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The Sudanese Trade Unions And  
The State. Their Role In The  
Democratic Economic Reform And  
Development

By: M. El Murtada Mustafa, ILO/ARLAC,  
Harare, Zimbabwe

Universität Bremen  
Sudanforschungsgruppe Bremen  
Diskussionsbeiträge

D-28334 Bremen, Federal Republic of Germany  
P. O. Box 33 04 40 (Postfach 33 04 40)  
Telex UNI 24 58 11  
Telephone (04 21) 218 - 30 74

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Editor: Karl Wohlmuth

Professor of Economics,

University of Bremen

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**THE SUDANESE TRADE UNIONS AND THE STATE. THEIR ROLE IN THE  
DEMOCRATIC ECONOMIC REFORM AND DEVELOPMENT**

**BY**

**M EL MURTADA MUSTAFA  
CHIEF TECHNICAL ADVISOR**

**AFRICAN REGIONAL LABOUR ADMINISTRATION CENTRE  
HARARE, ZIMBABWE**

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In my belief the Sudanese trade unions are an important social force. They have played eminent economic and political roles in Sudan's recent past. However, little research on them has been done and the few books and articles that have been published reflect the views of academic outsiders.

Let me give you an insider's view on the trade unions, based on twenty-five years of experience in Sudan's labour administration.

In the beginning I would like to state the propositions which are the basis of my presentation:

1. Politics of economic reform (often called structural adjustment) have often failed because of too limited approaches. Especially the important roles of the State and of institutions in general have been underestimated.
2. Another missing point in the orthodox adjustment programmes is the need for political sustainability, it is not enough for a reform programme to be economically sound, it must also be acceptable and in fact accepted by the different social groups.
3. For this reason, the institutional mechanism of tripartite consultation, that is consultation with trade unions and employers, can play an important role.
4. The trade unions in Sudan are among the most dynamic in Africa. Sudan with its rich trade union history offers itself as a case study for the potential of trade union involvement in development.
5. Contrary to the literature of the 1960s and 1970s, trade union interests do not represent a privileged group. Experience shows that the real incomes of the workers have been adversely affected by the economic crisis and have deteriorated. Trade

union interests and demands represent the conditions of life of the majority of the people who are no trade union members.

In my presentation I will briefly review the evolution of the trade unions and in the second part concentrate on the 1970s and 1980s. I will not include the time of the present government, which came to power in 1989, because these developments are too fresh to be assessed now. Also I do not have first hand experience of this time.

### **The evolution of the trade unions in Sudan**

The Sudanese labour movement started as a political and economic protest movement during the colonial time. Actually, the driving force behind its creation was activists influenced by liberal, socialist and marxists ideas from the opposition parties to the colonial British Administration. The trade unions were used as a means of agitation against the colonial power.

The first and largest trade union in Sudan was the Workers Affairs Association (WAA), founded by the workers of the Sudan Railways in 1946-47. After a determined struggle against the colonial authorities the union was recognised in July 1947. The economic drive behind the formation of the unions was the increases of prices during the Second World War and afterwards. The meagre allowances granted by the employees did little to alleviate the distress of the workers. The growing nationalist consciousness in the country also increased the consciousness of the workers. The direct involvement of the labour movement in nationalist politics started with the creation of the Sudan Workers Trade Union Federation (SWTUF) in 1950.

The state was the main employer not only in the economic sense, but also in the political sense. This helped to focus the thinking in the trade unions on politics and the struggle with the government. Behind this thinking was an idea of a "just government". The idea was to replace the government by strike and confrontation.

Thus this idea had not only a strong intellectual appeal, but was also appropriate to the circumstances.

The trade union movement started completely independent from the sectarian Sudanese organisations. It had its roots in the urban, de-sectarized organizations of the society. This origin remained the heritage of the Sudanese trade unions. Until Numeiri's time the structure remained unchanged in this respect.

The trade union movement was fragmented, because the British colonial administration legislation allowed freedom of association for any group of more than 10 people to form a trade union. However, some cohesiveness was given to the movement in the trade union federation.

There were two special features of the Sudanese trade union movement:

- (a) They put high emphasis on political education: they criticized the working conditions from the point of view of political economy.
- (b) From the beginning, the trade unions realised that in a country with a huge public sector it is very difficult to differentiate between the government as employer and as the State in general.

A fundamental characteristic of the colonial time, as well as the post-independence Sudan, was a polarisation of political elements in the country into two opposing groups: on the one hand, the traditional elements represented by their parties (Umma, Nationalist Unionist Party, Peoples Democratic Party) and their religious sects, and on the other hand the non-traditional elements, which constituted a fluid coalition between the SCP, the SWTUF; white-collar and professional organisations, tenant farmer unions, student unions, and others. Although the traditional parties were leading the nationalist struggle against the colonialist powers, they offered only meagre and belated assistance to the emerging labour organisations. Their bourgeois orientation and their reliance on the sectarian loyalties of the population militated against their active involvement in organising labour unions.

The alliance between the labour movement and other non-traditional elements, was decisive in determining the nature of government-labour relations in the post-independence period. After independence the traditional political parties became the Government. Their position changed from a position of, at best, indifference to trade unions to one which saw SWTUF as a threat to their own authority. During the period 1954-58, nationalist governments under traditional hegemony were continuously attempting to split the SWTFU, or to undermine its influence in the labour movement. For this reason, the traditional parties tried to set up parallel, pro-government organisations in competition to the SWTUF. Also the SWTUF and its leaders were continuously harassed. These attempts to undermine the labour movement however, were without success.

The confrontation between the trade unions and the conservative government reached a climax in October 1958 with a general strike against the economic policies of the

government. When this successful strike strengthened the opposition, the resulting political crisis paved the way for the military coup d'etat of November 1958.

The new military regime of General Abboud immediately decided to dissolve all labour organisations and started to persecute their leaders. In 1960 the formation of unions was again allowed, but the new Trade Union Ordinance placed various restrictions on the freedom of association of workers. This weakened the labour movement by reducing its membership and also its effectiveness. Nevertheless, the trade unions did not become the subservient movement the military regime was hoping for. Instead, the labour movement turned into one of the most determined centers of political opposition. With the students the Sudan Communist Party and other non-traditional elements, this struggle ultimately led to the uprising of October 1964.

As a result, a government composed largely of non-traditional elements came to power. For the first time, the labour movement was represented in the government. This suspended the restrictive Trade Union Ordinance of 1960 and reinstated the 1948 law. Inherently, faced with a choice the radicals preferred the Colonial law.

After the 1964 uprising a strong and militant labour movement emerged. The strong bond to the government led the SWTUF even to suspend all labour demands that would have increased the financial burden of the public treasury. Thus, this time went far towards a social consensus.

However, in less than 4 months the traditional parties were able to regroup and to force the progressive government to resign. With respect to the relation of the trade unions and the government, this implied a return to the former patterns of conflict that had persisted during the period 1954-58. However, this time the trade unions were stronger, and the government had more respect for the movement's power and influence. The labour movement was able to resist attempts of the conservative governments to liquidate the political gains made after the 1964 uprising. In the period up to 1969, it continued to agitate for a non-traditional dominated government and a socialist economy. An unusual feature is the emergence of the power of the professional associations.

During the period up to 1969, the labour movement has experienced a steady growth, interrupted only during the military regime of 1958-1964.

### **The period of the 1970s and the 1980s**

When Numeiri came to power, a new period of highly structured unionism began. Models for this structure were the Soviet Union, Egypt and and Yugoslavija. This structure was embodied in legislation.

During the period a corporate relation was established. The Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU) established a trade union office (secretariat). Secretly the Security used to watch closely the activities of the trade unions with a department speficially for that purpose. Some trade union leaders collaborated. In spite of this corporate relationship, the trade unions were never fully integrated into the SSU main stream structures.

During all of his time, Numeiri remained wary of the trade union movement. Constantly he tried to win their political support. He tried to reconcile the authoritarian state with the trade unions; strikes were not tolerated. But the spirit of independence of the trade unions continued.

The favouritism of the State towards the trade unions expressed itself in:

- accommodation of wages;
- support of cooperatives;
- support of the idea of a workers' bank;
- provisions in legislation for non-dismissal of workers;
- customs exemptions for trade unions technical cooperation equipment;
- programmes for workers' education;
- facilities provided for trade union leaders; and
- apparent representation in the regime's institutions (symbolic.)

However, these measures must not be considered as an interest articulation of the workers. They were not comprehensive, and rather an indicator of the government's patronizing attitude.

After the clampdown of Numeiri on the communists in 1971, the trade union leaders realised that the possibility of overthrowing the government was no longer feasible. A new type of trade unionism evolved.

The three main features of the new approach were:

- a broad outlook and commitment to the national cause (economically and politically);
- the independence of the trade union movement, especially with regard to the traditional and ideological forces;
- a pragmatic approach of accommodation.

After the overthrow of Numeiri, the traditional parties came to power in 1985. They regarded the workers' trade union movement as not having been credited for the overthrow of Numeiri. This evaluation is at least true for the workers trade unions, less for the professionals. This had two effects: The professional organisations (representing the white-collar professions) believed that they were entitled for better treatment because of their role as forrunners for the overthrow of Numeiri. Secondly, they thought to have the power to overthrow a government. Thirdly, they accredited themselves as the speakers of the trade unions movement.

In the workers trade union elections after Numeiri the traditional parties were completely defeated. The trade union members tend to think that the traditional parties coalesced against them. Trade unionists who stood for the independence and non-partisan movement won the elections.

During the period 1985-89 the trade unions were very successful in revising the labour legislation, to accommodate them to the new democratic structure. Also they started to call for economic reform and peace in the South. Thirdly, they tried to enhance the cause of Sudan in the international sphere.

However, the economic situation worsened. The organised pressure from trade unions, especially the white collar unions, contributed to an ungovernable situation (in the presence of a weak government) and paved the way to the 1989 coup. There are many parallels of the 1986-9 governments to the period of 1964-9. They were characterised by a corrupt and inefficient party system, predominance of short-term interests of politicians, and inability to address the country's major economic and political problems.

Immediately after the coup an agreement was made on a transitional trade union period, and the trade unions continued to function as committees. Later the trade unions were dissolved, and a new highly structured organisation, including both blue collar and white collar workers in the same organisation, was created. People supportive to the new regime



were appointed without elections.

The new economic policies hit hard on the urban classes, and the government remained fearful that it might be driven out of office by the trade unions.

In general one can say that the trade unions in Sudan are highly active, but every time they have become strong - in the forefront and champion to improvement of the conditions of life of the working people - they have been stopped by military governments. In fact, there was never a major conflict between the trade unions and the employers in the private sector, most of whom are organised in Sudan.

In the political sphere, the concept of the authoritarian/corporate state appears useful. During Numeiri's time there was a highly structured and, in the later part, a slightly more liberalised approach to the unions. After 1975, the Numeiri regime can be described as an amalgam of the authoritarian and the corporate state. There were elements of suppression, strikes were not tolerated, but also concessions were given to the trade union movement.

During the pluralistic political regime (1986-89) there was a structured, but more liberal policy with respect to trade unions. The state of this period can be described as an amalgam of the corporate and the liberal state. The process of reconciliation continued, but the trade unions were seen as a potential source of undermining the power of the state.

The trade unions found a more enabling climate during the democratic phase. Actually, the trade unions were forerunners of the national coalition government formed early 1989. But the SWTUF were concerned from the start that the National Islamic Front (NIF) was not included in it. This meant that the national coalition government did not consist of all parties. The NIF was isolated and functioned as an opposition..

Elements of the corporate system in both periods were

- support for trade union projects, i.e. co-operatives, the Workers Bank etc.
- protective legislation for workers, i.e. minimum wages and social security.

In the liberal period, the idea of a social charter was added.

We have to interrelate the dynamics of the trade unions to the dynamics of both the economy and the State. One has to arrive at a new idea concerning the relation of the trade unions to the State and to the development of the economy. In the past, neither the

authoritarian nor the liberal model was successful. In effect, there was a dynamic, but not progressive process of movements between the authoritarian and the democratic state. The vision would be a democratic state which can tolerate a free independent trade union movement where interests can be reconciled with the interest of the State and the other economic groups, and with the population at large: A social bond relationship.

## Conclusion

Main conclusions are:

1. Adjustment policies have to be reconciled with development strategies. Additionally, they need to have a "human face". A purely capitalistic oriented adjustment and development path would neglect the interests of the workers and the poor social groups which have, however, to be included.
2. A democratic society is a condition for this kind of policies. However, a simple transfer of the Westminster model of democracy is not appropriate. The experience of Sudan during the years 1964-69 and again 1985-89 have proved this. There was a liberal state, but it failed to come up with a programme for reconciliation. Instead, mechanisms have to be developed to reconcile the interests of the different social groups.
3. The tripartite mechanism would be an important step in that direction, because the organised sections of the working people and the employers (in the modern sector) together with the government could articulate and represent the interests of the people.
4. A social contract "la paix sociale" between all the major social groups will be the basis for a socially bonded development relationship.
5. The Sudan example shows that the trade unions can only be strong in a democratic state. Under authoritarian regimes, the reconciliation of interests remains more apparent than real. The authoritarian state failed to acknowledge the trade union interests.
6. Trade unions need to understand the working of a democratic system and the tripartite nature of democracy in many developing countries. They must not seem to be threatening the economic stability of the country - nor, by organisation of large popular demonstrations, the political stability of the state.

**REJOINDER**

The role of the Sudanese Trade Union Movement in economic and social development requires an understanding of democracy in the Sudan. The origin of the two main political parties dates to the 19th century Sudanese politics, but the parties themselves were not necessarily democratic. These parties are reminiscent of the past. Leadership based on "inheritance" tends to be conservative and difficult to challenge with leaders showing little willingness to adapt to changing circumstances and realities.

In this environment, trade unions were never reconciled with the interests of other groups. Herein lies the real issue: There is a need to reconcile the interests of various social groups with the strengthening of tripartite processes and consultations as a stepstone towards that direction.

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