

Military Coup in Sudan

With the June 30th coup d'état ends the first democratically elected government in the last 20 years of Sudan's history.

The recent coup of General Omar Hassan Ahmed Bashir has destroyed the accomplishments of the Sudanese people who, through their April 1985 popular uprising, chose democracy, political pluralism and debate, the freedom of political and union activities, and freedom of expression. The toppling of this democratic experience is indeed a blow to democratic aspirations.

PROBLEMS MAHDI FACED

The deposition of Sadiq Al Mahdi will not solve the problems that have existed in Sudan for many years. The roots of many of these problems go back to 18 years of Gaafar Nimeiri's pro-western dictatorship which was deposed in 1985 with the participation of the Sudanese armed forces.

After the April 1985 uprising, within exactly one year, elections were held, fulfilling a promise to the masses that power would be transferred to civilians; Mahdi's Umma Party won a parliamentary majority.

One of the two main problems Mahdi's government faced was the civil war in the South which has continued like an open national wound. The second problem was the economic crisis, consisting of stagnation, inflation, high unemployment, foreign debt, cash shortages and IMF pressures. Other closely-related problems included tribal feuds and shortages in food supplies. Many mistakes were made by the Mahdi government, but it would have been impossible, in any case, to resolve all of these problems in only three years.

ANNIHILATION OF DEMOCRACY

The new junta has its own program for solving the many problems Sudan faces. Its two basic premises are (1) annihilation of democracy and

violating basic human rights, and (2) vagueness. A list of the first actions taken by the junta shows the destruction of all traces of the democracy that was built up during Mahdi's government:

Bashir suspended the constitution and announced military rule. The parliament was dissolved as were the president's cabinet, all political parties and unions. The independent press and non-Islamic societies were closed. There was a clamp down on all free expression, meetings, demonstrations and strikes. A dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed; communications were cut. Some leaders of political parties and unions were arrested, while others were banned from travelling or working. Twenty-eight of the country's military officers were dismissed - virtually the entire senior command of the armed forces.

In place of all these institutions, Bashir established the so-called Revolutionary Council for the Salvation of Sudan which holds all legislative, executive and judicial authority without popular constraints or supervision. Moreover, Bashir named himself head of state, prime minister, minister of defense, head of the 15-member Revolutionary Council and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, meanwhile elevating his own military rank from brigadier to lieutenant general.

EGYPT'S ROLE

It is no coincidence that on Friday, June 30th, Middle East Radio (Egypt) was the first to report that Sudanese armed forces had entered areas in Khartoum, the capital, and had taken over the president's palace. It is also no coincidence that within a few short hours, Egypt became the first country to recognize the new regime. In fact, Egypt's delegation, which was sent to

meet the new regime's leaders, included the head of the General Intelligence Service (GIS). Nor is it a coincidence that the very next day Egypt sent Sudan 20,000 tons of fuel oil, cargoes of medicine, children's food, vehicle spare parts, ammunition and army uniforms. Can it also be a coincidence that Nimeiri sought refuge in Cairo after deposition?

There are several reasons for Egypt's interest with the government of Sudan. To say the least, relations between Egypt and Sudan over the past three years have not been at their best. Some of the events which have aggravated the situation include Egypt's refusal to extradite Nimeiri to be tried in Sudan, and Mahdi's promise to receive Khalid Abdul Nasser who is wanted in Egypt for anti-government activities. Another factor was the close relationship between Mahdi and Gaddafi which had irritated Egypt.

But the main reason was the Egyptian regime's fear of the spread of the democratic experience in Sudan, and particularly the effect that it might have on Egypt's population, due to the proximity of the two countries.

The second reason was Egypt's frustration by Mahdi's inability to end the war in the South. After the coup, Egypt is exporting new weaponry to the junta in Sudan, and has persuaded Saudi Arabia to provide financial assistance. Ending the war in the South is critical for Egypt due to its heavy dependency on the waters of the Nile River. The continuation of the war in the South could threaten Egyptian water supplies.

Egypt is to receive 55.5 billion cubic meters of water from the river under the 1959 Nile Water Agreement between Egypt and Sudan, which incidentally expired on June 28th of this year. So far, Egypt has exceeded this limit and still requires much more for a major expansion of irrigated farmland scheduled.

With the projected Jonglei Canal, a 355 kilometer conduit through the Sudd Swamp in Southern Sudan, Egypt needs the war to end fast, particularly since