

Sorting out Sudan mess

Down came Sudan's military dictatorship this weekend, with a crash heard across North Africa and the Middle East. After 15 years of topsy-turvy rule, Gen. Gaafar Nimeiri's regime, beset by civil war, popular uprising and economic collapse, was overthrown by senior army officers.



GAAFAR NIMEIRI
Overthrown by officers

American regional client.

By last week, it was clear that Nimeiri's days were numbered. Rioting and general strikes brought life in north Sudan to a halt. The mercurial general had managed to alienate just about every group in the sprawling nation of 20 million except for the army. Over the weekend, even its patience ran out.

The coup occurred during Nimeiri's visit to his two patrons, Egypt and the U.S. While Nimeiri was asking for more aid from President Reagan, rioting was sweeping through Khartoum, Sudan's seedy capital. Nimeiri evidently believed that a combination of American money and intelligence support, backed by Egyptian troops, would keep him in power.

It now appears that the coup, staged by senior officers, was designed to prevent another coup by younger officers, colonels and majors who were disgusted and sickened by their nation's slide into penury and famine. Nor would it be surprising to learn that Gen. Ddahab's coup was, in fact, mounted with CIA and Egyptian support, pre-empting the emergence, for now, of radical, nationalist officers.

Punch



"Those were the facts, reported objectively.
We now return to your own irrational prejudices."

ERIC MARGOLIS



To those with long memories, the bland Gen. Ddahab very much resembled another colorless officer, Gen. Naguib, who fronted for a while for younger Egyptian officers after the overthrow of King Farouk. Behind Naguib was the modern pharaoh, Gamal Nasser. Who might be behind Gen. Ddahab?

Even if pro-American officers retain control of the Sudan, Washington will not breathe a sigh of relief. One of the pillars of its Middle Eastern policy, one of only three Arab backers of the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel, has just had an earthquake. This leaves an increasingly cool Egypt and little Oman, its government run by officers from the CIA and British Intelligence, as the last Arab partisans of Camp David.

Sudan's new rulers have loudly announced their pro-Western, pro-Egyptian stance. But this may have merely been a ploy to prevent American planes from flying Egyptian paratroopers to Khartoum to overthrow the new junta. Sudan has a long history of Egyptian intervention and is extremely wary of its powerful neighbor.

Whatever happens in Khartoum, the Sudan is in a terrible political and economic mess. Few observers think that any regime will be able to cope with the nation's mounting problems.

Nimeiri's fall means that yet another American-supported Middle Eastern regime, the recipient of millions in aid and arms, has collapsed. Interestingly, no one in the U.S., neither Congress, the media nor "human rights" groups, ever seem to have complained about Nimeiri's execution of opponents, jailings and widespread repression or corruption. So long as he supported the Camp David accords, he remained immune to criticism — just like his late friend, Egypt's Anwar Sadat.

Meanwhile, the Reagan administration, which has an unbroken record of disasters and blunders in the Middle East, must now ponder what to do with its paraplegic former client state. The nation is bankrupt; exports only cover interest payments on the huge foreign debt. There are no funds for imports. Food, fuel and gasoline are scarce; sickness rampant, roads and bridges are falling apart from neglect. The U.S. stuck with supporting Egypt and Israel, has no money to spare for Sudan. But if it does not keep up a flow of aid, its arch-enemy, Libya, may step in.

In the south, Dinka tribesmen, many of whom are still naked cattle-herders, are fighting for a separate non-Muslim state. Libyan and Ethiopian agents are stirring up trouble. Strange religious sects in the north — including the heirs to the fearsome Dervishes — are becoming dangerously agitated. Drought is spreading and bringing with it millions of starving Ethiopian refugees. Sudan is fast returning to the bush.