

**ACAS BACKGROUND PAPER NUMBER 1**  
**September 1982**

This series of background papers is circulated to interested Africanists by the ACAS Research Committee. ACAS is committed to providing background information and to encouraging discussion on issues of contemporary importance. While ACAS acknowledges the importance of the views presented here, the views presented are those of the author.

**PERSPECTIVES ON THE SUDAN:  
ISOLATION AT HOME AND ABROAD**

**A. F. Mazz**

To understand the contemporary Sudan requires an appraisal of its international and regional context as well as its domestic relations. Since 1971 the Sudan reversed the majority of its socialist initiatives taken in 1969, seriously damaged the Communist Party, crushed the Mahdist revival with military force, and suspended multi-party democracy. Its relations with eastern Europe have been curtailed, and it has sought financial and political support from China and Western Europe in general and from the United States in particular. This paper reviews some of the central features and contemporary implications of the internal and external relations of the Sudan.

International and Regional Contexts

The focus here is the Sudan, but it is critical to give prominence to the Sudan's relationship with Egypt since, at present, the Sudan has unusually close relations with Egypt at the same time that both nations have deep association with the United States, and both nations are markedly isolated in the Arab world. The hydro-politics of the Nile Valley also give certain fundamental dimensions of unity between the Sudan and Egypt. This relationship has military significance as well. The July 1971 counter-coup which returned the Sudanese President Gaafar Nimieri to power received essential logistical support from Egypt. A military pact underscores this current military alliance which, in Operation Bright Star in 1981, saw joint war games between Sudanese, American and Egyptian troops.

The death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970 paved the way for a realignment of forces in the Nile Valley. His successor, Anwar Sadat began to reverse many of the programs and policies which had characterized Egypt from 1952 to 1970. Perhaps most important was the formation of the 'infatih' "open door" liberal economic policy which provided open access for western capital and ideology to the investment market and political arena in Egypt and subsequently to the Sudan. The climax of the shift in relations with the United States was seen in the Camp David accords which resulted in the return of the Sinai to Egypt, and in Egypt's recognition of the state of Israel. Despite Egypt's isolation in the Arab world for this agreement, close links have been maintained between Khartoum and Cairo. These links have also tended to isolate the Khartoum regime.

The long-standing and complex history of relations between the Sudan and Egypt has meant that the Sudan has had to confront problems which have bedeviled Egypt for some time. Poverty and over-crowding in the urban areas of the Sudan is worsening. The Sudanese economy is weak and growing still weaker. And the rising forces of Islamic fundamental revivalism remain a serious concern for both as long as the United States remains such a reliable supporter of Israel, the Zionist anathema to the Arab world as a whole. Furthermore, the Cairo government now is host to the largest AID mission in the world, formerly second only to those missions in Saigon and Tehran. The Sudan is, not surprisingly, the host of the largest AID mission in Africa after Egypt. Since Egypt's relations to Israel in the east are tentative and still precarious and its relations with Libya to the west are hostile, just as the Sudan has been looking northward for friends, it has done so when Egypt has been searching southward.

Not only are Khartoum's relations to the north very important, but also its relations in other directions are particularly tense, complex, and frustrated. To the west, there is the very long contest for the control of Chad. Internal divisions within Chad have given Libyan entry in its sometime support of the forces of Ghoukouni Waddeye. Egypt, the Sudan and the United States have been giving covert arms support to Hisene Habre who has, in 1982, toppled Waddeye. The situation in Chad remains markedly unstable. To the south of Sudan, in Uganda, the end of the rule of Idi Amin and the successive civilian regimes including that of Milton Obote, returned from years in exile, have not yet brought tranquility to the strife-ridden nation. Consequently, trade with Uganda in the southern Sudan is not extensive, except the destabilizing trade in illicit weapons and the flow of political refugees.

The relations with Ethiopia to the east are also deeply troubled on at least three levels. First there is the decade-long war in Eritrea which receives sporadic support from the Sudanese government at the expense of antagonizing the revolutionary regime in Ethiopia. This conflict represents a thorn in the side of the rulers of Ethiopia and thus, remains a chief contentious issue in their relations with the Sudan. On a second level the regime in Addis Ababa gives some support to Sudanese dissidents of various sorts and has now joined a pact with Peoples' Yemen and Libya which was created in reaction to the Sudano-Egyptian alliance. Third, the leaders of Ethiopia threaten to destabilize the touchy southern Sudan if Nimieri does not cease his government's aid to the Eritreans.

Aside from Egypt, the other friendly neighbors of the huge Sudan are Kenya, Zaire and the Central African Republic but these relations are without major political and economic importance. In short, Sudan's eight neighboring nations include the powerful and friendly Egypt to the north; two nations with hostile and tension-filled relations to the east and northwest, two destabilized and insecure nations to the south and west, and three nations with cordial relations but with notably minor importance. Consequently, given the socio-political dominance of the Islamic and Arab groups in the Sudan and the relative isolation of the contemporary Sudan it is little surprise to find the emphasis on relations with Egypt. Yet, there are two major prices to pay for this alliance. On the one hand joining with Egypt means joining with Egypt's profound political isolation in the Arab world, an isolation which becomes more pronounced in the wake of the 1982 event in Lebanon. On the other hand close ties with Egypt inflame two major political constituencies inside the Sudan, the Mahdists and the Southerners. The Mahdists never forgave the Egyptians for their role in assisting the British reconquest of the Sudan, and their

fundamental Islamic beliefs are opposed to the secular trends in modern Egypt. At the same time, the Southerners are deeply fearful of any Islamizing trends which threaten their fragile sense of political and cultural autonomy.

The question needs to be put, "How did the Sudan devolve to this point of having poor, or inconsequential relations with its neighbors, save Egypt, which itself is so highly contentious?"

### Domestic Perspectives

The main answer to this question lies in an appraisal of the myriad domestic problems in the Sudan. There are many difficulties indeed and very few encouraging signs for the near future. Perhaps most obvious is the fact that despite a host of efforts to legitimize the Sudan government, it remains an increasingly narrow military dictatorship which is highly intolerant of any forms of opposition. Its apparent liberalization in recent years is due mainly to its inability to control unending varieties of protest rather than any genuine democratization. Some say that the state has become, in effect, simply a "security outfit" for the ever-smaller governing group which has devolved to an alliance between loyal sections of the military and a parasitic class of landlords, land speculators, and merchants.

So, parallel to the international and regional isolation, the ruling circles of the Sudan are also experiencing a steady erosion of their influence. The regime, now tenuously held together, has its strength measured principally by the weakness of the opposition which has alternately been militarily crushed, cajoled, deceived, absorbed, exiled, or otherwise neutralized as an effective force from the pre-independence days or from the periods of parliamentary opposition.

At the same time, a pronounced process of class formation has caused deep fissures in the remarkably homogeneous socio-cultural life which had been traditional in the Sudan. The creation of the Sudanese working class particularly with the railway workers and Gezira tenants was central in the independence movement in the 1940's and 1950's. Today these forces are sharply constrained and the new mercantile and speculator groups, in alliance with the military, are determining the main political direction of the country.

The internal economy is markedly poor. The pound has been devalued several times and the black market in currency is now open and widespread. Chronic shortages exist in basic fuels, electricity supply, meat, bread and other critical items. Sudanese are bedeviled with gasoline lines of hundreds of cars at times and areas in the capital city - not to mention outlying districts - have long periods without water or power.

Shortages even in small coins result in merchants making change in aspirin, candies, gum and matches. The grandiose agricultural development programs are typically running far from capacity if at all. The vast Gezira scheme inherited from the British is mismanaged to the extent that a significant portion of the cotton crop is not harvested despite huge investments in labor, water and fertilizer. The shortage of capital is cited as the main reason for the failure of the development projects, yet consumer items are readily available for those with money.

The Three Towns capital area has doubled in population in a decade but for large numbers this has meant life in squalor conditions and substandard

dwellings with deteriorating public transportation to get to and from work. Even the prestigious neighborhoods are troubled with poor supply in water and electricity and the roads are an obstacle course of sand and potholes.

The deep economic miseries are so severe that the immense and burdensome loans to bail out the Sudan have had to be rescheduled if only to pay portions of the interest due. These serious problems in the Sudanese economy have been reflected in the political life of the country. Officially, all political parties are disbanded and political activity is channeled through the Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU). However, there are strikes of all sorts by a wide variety of groups ranging from bank workers to doctors, and from railway workers to university professors. There is also underground literature exchanged. More visibly, there have been major riots and nation-wide civil disturbances in 1981 and 1982. These events were met with considerable loss of property and life. The politically charged campus at the University of Khartoum has witnessed violent clashes between rival student groups and confrontations with security police particularly after a major speech was disrupted by the First Vice President. Frequently the University is closed completely, and even when it is opened many faculties are so understaffed that they hardly function. The faculty with saleable skills have emigrated to other Arab states or elsewhere so that their families will have more security and they may continue their work in relative peace and tranquility.

The difficult conditions have also proved fertile for efforts to bring down the government by violence and conspiracy. Coups were attempted in 1971 and 1976, and there have been so many other attempts and rumors of attempts that an exact tally would be impossible.

Special mention must also be made of the southern Sudan which perilously clings to its grant of regional autonomy in 1972 - a reward of 17 years of war in the region. Nonetheless inter-ethnic conflicts persist and give a sense of tension that bathes North-South relations in distrust and skepticism. The discovery of small-scale, but commercial, deposits of oil in parts of the south has fueled the suspicions as the planned refinery is to be built in the north. The difficulties of daily life in the Three Towns still contrast favorably to the much greater and perpetual hardships in the southern provincial capitals, which are only feebly articulated with the rest of the nation. From Khartoum to Juba for example there is no railroad, irregular air service and only a poor unpaved road network.

#### Observation & Implications

The description of the internal situation in the Sudan is not intentionally discouraging; however the current realities do offer very little basis for optimism. Aside from Nimieri's survival since 1969 and the great achievement of regional autonomy for the south and an end to the war, one is hard-pressed to identify other substantive accomplishments of the regime. The goals of transforming the Sudan into the "bread-basket of the Arab world" have not been realized. Indeed the nation has become impoverished by the United States-dominated banking circles.

The lively, diverse political life of the Sudanese has been yoked to the SSU and its leadership suppressed. The object of synthesizing a new political order within the SSU has not succeeded as various representatives are dismissed from their elected positions and as the SSU is periodically suspended. Cabinet reshuffles add to the atmosphere of a leaderless administration. Underground opposition still exists among the Muslim Brothers, the Communist Party and

traditional religious sects.

In short, the Sudanese government is isolated at home and abroad. Desperately needing allies, the regime has made its close relations with Egypt the centerpiece of its foreign policy because this alliance helps to insure and buttress the Nimeiri government against its foreign and domestic adversaries which have grown considerable in their numbers.

It is for similar reasons that the relations between the Sudan and the United States have grown in the past decade. The United States wanted a *cordon sanitaire* around Ethiopia and wanted to be able to influence events in Chad. The State Department also sees the Sudan as the underbelly of Egypt on which it has already staked so much. A "moderate" Afro-Arab state with Red Sea coastline is also attractive. Sudan's anti-communist and anti-Libyan positions and actions have distinct appeal to the Reagan administration as well. So it is that Sudanese-American linkages have been tightened, but this is all taking place at a time of steadily growing unpopularity and internal isolation of the military government which has defeated, divided and disoriented the opposition from the Islamic right, the secular left, regionalists, and others, save the mercantile/military elite which is the chief beneficiary of the current Khartoum administration.

It would be foolish to make specific predictions about the political or economic future. Nonetheless several points may be raised which draw an alarming trajectory:

1. Accelerated economic decline
2. Increased domestic isolation of the administration
3. Increased international isolation in African and Arab affairs
4. Marked class formation and polarization
5. Notable regional centrifugalism
6. Periodic civil disorder
7. Substantial "brain and labor drain"
8. Unrealized agricultural potential
9. Limited natural resources
10. Large-scale military conflict in several neighboring states

These factors and others are certainly indicative of serious potential instability which could require measures making the Sudanese administration even more unpopular. The alliance with the United States also has the potential for becoming the target of blame for everything from the turbulent Middle East in general to the impoverishment of the Sudan in particular. Shaping the trajectory are other factors of importance in Sudanese history.

1. fierce national pride and cultural dignity

2. Islamic radicalism/revivalism
3. the African dimension of the Sudan which lowers its orbit in the Arab world
4. certain anti-Egyptian forces which look unfavorably on close ties to Cairo
5. a suppressed sense of national independence

#### Sudan and the United States

This background paper is free-wheeling and impressionistic but from these remarks one may be able to formulate several recommendations which would be in the common interest of both the Sudanese and American people.

First, there should be a recognition that the Sudanese regime is no longer popular at home and financial or political support given to the government at such present high levels may, in fact, make it more difficult to have close bilateral relations in the future. The huge amounts of economic "aid" may actually be counterproductive insofar as they tend to fuel the fires of inflation in an economy with so little infrastructure to accommodate the large influx of capital. Consequently this "aid" may be destabilizing rather than stabilizing the government.

Second, every effort should be made to encourage political diversity in the Sudan and a restoration of electoral politics which Nimeiri has suspended. This administration has not successfully created genuine political representation and those traditional groups opposing him have simply gone deeper underground where the atmosphere for conspiracies is heady indeed.

Third, formulate policies which appropriately incorporate the Arab AND non-Islamic aspects. The diversity in the Sudan is marked. Related to this, the sensibilities and sensitivities relating to Islamic fundamentalism ought not to be overlooked.

Fourth, legitimate commercial interests in the Sudan should feature realistic projects of economic development. These ultimately stabilize the nation and give it the long-term permanent markets for mutual interest and benefit. Infrastructure development and appropriate training programs are essential in transforming and modernizing the Sudan.