



ERIC MARGOLIS

Sudan's astonishing about-face

Becoming democratic is the in thing these days. Witness the enormous ballyhoo over the downfall of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos. That successor Cory Aquino seems to be setting up a dictatorship has not yet dampened the enthusiasm of North American liberals.

New democratic regimes in Argentina, Guatemala and Uruguay have received a great deal of friendly North American press coverage. Given this current passion for democracy, one must wonder why its current flowering in Africa's largest nation, Sudan, has received so little media attention and even less favorable reporting in the West.

Until April, 1985, Sudan was ruled — or, rather, misruled — by the military dictator Jaffar el-Nimieri. Last year Sudan's people, disgusted with the regime's corruption, cruelty and economic ineptitude, rose up en masse. A military coup toppled Nimieri who then fled to Egypt. Sudan's new military rulers are now conducting free elections to select a national assembly that will draw up a constitution. By African standards, the emergence of

democracy in Sudan is astonishing. Rough and imperfect, to be sure, but still a reasonably free system in which 30 political parties are now active. Whether it will last remains to be seen. Over the past 12 months, Sudan, a vast war-torn nation teetering on the brink of famine and economic collapse, has managed to create a measure of political freedom that is unknown in most of black or Arab Africa.

Yet this remarkable accomplishment has been ignored by the West. It is also curious that so much ink has been devoted to horror stories about Imelda Marcos's 3,000 pairs of shoes but hardly a word has been said about massive corruption in Sudan. Pro-American nations in the Mideast such as Morocco or Egypt are seemingly exempted by the U.S. Congress and the media from the same criticism about rights violations or corruption that are heaped on pro-American leaders in South Korea, Chile or Pakistan.

Nimieri was kept in power for the past decade by American money and support from the CIA. That Nimieri was wrecking the Sudan and antagonizing its people was,

apparently, less important than the fact that, except for the Sultan of Oman, Nimieri was the only Arab leader to openly support Egypt's Camp David Accords with Israel.

So long as Nimieri co-operated with Washington's Mideast policy, usually vociferous human rights watchdogs, Congress and the media asked few questions. Nimieri's downfall was triggered by the bizarre episode of the flight of part of Ethiopia's black Jews, known as Falashas. As Ethiopians starved, Jewish groups in North America acted to rescue the Falashas from Ethiopia. Sudan, just across the border, was the logical escape route.

"Operation Moses" was secretly set up by the CIA, Israel's Mossad and Sudan's security forces. North American Jewish groups reportedly funneled \$56 million (U.S.) through the CIA into the pockets of Nimieri and some of his aides to buy the Falashas freedom. The Red Sea parted once again.

Operation Moses remained secret until exposed by Israelis who rejected the notion that the black Falashas were true Jews. When the details of the airlift

emerged, and word spread that Sudan's dictator was being massively bribed, outraged Sudanese rose up and overthrew him. If reported figures are correct, each Falasha smuggled out of Ethiopia via Sudan cost \$10,000 (U.S.) — making Nimieri the modern era's most successful slaver.

Besides such errant corruption, Nimieri had opponents hanged or beheaded. While he and his cohorts stashed money in Switzerland, Sudan edged very close to Ethiopian-style famine. Torture and rights abuses in Sudan were commonplace.

But no one in Washington or New York much seemed to care — any more than during the era of the shah, when reports of violations of human rights and widespread torture in Iran were shrugged off. The same blind spot occurs in the western view of black Africa.

Praise pours forth daily for Cory Aquino, now become something of a Philippine Joan of Arc. But not a word for Sudan's leader, Gen. Abdel Rahman Siwar el-Dahab. He could use some encouragement.