

Sawar adh-Dhahab: coping with Numeiri's legacy

MEI
248 4/19/85 Cairo

from Simon Ingram

The harsh realities of President Numeiri's political and economic legacy quickly dissipated the euphoria that greeted his downfall, but the initial corrective measures taken by the military junta that succeeded him have proved a considerable relief to most elements within the Sudanese opposition, and – even more – to the various Western and Arab powers that claim a strategic interest in the country.

The almost universal disrepute into which Numeiri's regime had sunk among the Sudanese people helped avert any large-scale blood-letting, and has granted General Sawar adh-Dhahab the consensus he needs to dismantle the more misguided policies of Numeiri's twilight years. Nonetheless, the new leader cannot afford to have any illusions about the highly limited duration of the honeymoon he has been offered. The opposition groups, suppressed so effectively under Numeiri, have emerged from the woodwork in surprising strength and numbers, and are already demonstrating that they will not be bullied out of claiming a political reward for precipitating his overthrow. So far, however, Sawar adh-Dhahab has proved their match.

For a man best-known (until a fortnight ago at least) for his devotion to a leader given over increasingly to megalomania, he has displayed considerable tact and resourcefulness in his efforts to achieve reconciliation both at home and abroad. True to the established pattern of Third World military coups, the general defended the army's action as being at the request of the people and in defence of national interests, and pledged a return to democracy after a one-year transitional period. These well-rehearsed – but so often disingenuous – phrases were quickly followed by negotiations between Sawar adh-Dhahab's military council and the trade unions and political parties which make up the alliance of national forces aimed at the formation of a caretaker civilian cabinet. Meanwhile, an olive branch was being

handed to the rebel SPLA leader, John Garang, in an attempt to end the insurgency wracking the south of the country. The overtures to Garang were accompanied by assurances on one of the deepest grievances of the Christian and animist southern provinces, the imposition of Sharia Islamic law. Sawar adh-Dhahab's early statements implied an end to the harshest punishments meted out by Numeiri's Islamic courts, but a continuation of the Sharia's more benign elements in deference to the powerful Muslim Brothers and other religious groups.

Sawar adh-Dhahab wasted no time either in attempting a more balanced foreign policy aimed at mending fences with neighbours long at loggerheads with his predecessor, and at reassuring the allies on whom the stricken country will clearly depend for its survival, at least in the short-term. Friendly messages were despatched to Libya, Ethiopia and their Soviet backers (each of whom Numeiri regularly accused of being behind designs to topple his regime), together with hints that Eritrean and Libyan rebel groups would no longer find Sudan a haven for their operations. In the meantime, envoys were carrying greetings and appeals for continued support to Cairo, Riyadh and Washington, capitals where the smooth transition of power in Sudan has already rid most officials of their qualms about the new regime.

Two weeks on, the consuming interest both within and outside the Sudan is how far such early indications of political nous will carry the new leaders as they grapple with the chaos they have been bequeathed. For one thing, the goodwill so far shown toward the junta may not last once it becomes clear that the deeply unpopular economic austerity programme Numeiri instituted will have to stay. Sawar adh-Dhahab has implied that better public relations would ensure acceptance of the measures, a view which the average Sudanese, confronted with rocketing prices and empty shelves, may not readily

endorse. It is also uncertain how amenable Colonel Garang will prove even if offered a seat in the cabinet. His first public comment on the coup accused the military of "stealing" the people's revolution. "No matter what clothes the hyena puts on", Garang told the SPLA radio on 9 April, "it remains the hyena." The ceasefire he declared appears to be holding for the time being, but may not do so indefinitely.

The 14-odd groupings within the opposition alliance seem prepared, at least for the moment, to allow the military considerable room for manoeuvre as a return to multi-party democracy is charted. However, this pliancy could soon be exhausted were the generals to try to restrict the powers of the cabinet too severely, or if any of the major figures were to feel their interests directly threatened.



Muslim Brotherhood leader Hassan at-Iurabi, for example, issued an early warning against any move to do away with Sharia law. Saudi Arabia, which has already promised urgent supplies of oil and food, would also oppose such a decision.

Relations with Egypt have thus far weathered the coup remarkably well, not least thanks to the deft manner in which President Mubarak distanced himself from Sudan's internal affairs while warning against Libyan interference. The only real threat to continued close ties would be the extended presence in Egypt of Sudan's erstwhile leader in the face of

growing popular demands for his return to Khartoum to face trial. However, the Egyptian government is unlikely to feel overburdened with loyalty towards Numeiri, whom they had long regarded as a dangerous liability, and would far sooner press him into continuing his exile in London or Paris than risk a falling-out with the new leadership. Washington, too, has been quick to wash its hands of a leader it was feting as a close and loyal ally only hours before the coup took place, given over – like the Egyptians – to relief that Numeiri's successor shows no signs of becoming a Libyan or Soviet stooge.

Sawar adh-Dhahab may just fit the bill for his own people too. A career soldier known for his patriotism and his lack of political ambition, his modesty, and a religious temperament that leans more to mysticism than to bigotry, the general could well turn into a popular leader in the mould of Mohammed Naguib, the first president of post-revolutionary Egypt. However, the question remains as to how far such qualities will help him forge a new beginning in Sudan, and guard his premiership against the more vigorous elements of the officer corps who may regard him as excessively tainted by association with the old regime. Developments over the last fortnight have done little to dispel the suspicion that the coup was a preemptive strike by senior generals to forestall a plot by their juniors to purge the entire leadership. By this account, Sawar adh-Dhahab will need to maintain all the political agility he has shown so far if he is to survive even the hiatus he has declared before the military return to their barracks.

Lebanon

Chaos and confusion

from Jim Muir

Beirut

Lebanon has now passed into its second decade of crisis, and rarely has the situation over the past ten years appeared more confused, chaotic and hopeless than it does now. Nobody here even pretends to understand what is happening any more, and most people have gloomily concluded that their country may be condemned to endless convulsions.

The situation is perhaps simplest in the far south, and even there, uncertainty prevails, both over the timing of the final stages of the Israeli withdrawal, and over what happens then.



The swift and silent pullback from the Nabatiyeh area on 11 April is expected to be followed very soon by a similar withdrawal from another troublesome Shi'ite area, that around the port of Tyre, and preparations are also under way for a pullback on the eastern front. But the exact line of the "security zone" the Israelis plan to establish remains uncertain, though officials of Unifil, the UN peace-keeping force in the south, believe it may encroach heavily on the Unifil area of operations. Also unclear is the extent to which the Israelis intend to maintain a direct presence there, or to act as a mobile strike force lashing out from within the border in support of a two-tier system of local "village guards" supplemented by General Lahad's South Lebanon Army (SLA).

Doubt also hangs over the question of whether the Israelis will support the "Jezzine corridor", stretching from the border belt at Marjayoun up to the Christian town of Jezzine in the mountains east of Sidon, and extending down as far as Kfar Falous, only five miles from Sidon. On 9 April, the SLA recruited several hundred new men from the Kfar Falous-Jezzine area – a clear sign the Israeli-backed militia intended to stay on after the official Israeli withdrawal. A local mayor told MEI, "the Israelis have guaranteed air and artillery support if needed, and even say they'll come back with tanks if we get into trouble. They've also given us guarantees that the Druze (in the adjacent Chouf mountains) won't attack us." But the following day, Israeli officials were quoted as saying they had told Lahad they would *not* support a Jezzine corridor.

The Israelis *have* made their position more than clear on one matter, however. That is that they will retaliate with increasing ferocity against attacks on them, on either side of the border, and they make no bones about formally threatening the civilian population of south Lebanon.

The leaflets scattered over Nabatiyeh during the withdrawal, signed by General Ori Orr, GOC Northern Command, was addressed to "the citizen of south Lebanon". Written in Arabic, it commenced, "Think of the safety of your wife and children, your brothers, sisters and parents, and don't cooperate with aliens who care nothing for your interests or those of south Lebanon. Don't let them exploit you and bring down disaster on you and your family".

With the Lebanese army embroiled and distracted in the Sidon fighting, it was left to the mainstream Shi'ite movement. Amal, to take matters in hand. Amal leader Nabih Berri announced a ban on the carrying of arms or wearing of uniforms in the Nabatiyeh area other than by the Lebanese army or police. His followers set up a rigorous checkpoint on the main highway to the town, and turned back gunmen from all groups. The aim was to prevent the area becoming a launching-pad for anti-Israeli operations which could prompt the Israelis into making good their threats. But Amal and other leaders of the anti-Israeli campaign have made it clear they intend to keep up their attacks until the Israelis leave. "We're going to give them some good farewell presents in the Tyre area", said one Amal activist.

The Israelis clearly hope that once they are out of the main hotbeds of Shi'ite unrest, the pressure will ease, and that the border security zone might be tenable. Lebanese resistance leaders however remain committed to driving the Israelis and their influence off every inch, and further upheavals seem inevitable. Christians living within the border zone are deeply fearful. Many believe it is too late for coexistence and reconciliation with the Muslims. "We know there will be attacks, but it is better that some dozens of us should be killed by bombs and shelling than that we should all be massacred."