

THE CHOICE FOR THE SUDAN

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IN the Middle East the situation is once more pregnant with possibilities. The threats of colonialism, whether by military force as in Aden, Oman and Algeria, or by diplomatic pressure as exemplified by the recent visit of the American Under Secretary of State Rountree to the area, remain the principal preoccupation of the Arab people. At the same time the fight for democracy and better standards of life continues with all its difficulties. There is renewed speculation about the future development of the United Arab Republic where the internal contradictions have sharpened in recent weeks, and intense interest in Iraq where the progressive forces keep up vigilant struggle in defence of the young Republic.

Meantime in the newest of all the military dictatorships, in the Sudan, where the change of régime was carried through ten weeks ago, there is silence and no indication as yet of the clean break with the colonial past which has been the aim of the Sudanese people since political independence was achieved three years ago.

When the Sudan became independent in January, 1956, it had been under British influence for over a century including 57 years of full British control.

The British 'gifts' to the Sudan in our modern era of swift technical advance are easy to enumerate. A railway network of 2,500 miles (in an area ten times the size of Britain), the Sennar

Dam irrigating a huge cotton plantation between the Blue Nile and the White Nile, and a British-trained army. What of the debit side, of the neglected resources and human skill? Perhaps the most damning indictment of the British colonial system was the fact that in 1956, 95 per cent of the 10 million Sudanese were completely illiterate. Education had been strictly rationed to a small section needed to help run the railways and the civil service. Industry was non-existent, except for Army and railway workshops; the mineral resources were untapped and uncharted.

As in the case of all newly liberated countries, economic independence did not automatically come about with political independence. In the Sudan, it still has to be fought for and to be won. The new régime came to power last November as the Sudanese people were preparing to enter this most important battle.

The coup d'état of General Abboud displaced a government that had become increasingly unpopular and was about to die a natural death. A Coalition Cabinet had been in power for most of the three years of independence, led by a party of big landowners, the Umma party, which by promising a nationalist policy had gained a large vote—though not a majority vote—as well as the support of a centre party, the People's Democratic Party. In practice, however, its policy had the main characteristics of the policy of the big land-owning class in ex-colonial countries: preservation of the old order and disguised hostility to the aspirations of the nationalist movement. Its achievements were few, and it may be said that no spectacular progress could have been made in three short years. But in the Middle East today things are going fast and the government of Abdallah Khalil had the misfortune of starting on its conservative career at the precise moment when in other Arab countries the anti-imperialist struggle was coming to a head.

It had been in existence for only a few days when Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal Company on July 26, 1956. Eden's threats to Egypt were understood by the Sudanese for what they were: threats to every ex-colonial country trying to proclaim its full independence. A spontaneous solidarity movement with Egypt grew during that summer, and when Eden's threats materialised into barefaced aggression, hundreds of Sudanese volunteers were ready to join Egypt's battle for the Canal. The whole country was swept by a violent wave of hatred for the colonialists and all who stood for them. The defeat of the aggression against Egypt brought with it in the Sudan, as everywhere in Africa and Asia, a realisation of

the power of the new forces of liberation when they act in unity as they did in November, 1956.

Immediately after the withdrawal of the British troops from Egypt came the now defunct Eisenhower doctrine—America's attempt to buy her way into Britain's shoes. Dollars were offered in return for a military alliance in the Middle East: should not the representatives of the old order be eager to accept, conscious as they were of the danger to their own positions? Whether eager or hesitant, most of them dared not accept. The Khalil government politely declined, relying on its British connection but wondering already whether the traditional methods would help to solve the growing economic difficulties.

Colonialism always distorts the economy of a subjected country to serve its own needs. When its needs change, however, the burden of economic subjection quickly sharpens into an acute crisis. Like Egypt before it, the Sudan under British control had become a supplier of raw cotton to Lancashire, depending on cotton exports for 70 per cent of its foreign revenues. In 1957, it had to be admitted that Britain's textile mills no longer required the same large quantities; they had their own crisis: and besides, American surplus cotton was being dumped in Britain and Western Europe in increasing quantities. Unsold cotton has been piling up in the Sudan in the last two years, despite reduced prices, and frantic efforts are now being made to dispose of the stocks from the last two seasons.

The results of the failure to sell their cotton have been disastrous for the Sudanese. Government revenue and personal incomes are falling steadily, the development programme has had to be curtailed, restrictions on imports have been introduced causing a steady rise in prices since, for lack of industries, essential goods such as sugar, textiles and paper, have to be imported.

Egypt solved the problem of the vanishing capitalist markets for her cotton by turning to the Socialist markets, and not only selling her cotton but in return getting the long-needed industrial equipment for her new industries. In summer 1957, a Soviet offer to conclude a trade agreement with the Sudan remained unanswered by the Khalil government. In March, 1958, an American offer of economic aid was however accepted.

Khalil's decision to join the circle of 'American Aid' countries instead of expanding economic relations with the Socialist world was denounced in street demonstrations and in Parliament. His claim that the American offer was without strings was ignored in the country, especially as it was quickly followed by undisguised

acts of hostility towards Egypt and by the virtual cessation of economic relations with the United Arab Republic. The unnatural enmity between the two parts of the Nile valley was understood quite correctly as serving only the interests of the enemies of the common aim of independence, a diversion from Sudan's problems.

The American alignment was also seen as a contributing factor to the new attacks against the Sudanese trade union movement. The Sudan Workers' Trade Union Federation, in existence for about ten years, was suddenly told that it had no legal status, and a Magistrate's Court was asked by the government to declare it illegal. The government's case was dismissed, but its intentions had become clear. A one-day general strike and mass demonstrations left little doubt on the unpopularity of the Umma party.

By November, it was clear that the Khalil government could not keep in power much longer. One of the Coalition parties joined the National Unionist opposition in asking for immediate negotiations with Egypt and for a national policy unhampered by political or economic strings. For a few days it seemed that Khalil was about to give way: he announced that he would form a new and enlarged government; he agreed to start negotiations with Egypt. Within the week, he quietly ceded power to the Army leaders.

The men of the new régime have gained some support by finally recognising the Chinese People's Republic and allowing the first trade exchanges with Socialist countries. But they have not given any other indication of a new departure, nor have they aligned themselves with the forces of national liberation internally or in neighbouring countries. The Sudan was the one independent African state which sent no delegate to the All African People's Conference at Accra last December. The Abboud Government has outlawed the Trades Union Federation and the Anti-Imperialist Front, banned the latter's newspaper, arrested their leaders and suppressed all trade union activity, whilst it has confirmed its acceptance of the American aid agreement.

A few days after the military take-over, the ex-Prime Minister Abdallah Khalil told a Lebanese newspaper correspondent that he knew beforehand of General Abboud's coup and approved it. His hopes and those of the Umma are that the new régime will continue their policy, only with better chances of success. But no government can be successful in the Sudan today unless it can offer a truly national policy which, by ending colonialist control, will allow them to develop freely their own economy and to chart their own road to progress without foreign interference.