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The 1964–5 Transitional Regime: A Missed Opportunity?

The transitional period of 1964 is often cast in somewhat binary terms as a clash between ‘communists and radical forces’ who were slowly defeated by a ‘conservative/traditional bloc’.¹ According to Mansur Khalid, the ‘progressive elements of the Professional Front ... called for ‘the phasing out of native administration, land and agrarian reforms and the pursuit of a non-aligned foreign policy’, while ‘those slogans did not go down well with the traditionalists who depended heavily for their survival on the traditional tribal leadership as well as the exploitation of the rural poor.’² Such statements reflect the contemporary influence of ‘modernization theory’, which assumed that ‘modernity’ and ‘traditional values’ such as ethnicity, sectarianism and clan loyalty were mutually exclusive values, and that the former would eradicate the latter.³ However, more recent Africanist scholarship contends that ethnicity is a far more dynamic social and political force than modernization theorists would have us believe, and has facilitated political pluralism by enabling the representation of various social groups otherwise marginalized by authoritarian military-led governments.⁴

In the Sudanese case, the divides between the ‘progressives’ and the ‘traditionalists’ were not as decisive or as immediate as is often assumed. As will be seen later, many of the ‘traditional’ forces at the time shared the same agendas as the Professional Front and the SCP. The early phases of the transitional government witnessed a continuation of the same alliances, between parties and professionals, left and right, proletariat and bourgeoisie, which had characterized the Revolution itself. In 1964 there was no single issue that would prove to be as divisive as the September Laws would be in 1985, and thus the conflict within the revolutionary fronts – although constantly simmering below the surface – did not become immediately manifest.

The Professional Front and transitional cabinet

An element of compromise was evident in the selection of both the interim cabinet and the Professional Front leadership. There had initially been tension between the *Ikhwani* and communist factions within the Front, with both sides accusing each other of attempting to create fake associations to boost their own representation. As seen previously, some claim that Hasan al-Turabi had been responsible for switching the

professionals' headquarters to the Doctors' Union on 26 October and had done so to outmanoeuvre the communists within the Front.⁵ However, the meeting on 27 October was held at the house of a political independent, Ahmad al-Amin, where members appointed another neutral, Jafa'ar Karrar, as their chairman so as to ward off potential disputes between SCP and Muslim Brotherhood elements. The leadership of the Front picked two secretaries – one a communist (Farouk Abu Eissa) and the other a Muslim Brother (Ahmad al-Tijani) to support Karrar.⁶ The professionals thus acknowledged the existence of separate factions within the Front and did their best to balance them against each other.

A similar series of compromises brought about the election of Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa as the interim prime minister. The Professional Front originally proposed left-leaning figures such as Abdin Isma'il, and then Taha Ba'ashar, as candidates for the position, but the more conservative political parties refused to accept either of these nominations.⁷ Ultimately al-Khalifa, a senior civil servant from the ministry of education, was chosen because, like Karrar, his apparent lack of political affiliations made him acceptable to most parties. He hailed from a famous Khatmiyya family and was about to marry into a prestigious *Ansari* one until the Revolution delayed his wedding by 1 week.⁸ This did not necessarily mean that al-Khalifa identified with the Umma, NUP or PDP any more than it meant that the numerous radical, secular or leftist figures with *Ansari* or *Khatmi* connections did. He was, of course, a professional himself. His fellow professionals also believed him to be a popular and competent man who had few political enemies and was acceptable to the public in the south, where he had recently spent 11 years working for his ministry.⁹ However, it is noteworthy that it was leaders of the student union at the Technical Institute, which was controlled by a party affiliated with the Umma and NUP, who originally approached him and brought him into the Professional Front, and that it was an NUP man, Mubarak Zarroug, who nominated him for the post of prime minister.¹⁰ While he cannot exactly be characterized as a 'reactionary' figure, his appointment belies the notion that the left dominated the transitional government from the very start.

The election of the interim cabinet also represented a subtle balancing act. The United National Front (UNF) – the body that brought the political parties and the Professional Front together – had initially agreed upon a plan that would guarantee its political neutrality. According to this plan, the political parties and the professionals would share the right to nominate ministers to the interim cabinet. Five political parties – the Islamic Liberation Front, the Sudan Communist Party, the Umma Party, the National Unionist Party and the People's Democratic Party – would each have the right to put forward one minister.¹¹ The individuals that were appointed all turned out to be senior party representatives, such as Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub of the Umma, who became foreign minister, or the Brotherhood's Muhammad Salih Umar, who acquired the Animal Resources portfolio.¹² Meanwhile, the UNF agreed that the Professional Front would have the right to nominate eight ministers, and the 'Southern Front' two.¹³

It was the appointment of the Professional Front's nominees that generated the controversy that would dominate the first transitional government. Political conservatives argued at the time, and have argued since, that the SCP and the

Professional Front – which it supposedly dominated – used this arrangement to impose leftist ministers on the cabinet.¹⁴ Al-Sadiq al-Mahdi maintains that the professionals tricked the parties, claiming that the UNF and Professional Front had originally agreed that the professional representatives would have no political affiliation, and that the Professional Front betrayed this agreement by nominating communists or ‘fellow travellers’.¹⁵ One contemporary Islamist denigrator of the October Revolution has even gone so far as to assert that there were ‘eleven communists’ in the fifteen-man transitional cabinet.¹⁶

This is going too far. Only three members of the interim cabinet were active SCP members: Ahmad Sulayman, the minister of agriculture, Amin Muhammad al-Amin, the minister of health, and Shafi’ Ahmad al-Shaikh, the minister of labour.¹⁷ While these were hardly key portfolios, the Umma’s representative, Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub, obtained the crucial post of foreign minister and the NUP man, Mubarak Zarroug, became finance minister.¹⁸ Admittedly, a number of the other ministers were ‘very near to the Communist Party, but not members of it’.¹⁹ Abdin Isma’il, the left-leaning chairman of the Bar Association who acquired the local government portfolio, probably fitted within this category. However, the information minister Khalafallah Babikir was more of a pro-Egyptian than a pro-communist.²⁰ Such individuals struck political alliances with the SCP because – in contrast to other North African and Middle Eastern territories where Arab nationalists and Communists entered into, at times violent, political conflict – the religious parties were so strong that they compelled adherents of these two modern ideologies to combine to put forward a secular agenda. In 1968, Abdin Isma’il as a ‘socialist’ and Khalafallah Babikir as an ‘Arab Nationalist’ would join a coalition of ‘leftist forces’ that comprised communists, Independent Marxists, socialists and Arab nationalists, to put forward a leftist candidate in the 1968 elections.²¹

At the same time, other interim ministers were genuinely chosen on the basis of their qualifications rather than political affiliation – for instance, Rahmatullah Abdullah was not even a member of the Professional Front but was chosen as minister of education due to his experience in the field.²² Moreover, it should be observed that leftist ideologies were prevalent among educated and professional elites in general at the time – just as Islamist ideals had acquired a certain hegemony in 1985. Thus, the fact that a number of the ministers in the interim regime sympathized with the SCP was hardly as much evidence of direct political manipulation by the party as a reflection of broader trends within Sudanese intellectual and political life. As we have seen, the SCP was in many regards more a left-wing faction within a wider bourgeois nationalist movement than a direct representative of the oppressed proletariat.²³

The cabinet was hardly a ‘government of the workers’ – only Amin Muhammad al-Amin, the representative of the Gezira tenants, and the veteran trade unionist Shafi’ Ahmad al-Shaikh fell within this category. Apart from these two, it was very much a bourgeois government, employing five lawyers (Mubarak Zarroug, Abdin Isma’il, Ahmad Sulayman, Muhammad Mahgub, Ahmad Sayyid Hamad), two former ambassadors (Rahmatullah Abdullah and Abd al-Karim Mirghani), three civil servants (Khalafallah Babikir, Clement Mboro and Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa), a university lecturer (Muhammad Salih Umar), and a journalist (Ambrose Wol).²⁴ Abu Eissa refers

to these men as 'effendiyya', utilizing the term coined during the Condominium period to refer to the elite produced by the colonial education system.²⁵

The northern ministers were all men who hailed from the riverain centre of Sudan – it is perhaps revealing that it was not the transitional government but the subsequent Umma-led parliamentary governments, deemed 'reactionary' by the 'modern forces', that would incorporate Darfuri ministers for the first time.²⁶ Nevertheless, the fact that a southerner, Clement Mboro, became minister of interior was of considerable consequence. For such a major position to be obtained by a representative of a regional group that had previously touched only the fringes of northern Sudanese politics suggested the radical nature of the new regime. In this regard, the 1964 transitional government can be loosely compared to that of 2005 in that it empowered militant southerners while doing little to embrace the marginalized peoples of the north.

The incorporation of these militant southerners, and the presence of the leftist ministers in the cabinet, would soon set the stage for a clash with the more conservative political forces. However, it would be the combustible relationship between the cabinet and the military that exposed the first cracks within the new regime.

Civil-military relations and the 'Night of the Barricades'

The relationship between the military and the interim regime at the beginning of the transitional era was the product of another series of compromises. While the army had agreed to relinquish the key post of minister of defence to the transitional prime minister Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa, they were simultaneously able to negotiate Abboud's retention as the head of state. This ensured that the military continued to have a say in Sudanese politics – although it remained divided, just as it had been in the revolutionary period, between relatively conservative factions sympathetic to the old regime and those that identified with the junior radicals. These conflicts within the military would define the subsequent phases of the Revolution.

The conservatives within the army leadership attempted to use the transitional period as an opportunity to root out those young officers who had displayed their radical proclivities in Sudan's 'Revolutionary week'. They struck on 7 November, when Abboud arrested seven officers associated with the Free Officer Organization, including Jafa'ar Nimeiri, Rashid Nur al-Din and Faruq Hamdallah. The press later reported that these individuals had been accused of plotting a coup on behalf of a foreign power, presumably Egypt.²⁷ However, it seems that the real reason for their detention was that they had presented a petition to their seniors demanding the dismissal of every member of the November junta from the military. Bireir, although his chronology is somewhat confused, maintains that Awad al-Soghayrun had presented Abboud with a list of twenty-four officers whom he advised the president to pension off, claiming that they had been witnessed at a conspiratorial meeting in Jafa'ar Nimeiri's house.²⁸

Abboud's decision to apprehend the seven men provoked an immediate response. Free Officers who had escaped arrest began to distribute pamphlets condemning the detentions.²⁹ Meanwhile, the SCP chairman Abd al-Khaliq Mahgub contacted Farouk Abu Eissa and instructed him to mobilize the Professional Front to protest against

the decision.³⁰ Abu Eissa then contacted Jafa'ar Karrar and the other professional leaders, and together they agreed to arrange demonstrations to voice opposition to the arrests, entering cinemas and football stadiums to warn the public of the dangers of a reactionary coup.³¹ The Front met and members of the Bar Association proposed a motion that all the former SCAF generals should be taken into custody; the leadership of the Professional Front accepted this proposal and sent news to the cabinet informing them of their decision.³² As this was happening, four members of the cabinet – Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa, Abdin Isma'il, Clement Mboro and Mubarak Zarroug – met with Abboud to complain about the arrest of the Free Officers, rejecting the president's claim that he was pursuing a purely internal military matter.³³ Under pressure from the crowds massing in the street around the cabinet building, Abboud accepted the Front's demand and ordered the arrest of all the former strongmen of the old regime. They included the entire SCAF other than Abboud himself, as well as the senior police officials Ahmad Abdullah Abbaro and Abbas Muhammad Fadl, and the previous foreign minister Ahmad Khair.³⁴ The decision represented a victory for professional solidarity against military intransigence.

The prime minister's assault upon Abboud's old guard did not exactly represent a 'swing to the left'. Of the four ministers who met with Abboud, only Abdin Isma'il had any links to the SCP. That a leftist, a southerner and an NUP man would join together with al-Khalifa to support his protest against Abboud indicated that the desire to stamp out any legacies of the military regime was more significant than the divisions that existed among the various political parties at this time. Moreover, the two army officers with whom the cabinet consulted to arrange the arrests, Muhammad Idris Abdullah and Baqar Abu Bakr, were men with no known connections with the Free Officers. This indicates that the senior and middle-ranking officers immediately outside the ranks of the former regime were still in charge at this point.

Nevertheless, the events that occurred a few hours after the arrests of the former SCAF men proved far more divisive – to the extent that it remains, up till the present, difficult to piece together an objective narrative of what occurred. It was reported in the press the next day that Uthman Nasr of the Signallers' Corps had been preparing a coup that would overthrow the transitional regime. The Professional Front had issued a warning via Omdurman Radio calling upon the people of Khartoum to come to protect the radio station and the cabinet building. The crowds had then flocked to these two buildings, and barricaded the Blue and White Nile bridges so as to prevent the tanks rolling into central Khartoum.³⁵ This is why the evening of 9 November 1964 would later become known as the 'Night of the Barricades' (*laila al-mataris*).

The question of whether or not a coup by Uthman Nasr was genuinely imminent remains a contentious one. Sirr al-Khatim Khalifa came on the radio later in the evening and denied that there had been any movement in the army, urging the demonstrators to return to work.³⁶ A number of anti-communist sources now assert that the whole story was a fictitious one spread by the SCP and their leading representative in the Professional Front, Farouk Abu Eissa – who is said to be the man who broadcast the rumour of the coup on Omdurman Radio.³⁷ It is indisputable that the SCP had a major role in circulating the story, whether it was true or false – other members of the Front who participated in the anti-coup demonstrations remember that it was communist

acquaintances who told them that the Signallers' Corps was planning a takeover.³⁸ Abu Eissa acknowledges that he had a role in mobilizing the Front and obtaining permission from the director of the radio station for the statement warning of the coup to be broadcast – although he states that it was the regular newsreader, rather than he himself as is usually maintained, who read out the statement. Nevertheless, he insists that there had genuinely been a *putsch* in the making, stating that he was informed about separate movements in the Service Corps (*salah al-khidma*) and Signallers' Corps (*salah al-ishara*) by members of his party and by students inhabiting the 'barracks' dormitory adjoining the army training grounds, respectively. He claims that his student informers had been sent by their families to discover why relatives in the Signallers' Corps had not returned home for tea, and had witnessed Uthman Nasr declaring to his men that the corps 'was going to restore the honour of the army which had been dragged through the mud by the *effendiyya*'.³⁹

An alternative explanation for the rumours about the coup is offered by Free Officer insider Mahjub Bireir. Bireir claims that they were fictitious, but asserts that the deception originated not within the SCP, but within the army itself. Bireir maintains that a number of junior and middle-ranking officers had wished to see further purges among the senior army command, and thus effectively used the SCP as their tool by providing members of the party with a fictional story about a proposed coup attempt so that the resulting popular backlash would lead to further cleansing in the military.⁴⁰ As is the case with the other stories that concern these events, it is impossible to either confirm or deny Bireir's account. However, if it is true, it would support a somewhat more realistic picture of Free Officer activity during this period, in which the movement chose to subtly influence the course of events rather than making itself the powerhouse of the Revolution.

What is perhaps more interesting than the factual verity of the numerous claims made regarding the 'Night of the Barricades' is the manner in which the various political blocs within the Professional Front interacted in responding to the perceived threat of a military counter-revolution. It seems that the fears of a reactionary coup united the diverse civilian factions. Among the members of the Front who accompanied Farouk Abu Eissa to the radio station to broadcast the news of the supposed takeover were two members of the Muslim Brotherhood, including the General Guide (*al-Murshid al-'Aam*) Ali Talaballah.⁴¹ Leftists who participated in the 'Night of the Barricades' tend to acknowledge that individuals associated with the other political parties joined them in the streets to help ward off the rumoured coup. Fathi Fadl, one of the communists on the KUSU executive committee, claims that representatives of all political factions within KUSU came out onto the street on the evening of 9 November, because their enmity towards the military was far greater than that towards their civilian adversaries.⁴² Abd al-Hamid Fadl, the Umma-affiliated president of the Technical Institute student union, admits that he believed the coup rumour when he heard it from Shaikh Rahmatullah, a student communist who served as secretary of the KUSU executive committee, and went on to lead all the students of the Technical Institute towards the Blue Nile Bridge.⁴³ Meanwhile, Ali Abdullah Yaqub insists that it was the Muslim Brotherhood who organized the closure of the bridge to prevent an army takeover.⁴⁴ Even in the western town of Nyala, where the

SCP had sparse political support, the local press reported that civil disobedience had been declared, that 5,000 people had demonstrated in the towns and that there had been plans for the people of the town to drive to Khartoum to protect it from the military reactionaries.⁴⁵ In other words, there was still widespread cooperation between members of the various social and political factions at the time of the 'Night of the Barricades'. These events were defined by the same unifying streak of urban nationalism that had characterized the Revolution itself.

Although the broad composition of the demonstrations witnessed during the night of 9 November illustrated just how cohesive the pro-democracy movement still was, events later in the evening would provide the catalyst for the emergence of serious schisms and, ultimately, the disintegration of the Professional Front. It seems that when the rightists within the Front came to believe that the coup rumour had not been true after all, bitter recriminations broke out with their colleagues on the political left. Mallasi recalls that he returned to the Lecturers' Club later that evening and discovered members of the Brotherhood haranguing the various leftists present and protesting that the coup story was part of a conspiracy organized by the SCP and Farouk Abu Eissa, whom they were threatening to hang for his role.⁴⁶ The disputes then persisted after Khalafallah Babikir broadcast a statement from the Ministry of Information denying that there had been any military plot. Mallasi states that senior members of the Front continued rowing as they drove to the ministry in the wake of this news, and at one point they had to stop their car to prevent Farouk Abu Eissa from physically strangling Hasan al-Turabi!⁴⁷ Abu Eissa argues that Mallasi 'dramatically exaggerated' his fracas with al-Turabi, but concedes that the atmosphere was 'full of tension'.⁴⁸

It appears that these events upset the delicate series of compromises that had held the Professional Front together. Ali Abdullah Yaqub asserts that the next day he helped to organize an anti-SCP march with the collaboration of the Umma Party and NUP, with participants proceeding towards the ministry of information chanting 'Abd al-Khaliq [Mahgub] is the enemy of God' and 'Khartoum is not Moscow'.⁴⁹ As will be seen, these three parties – the NUP, Umma and the Muslim Brotherhood – would later collaborate on a number of issues, though not all, to combat what they perceived to be the SCP agenda. The rifts within the Professional Front appear to have widened after this date, and led to a major decline in its ability to influence transitional politics.⁵⁰ Jafa'ar Karrar would later lament that the left and right had simply not given the centre a chance.⁵¹

The political whirlwind that blew through Sudan between 7 and 9 November also left its mark on the army. The detention of the seven Free Officers exposed tensions between the officers who sympathized with the junior radicals and those who feared them. According to Bireir, other Free Officers who escaped arrest were able to utilize their contacts within the cabinet to secure the release of their imprisoned colleagues.⁵² They were, indeed set free on 11 November.⁵³ This immediately provoked a conflict within the army leadership between senior officers such as Hasan Fahl, Umar al-Haj Musa and al-Tayyib al-Mardi – the latter two would become ministers under the May Regime – who sympathized with the movement and had supported the move to get the Free Officers released, and Abboud and Awad al-Soghayrun who had been responsible for their arrest.⁵⁴ The less conservative faction won out, with the assistance of a report

from the clandestine Free Officer and head of military intelligence Babikir al-Nur, which comprehensively denied the allegation that a conspiratorial meeting had been held in Jafa'ar Nimeiri's house.⁵⁵ This seemed to indicate that in the military, at least, the radicals were starting to enter into the ascendancy. By the end of November, both Abboud and Awad al-Soghayrun had been removed by the cabinet.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Abboud was still permitted to dictate his choice of replacement as commander-in-chief. He elected General Khawwad Muhammad, who he believed to be a relatively apolitical officer who would steer the army away from radical ideologies.⁵⁷

The series of events surrounding the 'Night of the Barricades' thus proved to be just as critical to the overall outcome of the Revolution as those that had occurred between 21 and 28 October. They exposed the severity of the divisions that existed within the army between radical and conservative factions, and the fact that the former was gradually increasing its influence. At the same time, they led to the complete removal of the military presence within the government. They raised the Professional Front to the summit of its influence, and then saw it fragment in the wake of inter-party rivalry. They revealed how powerful and expressive a force the northern Sudanese urban public could be when it was united by the ideals of nationalism and democracy, but also generated divisions that would exacerbate themselves as the transitional period continued.

Election disputes and the disintegration of the transitional government

The tensions that manifested themselves within the Professional Front after the 'Night of the Barricades' were soon matched by a more wide-ranging series of disputes that encompassed the cabinet, the professionals and the political parties. While it was the issue of Islamic law that would divide the left and right in 1985, in 1964 it was debates over the timing and nature of the upcoming elections that polarized ideological differences within the transitional government. However, although disagreements over this issue were perhaps inevitable, they were not immediate.

To understand how a government that comprised various 'satellites' of the competing political parties could forge any kind of common position, we have to understand the nature of its social composition. Apart from the two southerners and the two workers' leaders, the other eleven members of the transitional cabinet represented the professional bourgeois of the urban north. As a result of this, there was considerable social affinity between these ministers, which transcended party boundaries. The fact that five of them were lawyers was particularly important. Observations made by the British Ambassador following a meeting with one of these five, Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub, are indicative of the role that professional and social ties played in uniting the cabinet:

The foreign minister, both at this and a different point, made remarks which suggest that he regards the Sudanese Communists with some equanimity. Speaking of Ahmad Suleiman, the Communist minister of agriculture, he said that the minister

was a communist 'only in name'. We know that Ahmad Suleiman, together with another Communist minister, Abdin Isma'il, is a constant visitor of the foreign minister's house. Ahmad Suleiman begun his law career in the foreign minister's chambers and the two men are close personal friends. Ahmad Suleiman is a man of considerable charm and persuasive ability and it may be that his influence over the foreign minister is greater than the foreign minister thinks.⁵⁸

An important fact overlooked by this source was that Ahmad Sulayman, Abdin Isma'il and Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub were all members of the Bar Association, which reinforced the solidarity between them.

The fact that professional and personal affinities were so significant leads us to question whether the importance of party ideologies has been overestimated. It is worth remembering in this context that a number of Sudanese politicians in this era, like Mahgub and Sulayman, joined parties not simply for ideological reasons but also because they provided a launch pad for their political careers. Mahgub, although he was a member of the Umma Party, was often critical of the programmes put forward by al-Sadiq al-Mahdi.⁵⁹ There were many intellectuals and professionals in the SCP, but part of the reason for this was the fact that they considered it the only genuinely national party, given that apart from the Muslim Brotherhood the other major political parties all relied upon patrimonial religious orders for their backing.⁶⁰ Their commitment to Marxists ideals was often somewhat lukewarm. Ahmad Sulayman, for instance, would later switch allegiance to Nimeiri's SSU, and then to al-Turabi's NIF.⁶¹ He, Abdin Isma'il and Farouk Abu Eissa – the three SCP/pro-SCP lawyers who were so influential in the Revolution itself – were all happy to distance themselves from the party and side with Nimeiri during the rift of 1970. This kind of 'political nomadism' reflected the fact that in Sudan, as elsewhere in the region, class boundaries were fluid and class-based ideologies imported from the West were not adhered to as rigidly as they were in countries where social classes were clearly defined.⁶²

One positive consequence of the professional camaraderie that united these individuals was that they were able to agree on significant changes to the electoral law. In a series of decisions between November and December 1964, the cabinet determined that the voting age would be lowered from 21 to 18, candidates as young as 30 would be permitted to contest, and women would be given the vote for the first time in Sudanese history.⁶³ It also resolved to further the representation of the 'modern forces' by increasing the number of seats set aside for university graduates to fifteen.⁶⁴ This was in effect a sop to the left and in particular the SCP, which would win eleven of these seats when the elections took place.⁶⁵ Although there was lengthy debate within the cabinet over the measures concerning the age of suffrage and candidature, and the NUP and Umma were said to have been against the decisions,⁶⁶ no major political crisis emerged as a result. Although the increase in graduate representation empowered the SCP, it was the university-educated elite that provided the party with its leadership – and enabled it to identify on both a social and professional level with the men who led the transitional government – that benefited the most.

Two other issues regarding the elections provoked a far greater division within the cabinet. First of all, in January 1965, the SCP proposed allocating 50 per cent of the seats in the new parliament to workers' representatives. This was supported by the

Professional Front, in addition to the PDP, which had entered into an alliance with the SCP.⁶⁷ As we have seen, in the aftermath of the Revolution, the PDP had become a vehicle for Nasserists and Ba'athists within the 'modern forces'. Mallasi claims that the Khatmiyya leadership, even though it had established the PDP, did not interfere significantly in the running of the party during this period.⁶⁸ However, other religio-political parties vehemently opposed the proposed electoral measures, claiming that they were 'undemocratic'.⁶⁹ It was at this stage that the upcoming elections became a party political issue, with the PDP, SCP and Professional Front uniting against the ICF and Umma Party, and the NUP temporarily attempting to take a middle position so as to appease its own supporters among the 'modern forces'.⁷⁰

This reminds us that the quarrels of the transitional period cannot be understood as simply the product of a schism between the 'modern forces' and 'reactionaries' – the Muslim Brotherhood was constituted by far more 'modern' elements than the *Sufi* Khatmiyya patrons of the PDP, but ultimately took a far more conservative stance towards the principle of sectoral representation so as to undermine its socialist nemesis. It was also interesting that the two parties that advocated more favourable representation for the 'modern forces', as opposed to strict one man, one vote democracy, were the same two parties that had been willing to participate in elections for Abboud's Central Council. This revealed some of the internal contradictions of the Revolution – its protagonists struggled to reconcile the principles of pure democracy and modernization. At the same time, the fact that the radicals were able to secure individual seats to represent university-educated professionals, but not farmers or urban labourers, is evidence of the narrow social base of the Revolution.

Without workers' representation, the SCP could not hope to exert a substantial influence within any democratic parliament. As a result of this, the party and its affiliated unions advocated postponing the elections until a further series of reforms could be effected by the transitional government.⁷¹ Specifically, these reforms included the dissolution of the Native Administration, further anti-corruption purges and the solution of the 'southern problem'.⁷² The SCP had vested interest in the first two issues in particular. Again, they were supported in their proposals by the Professional Front and the PDP,⁷³ and vigorously opposed by the NUP and Umma Party, in addition to the ICF and other branches of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷⁴ The former two parties knew that the upcoming elections would almost certainly put them back in control of the government, and while the Muslim Brotherhood had comparatively little to gain from democratic elections, it knew that they would serve its principal goal at the time of preventing the SCP from acquiring an influence in the government.

The debates over the elections generated a series of particularly acrimonious disputes between the involved parties in the press, which exhausted the goodwill that had been built up as a result of their shared participation in the pro-democracy struggle. The pro-Umma press accused the SCP of trying to bring about a regime akin to that which existed in the Soviet Union, in which 'each individual is a spy against his brother', and 'the Russians do not allow [their people] to leave their country like the other peoples of the world'.⁷⁵ One writer in the pro-Umma organ *al-Nil* argued that in trying to delay the elections, the SCP were attempting to 'deny the individual his basic freedoms and rights', and to put power in the hands of 'a small minority raised above the level of the

ordinary man.⁷⁶ It is likely that this animosity between the political parties within the press also played a role in preventing compromises between party 'satellites' within the cabinet and Professional Front. Moreover, what is particularly significant is that a party that was closely associated with a neo-revivalist Islamic religious order began to use the language of democracy, individual rights and anti-totalitarianism in order to ward off the challenge posed by the political left. This essentially secular discourse was just as important as the party's religious critique of communism, and further reminds us that there was no binary conflict between religion and modernity in the transitional period.

The disputes over the elections undermined the unity of the Professional Front, and changed its relationship with the political parties. After its public support for the PDP and SCP proposals, anti-leftists in the media attacked it for trying to behave like a political party.⁷⁷ Umma and ICF representatives within the Front came to realize that by staying in it, they were implicitly opposing the policies of their own organizations. On 18 January, the Student Union of the Technical Institute, which was headed by the Umma's Abd al-Hamid Fadl, withdrew from meetings of the Front and demanded that the body be re-organized.⁷⁸ The next day, the various parties opposed to the extension of the transitional period declared that they were removing the Professional Front from the membership of the United National Front.⁷⁹ In the following weeks, the Khartoum University Teachers' Union, in which the Muslim Brotherhood was heavily represented,⁸⁰ joined the Doctors' Union and the Islamic Qadis in withdrawing from the Professional Front.⁸¹ Thus, the very bodies that had made the October Revolution were now fragmented and detached from the political mainstream.

By this stage, the position of the political left had been weakened considerably. Sadiq al-Mahdi was confident enough to reject an SCP proposal that the transitional cabinet be re-formed so as to incorporate an Umma prime minister, four or five Umma ministers, three ministers from the NUP, one or two ministers to represent the PDP, and a minister each for the SCP and other parties with minor representation, in addition to one representative for the farmers and workers.⁸² The fact that the SCP made such a generous proposal suggests that it knew the weakness of its position. Nevertheless, the Professional Front nominees in the cabinet continued to use their positions to attack the political parties that had opposed the extension of the transitional period. On 6 February, Khalafallah Babikir, the minister of information, broadcast a virulent public condemnation of the Umma, NUP and Muslim Brotherhood, accusing these parties of 'treachery' and of endeavouring to 'waste the profits of the October Revolution'.⁸³ It appears that Babikir nominally broadcast this statement on behalf of the entire cabinet, although it was evident that he had not consulted the ministers representing the political parties he attacked.⁸⁴ The parties he had targeted soon issued a counter-statement observing that his broadcast 'serves only colonial purposes', and aimed at 'crippling democratic life within the country'.⁸⁵

Khalafallah Babikir's statement brought about a catharsis of the tensions between the SCP and its allies, and the religious right. The crisis initiated by his broadcast introduced a scenario in which physical exhibitions of force on the streets became a vital part of the political negotiations. It is often observed that it was the Umma's sizeable

base of loyal constituents within rural Sudan that guaranteed its robust performances in democratic elections. What is often forgotten is that it was the physical manpower the *Ansar* as a military-religious organization could provide that ensured that the elections took place on the terms that the Umma Party and its allies dictated in 1965. Admittedly, the *Ansar* were not the most powerful military force in the country at the time. They were equipped with mainly pre-modern weaponry, and as would be seen at Aba Island 5 years later, they were no match for the Sudanese army. However, in 1965 the army was divided between the Free Officers and their supporters, and those who sympathized with the Umma Party stance. As a result, it seems to have intervened little in the crisis.⁸⁶

As the conflict between the pro- and anti-election camps intensified, the British embassy reported the Umma Party secretary general Nugdallah as stating that the party could if it wished mobilize the *Ansar* to provoke violent demonstrations as a pretext for an Umma Party takeover of the government, and that 20,000 *Ansaris* would be brought in from al-Ubayyid and Blue Nile Province to support them.⁸⁷ After 6 February, the party did begin to ferry in supporters from the regions. Senior Umma Party member Ahmad al-Mahdi declared that the *Ansar* had come to Khartoum 'not [to commit] any evil or for fighting as some enjoy claiming about them' but 'to support the political position of the Umma Party, and this is a legal and democratic action which it is not in the power of anyone to forbid'.⁸⁸ In spite of al-Mahdi's protestations regarding the peaceful intent of the *Ansar*, Howell and Hamid maintain that they were in a 'very bellicose mood'.⁸⁹

The Umma tactic of summoning in thousands of *Ansar* from the countryside to support the party's position highlighted the divisions between the populations of rural Sudan and the urban inhabitants of Khartoum who had made the October Revolution. Ahmad al-Mahdi claimed that the *Ansar* came 'representing millions of citizens in the villages as a result of the statement of the information minister'.⁹⁰ An *Ansari* author writing in *al-Nil* welcomed the *Ansar* to 'your capital, which was founded by your fathers and grandfathers', observing 'you are not strangers to Omdurman but you are its people and the people of the country in general'.⁹¹ This was a reference to the role the Mahdist *Ansar* – which had recruited heavily in the rural regions of western Sudan – had played in founding Omdurman following the defeat of the occupying Egyptian army between 1882 and 1885. The mass arrivals from the countryside were thus implicitly represented by the *Ansari* writers as an attempt by the rural population to reclaim the capital from an urban elite that had isolated itself from the rest of Sudan's population. The fact that one of these authors chose to refer pejoratively to Khalafallah Babikir as 'Khalafallah *Effendi*', using the Ottoman term that was associated with both the urban middle class and the Turco-Egyptian regime that had been overthrown by the Mahdists in 1885, indicated the extent to which the *Ansar* were playing on these feelings.

For the left-wing elements within the 'modern forces' in Khartoum, the mobilization of the *Ansar* represented not an expression of rural nationalism but the recrudescence of a dangerously atavistic force that could threaten the progress that urban radicals were hoping to achieve. When bloody clashes had broken out in 1954 between the police and large groups of *Ansar* who had flocked into the capital to protest against the visit

of the Egyptian president Muhammad Najib, the Khartoum newspaper *al-Ra'i al-'Aam* had depicted the *Ansar* as akin to 'Red Indians'.⁹² In the final months of 1965, Abd al-Khaliq Mahgub would coin the term 'the violence of the wilderness' (*unf al-badiya*) when referring to the use of the *Ansar* as anti-communist strike-breakers by the then Umma-dominated government.⁹³ SCP politicians later argued that the Umma's move to bring in its supporters from the regions in February 1965 was intended as a threat to Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa and, in effect, constituted an ultimately successful effort to 'bring down the government through violence'.⁹⁴ However, the skirmishes that broke out in February between the *Ansar* and large groups of pro-communists from the industrial region of Khartoum paled in comparison to those that would break out towards the end of the year. What they did achieve was to reveal the physical strength of the *Ansar* and the fact that neither the army nor the police were willing to act against them.⁹⁵ They also illustrated the failure of a Revolution that had been guided by the 'modern forces' of the cities to incorporate Sudan's rural population into its ideological framework.

The *Ansar* occupation of Khartoum set the stage for the final defeat of the Professional Front at the hands of the Umma, NUP and ICF. While the march from the countryside was proceeding, these parties entered into frequent talks with the prime minister demanding that he reshuffle the cabinet, but were unable to develop any plan that the left would agree too.⁹⁶ In the midst of this, Ahmad al-Mahdi made a statement on 16 February insisting that 'although the Umma Party is capable of using force to enforce its demands it would nevertheless resort to peaceful means unless it was forced to the contrary'.⁹⁷ The inability to reach an agreement over the formation of the cabinet brought about the collapse of the first interim government, in which the Professional Front ministers were so important, following al-Khalifa's resignation on 19 February 1965.⁹⁸

It has often been claimed, particularly by leftists, that the more conservative political parties forced al-Khalifa to resign,⁹⁹ and the evidence for this is indeed strong. Perhaps the clearest indication of their involvement was the fact that while the Professional Front issued statements describing his resignation as unconstitutional, the NUP, Umma and Muslim Brotherhood were the first to hold meetings with him the next day.¹⁰⁰ Sadiq al-Mahdi now acknowledges his own role in arranging the prime minister's temporary resignation, confessing that he played a 'constitutional trick' by agreeing with both Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa and Tijani al-Mahi, the head of the Sovereignty Council, that al-Mahi would take over the duties of governing the country for a brief period before re-appointing al-Khalifa and giving him the remit to form a new ministry.¹⁰¹

The SCP endeavoured to challenge the formation of the new ministry by launching another general strike, but this time unsuccessfully. It was not carried out fully either in Khartoum or in the other major northern cities, and employers were confident enough to dismiss hundreds of those who did participate.¹⁰² This, in itself, served as a reminder that the SCP and its allies by themselves did not have it within their power to mobilize the entire population of northern Sudan; their relations with the more conservative parties now being strained, they were unable to repeat the feat of 24–26 October. The dismissals of the workers underlined the fact that it was not they, but the professional elite, who had been most empowered by the Revolution.

The new government formed by al-Khalifa did not grant sectoral representation to either the workers or the Gezira tenants, and offered seven ministries to the Umma, NUP and Muslim Brotherhood. Meanwhile, the PDP and SCP initially refused to participate in the cabinet as an objection to the lack of worker representation, thus weakening the position of the leftists and Arab nationalists even further.¹⁰³ The second interim government would adopt a fairly conservative set of policies that reflected the nature of its composition, before steering the country towards partial elections in the north on 21 April 1965.

What is significant about the conflicts between the leftist/secularist and more socially conservative elements within the revolutionary front is that the various protagonists continued to employ civil and non-violent methods – media campaigns, negotiations in the transitional cabinet and protests on the street – to wage them. Even the *Ansar* demonstrations, while interpreted by many as a show of force, did not lead to large scale outbreaks of violence. This is where comparisons between the October Revolution and the Iranian Revolution end – while in both cases the protest movements were defined by an ‘ambiguous ideology’ that enabled both leftists and rightists to combine forces in a relatively non-violent struggle against the regime, in the Iranian case, the Islamist factions used far greater violence against their left-wing rivals in the aftermath of the Shah’s downfall.¹⁰⁴ The fact that such an eventuality did not transpire in Sudan once more reflects the cultural homogeneity and social interconnectedness of the political elite, and explains why a transition to a liberal – albeit flawed – democracy, as opposed to a regime more overtly dependent on force, was possible.

The Native Administration

Part of the reason that the Umma Party was able to mobilize the rural population against the more socially radical urban public and bring down the first interim government was that it had the potential to manipulate networks of patrimonial authority in the Sudanese countryside, which were embedded in the so called ‘Native Administration’. The series of debates that occurred concerning the nature and status of the ‘Native Administration’ (*al-idara al-ahliyya*) following the demise of the November Regime provided another context in which the educated radicals of the northern cities could challenge the more socially conservative forces within the Sudanese political arena – although, as will be demonstrated here, the campaign against this colonial hangover had a far wider base of support than has typically been assumed. The Native Administration was the product of a series of ordinances issued by the British in the 1920s and 1930s, which conferred legal, judicial and administrative authority to rural ‘notables’, such as *Shaikhs*, *Umdas* and southern chiefs.¹⁰⁵ The British had intended that this system would sap the influence of the educated elites of Khartoum and other major northern cities, which represented the core of what was at the time a nascent nationalist movement.¹⁰⁶

Thus it is unsurprising that in 1964, a cabinet dominated by urban professionals would seek to abolish the Native Administration. Admittedly, it was the SCP that pursued the issue with the greatest alacrity. Shafi’ Ahmad al-Shaikh, the communist

labour minister, was the first to propose dismantling it, on the basis that it was a colonial creation which had been used to subdue the nationalist movement and which had supported Abboud's authoritarian regime.¹⁰⁷ The Native Administration was also particularly odious to the communists because it provided a rural support network for the Umma Party. The SCP was fighting with the Umma for votes in major cotton farming regions such as the Blue Nile and White Nile, where the local tenants mainly came from *Ansari* backgrounds. When the Umma brought *Ansaris* in from these regions in February 1965, the SCP organ *al-Midan* attempted to address them directly, promising that if they allowed the Revolution to continue they would find that they 'will not be coerced by the laws of the Native Administration, and they will find organizations that defend their rights'.¹⁰⁸ The Gezira Tenants' Association, which was directly controlled by the SCP through the party member and government minister Amin Muhammad al-Amin, competed directly with the Umma Party for the support of these *Ansari* cotton labourers. It is therefore unsurprising that one of the reasons this union supported postponement of the elections was so that there could be more time for the government to dismantle the Native Administration.¹⁰⁹ The debate over the Native Administration was directly tied to the SCP's drive to give itself a fighting chance in the upcoming polls.

However, it would be a mistake to associate the campaign against the Native Administration purely with the SCP. The ICF and NUP, although they had opposed the communists' plans to delay the elections, also supported the proposals, because these parties had strong bases of support in the urban areas and wished to remove what they saw as networks supporting the two 'sectarian' parties, the Umma and PDP.¹¹⁰ Although al-Turabi's NIF would later support the regeneration of the Native Administration system in 1992 – by which time his party had morphed into a mass movement with considerable support in the rural areas – in 1965, his ICF was rooted among the same student groups that sympathized with the SCP and had little interest in preserving the existing social order. As Gallab reminds us, the first generation of communists and Muslim Brothers in Sudan shared the same radical tendency to describe the existing sociopolitical system in Sudan as *taqlidi* (traditional), *taifi* (sectarian) and *rajii* (reactionary).¹¹¹ After all, al-Turabi would describe the October Revolution later in 1965 as a 'comprehensive movement which aimed to destroy the existing system of life ... and build a new philosophy'.¹¹² The judiciary, now headed by the pro-Egyptian radical Babikir Awadallah, also supported the plans to dissolve the Native Administration, demanding that the funds previously allocated to its maintenance be transferred directly to the headquarters of the judiciary so that it could take over its role in administering the law.¹¹³ In other words, adherents of each of the three 'isms' that played such a major part in urban Sudanese intellectual and political life – Arab nationalism, Islamism and communism – supported the campaign against the Native Administration equally.

Sympathy for the plans to dismantle the Native Administration also existed in places farther afield than the developed riverain areas where these 'ideological' parties enjoyed most support. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, while the Revolution had its origins in Khartoum, it found a good deal of support within the provinces. Condemnations of the existing Native Administration system even came from within 'tribal' society itself.

Numerous ethnic groups supported the memorandum of Shafi' Ahmad al-Shaikh, and messages were sent to him on behalf of the Bani Amir and Dungulawiin demanding the removal of their *Nazirs*.¹¹⁴ Others alleged that the Native Administration had been used by larger 'tribal' units as a means to control less powerful neighbours.¹¹⁵ The Ma'aliyya, who wished to secede from the administration of the larger Rizayqat group, were a case in point.¹¹⁶

In December 1964, thirty-four members of a group that called itself the 'central committee for the Missiriyya tribes' (*al-lajna al-markaziyya li-qaba'il al-missiriyya*) sent one of the government 'purging committees' (*lijan al-tathir*) a memorandum in which it demanded the removal of the Paramount Nazir of the Missiriyya, Babu Nimr, and a number of other senior Nazirs and members of the Native Administration.¹¹⁷ The memorandum condemned these men both for their corruption and for their association with the previous regime, informing the minister that 'we have the right as Sudanese to choose who rules us ... it falls to us as a national duty to inform you that the Missiriyya tribes are resolved upon getting rid of these Nazirs whatever it takes'.¹¹⁸ The local campaigns against the Native Administration revealed just how widespread the influence of the 'Professional Front' was in the 1960s. For instance, a branch of the Professional Front in the Basinda region of Gedaref in eastern Sudan was involved in the campaign against the local Native Administration magnates. Alongside the region's *Umdas*, they attacked the local al-Bakr family for exploiting their influence within the Native Administration 'to the most extreme extent' and maintaining that the land was 'the property of their ancestors by the edge of the sword [i.e. by right of conquest]'.¹¹⁹ The urban elites thus had a considerable number of local allies in their campaign against the established rural socio-political order.

As seen in Chapter 1, the October Revolution had brought professional bodies into power not just in Khartoum but also in all the major towns of the north. Since the Professional Front had been formed spontaneously and was loose in organization, this offered a great deal of scope for local bodies to exercise genuine self-government. Muhammad Sulayman remembered in 1968 that during the revolutionary period, 'the regions had achieved power and its people were raised to a high level of responsibility in guarding state institutions and foreign possessions and steering the government ... this happened in Madani and al-Ubayyid and Kassala and Dueim and Port Sudan and Kosti and not one criminal incident was recorded throughout the revolutionary period'.¹²⁰ While the last statement, in particular, is probably exaggerated, this illustrates that the Revolution did give a brief taste of power to the regional educated elites who would have sympathized little with the Native Administration system.

Spontaneously formed local bodies identified with the nationalist and radical rhetoric coming out of Khartoum and used this rhetoric to mobilize mini-revolts within the provinces against established local authority figures. Most of these local protests did not outline a framework for removing the Native Administration altogether. Nevertheless, the most literate inhabitants of regional towns were prepared to attack the Native Administration quite expansively. Abd al-Hasan Fadl wrote to the regional newspaper *al-Kurdufan* from Nyala that the Native Administration had 'caused backwardness in a number of regions'.¹²¹ Yusuf Ahmad, a student at Khor Tegat secondary school in Kordofan attacked the Native Administration for having

‘collaborated openly’ with the military government and for ‘exploiting its judicial and administrative authority to seize the support of the people for the military regime’.¹²² The assault on the Native Administration, therefore, while inevitably driven by the agendas of the urban elites in Khartoum, was not simply a top-down process.

On 14 February, just before the first cabinet was dissolved following Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa’s resignation, it established a committee to decide upon the best means by which to effect the dissolution of the Native Administration.¹²³ Two days later, members of the cabinet agreed upon the principle of dissolving the Native Administration in Blue Nile Province immediately and setting up committees to investigate the possibility of dismantling it in the other provinces.¹²⁴ Although the influence of the leftists within the government declined after the fall of the first cabinet on 19 February, the next cabinet also committed itself to upholding the policies of the previous one regarding the Native Administration.¹²⁵ As observed above, this cabinet still contained members of the NUP and ICF, parties that were sympathetic to the abolition of the Native Administration. However, these plans hit a stumbling block when regional administrators in Kordofan and Darfur protested that the removal of the Native Administration would lead to a security vacuum in their regions.¹²⁶ Regional security still relied heavily on ‘watchmen’ (*khufara*) working under the aegis of local Native Administration police forces as opposed to the state judiciary. A survey conducted by one senior administrator in 1965 observed that there were 466 such men in Kordofan, 400 in Blue Nile and 356 in Kassala. The numbers for the southern provinces were even higher.¹²⁷ The process of dismantling the Native Administration was put further on hold after the Umma Party won the highest share of the votes in the 1965 elections. The Umma forged a deal with its NUP coalition partner to dissolve the Native Administration only in the most ‘advanced’ regions, but to ‘develop and democratise’ it elsewhere.¹²⁸

The debate over the Native Administration illustrates the difficulty associated with defining the October Revolution as a straightforward battle between an urban, progressive left and a rural, religious right. The fact that both the NUP and ICF supported the SCP campaign against the Native Administration, while condemning the party for its secularism and its plans to delay the elections, highlights the difficulty of associating the term ‘modern forces’ purely with the political left. Moreover, support for the SCP stance also came from within provincial and rural society, reflecting the broad regional impact of the radical and nationalist slogans aroused by the October Revolution – although local campaigns against the Native Administration were often framed with very parochial agendas in mind. As was the case with the electoral law, the overall result was neither a radical new venture nor a total ‘abortion of the Revolution’, but rather a compromise between the ‘modern forces’ and the more conservative elements within Sudanese politics.

Purges and their limitations

Sudanese critics of the October Revolution have often condemned it for giving too much space to left-wing radicals and the SCP in particular to purge competent and much-needed officials from the police and civil service.¹²⁹ Abdullahi Ali Ibrahim,

an SCP activist at the time but now an independent Islamist and academic, has denied this and argued that there was much wider support for the measures.¹³⁰ He observes that the Umma Party declared their support for the purges on the condition that no injustices should occur, while the Muslim Brotherhood continued to issue statements emphasizing that they had supported the idea of the purge since the very first days of the Revolution.¹³¹ Indeed, the slogan of 'purging' tied in very effectively with Islamist discourses about moral regeneration. The Islamic Socialist Party, another branch of the Muslim Brotherhood active in politics at the time, declared that it was necessary to 'cleanse our society in a complete way'.¹³² In October 1965, Hasan al-Turabi recalled that one of the purposes of the Revolution had been to 'cleanse the moral corruption which had become widespread in the administration in terms of bribery and forbidden wealth (*thara' al-haram*)'.¹³³ The pro-Umma organ *al-Nil* even criticized the information minister Khalafallah Babikir – whom it was used to condemning for his urban radicalism – for his failure to cleanse the ministry of information.¹³⁴ It is worth remembering that members of most of the political parties (except the PDP) had been interned during the November Regime and thus bore grudges against it.

The importance attached by the urban radicals to the notion of 'cleansing' further illustrated the manner in which the engineers of the October Revolution conceptualized it as an extension of the struggle for independence. It is worth remembering here that Franz Fanon – whose *Wretched of the Earth* declared that emancipation from colonialism required not just political independence but a complete demolition of the social and political order established by the colonists – was widely read among Khartoum's educated elites at the time.¹³⁵ For instance, Sharaf al-Din Abdullah wrote in *al-Nil* in December 1964 that 'the people realized well that independence was not just a flag and decorations and *zagharid* (celebratory ululations)', but that it required achieving tangible goals such as building schools, hospitals and universities – which the colonial administration had failed to do. Abdullah observed that 'colonialism after its departure left behind an administrative apparatus bound to itself ... to achieve its interests...'.¹³⁶ Thus, the author concluded that more purging would be necessary to 'build the national economy on a socialist basis'.¹³⁷ In a similar fashion, Abd al-Khalik Mahgub declared that the administration had been appointed mainly by the British and that cleansing was thus 'a completion of national liberation'.¹³⁸ This was one of the reasons that support for the purges extended beyond the SCP – even its SCP advocates propagandized it as a means to achieve national emancipation, rather than to pursue class conflict.

The 'cleansing' of the government apparatus was not driven simply by the agendas of a small elite in Khartoum. Chants such as 'purging is a national duty' and 'revenge, revenge against the butchers' were sung by crowds from Khartoum to Hassaheissa to Port Sudan.¹³⁹ Individual citizens would write letters supported by documents and other forms of evidence to government committees.¹⁴⁰ Delegations came from towns outside Khartoum such as New Halfa to insist that committees be set up to investigate corrupt acts for which the previous government had been responsible.¹⁴¹ As seen above, even citizens from relatively peripheral areas of northern Sudan would use the 'cleansing committees' as a means to conduct their campaign against local Native Administrations.

Was the process fair? Ibrahim has also defended the transitional government on this count, maintaining that the investigation committees that were established scrutinized every individual claim of corruption thoroughly before axes fell on heads. These investigations involved, for instance, field research trips to provincial towns.¹⁴² Nevertheless, reports on the trials and investigations are so full of accusations of personal grudges and political agendas biasing the process that it is difficult for the historian to make any confident and objective judgement on how reasonable it was. The fact that the minister charged with overseeing the 'cleansing committee' was Ahmad Sulayman, an SCP man, would have raised expectations that aggressive measures would be taken against officials of the former government.¹⁴³ However, as noted above, Ahmad Sulayman was a political pragmatist. He even made sure to inform the British Ambassador in early December that he did not intend to conduct any purging in his own department.¹⁴⁴

The transitional government did find it necessary to sacrifice some officials to appease the clamouring public. Even before it did, a number of prominent public servants resigned pre-emptively to save face. The Chief Justice, Abu Rannat, fell on his sword along with his deputy Mahgub Hussein and was replaced by the radical Babikir Awadallah, who had been at the forefront of the judges' protest.¹⁴⁵ The permanent under-secretary at the ministry of foreign affairs left his position in the same manner.¹⁴⁶ The committee also purged the permanent under-secretary at the ministry of interior, and four leading officials in the ministry of irrigation, while three top men in the ministry of animal resources and two senior diplomats including the representative to New York were retired on pension.¹⁴⁷ The ministers in charge of the interior, irrigation, animal resources and foreign ministries represented the Southern Front, PDP, Muslim Brotherhood and Umma, respectively – which would again seem to challenge the notion that 'purging' was the exclusive prerogative of the political left. The Ba'athist Shawgi Mallasi, who served on the 'cleansing committee', maintains that 'the source of the injustice and the extremism' was not Ahmad Sulayman, but Muhammad Salih Umar, the Muslim Brotherhood representative.¹⁴⁸ This further demonstrates that the rift between 'progressives' and 'conservatives' was not as comprehensive as is often assumed.

These limited measures represented a symbolic effort to remove the talismans of the old regime, rather than a root-and-branch expurgation of government malpractice. The transitional government's reluctance to punish the widespread forms of corruption practised under the rule of its military predecessor was illustrated by its lenient attitude towards newspapers that had taken money from Abboud's government. Although a committee was established under Khalafallah Babikir to purge the press, it failed to commit itself to any punitive measures.¹⁴⁹ This was in spite of the fact that this committee announced on 3 December 1964 that the former government had dispensed over 10,000 Sudanese Pounds to various journalists to give favourable coverage of government policy and that a number of these funds had been distributed to private accounts.¹⁵⁰ Media organs that had been banned under the November Regime, such as *al-Nil*, *Sudan al-Jadid* and *al-Midan* were all quick to encourage action to be taken against those newspapers that they perceived as having supported it. Both *al-Midan* and *Sudan al-Jadid* made demands that the committee publish a list known to be in its

possession of journalists who had taken funds from the Novemberists.¹⁵¹ Eventually, *al-Midan* managed to obtain a copy of the list and print it for the public to see, much to the frustration of the committee.¹⁵² However, even this revelation did not lead to any journalists being sanctioned, probably reflecting the fact that they had chosen 'the side of the angels'¹⁵³ after the success of the Revolution.

The transitional government also failed to achieve justice for those who had been the victims of government brutality during Abboud's period. Mustafa Hassanain, the young communist whose alleged torture had led to the FOP protests against the Abboud Regime in 1961, attempted to press charges against a number of military personnel, but the new Chief Justice was unable to go ahead because he was unable to find any papers relating to the case.¹⁵⁴ Courts were established in the south to investigate cases of torture committed against southerners by the northern security forces, but were dissolved following protests from the Professional Front and from northern policemen serving in the south.¹⁵⁵ This was further evidence of the Khartoum professionals' radicalism being constrained by their regional bias.

The Professional Front insisted that instead of holding individual soldiers or policemen responsible for atrocities committed in the south, the interim government should consider the SCAF generals to be ultimately responsible for the government's acts in the region and try them instead.¹⁵⁶ The cabinet appears to have taken the same attitude, which further illustrated that the regime had focused on a policy of targeting top-ranking individuals rather than endeavouring to remedy the brutalities and corruption of the authoritarian system in a systematic fashion. It probably treated the former SCAF strongmen more harshly than any other figures associated with the government during this period. The interim government interned them in Zalingei in western Sudan, which hardly represented a cushy option.¹⁵⁷

The eventual decision to try the former SCAF members did, in itself, represent a radical move. It divided members of the provisional cabinet, given that it involved rewriting the interim constitution, which had included guarantees that these men would be exempt from trial.¹⁵⁸ Criminal proceedings were initiated against them in February 1965 under articles 96–98 of the Sudan Penal Code, on charges of, among other things, mutiny and inciting war against the government.¹⁵⁹ However, the trials dragged on and the democratic government that emerged following the April elections did not take a sympathetic attitude towards the decision to violate the provisions of the interim constitution in bringing them to trial.¹⁶⁰ Ultimately, all that was achieved during the second democratic regime was the promulgation of a 'political isolation' law in late 1965, which banned senior members of the November Regime from participating in public life for a period of 5 years.¹⁶¹ This had a relatively significant impact. Although the civilian Finance Minister Mamoun Biheiri returned to the same post during Nimeiri's May Regime, none of the former SCAF members ever returned to government office after 1964.

The one member of the SCAF who received lenient treatment was Ibrahim Abboud himself. The day after he stepped down as head of state, Khalafallah Babikir declared that he would have freedom to travel wherever he wished, and the former president was even given a small financial reward to help him retire.¹⁶² This perhaps signalled the transitional government's gratitude towards Abboud for the relatively obliging manner

in which he had conceded to the pro-democracy protests. It also illustrated one of the most important truths regarding the entire transitional experience, which was that it was driven by a group of professionals who were happy to remove their immediate political enemies but had little interest in imposing the kind of extreme punishments that might radicalize the existing political and social order, as, say, the killings of Nuri al-Sa'id and Faisal II had in Iraq in 1958. The purges were partly generational, as senior civil servants associated with the colonial order were targeted and removed, and in this sense they fulfilled the conditions of a Fanon-esque 'cleansing' of the past. However, since the majority of government servants came from the same regional, social and ethnic backgrounds as those who had led the Revolution and served in the transitional government, it is unsurprising that these purges were not systematic in nature. The vision of a purified government, cleansed of its sins by representatives of the society it had oppressed, proved to be elusive.

The 'Southern Problem'

The October Revolution stimulated images of a nation that was not just morally and socially cleansed, but also socially and culturally united. Such was the sense of national positivity brought about by the Revolution that it offered somewhat illusory hopes for the potential future unity of the Sudanese nation, at least to northerners. The initial sense of elation created by the downfall of the military government inspired the belief that north and south could be reconciled just as right and left, or military and civil, could be. The PDP even suggested repatriating the body of Ali Abd al-Latif from Cairo to Khartoum, declaring that the half-Dinka leader of the proto-nationalist White Flag Revolt of 1924 could be used as a symbol to entice southerners back into the national fold.¹⁶³

While they did not contribute notably to the Revolution itself, the southerners of the capital responded quickly to the new political environment by establishing a 'Southern Front' on 30 October, which was acknowledged by the UNF and tasked with electing southern representatives in the national government.¹⁶⁴ Both the representatives whom they elected to the cabinet were well known for their open opposition to the military's aggressive policy in the south.¹⁶⁵ That al-Khalifa was able to incorporate such men into his cabinet seemed to demonstrate a commitment towards dealing with the problematic relationship between north and south, particularly since Clement Mboro was awarded the crucial position of minister of interior. Mboro utilized his position to release twenty-eight southern political prisoners, and to offer a general amnesty to all those bearing arms in the south.¹⁶⁶ In a speech in Wau in late November, he spoke angrily about the crimes committed by the military regime in the region, promising that they would be investigated and the perpetrators punished.¹⁶⁷ The fact that Mboro was voicing this agenda as the representative of a Khartoum-based government seemed to offer hopes of significant progress in relations between north and south.

The 'Black Sunday' events of 6 December 1964 would undermine hopes for a resolution to the southern conflict. Clement Mboro proved to be the central figure as southerners awaiting the arrival of his plane into Khartoum airport sparked angry

demonstrations following a lengthy delay, which had generated rumours that the minister had been assassinated by the army.¹⁶⁸ The riots that subsequently broke out between northerners and southerners in Khartoum illustrated well what Simone describes as the wars in the marginalized peripheries coming 'back to haunt' the riverain elite of the urban towns.¹⁶⁹ Hamad argues that the southerners who sparked off the tumult were recent migrants from the war-affected region.¹⁷⁰ Reportedly, nine southerners were killed, alongside four northerners and a Greek.¹⁷¹

It is ironic that the civil war should have come back to haunt Khartoum at this time, given that the capital itself had been free of conflict during the military campaign waged by the November Regime in the south in the years prior to the Revolution. While the new possibilities offered by the Revolution had raised hopes of unity, they had also provoked the fears of the Sudanese who did not believe that northerners and southerners could work together in a government without prejudicing each other's interests. In particular, the events exposed the tension that had been generated within the ministry of interior as a result of Mboro's appointment. Mboro had purged two senior northern police officials, and former policemen claim that he bore grudges against others.¹⁷² The resultant state of discontent massively undermined the operational efficiency of the force, and probably explains its paralytic reaction to the inter-ethnic violence between northerners and southerners.¹⁷³

On the surface of it, the Black Sunday events did not create an immediate rift between northern and southern politicians. Both the government and the regional as well as local Arabic-language press attributed the riots to unseen 'foreign agents' and 'colonial conspiracies' aimed at fomenting disunity within Sudan.¹⁷⁴ However, in practice, the riots had created new divides in addition to exposing old ones. Two months later, Luigi Adwok, the only southern member on the Council of State, informed the British Ambassador that he had lost a brother in the riots, in addition to one other who had perished in the fighting in the south. Adwok reportedly stated that he wished he had been fighting alongside the southern rebels himself.¹⁷⁵ Meanwhile, northerners began to display an increasing distrust towards southern officials working in the government. Northern officials and northern journalists began to accuse them – and particularly those who were transferred back to the south from the north as a result of pressure from the Southern Front – of working to assist the rebel movement.¹⁷⁶ *Al-Ayyam* asserted in January 1965 that a 'major [southern] official' in Khartoum had been implicated in passing on information to the rebels, telling them not to lay down their arms but to prepare for further conflict.¹⁷⁷

The rebels' refusal to lay down arms was a significant factor in the failure of northern and southern politicians to come to terms. It caused northern parties to reject the idea of holding the much mooted 'round table' conference in the south itself on security grounds, thus undermining the whole legitimacy of the process for the southerners themselves.¹⁷⁸ When the conference was eventually held in Khartoum, the leadership of the major southern political movement, the Sudan African Nationalist Union (SANU), could not offer a united position, being divided between those who favoured self-determination for the south and those who accepted the idea of a potential federation with the north.¹⁷⁹ However, it would be injudicious to blame the southerners themselves for the failure of the conference. As we have seen, the political debates that ignited the

October Revolution had never evinced a serious commitment among the northern educated elite to engage with the 'southern problem'. When the round table conference did occur, it was the intransigent attitude of the northern political parties towards any notion of either self-determination or federalism that stymied any potential for a negotiated solution to the conflict.¹⁸⁰ This further demonstrates the regional bias of the Revolution's principal northern protagonists.

A radical new foreign policy?

A cursory analysis of Sudan's foreign policy during the 1964–5 interim period might result in the same binary approach that has emerged in the understanding of the transitional period in general. The 'radical' forces who had taken control of the first interim cabinet produced a more 'left wing' foreign policy, whereas the 'traditional' forces that seized the second interim cabinet and then the post-election parliamentary governments reversed it and applied more 'conservative' policies. There is, naturally, a great deal of truth in such observations. The first interim cabinet was genuinely more radical than those that preceded it. As Hamid and Howell, who conducted research on Sudan's foreign policy immediately after the Revolution, observe, 'with power now in the hands of urban and intellectual groups, the Sudan was bound to move left anyway, and in the new political climate, a fresh approach to foreign policy was inevitable'.¹⁸¹

The new government was quick to confront what it saw as Western Imperialism, immediately refusing British aircraft carrying military aid to British forces in Aden access to Sudanese airports.¹⁸² However, the clearest evidence of Sudan's newly radicalized foreign policy was its support of Lumumbist rebels who were fighting the Western-backed forces of Moïse Tshombe in Eastern Congo. The October Revolution occurred at a time when this conflict had reached a particularly critical juncture – in November 1964, Tshombe's troops captured Stanleyville with the support of US and Belgian troops, provoking widespread resentment of what was perceived to be a neo-colonial intervention.¹⁸³ The new Sudanese government, with support from the Algerian and Egyptian regimes, was quick to intervene in favour of the Lumumbist factions. In December, twelve aircraft passed through Khartoum airport bearing arms for the rebels from Algeria and Egypt. *The Times* reported that Sudan was using its southern region to play host to the rebel leader Christopher Mbenye, and facilitating Algerian and Egyptian military training of rebel troops.¹⁸⁴ The interim foreign minister, Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub, insisted that his government was providing only medical and economic, as opposed to military, aid.¹⁸⁵ However, former Professional Front members have since acknowledged their role in assisting the arms transfer.¹⁸⁶ Predictably, once the second interim cabinet took over in February, and was replaced by a parliamentary regime following the April elections, this military support trickled to a halt.¹⁸⁷

However, the interim government's policy was not as radical as it might have been, given the presence of three SCP members in the cabinet. At no point did it openly espouse Marxism or champion the Russian and Chinese Revolutions. On taking office on 1 November, Sirr al-Khatim al-Khalifa declared that his government 'would support

non-alignment and principles laid down at the Arab and African summit conferences this year'.¹⁸⁸ His regime broadly adhered to this statement. In spite of rumours that the Professional Front was receiving funding from Eastern Bloc Embassies,¹⁸⁹ its main dealings in this period were with African and Arab nationalist regimes or rebel groups in Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, Congo, Ethiopia and Chad.

Furthermore, it might be observed that none of the interim regime's foreign policy manoeuvres were inspired by the leftists within the National Front. Its policies towards the Eritrean rebels and Chadian rebels, although more vigorous, were to some extent consistent with the outlooks of the regimes that preceded and followed it. Although Howell and Hamid emphasize the interim regime's role in backing rebels in Chad and Ethiopia, Ibrahim observes that the Public Security division within the police had been forging contacts with both these rebel movements since the early 1960s, under Abboud's regime.¹⁹⁰ Both the Chadian and Eritrean rebel movements were largely Muslim in countries with Christian-dominated governments. It appears that of all the parties that participated in the interim regime, it was the Islamic Charter Front that provided the most significant support to the Chadian rebels. They formed a group that called itself 'the Islamic Republic of Chad in Exile', and began to publish in the ICF's newspaper, *al-Mithaq*.¹⁹¹ The worst conflicts with Ethiopia over the exiled Eritrean rebel leaders, which involved a number of assassination attempts on dissident Eritreans in Khartoum and Kassala, came in April and May – by which time the 'radical' first cabinet had disappeared.¹⁹²

Moreover, in spite of the fact that the transitional government had hampered the former colonizer's campaign in Aden, British diplomatic personnel were objective enough to not view the campaign simply in the light of the Cold War. In fact, the British Ambassador criticized the American representative for doing so, and for planning to provide financial support for the Umma Party so as to use them as a counter-weight against any potential communist takeover. The British Ambassador lamented on 23 December 1964 that 'it is discouraging that a responsible official in Washington should see things in terms of black and white, when they are the usual infinite variety of dirty shades of grey'.¹⁹³ As seen above, the Umma-affiliated foreign minister, Muhammad Ahmad Mahgub, was quick to reassure the British that his colleague Ahmad Sulayman was a communist 'only in name'. The British were clearly not frightened enough of the 'reds' in the interim cabinet to defer the Queen's official visit in February 1965 – and this decision was perhaps justified when Ahmad Sulayman reportedly brought laughter from Elizabeth II by introducing himself as a member of 'your Majesty's loyal Communist Party'.¹⁹⁴

Conclusion

The political challenges of the transitional period exposed the fault lines within the Sudanese body politic that had been hidden by the Revolution itself. However, these fault lines cannot be defined with the ease that one might imagine. There was no Manichaean conflict between a religious, conservative right and an urban, progressive left. Up until the political crisis triggered by the role of the SCP during the 'Night of

the Barricades', individuals of all party persuasions within the 'modern forces' had campaigned together against the perceived efforts to restore the older order. The fact that most of the branches of the 'modern forces' – including the students, the professionals and the radical young generation of army officers – hailed mainly from the same homogeneous northern riverain social backgrounds helped for a while to reduce the effects of ideological cleavages. There was no single issue in 1964 that divided the religious and the secular parties as much as the issue of the September Laws would in 1985 – the various parties did share disagreements over the matter of an Islamic constitution, but since no system of Islamic law was in place at the time, the matter could be left till the post-election period to be discussed.

Different parties adopted different stances on different issues and brokered separate alliances to back up their positions. While the NUP and ICF saw it in their interest to oppose the SCP's proposals on the timing and structure of the electoral process, they actually supported the SCP line in other regards. The slogan of 'purging' fitted in just as well with Islamist morality tales as it did with the SCP desire to bring in a new, socialist order or the wider nationalist project to distance those perceived to be remnants of the colonial system. The fact that the ICF and NUP, both of which appealed to urban constituencies, advocated the dissolution of the Native Administration illustrated that radical social agendas were not purely the prerogative of the left. Meanwhile, the PDP, in spite of the fact that it relied heavily on the support of conservative rural social groups adhering to its religio-political backers in the Khatmiyya order, embraced the 'modern forces' and supported SCP proposals to delay elections and allocate seats to workers.

If we are to attribute reasons for the various crises of the transitional regime, perhaps it is the divide between urban and rural, and between Sudan's 'centres' and 'peripheries', that offers the greatest explanatory value. It is true that the slogans of the October Revolution generated some degree of change within provincial society, this change being driven along by local professional elites and those who were discontented with the existing social order. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the urban radicals who led the Revolution failed to associate the majority of the rural populace with their agenda. This enabled the Umma Party to introduce an alternative vision of Sudanese nationalism and, indeed, the Revolution itself, so as to mobilize its rural *Ansari* support base. While the Umma Party's *Ansari* followers had not played a crucial role in the decisive events of October, their mass migration to Khartoum in February altered the character of what had previously been an urban revolution.

In particular, the urban radicals failed to offer a revolutionary vision that appealed sufficiently to the inhabitants of the southern periphery. The very fact that Khartoum's southerners constituted a Southern Front, implicitly separate from both the UNF and Professional Front, illustrated the social and regional limitations of the institutions associated with the October Revolution. The appointment of outspoken southern politicians to cabinet positions was evidence of the liberal intent of the transitional regime, but the wide gap between negotiating positions at the round table conference of March 1965 demonstrated that the northern elite was still incapable of offering compromises that would satisfy southern aspirations. The limited regional and social roots of the October Revolution had ensured that it would be unable to transform its slogans into reality.