelligence.¹³⁵ However, in spite of reportedly having been tortured, they did not reveal any information about the objectives of the cell and the army leaders thus chose to dismiss them rather than putting them on trial.¹³⁶

Al-Mirghani, one of the founders of the organization, states that it incorporated sympathizers with the various 'modern' political parties – including Ba'athists and communists, and even the Islamist sympathizer Ibrahim Shams al-Din, who wished to bring an end to the military regime and return democracy to the country.¹³⁷

The communists withdrew from the organization in 1977, fearing that it was planning another military coup that would provoke a backlash upon their party similar to that suffered after the 1971 Hashim al-Atta coup.¹³⁸ The Ba'athists, although less scarred by past experiences than the SCP, also had a lukewarm relationship with the Free Officer Organization. The origins of the Ba'athist cell date back to the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–8, when Sudan sent troops to support Ba'athist Iraq and Saddam Hussein repaid the favour by providing a number of Sudanese officers with training in Iraqi military colleges. These officers then formed the nucleus of the Ba'athist cell in the Sudanese army, and a leadership first emerged in January 1984.¹³⁹ The same cell also incorporated a number of DUP officers who were linked to the Ba'ath through the Alliance of the Sudanese People.¹⁴⁰ However, although the Free Officers persuaded one Ba'athist sympathizer, Abd al-Rahman Sa'id, to join the FOO when it re-emerged in 1983, he was not able to coax the leader of the Ba'athist cell, Uthman Balol, into participating. Uthman Balol was apparently afraid that the FOO had come to be too close to the United States, given that a senior Free Officer, Fathi Ahmad Ali, had recently spent 3 years as a military attaché in Washington.¹⁴¹ In this sense, the non-Islamist oppositionists within the army were more divided than in the 1960s, when the Arab nationalists, communists and Ba'athists cooperated within one relatively cohesive 'Free Officer' movement until the cataclysm of 1971.

It seems, nevertheless, that there was a particular recrudescence of political activity within the military in the years leading up to 1985, with three separate ideological movements competing for influence. This in itself was indicative of the fact that – in spite of being the offspring of the Sudanese military's first radical movement – the May putschists had failed to impose the kind of rigid ideology upon Sudan's military that they needed to bind it firmly to the regime. Furthermore, the growth of the Islamist faction within the army and the military authorities' inability or unwillingness to challenge it illustrated the extent to which the regime's constant ideological shifts and fragile alliances were causing it to lose a grip on its agencies of coercion.

Military-civilian links during the 1985 *Intifada*

Given the emergence of numerous cells representing ideological movements opposed to the government within the military in the period leading up to Nimeiri's ouster, it would be easy to assume that the significant role that the army played during the *Intifada* was a direct result of this politicization of this military. However, to do so would be to exaggerate the strength of these various groups, although the Free Officers were visibly engaged in encouraging opposition to the regime during the protests. On 2 April 1985, *al-Watan* reported that the FOO had issued a statement declaring that the Sudan Armed Forces were supporting the revolt against 'Hunger, ignorance and misrule, and for social justice and equality'.¹⁴² Umar al-Tayyib was so disturbed by the movement's activities that he issued a statement on 4 April, 2 days before the success of the *Intifada*, denying that any such organization existed.¹⁴³ Former Free Officers have been quick to stress their part in forging military-civilian links in preparation for the *Intifada*. They maintain that members of the organization contacted the

various professional unions that would form the leadership of the *Intifada* in the days preceding its outbreak and informed them of their sympathy with the goal of regime change.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it would seem that these liaisons were rather *ad hoc*. Leading professionals recall that Alliance leaders and discontented army officers coordinated and shared information, but that there was no 'joint movement'.¹⁴⁵

The fact that these liaisons occurred does not mean that the Free Officers determined the army's behaviour during the *Intifada*, and their impact has to be understood within the context of the rapid and spontaneous development of anti-regime activity within the military and the public at large. Al-Mirghani concedes that the Free Officers' Organization was not strong enough to change the regime by itself and, thus resolved that it should restrict itself to supporting the civilian movement and encouraging opposition to the regime within the military.¹⁴⁶ Awad al-Karim Muhammad Ahmad, the chairman of the Engineers' Union, recalls that one of the Free Officers, Ali Tijani Ali, approached him and encouraged him to delay the mass demonstration that was being planned by the union leaders for the coming Monday till Wednesday, since on Wednesday the army unit on patrol in Khartoum would be one that was linked to the FOO. He states that although he succeeded in persuading the other union leaders to delay the demonstration till Wednesday on the basis that more time was needed, he never revealed the details of his communications with Ali Tijani Ali to them since it had already become clear on the streets that the army as a whole was siding with the public. However, it was also Ali Tijani Ali who, as the National Alliance was meeting to establish the National Charter on 5 April, provided Awad al-Karim with the information that the Army Forces Headquarters was about to take over and displace Nimeiri, and this foreknowledge seems to have given him the impetus to push forward the agenda of the professional movement and ensure that the National Charter was signed before Siwar al-Dahab's famous declaration of 6 April.¹⁴⁷ Thus the Free Officers assisted the professionals and helped to determine their policy at crucial times during the *Intifada*, although it was not their activity that made the *Intifada* possible.

The Islamist and Ba'athist cells were also active during the *Intifada*. It is worth bearing in mind that while the FOO was avowedly pro-democratic and opposed to military rule, both of these groups would be involved in attempted takeovers later in the decade – the successful Islamist coup of 1989 and the failed Ba'athist counter-coup of 1990. However, it seems that in 1985 neither of them came close to successfully effecting a coup, as much as they might have aspired to such an end. Sa'id claims that none of the political cells in the military was strong enough for this, and that members of the groups that he had interviewed denied even having made plans for such a thing.¹⁴⁸ On the other hand, former members of the Sudanese Ba'ath Party – which, as seen in Chapter 3, was probably the most effective of all the parties in mobilizing opposition to Nimeiri's regime in the year before the *Intifada* – recall that its civilian leader tried to persuade Uthman Balol as head of the military wing to launch a coup, but Balol refused.¹⁴⁹ Al-Mirghani states that as the *Intifada* was beginning on 26 and 27 April, the Ba'athists in the military began to gather and hold meetings, but that all this achieved was exposing them to military intelligence.¹⁵⁰ The current Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party leader now claims that after the Alliance of the Sudanese People military wing (which included the Ba'athists) brought two battalions from Jabal Awliya to the

army headquarters to put pressure on the military leadership, the army command placed all its leaders including Uthman Balol under house arrest, but released them after the intercession of other army units.¹⁵¹ It seems that Taj al-Din Abdallah Fadl as deputy commander-in-chief chose not to take full action against these men because of the delicate political situation, although the army leadership would expel a number of them retrospectively in the months following the *Intifada*.¹⁵² While the Ba'ath Party's civilian wing was at the forefront of the civil protests, therefore, the uprising appears to have come too early for the military faction. Nevertheless, both former military Ba'athists and one prominent ex-ICF member now contend that the Islamist faction did perceive that a Ba'athist coup was in the making, and that this led them to escalate the pressure on the army leadership.¹⁵³

As seen previously, the civilian Islamic Movement adopted a somewhat ambivalent stance during the *Intifada*, being at odds with Nimeiri's regime and yet adopting a wary approach towards the National Alliance. Nevertheless, it has been claimed that the military Islamists directly influenced the outcome of the *Intifada*, through the person of Siwar al-Dahab's second in command, Taj al-Din Fadl. Abd al-Aziz Khalid Uthman maintains that he headed an Islamist group within the army that also included Umar al-Bashir, and that it was he who pressured the army to take control on 6 April to prevent the emergence of a secularist regime.¹⁵⁴ This narrative perhaps reflects Abd al-Aziz's frustration that Siwar al-Dahab's declaration of an army takeover thwarted the Free Officers' chances of developing closer links with secular factions in the National Alliance – in this sense, Taj al-Din acts as a convenient figure to blame. A more common and relatively more conservative assertion is that it was Taj al-Din who pressured a hesitant Siwar al-Dahab to announce that the armed forces were 'siding with the people'.¹⁵⁵ However, it is not usually acknowledged that he was part of an Islamist cell. Indeed, in 1973 he had been one of the main individuals responsible for crushing the Sha'aban uprising – in which the ICF had played a significant part.¹⁵⁶ Taj al-Din himself claims that he had no absolute political loyalties, although he states that at school he had sympathized with the National Unionist Party.¹⁵⁷ Members of the ICF who were active at the time identify Taj al-Din as having a neutral stance towards the party, or at least being only a sympathizer¹⁵⁸ – although given the separation between the civilian and military wings of the movement, it is possible that even if he had been in a cell, they would not have known the extent of his involvement. What is more widely acknowledged is that al-Bashir, who was a lieutenant-colonel in the paratroopers at the time, did play a role in informing on Ba'athist activity and endeavouring to mobilize officers within the armed forces against the regime.¹⁵⁹ Some Ba'athists now contend that al-Bashir motivated Siwar al-Dahab's actions on 6 April through his alleged efforts to inform the commander-in-chief of the danger of a Ba'athist takeover on 4 April.¹⁶⁰

Claims have also been made that it was communication between civilian Islamists and Siwar al-Dahab that induced the latter to 'side with the people'. Ali Uthman Taha, who was one of the few civilian Islamists to escape Nimeiri's crackdown on the Islamic Movement in the previous month, claimed 2 years after the *Intifada* that he had addressed a letter to Siwar al-Dahab encouraging the army to take over to prevent bloodshed.¹⁶¹ Other accounts state that this letter was a message from

al-Turabi himself, who managed to smuggle it out of prison with the assistance of a sympathetic warder.¹⁶² It is difficult to gauge the veracity of these accounts, especially given that the Islamic Movement charged the media empire it acquired in the wake of the *Intifada* with the task of glorifying its role in the uprising and countering accusations that it had not participated. However, Abd al-Aziz Khalid Uthman, one of the Free Officers, delivers a similar account about Siwar al-Dahab receiving a message from al-Turabi.¹⁶³ Another part of this narrative that appears to have gained a degree of credence among both pro and anti-ICF sources is that Ali Uthman Taha and other members of the Islamic Movement then went on to bring senior members of the *ulama* (a body of Islamic scholars) to inform the vacillating general that he had their religious sanction to revoke his *ba'ya* (religious oath of allegiance) to Nimeiri.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, this narrative has been somewhat undermined by recent statements made by a senior ICF member, Amin Hasan Umar. Umar insists that Ali Uthman did send a message to Siwar al-Dahab informing him that his oath of allegiance should be considered as an oath not to Nimeiri but to the Sudanese state, and observes that he himself carried the message from Ali Uthman to a relative of Siwar al-Dahab at his house on the evening of 4 April. However, Umar now maintains that the commander-in-chief did not have the opportunity to read this message until just after he had made his famous statement on 6 April. He thus concedes that Siwar al-Dahab made his decision independently of the ICF.¹⁶⁵

Siwar al-Dahab himself comprehensively denies that he was encouraged to seize power by the Islamic Movement. He does not acknowledge having met with any of its representatives in the period *before* the *Intifada* and, with regard to the story about the religious scholars, states that 'This is complete nonsense. Bring these *ulama* who met me!' Insisting that his decision to 'side with the people' was 'a purely military decision', he also argues that the claims that he was a member of the Islamic movement are exaggerated.¹⁶⁶ For instance, while Hasan al-Turabi maintains that Siwar al-Dahab was a member of the Islamic movement at secondary school, all that he himself acknowledges is that he voted for them in school elections on the grounds that he could choose between either them or the communists.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, he clearly holds conservative views, admitting that he sympathized with the execution of Mahmud Muhammad Taha.¹⁶⁸ Umar states that the ICF decided to approach Siwar al-Dahab because although he was not considered a member of the Islamic Movement, 'he was a religious man with links to the Khatmiyya'.¹⁶⁹ It may well be that even though Siwar al-Dahab was not directly prompted by the ICF to take power, his active antipathy towards the SCP and particularly the Ba'athists, who he may have feared were mobilizing for a coup, provided him the motivation. As we have seen, a number of Ba'athists now contend that it was Umar al-Bashir's decision to inform Siwar al-Dahab of a potential Ba'athist coup that jolted the commander-in-chief into action. Siwar al-Dahab – and possibly Taj al-Din as well – probably identified with Islamist political ideals in a broad sense, without having any specific sympathy for the particular party that happened to dominate the Islamic Movement at the time.

It is difficult to deny that members of political formations within the army, whether they were Ba'athist, Islamist, or Free Officer movements, all helped to sow dissent within the military. As will be seen below, the dissension spread by these junior officers

contributed significantly towards the decision of their more senior commanders to break with the regime. However, overstressing the agency of these political formations would lead us to neglect the more general discontent with the political situation within the military that had grown in particular since the conflict between Nimeiri and Abd al-Majid Khalil in 1982.

The military-security conflict

Emphasizing the role of party politics within the military risks neglecting the importance of struggles between institutions and personalities. In particular, the *Intifada* was defined by the conflict between the army and the SSO, including its leader Umar al-Tayyib. In assessing the significance of this conflict, we should again bear in mind Bellin's observation that Arab regimes have tended to survive even extremely vigorous civil protest where the agencies of coercion remain cohesive and united. As observed above, it is unclear whether Nimeiri's intelligence chief was aspiring to take over the government himself or simply hoping to hold off the demonstrators until the president returned. However, he and the security units he commanded were the only group within the overall Sudanese security framework that took action against the protests that began on 26 March 1985, while the army remained passive and the police limited themselves to releasing the occasional burst of tear gas. From the beginning, the SSO deployed men on rooftops and sent plain-clothes gunmen among the crowd to shoot down demonstrators.

The friction appears to have reached its peak at a meeting between Umar al-Tayyib and the army leadership on 4 April. In this meeting, the director of military operations, Uthman Abdullah, presented a report that acknowledged the increasing criticism of the regime among army officers, observing that the recent unrest represented 'a political crisis and not a security crisis', and that trying to keep the regime in power would bring about 'a sea of blood and division within the armed forces'.¹⁷⁰ The report concluded that the army must step in to supervise the transfer of power to a temporary civilian authority.¹⁷¹ Umar al-Tayyib was infuriated by this report, and ordered SSO agents to follow the activities of its principal authors, Uthman Abdullah and Faris al-Husseini. It appears that in this meeting he also faced numerous accusations of corruption and nepotism directed against his own person.¹⁷² The enmity between him and his old foe Taj al-Din Fadl also appears to have revived itself through these events.¹⁷³

In the wake of this stormy meeting, frustrated at the army's refusal to take actions against the crowds, Umar al-Tayyib began to send SSO agents in military clothing onto the streets to shoot at the demonstrators.¹⁷⁴ The calculation was probably that this would provoke general clashes between the armed forces and the crowds, which in turn would force the military to take the side of the regime. The ploy did not work, since the relationship between the soldiers on the street and the general public remained as pacific in the last days of the *Intifada* as it had throughout. Umar al-Tayyib's machinations also appear to have further incensed officers in the armed forces.¹⁷⁵ Again, this reflects the extent to which these officers saw themselves as part of a corporate institution and not simply an extension of the government.

There is, therefore, compelling evidence that it was friction between the various branches of the security forces that helped motivate the military to intervene and topple Nimeiri. This would support the contention that the coherence of the various agencies of coercion is crucial to the capacity of regimes to survive civil dissent.

Tensions between the army leadership and senior commanders

Since the army's role in the *Intifada* was at least partly determined by institutional rivalry with the SSO at the highest levels, it is evident that very senior officers had an important part in mobilizing dissent against the regime. In particular, this included the director of military operations, Uthman Abdullah, and the six regional commanders stationed in Khartoum's six principal military regions. These individuals all helped to pressure the army leadership to take the side of the demonstrating public. While the role played by Uthman Abdullah is very complex, the role of the latter group in particular is interesting because they had no obvious links to any of the ideological organizations within the military.

The senior military leaders were not men of notably radical backgrounds. None of them had participated in the original Free Officer movement, although some of them shared social backgrounds similar to those of its protagonists. Taj al-Din Abdullah Fadl attended the same *Ahliyya* school as Jafa'ar Nimeiri, and had briefly worked as an accountant in one of the cotton projects in the Gezira before joining the military college in 1954.¹⁷⁶ However, he had no history of expressing the kind of sympathy towards civilian dissent that had brought the Free Officers into the political limelight in 1964, or had necessitated Abd-Majid Hamid Khalil's dismissal in 1982. Indeed, he proudly claims that he was the man who crushed the Sha'aban student uprising at the University of Khartoum in 1973.¹⁷⁷ Meanwhile, Siwar al-Dahab hailed from a more privileged background, his father having served as the representative (*khalifa*) of the Khatmiyya patron Sayyid Ali al-Mirghani in al-Ubayyid.¹⁷⁸ Like Taj al-Din Fadl, his actions in the past had been far from radical – as acting commander of the regiment stationed in Gedaref in 1964, he had taken a relatively neutral stance towards the October Revolution, and he had refused to surrender the garrison at al-Ubayyid to Hashim al-Atta during the latter's 3 day coup in 1971.¹⁷⁹ Thus, even though they had no particular ideological or patrimonial commitment to the regime – indeed, as we have seen, Taj al-Din Fadl possessed a number of grudges against Umar al-Tayyib – they were not men who would have been likely to oust it on their own initiative.

Thus, it is worth analysing the role of the regional commanders, who were more emancipated from the regime and applied pressure on Siwar al-Dahab and the general leadership from the army as an institution. These men hailed from a diverse range of social and political backgrounds. Fadlallah Burma Nasir, the commander of Bahri region, was born in South Kordofan, where his father and uncle had both served as leaders in the 'Native Administration' of the Misseiriyya Zuruq.¹⁸⁰ Given his conservative *Ansari* background, it is unsurprising that he had no links to the original Free Officer movement, and that he would join the Umma Party and become

Sadiq al-Mahdi's minister of defence upon retiring from the army in 1986.¹⁸¹ However, Humada Abd al-Azim Humada claims that he actively helped to stage the 1969 coup alongside the Free Officers Khalid Hasan Abbas and Abu'l Gasim Muhammad Ibrahim – both of whom were still active members of the regime at the time of the *Intifada* – and identified with the Arab nationalist sentiments they had expressed.¹⁸² Abd al-Aziz Muhammad al-Amin would join the DUP after his departure from the military following the transitional period.¹⁸³ Nevertheless, in spite of their diverse political backgrounds, the six regional commanders all seem to have corresponded as regards the view that they should reject orders to open fire on the crowds, and appear to have expressed these views in their meeting with the army leadership on the night before the major demonstration on 5 April. Nasir claims that he, among others, put particular pressure on an indecisive army leadership:

we were insisting that at 6 O'clock tomorrow the Sudanese people will go out to demonstrate ... we want your decision, instead they tried to avoid to tell us not to shoot or shoot ... and instead of giving very clear orders, they said the Gaddafi men [the 'Revolutionary Committees', agents of Gaddafi sent to Sudan under Abdullah Zakariyya to foment unrest against his enemy Nimeiri], tomorrow at 5 O'clock they will come out in the street to make some damages. And you know that they want to draw our attention away. And we answered them clearly, we are not interested in the Gaddafi people. We are interested in how we are going to treat our people. Give us your clear instruction, fire or no fire! And they said that there are policemen, and the policemen will take all the necessary steps, not to allow the demonstrations to come to the palace. I told them, if the people ... cross all the defence arrangements and went to the palace ... [they said], ok, if the people cross all the defence arrangements and they entered the palace they will fire on them ... so I said we are not going to obey that, we are not going to shoot! And we are not going to allow any person to shoot!¹⁸⁴

While we have to be aware of potential exaggeration or self-justification here, it is certainly true that the army did not fire on the demonstrators during the period of the *Intifada* and this account at least indicates that there must have been some kind of conflict between the regional commanders and the army leadership, who were, effectively, representatives of the May Regime. As seen above, a number of the senior officers also exchanged heated words with Umar al-Tayyib at the meeting with the vice-president on 4 April. In this meeting, senior members of the army leadership actively refused to comply with his demand that the military declare a state of emergency.¹⁸⁵ Even though Siwar al-Dahab himself now maintains that the decision to 'side with the people' was made by the army leadership unanimously as soon as they witnessed the SSU demonstration of 2 April deteriorate into a 'farce' (*hazila*),¹⁸⁶ his statements at the time suggest that, personally, he was reluctant to take the side of the demonstrators until the very end. When he addressed the officers, NCOs and privates at the Omdurman garrison on the morning of 5 April, he attributed the demonstrations to the malign influence of the Ba'athist and communist parties and promised that the whole army would support Nimeiri.¹⁸⁷ It seems that following this, the regional commanders put further pressure on Siwar al-Dahab and other members of the leadership to change

their minds. Nasir now claims that he would have been put under house arrest had he not complied.¹⁸⁸

Since, with the possible exception of Uthman Abdullah, none of these men were involved in the ideological cells within the army at this time, their response to their superiors does appear to have represented an *army* response to the situation. However, while the regional commanders were pressuring their superiors, they themselves were being pressured by their own subordinates. Immediately after their meeting with Siwar al-Dahab on 5 April, a number of these commanders had returned to their units to face angry demands from their junior officers, which they relayed to Siwar al-Dahab and Taj al-Din Fadl once they in turn had begun to visit the various regional commands.¹⁸⁹ Sa'id argues that it was their realization of the extent of the discontent among these junior officers that appears to have played an important role in pushing them to 'side with the people'.¹⁹⁰ Al-Mirghani asserts that officers in the Engineers' Corps and Armoured Corps even threatened to move their divisions into the centre of Khartoum if the army leadership did not step in and remove Nimeiri, effectively forcing Siwar al-Dahab's hand.¹⁹¹ It is likely that some of this pressure was applied by officers attached to the Islamist, Ba'athist or Free Officer cells. Sa'id states that part of the reason the army leadership decided to act against Nimeiri was the fear expressed by the commanders of the Engineers' Corps and Armoured Corps that there would be a coup within the army led by partisans of either the left or the right.¹⁹² However, it is possible that, given the frenetic pace at which events were unfolding, they overestimated the potential for such an eventuality. It is worth noting that even within the regional commands, a vast majority of the officers were simply expressing their own general frustration at the acts of the regime. Al-Mirghani alleges that it was on this night that the Free Officers played their greatest role, but admits they had (only) 'part of' the credit, and as seen above it is unlikely that any of the ideological cells were capable of bringing about a coup.¹⁹³

The most intimately involved of all the senior officers was Uthman Abdullah, the director of military operations. It was he who suggested that the army take power to 'prevent bloodshed', both in the meeting with Umar al-Tayyib on 4 April and in meetings with the army leadership on 5 April, and it was he who penned Siwar al-Dahab's famous declaration of 6 April.¹⁹⁴ Sa'id suggests that there are a number of reasons why he was, to a certain extent, able to dictate events. First, he enjoyed the complete confidence of both Siwar al-Dahab and Umar al-Tayyib. Secondly, part of his job was to coordinate security arrangements for the capital in cooperation with the police, and his position provided him with the authority to issue instructions to every unit stationed within the capital. Thirdly, on account of his impressive professional qualifications and sociable nature, he was believed to have been both highly respected and liked among the higher, middle and lower ranks alike.¹⁹⁵

However, the role of Uthman Abdullah was probably more complex than that of any other actor because he was, according to a number of accounts, playing a double game. At first, he seemed to be allying himself with the liberals in the military. According to Al-Mirghani, after he took up his position as director of military operations, he came into contact with the FOO and took an oath to join it.¹⁹⁶ Fathi Ahmad Ali, the leader of the FOO, claims that he visited Uthman Abdullah soon after the doctors' strike and informed him that members of his organization would refuse to obey orders

to open fire on civilians.¹⁹⁷ Al-Mirghani maintains that Uthman Abdullah, who also became the military's chief contact with the National Alliance when it was formed on 5 April, kept in constant contact with the FOO through the person of Abd al-Aziz Khalid Uthman, who worked in his office. He even suggests that Abdullah used a copy of the FOO political programme borrowed from Abd al-Aziz Khalid Uthman as the basis of the negotiations he conducted with the National Alliance on behalf of the military.¹⁹⁸

Abd al-Aziz Khalid Uthman himself now recalls Uthman Abdullah's actions during the *Intifada* in a more cynical light. He believes that the director of military operations did not side with the public, but rather that by pushing the military command to take over themselves, he was the man who 'tamed the *Intifada*', and prevented its transformation from an uprising into a full-blown revolution. He recalls that his SSO contact at the time informed him that while Uthman Abdullah was suggesting that the military negotiate a transfer of power in army meetings, in security meetings he was pushing forward a policy of 'shoot to kill'.¹⁹⁹ Uthman Abdullah himself unsurprisingly denies ever having given such an order.²⁰⁰ Nevertheless, a number of other sources support this story, including the then police chief Abbas Madani, who claims to have been on the receiving end of this particular injunction, and former SSO agents Abd al-Aziz and Abu Rannat, who argue that Uthman Abdullah was 'playing both sides' and waiting to see whether it was the army or the SSO who came out of events on top.²⁰¹ They recall that he gave 'full co-operation' to Umar al-Tayyib and the SSO until 12 o'clock on the night of 5 April.²⁰²

Did the senior officers 'side with the people' during the *Intifada*? It is easier in this context to prove negatives than positives. In the cases of crucial figures such as Uthman Abdullah, Siwar al-Dahab and probably other members of the army leadership, it seems that political survivalism rather than sympathy with the objectives of the popular uprising provided the real motive. This does not mean they were part of any great conspiracy to preserve the ideologies and institutions of the May Regime, but simply that they decided to abandon Nimeiri and Umar al-Tayyib only when it became clear that the rest of the army would not stand in the way of demonstrations against these two men. Other senior officers, particularly the regional commanders, did not enjoy the same proximity to the regime that Siwar al-Dahab and the army leadership did, and it is possible that their motives included a general sympathy with the demonstrating public, or at least a professional belief that the army should not be dragged into supporting an autocratic regime. Other important factors that should be considered are their rivalry with the SSO and the pressure exerted on these officers by their own subordinates.

It is also questionable whether the middle-ranking officers working as part of ideological groupings in the army were really 'siding with the people', at least if we interpret 'siding with the people' as a policy of replacing military authoritarianism with genuinely accountable one man, one vote democracy. It is worth remembering that both the Ba'athists and the Islamists would attempt to stage coups half a decade later, the latter group successfully. The Free Officers appear to have been more committed to establishing democracy, particularly if we believe Abd al-Aziz Khalid Uthman's statement that the organization was dissolved following the *Intifada* on the grounds

that it had achieved its purpose.²⁰³ We should not downplay the agency that these groups exercised during the *Intifada* – after all, one of the reasons the army leaders took power in the manner that they did appears to have been their fear of the potential for a coup by one of the ideological groups in the armed forces. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that such a coup would probably not have been possible at this juncture, and that discontent in the army as among the public had become general and was not confined to specific party groupings. Whether or not stories of ‘Islamist’ influences on Taj al-Din and Siwar al-Dahab are true, it is more likely that it was the pressure exercised on them by their subordinates that made them make the decisions they did.

Police restraint in 1985

The police, just like the army, opposed Nimeiri’s regime on an institutional basis. As demonstrated above, the police force shared a number of the army’s grievances and, in particular, its resentment towards the SSO. As a result, it showed a similar lack of commitment to upholding the May Regime. At a conference held in November 1985, the National Alliance accepted the police force’s request that it should be acknowledged as being among the first forces that carried out the *Intifada*.²⁰⁴ Participants in the uprising now recall that the police ‘helped the people’ because they were ‘linked to them’ and opposed the lack of ‘justice’ (*adala*) under Nimeiri.²⁰⁵ However, popular identification with the police occurred in a somewhat different context during the 1985 uprising. Whereas the 1964 rebellion broke out among the urban educated elite, the later *Intifada* was the fruit of a temporary social alliance between this group and the marginalized populations of the shanty-towns.²⁰⁶ The fact that the police identified with the uprising and were remembered as being ‘linked’ to the people therefore reflects the shifting demographics of the police force itself, which after having been marginalized by the regime from the late 1970s onwards had increasingly resorted to recruiting from among the peri-urban poor.²⁰⁷

However, the extent to which the police force had an active and autonomous role in the 1985 uprising is questionable. During its first days, between 27 March and 3 April, it did participate in campaigns to rid the capital of the unemployed ‘vagrants’ held to be responsible for the protests, and used batons, tear gas and gunfire on rioters, reportedly killing between six and eighteen of them on 27 March.²⁰⁸ Nevertheless, it appears that the attitude of the police towards the demonstrators gradually became more sympathetic. There were leaflets issued in the name of a ‘Police Officers’ Association’ indicating that the force would be willing to join in any campaign against the regime, although the government unsurprisingly dismissed these as propaganda spread by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army.²⁰⁹ It was on 3 April that the police first appeared to participate alongside the demonstrators, who began to lift policemen onto their shoulders chanting ‘police go with the people’.

Some eyewitnesses recall that the police did not themselves participate in the demonstrations in any active way, and in this sense their actions were purely symbolic.²¹⁰ However, others recall that they effectively shepherded the demonstrations to act as a

'barrier against the SSO'.²¹¹ According to the well-supported story cited above, Abbas Madani actively refused Uthman Abdullah's demands that the police should 'shoot to kill'.²¹² By 5 April, one of the decisive days of the uprising, even the riot police were actively refusing to confront large crowds of protesters.²¹³ The response of the police to the civil protests was, therefore, just as significant as that of the army, and illustrated the same tendency of professionalism and resentment towards Nimeiri's personalized security agencies.

Conclusion

The fact that the role of the 'Free Officers' in 1964 is given more attention in academic texts than that of the namesake organization in 1985 is a classic exemplar of the old adage that winners write the history books. Whereas the Free Officer movement of 1964 would spearhead a military coup 5 years later on, the 1985 organization disbanded itself soon after the restoration of democracy, on the – in hindsight, somewhat overoptimistic – pretext that since multi-party politics had returned to the country, it no longer served any purpose.²¹⁴ This explains the disparity in the degree of significance awarded to each movement by the historic narrative. During both uprisings, officers involved in each organization exerted a considerable amount of pressure on their seniors that played an important role in ensuring that the army 'sided with the people', but they did not dictate the manner in which the transition from autocracy to democracy occurred.

During both uprisings, three important categories within the army can be identified. First and foremost, there was the army leadership, which was identified with the regime, although it embodied the government more directly in 1964 than in 1985, since leading army officers also held cabinet portfolios under Abboud. Secondly, there were the radicalized factions within the junior ranks who were affiliated to political cells within the military. Thirdly, there was a 'middle' category of senior and middle-ranking officers who were not a part of the immediate army leadership and thus acted as mediators between the first and second groups. In both cases it was this 'middle' group, rather than the junior radicals, that dictated the role that would ultimately be played by the army in the revolution. This group also tended to embody the corporate mind of the army as an institution, given that it was not directly incorporated into either the regime or the left- or right-wing factions among the junior ranks. However, there were links between the junior radicals and the higher echelons – Umar al-Haj Musa consciously protected the Free Officers in 1964, whereas Uthman Abdullah developed an altogether more nebulous relationship with the organization of the same name in 1985. There were also more specific interest groups within this middle-ranking faction pursuing their own agendas. In both uprisings, the senior officers who stood to gain most from military regimes that had been supported by the Khatmiyya were Umma/*Ansar*-affiliated generals such as al-Tahir al-Maqbul, Muhammad Idris Abdullah and Awad al-Soghayrun in 1964, and Fadlallah Burma Nasir, who would become the third parliamentary regime's minister of defence following his participation in the 1985 *Intifada*.

In some respects, the parallels between the military involvements in the two uprisings are striking. In both cases, politician factions within the military – the Free Officers in 1964 and the Islamists in 1985 – proved unwilling or unable to launch a coup, but used the experience to test their political mettle in preparation for a takeover around half a decade later. In both cases, social affinities between army officers and the urban elite were highly relevant. However, there were also important differences. In 1964, army intervention was determined partly by a principled belief that the military should not be dragged into politics, and partly by the fact that its junior officers were inspired by radical ideologies emanating from the wider Middle East. In 1985, the army, like the police, had far more general grievances against the May Regime, both because Nimeiri had endeavoured to marginalize it in favour of the SSO and because its privates and NCOs were suffering from the deteriorating economic situation just as much as other sectors of the population. Moreover, in 1985 the army leadership was not represented as directly within the government as was the case in 1964. For this reason, the army's decision to 'side with the people' was probably more inevitable in 1985 than in 1964, in spite of Siwar al-Dahab's vacillations. This same situation enabled the military leadership to take, perhaps somewhat undeserved, credit for the army's role in the uprising and establish itself as the dominant force in the political arena. Another significant difference in 1985 was that there were three main political organizations operating within the military, as opposed to one. This flourishing of political activity thus represented a power struggle between various factions just as much as it did an instinctive decision by the armed forces to 'side with the people'. Siwar al-Dahab himself 'sided with the people' so as to undercut these various competing factions.

The role played by the police force was also subtly different in 1985 from that in 1964, since the police, like the army, already had a number of pre-existing grievances against the regime and were thus considerably less disposed towards quelling the uprising on its behalf. However, once more it is possible to make broad comparisons between the role of the force in each of the two events. Although the clash with the students in 1964 sparked the uprising, after this the force lapsed into a passivity similar to that which was witnessed in 1985. This demonstrated the failures of both Abboud and Nimeiri, respectively, to establish a rigid divide between police and public. Both in 1964 and 1985, senior policemen hailed from the same relatively homogenous riverain elite that army officers, senior professionals and leaders of the major northern parties did. Thus, once it had become clear that the majority of the riverain elite and, in particular, the judiciary supported the anti-regime movement, it never appeared likely that the police would commit themselves to a forceful subjugation of the protesters. Even when the police did clash with the students during the famous seminar of 21 October 1964, the bungled manner of the operation demonstrated the limitations imposed on the use of the police as a serious tool of social and political control.

It cannot be said that either the army or the police created October 1964 or April 1985, although the manner in which they responded to the uprisings did to some extent determine the eventual outcome. The actions of all the various groups within the army were highly reactive and spontaneous. In 1964, the 'middle' group of senior and middle-ranking army officers swung between sympathizing with the old guard and identifying with the young radicals, depending on the course of events. In 1985, the

Ba'athist and Islamist factions, although initially established for the explicit purpose of launching a coup, were caught by surprise and thus found themselves not fully prepared for such a plan to be put into effect. Although the Free Officers coordinated with the professional movement to help stage the *Intifada*, they too were overtaken by the sheer pace with which the uprising unfolded. The army, or various factions within it, may at times have acted decisively to shape the course of the two uprisings, but for the most part, their actions were responsive, reflecting the internal divisions within the military. Nevertheless, the fact that the very existence of these divisions prevented a decisive show of support for the regime was in itself crucial to the success of the *Intifada*.