

Will the Sudanese 'domino' fall due to U.S. support for the IMF?

by Thierry Lalevée

A military coup d'état in Sudan on April 6, overthrowing the regime of Gaafar Numayri while the latter was abroad for talks in Washington and Cairo, quickly restored order to the strike-paralyzed capital city of Khartoum and produced cautious jubilation throughout the country. But with as many as 7 million of 22 million people facing starvation this year, a well-organized guerrilla rebellion in the south, and little prospect of meeting the usurious demands of international creditors and their collection agency, the International Monetary Fund, the new chapter opened in the region's history by the coup may well prove to be only a thin breathing space between the present situation and holocaust.

That Numayri had to go if the integrity of Sudan as a nation was to be preserved there was little doubt—not only in Sudan, but in the United States and Egypt, the country's two principal allies. There is every indication that the governments of both nations did not discourage, if they did not organize, the Sudanese President's overthrow.

Even so, this was no mere palace revolution. Numayri was not overthrown merely because of personal corruption, or a quarrel between himself and the military leadership. The conditions making the coup necessary were imposed on the country from the outside, by the IMF. It was a new round of harsh IMF austerity measures, including increases in food prices by one-third, imposed on March 27 as Numayri departed for talks with President Reagan in Washington, which provoked the mass unrest leading into the coup. The measures were greeted by 15-20,000 demonstrators in the streets of Khartoum demanding, "Down with the IMF, Down with the World Bank."

The coup thus came as, more than anything else, a national rejection of IMF policies. Numayri was overthrown because he had made himself the agent of a policy of genocide, the IMF's loan "conditionalities"—and these, to date, still have the backing of the United States.

Either U.S. policy toward Africa ceases to be IMF policy toward Africa, or the stability the coup now makes possible will be short-lived indeed.

The new regime

Reports coming from Washington indicate that, if there was little surprise at the news of the coup—Numayri had just departed Washington for Cairo—there was some perplexity over its perpetrators. Little was known about the new military ruler, Gen. Abdel Rahman Siwar Ad Dahab. He is reportedly a quiet military officer who, only last year, had refused to become chief of staff for health reasons. The official reports even say that he refused to take leadership of the coup until the last moment, that only the threat of younger, more radical officers assuming command, and waiting for Numayri's return before acting—a sure recipe for civil war—decided him upon his course.

Numayri's arrival at Khartoum airport would have split the army. General Ad Dahab accepted leadership late on April 5, on condition that the coup would be undertaken while Numayri was still abroad, thus averting a bloodbath. As it was, only some 10 people lost their lives.

General Ad Dahab is a member of the large Khatmiyya Brotherhood which, until 1969, shared political power with the Ansar Brotherhood of Saded al Mahdi. This points to a strong Egyptian connection. Traditionally associated with Egyptian Islam, the Khatmiyya opposed Numayri's attempt at complete Islamization of the country and his association with the extremist Muslim Brotherhood of Hassan al Turabi. Cairo, more than Washington, may have smoothed Ad Dahab's road to power.

It was also Cairo that could ensure Numayri's acceptance of the coup. The events unfolded as Numayri arrived in the Egyptian capital, where he remains. Some sort of agreement was quickly reached, as on April 8, the deposed President

cabled his good wishes to his successors, saying he "understood the reasons" behind the coup d'état.

Ensuring rapid success for the coup-makers were two other developments:

First, most of the military leadership quickly sided with Ad Dahab when he made his decision to proceed quickly, prior to Numayri's return. In particular, the commander of the well-trained and powerful paratroop units, Gen. Ibrahim Yousef el Djali, who might have functioned as an obstacle, sided with General Ad Dahab before the coup itself. El Djali deployed his forces side by side with armored units and tank forces around the airport and strategic locations in the capital. Behind such decisions was, in part, concern over younger and more radical officers, but also, the view that it was not now the army's job to repress the population.

A second and most important factor was Dahab's decision to repeal the IMF-imposed austerity measures, including the 33% price increase on bread and basic foodstuffs. Hence, the coup prompted new demonstrations, but this time, of jubilation. By April 8, the general strike had ended as trade-union leaders called on their members to return to work and "produce more." Calm returned to Khartoum.

As General Dahab himself underlined in a press conference on April 10, his new military regime, made up of a 15-officer cabinet, must immediately face two crucial tasks: to ensure a national reconciliation between North and South, Muslims, animists and Christians, to preserve the integrity of the country; and to remedy a situation in which, with or without Numayri, 4 to 7 million Sudanese are in danger of starving to death, in addition to hundred of thousands of refugees who have streamed in from Chad, Ethiopia, and elsewhere.

Meeting with ambassadors of the major countries traditionally friendly with Sudan, General Ad Dahab urged them to continue previously agreed-upon aid programs and to consider increasing economic and especially food aid as soon as possible.

There have already been some good-will gestures. Countries such as Egypt and Jordan, as well as Saudi Arabia, called the new ruler to offer "all necessary help immediately."

The United States, it was reported on April 10, is considering footing the bill for Sudan's badly needed oil imports, and may also soon release some \$100 million in aid frozen by the State Department last February. Some \$70 million have already been released, the announcement coming by President Reagan during his meeting with Numayri April 1.

However, there are no illusions in Khartoum or Washington that these are anything more than drops in the bucket—when 7 million people are close to death.

National reconciliation is also of utmost importance. On April 10, the leader of the southern Sudanese rebellion, Colonel Garang, delivered an ultimatum to Khartoum: The army was given a seven-day time-frame in which to yield power to

a new civilian government. The ultimatum, of course, was immediately described by General Ad Dahab as unacceptable, but it served as a reminder that, only four days after the bloodless coup, the period of grace was already over.

Whatever Colonel Garang is, peace in southern Sudan is essential. In that region is located the crucial Jonglei Canal project, 80% complete. The water transportation and irrigation capacities it promises could make the area a breadbasket for the entire continent, and is crucial for both Sudan and Egypt. Its construction, interrupted by warfare, must be resumed as soon as possible.

For example, as the drought afflicting the region is nowhere near ending, the canal could supply Sudan and Egypt with 6 billion cubic meters of additional water each year. This would have been one of Cairo's most important reasons for ensuring the return of some stability to Sudan.

There is little doubt that, backed by Soviet client-states Ethiopia and Libya, and fully aware of his blackmail power regionally, Colonel Garang will play for very high stakes before accepting any reconciliation with Khartoum, for which direct military confrontation with his forces has proven both ineffectual and expensive.

But then, a resolution to the conflict is not a military question so much as an economic one, requiring that the central government have the financial ability to share the fruits of national development between Islamic north and Christian south, something it has been systematically prevented from doing—not merely because of Numayri's Islamic focus, but because of IMF conditionalities.

In fact, it was those very conditionalities which led Numayri to attempt a process of Islamization, featuring nationwide enforcement of the fundamentalist *Sharia* (Islamic law). The brutal law was seen as the best means of controlling a restive population in the face of the IMF's brutal austerity—and the relevant desks at the IMF and World Bank were entirely aware of this.

Although a devout Muslim believer, General Ad Dahab is expected to repeal this Islamic law, not only as a gesture toward the southern Christians and animists, but toward Muslims who thus suffered just as much by it. On this score, too, there is no doubt that many in Cairo feel relieved. Sudan's fundamentalist Islamization was threatening to spread northward.

Sudan and the region may be opening a new page in their history, but unless it is understood, above all in the United States, that they have to be given the economic and financial means to save millions from a new holocaust, the Sudanese "domino," as some call it in Washington, will fall.

The consequences are known. In fact, these very consequences are prescribed in the Carter administration's *Global 2000 Report*. And if President Reagan does not, too many figures in the U.S. State Department do subscribe to that "population control" document.