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**Raising the Phoenix:
The Rise and Decline of Student Political Activism in the Sudan**

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Introduction

The basic theme of this study is that the political activism of the Sudanese student movement is, at present, in a state of decline and that any remedial effort first requires an examination of the reasons and processes of regression. The focus is mainly on the University of Khartoum as the institution with a history and legacy of a once vibrant student movement. Perceptions of decline usually stem from images of extraordinary past activism that are projected and contrasted with the present. The study offers the cautiously-optimistic proposition that the present itself may yet hold some possibilities for renewal.

The first part of the paper defines “student activism’ within the framework of relevant conceptual models and examines, as empirical referents, the student activism experience in the United States and Iran; the former for providing a variety of models, some of which may suggest possibilities of emulation, while the latter has similarities since 1979 to the current Islamic educational discourse and direction in the Sudan and, as the precursor in this regard, is examined to see what possible lessons it may have for the future of the Sudanese student movement.

The second part examines student activism in three historical phases: first, the rise of student activism from the 1940s anti-colonial struggle to the apogee of its success in 1964 and the related contrasts in the evolutionary trajectories of national and campus politics; second, the intrusion of state and party influences into campus politics and the resultant polarization of, and emergence of intergroup violence in, student politics; and, third, the implications and consequences, for both higher education and student activism, of the democratic/authoritarian cycles and the seemingly endemic malaise in the national political culture of which these cycles are symptomatic.

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The third part traces the origins of the current higher education strategy to the Islamicization policies during the period of national reconciliation and critically analyzes the main components of the revolution in higher education since 1990 as part of an overall strategy of the *top-down* societal transformation project. The macro-political and the higher educational contexts are seen as converging into a mutually legitimizing process whereby religion and language in the educational discourse are used to inform and reinforce Islamicization of the society at large.

The fourth part envisages an upward trajectory for student activism as essentially involving the transition from political to social activism through student engagement in local community outreach. It examines both the obstacles and opportunities of such engagement and suggests that the expansion of the third sector has established a number of non-partisan and volunteer-based NGOs that can mentor, and act as anchor, for nascent student-based activist groups. The study argues that some aspects of the educational policy may have opened opportunities for student engagement in local community grassroots.

The conclusions sum up the main arguments of the paper and suggest that while the decline is likely to endure in the short term, it is not irreversible. Drawing on concepts and models outlined in the first part, the study offers a number of options, explains the organizational challenges involved, and argues that creative interactions in community outreach can infuse students with an invigorating sense of social responsibility and collective optimism, enhance intellectual awareness in the short term and build up a reservoir of community-backed support for whatever wider endeavour student activism may undertake in the long run.

I

Defining Student Activism: The Relevance of Concepts and Models

On Activism and Violence:

Activism can be described in the broadest sense as “intentional action to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change,” undertaken “in support of, or opposition to, one side of an often controversial argument”. Although the word has a strong nuance of ‘militancy’, activism can “stem from any number of political orientations and take a wide range of forms” ranging from contributing to campus newspapers, to participation in political campaigns, protest rallies, strikes, to engagement in community work, or to outright violence.¹

The use of the term ‘student political activism’ has itself been criticized for assuming that student activists can automatically be typified as ‘students’ rather than free-thinking ‘individuals’ and the assumption itself is considered to be a form of oppression in the sense that “by isolating individuals as students without acknowledging their multiple other identities, activist movements tend to disenfranchise the very students that participate in them”. A related criticism challenges the manipulative nature of hardcore student leaderships: “the leaders treat the oppressed as mere activists to be denied the opportunity of reflection and allowed merely the illusion of acting, whereas in fact they would continue to be manipulated - and in this case by the presumed foes of

the manipulation." Thus by eliminating this individualistic 'opportunity of reflection' from activism, student leaders may actually perpetuate the very problems they seek to address. A more specific criticism sees student activists as being spoiled children of privilege rebelling out of a sense of self-guilt against the hierarchical society that favours them and which they readily rejoin once they outgrow the their adolescence of their activism.²

However, criticism of intent, practice and motivation does not necessarily invalidate the use of the term as such. While such criticisms, reflecting at their core establishment views, may have application in specific cases and contexts (the elimination of the 'opportunity of reflection' seems relevant in explaining the decline of student activism in Sudan) blanket generalizations ignore the fact that modern student activist movements vary widely in objectives, size, and motivation with students of all kinds of racial and socio-economic backgrounds and political perspectives participating in all kinds of educational settings.

Joseph Katz defines student activism in terms of the attitudes of the participants in it. In his analysis of research conducted by sociologists at the University of California at Berkley, Katz examines several motivational factors of student activism, mainly: dissatisfaction with social and political conditions; lack of meaning in institutional curricular content; increased pressure for higher academic performance; dissatisfaction with living conditions and frustration with student/university relations. The Berkley study found the surveyed students to have high academic aptitude and intellectual motivation. Katz suggests that affluent students also tend to resent the intellectual poverty at home as well as the frustrating challenges at school.³

Pippa Norris uses the term political activism as synonymous with political participation and refers separately to protest activism as part of new social movements and the "role of the internet in facilitating transnational advocacy networks – concerning such issues as human rights, conflict resolution, women's equality, environmental protection, and trade/debt – that transcend national borders". He relates political activism to modernization theory where common social trends "have increased demands for more active public participation in the policy-making process through direct action, new social movements and protest groups, while weakening deferential loyalties and support for traditional hierarchical organizations and authorities". Organizational theory emphasizes the way in which the structure of the state sets opportunities for participation while agency theories stress the traditional mobilizing organizations in civil society, notably the ways in which political parties, trade unions, and religious groups recruit, organize, and engage activists. The civic voluntarism model "emphasizes the role of social inequalities in resources such as educational skills, and motivational factors such as political interest, information and confidence, in explaining who participates".⁴

But the concept that comes closer to capturing the essence of student activism as a socio-political movement is the critical theory of society. Not only does the term itself encapsulates a vital value at the heart of educational philosophy and its core message (a "theory is critical to the extent that it seeks human emancipation") endows student activism with a powerful motivational concept, but the escalation in the global student protest movement in the 1960s provided the context in

which critical theory itself was further developed and expanded. As originally formulated in the 1930s by the German scholars Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, critical theory sought to “explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation.” The *critical* emphasis is on “human beings as the self-creating producers of their own history” and on the related need to “transform contemporary capitalism into a consensual form of social life”; that is, transforming it into a “real democracy”.⁵ Indeed, it is critical theory’s commitment to emancipation, understood as “the development of possibilities for a better life already immanent within the present that provides its point of critique of the prevailing [social] order”. Emancipation is further understood as “the more rational and purposeful utilization of already existing forces of production in order to bring nature under rational human control”.⁶

A critique of critical theory centres on the one-dimensional nature of the Horkheimer/Adorno formulation, namely, their pessimism about the actual possibility of change implicit in their reluctance “to orient their work towards political activity”, and the related absence of any concrete suggestions about the type of institutions and relationships that would exist in an emancipated society.⁷ The global upsurge of student activism in 1960s created within the German school of critical theory deep divisions that reflected “the extent of the distance between the old guard of critical theory and the would-be critical practitioners of the student movement”. While Adorno and Horkheimer (who doubted “the potential of any group within society to initiate and inspire a genuinely emancipatory politics”) distanced themselves from the radicalization of the student movement, a younger generation of German critical theorists, (notably Jurgen Habermas) identified in it new possibilities for descriptive and normative areas for social inquiry:

For them, the upsurge in radicalism was confirmation that emancipatory change remained more than simply an instrument of thought; it was an actually-existing potential that might be realized. The new radicalism was also a challenge to their thinking. How could their type of critical endeavour link up with progressive political practice? Could they actually provide the vision of a more emancipated society demanded by the students? What were the deep-seated sources of emancipatory impulse or instincts that had managed to defy the tyranny of instrumental reason and re-emerge so dramatically. If the analysis of [Horkheimer and Adorno] was too ‘one-dimensional’, then what was the correct understanding of contemporary society?⁸

Thus, the radical student movement opened new venues for critical enquiry for new generations of critical theorists. This proliferation in ‘critical theories’ from the late 1960s onwards, includes conceptual enquiries to determine the nature and limits of ‘real democracy’ in complex, pluralistic, and globalizing societies, as well as new concepts such as the theory of communicative action (Habermas), world systems theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and critical race theory.

The radicalization of the student movement in the 1960s which involved resort to violence on both sides of the student-versus-state confrontations has given rise to the tendency to equate

political activism with political violence and to the linguistically confusing distinction between the use of *violence* by non-state actors and the use of *force* by state agencies. Implicit in this distinction (more in currency in the United States than elsewhere) is that the former is malignant, illegitimate and immoral and the latter is benign, legitimate and moral (examples of this double-standard distinctions abound in US foreign policy). In this ‘legitivist’ approach to violence, popular among conservative and right-wing circles, political violence is defined as “the illegal employment of methods of physical coercion for personal or group ends”.⁹ Herbert Marcuse exposed the deficiency of this definition when he wrote in 1968: “thanks to this political linguistics, we never use the word violence to describe the actions of the police... but the word is readily applied to the actions of students who defend themselves from the police”.¹⁰ This deficiency also becomes more crucial when the distinction is used in authoritarian regimes to obscure overt state violence and to legitimize various forms of covert abuse.

Other definitions of political violence offer similar patterns of the complex interplay between concept and commitment. The concept of ‘wide’ or ‘structural’ violence is more leftist in outlook since it includes “within the extension of the term a great range of social injustices and inequalities” and implicitly justifies resort to violence by non-state actors as merely reacting to state violence. At its simplest and ‘restricted’ form, the definition of violence typically focuses on interpersonal acts of force, usually involving the infliction of physical injury.¹¹

These three types of definition need not be mutually exclusive and indeed they may overlap or become complementary to one another. Proponents of the ‘wide-structural’ definition usually offer it as an extension of the ‘restricted’ definition where it is seen as applicable to revolutionary attitudes towards totalitarian regimes. Similarly, ‘restricted’ violence has been linked to ‘structural’ violence in developing the ‘act/omission’ concept that stresses the ways in which the failure to act in certain situations may have implicit moral implications that can be indistinguishable from explicit acts of violence. John Harris extends the notion of ‘restricted’ violence to ‘structural’ violence without reference to the manner in which harm or injury is done other than its being done knowingly. Although Harris’ primary concern is with personal violence, the point is that the notion of personal failure to act can dramatize the damage done to people through similar failures by the structures and institutions of their society. A similar approach is implicit in Steven Lee’s treatment of poverty as a case of structural violence.¹²

The relevancy of these aspects of political violence is often overlooked in examining the sources of violence as an extreme form of student activism in third world contexts. Student violence is as much a product of the implicit failure of the state to act as it is a defence or protest against the operation of explicit institutional violence. A corollary of this is that *intentional* state acts of omission or failure to act resulting in suffering do constitute political violence of the worst type, not only in the act of omission itself but also in relation to violent backlashes that it is certain to unleash. Implicit in this concept too, is that resort to violence is more morally objectionable where it is practiced through the complicity of the state or instigated or condoned by any party for purely partisan interests or to obtain or maintain power.

Empirical Perspectives: the American and Iranian Models

From an empirical perspective, it may be useful to look at the experiences of student activism in the United States of America and Iran for two different reasons. The American model provides a wide spectrum of concepts and approaches some of which may suggest new avenues for emulation as this paper proposes later. The Iranian model, as the precursor to the Sudanese one in adopting an Islamic educational discourse and direction, is examined to see what lessons and implications can be drawn from its experience and performance to date.

In the United States, student activism dates back to the beginning of public education but it was the Great Depression of the 1930s that channelled student protest into social activity, often in support of labour struggles and economic justice. In the 1950s many students spoke out against McCarthyism and for freedom of speech and association on campus. During the 1960s student activists gained increased political prominence and moved to a critique of what they saw as a materialistic society whose work and culture ethic was based on consumerism. Some activists, such as the Students for a Democratic Society, focused on schools as a social agent that simultaneously oppresses society, through making education a means of social control, and could potentially uplifts society through providing opportunities to confront and solve social problems. The civil rights movement and the Vietnam War radicalized the student movement and student protest, and police reaction to them often took violent forms. A characteristic feature of this activism was that students (the ‘hippies’ and ‘flower children’ of the ‘counterculture revolution’) saw themselves as engaged simultaneously in social change and personal transformation.

The 1980s saw the orientation of many campuses towards neoliberal models of activism, namely the identification with, and campaigning for, engagement in community service. This trend continued in the 1990s as community organization, community practice and community action models proliferated in the literature and as these conceptual models, previously viewed as radical and controversial ideas, increasingly found their way, through student as well as faculty activism, into the curricula of schools and higher education institutions. There was also a resurgence of student interest in educational reform with more emphasis on ensuring that changes that were made remained sustainable, as well as renewed concern over the influence of the military/industrial complex in education, especially career-oriented funding by big corporations.

Since 2000, some new innovations in activism have appeared in which the institutions themselves were involved, such as the service-learning models of community outreach (linking student community service to degree award) and new forms of student-institution interactions. In the University of California at Berkley, a hotbed of student militancy in the 1960s, a new model of quiet student activism has emerged as a university-sponsored initiative. The project of ‘mobilizing the edges to transform the core’ is based on encouraging engaged and empowered students to take on some of the most challenging social problems (e.g. environmental pollution, inadequate health care, and development problems) and connecting the most creative ideas to resources across a variety of edges (e.g. entrepreneurial community and NGOs) to come up with innovative and high-impact solutions at the core. But generally, traditional issues of activism

have remained at the forefront reflecting new concerns or rekindling old ones: the war in Iraq, global warming, and the humanitarian situation in Darfur.¹³ Student volunteers in Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, largely on the basis of his stance on these issues, helped secure for him the majority of the youth vote – a major factor in his history-making electoral victory.

In Iran, students had been ardent supporters of the nationalist Musadiq regime whose anti-Western policies in the early 1950s led to the CIA-engineered coup that toppled him and restored the Shah to power. The Shah's blatantly pro-Western policies and his misconceived modernization (mainly of the army and security forces) alienated many sectors in society. Given the significant role of religious leaders in Iran's political and social culture, opposition to the Shah fell largely to them. Students played a leading role, as a part of Khomeini's opposition network, in the popular unrest that culminated in the 1979 overthrow of the Shah regime.

With the onset of theocratic mullah rule, student activism was manipulated by the regime. The students were used not only as pawns in power consolidation but also as instruments of state policy (e.g. the US embassy hostage crisis of 1979 that has, since then, greatly impacted American-Iranian relations as well as US domestic and foreign politics).¹⁴ But the last two decades have seen increasing student disillusionment with the rigid mullah rule, as well as fractures within the ruling establishment itself along conservative and reformist lines. From 1999 onwards, the regime has resorted to brutal but largely ineffective crackdowns on students: in late 2002, students held mass demonstrations protesting the death sentence meted out to a reformist professor for alleged blasphemy. The following year students again took to the streets to protest government plans to privatize some universities. Iran's largest student organization called for a boycott of the May 2005 presidential elections to protest the mullahs' exclusivist policy of prior screening of presidential candidates.

The continuation of protests after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made the regime call on its student base in 2006 to take its own counteraction against protesters with the President himself urging students to demand the removal of liberal and secular university professors. These calls, tantamount to incitement to campus civil wars, were intensified when mass protests erupted over allegations of massive electoral fraud following the June 2009 presidential election. More seriously, a presidential panel began investigation of the humanities curricula in response to renewed calls by hardliners to purge universities of professors and curricula deemed "un-Islamic" on the assumption that the teaching of secular concepts helped fuel some of the worst clashes in university campuses in the wake of the disputed election. In late August 2009 the supreme spiritual leader Ayatollah Khamenei warned students that the humanities and liberal arts "lead to the loss of belief in godly and Islamic knowledge".¹⁵

History does not usually replicate itself but despite the differences in origin, evolution and social and political backgrounds, there are certain similarities between the Iranian model and the Sudanese one which warrant comparison. First, students were used initially as an instrument to seize power and later as an instrument of state policy and, in both the Iranian and Sudanese cases insidious means were used to penetrate the military establishment and other sectors in society.

Second, once in power both theocratic regimes launched far-reaching campaigns to shackle the educational system within the confines of religious dogma as a part of wider strategies for total societal conversion and control. Third, state policies deemed to be in violation of international law have made the two regimes pariahs in the international community. Fourth, the spilt in the leadership in both cases reflected personality clashes, political expediency and the dynamics of internal power struggles rather than profound divisions over ideology, ultimate political objectives or long-term strategic concepts.

The incipient student revolt in Iran after 30 years of mullah control tends to contradict the dogmatic and theocratic notion that social engineering could transform societies overnight, and to confirm the essentially anti-authoritarian bias of student activism. Despite the shackling of the educational system in anti-intellectual straightjackets, the yearnings in university campuses after decades of indoctrination is still for free and critical expression as students, using instant communications, keep coming up with ideas for expressing their views and protests in new and imaginative ways.

II

Evolution of the Student Movement: The Ideological Dimension

Campus and National Settings: Contrasts in Evolutionary Trajectories

The first step to organize students began with the formation of a cultural society in 1939 which developed in 1941 into a union for the higher education schools to organize and develop cultural activities. When these schools were consolidated and elevated to college status in 1945, a union constitution was drawn making membership obligatory and stressing the need for close contacts between students and lecturers. Student political activism was evident almost immediately with the increasing intensity of the nationalist movement during the 1940s. This was both natural and inevitable as students were part of the elite and many student leaders were active members in the Graduates' Congress that led the nationalist struggle. The late 1940s saw another development that was to shape the political nature and orientation of student activism for the years to come, namely, the emergence of leftist and Islamist ideological currents in student politics. The Students' Congress (the fore-runner of the leftist Democratic Front) was established to bring together the College union and secondary school unions, while the Islamic Liberation Movement (the Muslim Brothers in the 1950s) came into existence mainly to challenge the student left.

What is striking is the contrast of this evolution in student activism with developments in national politics. While the Graduates' Congress spilt into political parties along traditional and sectarian lines, the two ideological groups, the leftists and the Islamists were establishing themselves as the dominant forces in campus politics. With the elevation of the University College to an autonomous University of Khartoum in 1956, the student union, renamed KUSU, also came into its own in terms of structural organization, commitment to national issues, and an intensely-contested, yet essentially democratic and inclusive, electoral process. The adoption of

proportional representation in the 1957 KUSU charter ensured that minority views were represented in the union's organs.¹⁶

In contrast, the first causality on the attainment of independence was the relative consensus in national politics that made it possible in the first place. The Westminster-style parliamentary democracy rapidly degenerated into intra- and inter-party manoeuvres and factionalism in which minorities were marginalized or excluded. Peter Woodward observes that "it is scarcely surprising that only two years after independence elements of disillusionment with liberal democracy in practice were to be heard amongst many of the politically articulate, among whom interest in such groups as the Sudan Communist Party and Muslim Brotherhood was growing".¹⁷

The outcome is equally paradoxical in its contrast: while the demise of democratic rule at the hands of the military in 1958 was made possible by the acquiescence or even the complicity of the established traditional order, it was student activism that made the first and ultimately the most effective challenge to military rule. In 1959 KUSU publicly called on the military junta to surrender power to a democratic and representative civilian government; the university administration, under pressure from the military, issued the infamous 'statute 9' barring students from political activity which the students predictably challenged. When the administration dissolved KUSU in 1961, the students ignored the ban and it was the administration that was largely isolated. As student activism escalated, the military regime sought to contain it by placing the university under the Ministry of Education in 1963 thus targeting the very autonomy that the whole community of students and academic staff cherished and were prepared to defend.

In contrast, it took two years for traditional party leaders to realize that the military had not intervened in politics just to clean up house and then hand them the keys. The entrenchment and increasing authoritarianism of the military awakened the political parties to real and potential threats to their own political constituencies and interests, and from 1960 onwards their opposition became more vocal, leading to the incarceration of prominent party leaders. But the solid work of opposition was being done by the communists and their allies in the trade unions and professional associations through strike organization and other clandestine activities. In southern Sudan, the regime's brutal policies were becoming a source of disaffection and resistance, and despite heavy censorship, news of the spreading civil war began to filter back to the north, and to cause increasing consternation among enlightened public opinion.

It was a fitting testimony to the traditions of Khartoum University as an institution of civic awareness and concern at the time, that the students' initiative to sponsor a public debate on this issue, and the regime's desperate but bloody efforts to prevent it, sparked the popular uprising that overthrow the military dictatorship in October 1964.

Campus and National Politics: Reversal of Roles

Paradoxically, the very success of student activism in being the catalyst of such dramatic change also contained within it the seeds of potential decline. 'Awad A. Karsani refers to what he calls the "political conditioning" of students by which "individual mores are transformed into a

collective consciousness of the importance of the institution and of the unique professional and political potential of its members”. This, he argues, in turn “feeds the ‘custodian myth’ of students (as guardians of the political system) and the kind of self-narcissism already inflated by immaturity and absence of responsibility”.¹⁸

While this form of psychoanalysis can be generalized (or, for that matter, individualized) to the point of distraction, there is nevertheless an element of truth in it in so far as students had a sense of pride and achievement in their role and became excessively preoccupied with politics. Moreover, the importance of this role was not lost on the national political parties which began to pay more attention to harnessing student activism in their struggle for power. Indeed, the post-October 1964 period witnessed the gradual erosion of the ‘vanguard’ nature of the student movement and its replacement over time by a form of *clientélisme* to party politics. In this the leftists and the Islamists had the advantage over the traditional parties in having their student cadres well ensconced and organized in schools and universities.

‘Ali A. ‘Abbās notes that “to the extent that the major political parties in developing countries were allowed to function openly, they tended to neglect the modern sector leaving the arena for the ideological parties and students”. He argues that the traditional parties in Sudan not only ignored this sector but in the 1960s supported the Islamist effort to control higher education institutions on the assumption that the Islamists, with their student base and limited resources, did not pose a serious political threat and could be employed by proxy to contain the greater menace of the communists.¹⁹ Given that the factionalism and weakness of traditional parties was replicated among their campus supporters, they might have had little other choice. A related point is that their political and ideological proximity to the Islamists, coupled with obsession with the communist threat, made the choice that much easier. But in retrospect it seems that this political manipulation, so typical of inter-party manoeuvring at the time, was the first of many instances of political miscalculation and underestimation of the Islamists’ intentions and strategies, that various political parties (including the communists) were to make at one time or another to their ultimate cost.

The close contest of the leftists and the Islamists for KUSU control was reflected in relatively narrow margins of victory and the periodic swings of union control between the two groups. A main, albeit brief, challenge to this pattern in the 1960s came from new centrist, but also secularist, groups reflecting various strands of Third World ideologies prevailing at the time. These centrist groups managed to gain control of KUSU in 1965/66 mainly because of growing student disenchantment with increasing polarization in campus politics and partly because of the appeal of Arab and African indigenous brands of socialism. However, this ascendancy of the centre-coalition was short-lived because the centrists, unlike the ideological groups, lacked both a clear action program and material and moral support from external parent parties.

But the resumption of the leftist and Islamist roles at centre stage brought with it into campus politics the intense polarization and the deepening political fractures in national politics. These were manifested in the split of the major parties into warring factions preoccupied more with the

politics of exclusion rather than inclusion as was demonstrated in the campaign to ban the Sudan Communist Party (SCP) and the escalation of civil war in the south. Given the prevailing political mood of intolerant and divisive politics, the stage was set for two developments: the emergence of inter-group violence in campus politics and the 1969 military takeover. The first was to become a characteristic of student activism as violence increased in frequency and proportions, and the second was to profoundly alter the course and content of national politics.

The first incidence of inter-group violence occurred in 1968 when a group of Islamists disrupted a campus cultural event. One student was killed and several wounded in the ensuing fighting. There is a consensus among educationalists who have studied student violence that it is largely attributable to the intrusion of national and party politics into student politics. ‘Abbās puts the 1968 incident in historical context noting that it occurred four years after Hassan al-Turābi assumed the leadership of Islamic Charter Front (as the Muslim Brothers were renamed in 1964) and marked a new direction that gave priority to the political at the expense of the educational in the party’s orientation and *modes operandi*. This entailed the transformation of the ICF student cadres from an educational elite, fighting for their cause through intellectual conversion, into a political elite spearheading the party’s drive to capture power by all available means, including violence.²⁰ Whether the particular 1968 incidence of violence was the first deliberate move in that strategy is perhaps debatable, but it certainly set a pattern for the violence to come.

Al-Karsani’s treatment of the causes of student violence follows a generalized approach in which he seems to attribute the emergence of student violence to out-of-campus dysfunctional national politics and implicitly distributes the blame evenly. Although he estimates that 70% of students, at any given time, are uncommitted to any political party, al-Karsani refers to this characteristic of the student movement as a pressure group rather than an interest group, and argues that this had made for “intense politicization that makes violence both structural and collective”. Al-Karsani outlines some of the negative returns of student violence: university closures and the resultant disruption of academic calendars; manipulation of academic or union issues for political purposes (e.g. the perennial controversy over proportional versus direct representation); and application (or the lack thereof) of academic sanctions against political activists. He notes that the level of influence of political parties on campus politics tended to increase under doctrinaire military regimes or military rule aligned with doctrinaire parties and that in these situations student groups acted almost exclusively as pressure groups either in support or in opposition.²¹

‘Abd al-Rahīm A. Bilāl observes a link between any type of leadership in general and the incidence of violence and suggests a classification of leaderships that may be useful in identifying the role of student leadership in campus violence.²² This linkage seems to be in line with al-Karsani’s assertion that a relatively small number of ideologically-driven student activists (from both the left and right) had traditionally dominated campus politics. To the extent that campus leaderships are influenced by hardened political party positions, then these leaderships, in Bilāl’s classification, are more likely to be *confrontational* than *accommodational* in relationships with other groups.

Similarly, ‘Adlān al-Hardalo attributes the drift into violence (from the late 1960s to the present) to three factors: first, the student consensus in opposition to military or authoritarian rule was breached when outside influences (state and party alike) began to intrude into campus politics. This breach of the “collective conscience binding the student community and endowing it with a collective sense of political fair play” was also reflected in a similar breach of institutional autonomy and academic freedom when, with every military takeover, the universities were subjected to direct state control. Second, the weakness or complicity of university administrations in failing to impose disciplinary measures against state-backed student perpetrators of violence had erased reverence for university laws and the resultant sense of impunity only made for more resort to violence. Third, whenever the state practiced what it claimed was legitimate violence, the students reacted with counter violence; and whenever the state relied on student factions to contain campus opposition, inter-student tensions became exasperated and inter-group student violence invariably escalated. Al-Hardalo concludes that “the ability of the student community to positively cultivate their creative potential depends in the first place on the democratic space available to them”.²³

Campus and State Relations: Reversals of Orientation

The 1969 military coup was a watershed in the course of student activism in the paradoxical sense of being both the occasion of the meteoric rise of the left and the cause of its equally sudden demise. It was also unique in Sudanese history in having started in the extreme left and, moving across the political spectrum, ended in the extreme right. The new regime was supported by some leaders of the SCP who identified with the ideological commitment of the coup leaders to a program of political and social transformation. But the SCP leadership was badly split over the issue: while a faction opted for collaboration, others in the leadership refused cooperation with a regime whose military mentality and ideological stance they still held suspect.²⁴

For its part, the new regime under Numīri became increasingly hostile to the SCP leadership and moved to clip its wings. The split within the left on the national level was reflected in campus politics. Even before regime’s crackdown on the communists, the consequences of the rallying of the left to the military coup were already being felt on campus. In the 1969/70 union elections, the Democratic Front came a distant second to the Islamic movement. Indeed, the Democratic Front found itself so isolated in 1970 that it withdrew from KUSU and formed its own shadow union. As a result of the campus tension that this tug of war created, the administration dissolved KUSU. In supporting the regime’s early education measures (dismissal of some academic staff and attempts at university restructuring) leftist students proved that, like their Islamist counterparts, they too were vulnerable to outside pressures and manipulation.

Following the bloody purge of the communists in 1971, there was a steady shift in the regime’s internal and external policies from the previous radical stance to a more conservative approach. Numīri moved quickly to consolidate his position by trying to ‘institutionalize’ and legitimize his rule; he established an important southern powerbase in 1972 when he concluded with southern leaders the Addis Ababa agreement that ended the civil war; and inaugurated the Sudan Socialist

Union (SSU) in 1973 as the political arm of the regime. The break with the leftists and the subsequent reappraisal of the regime's economic policies did not signal any immediate rapprochement with the traditional parties and the Islamists. An opposition National Front of the National Unionist Party (NUP) the Umma Party and ICF mounted a number of coup attempts that came close to overthrowing the Numāri regime in 1975 and 1976.²⁵

The impact of these developments on student activism was threefold: first, the suppression of the leftists allowed the student Islamist movement considerable control of campus political platforms, and this deprived student activism of a countervailing ideological energy that had kept campus politics both balanced and competitive. One result of this situation was the Islamists successful push in 1974 to amend the KUSU charter and reinstate the direct ('winner-takes-all') voting mechanism which, in effect, undermined democratic traditions by placing the union under their exclusive control. Second, the Islamists, who were junior partners in the National Front opposition-in-exile, became its leaders in campus politics thus placing themselves more closely within traditional party structures and power bases. National Front student cadres participated in the planning and execution of the failed coup attempts in 1975 and 1976. Third, while the regime tried to counter student opposition partly through the co-option of former leftists and centrist student leaders under the umbrella of the SSU, it relied increasingly and more heavily on using state violence to quell student unrest and opposition.

Paradoxically, the escalation of violence, culminating in the bloody events of July 1976, created an atmosphere more conducive to reconciliation between the regime and the National Front opposition. On the one hand, the fact that opposition forces could organize armed resistance inside the country that came close to success was not lost on the regime. On the other, some of the National Front leaders came to realize, as Sādiq al-Mahdi put it, that there were certain limitations to the use of violence in resolving political differences and that "in politics there is nothing permanent". A related point that could have made it easier to move towards reconciliation was that Numāri's "steady retreat from his initial leftist orientation had considerably reduced the ideological cleavage separating the two sides".²⁶

But the core factor underlying reconciliation was the assumption of the opposition leaders that by working from within the regime they could fill the political vacuum or, at least, influence policy changes or institutional reforms. The way the National Front leaders approached this key issue was revealing and was to have momentous political consequences. Al-Hindi's NUP faction in London expected immediate changes in the nature and structure of the regime's institutions and waited in vain for more evidence of Numāri's commitment and determination to do so. Sādiq al-Mahdi approach was ambivalent: he was neither willing to come out openly against the regime for its failure to deliver on reforms, nor yet able to work within the regime to influence its political direction, other than to assume largely symbolic positions in the SSU.

By contrast, al-Turābi's approach was as perceptive in its strategic thinking as it was expedient in its political opportunism. While al-Hindi held out and al-Mahdi vacillated, al-Turābi used the political space this provided to make the ICF seem indispensable to Numāri. Obviously, Numāri

had his own opportunistic motives in striking the deal with the ICF. Containing student opposition was an important plank in the regime's security arrangements as Numīri certainly knew from the experience of October 1964, and he might have expected the Islamists, as the dominant force in campus politics in 1977 to provide him with some reinsurance policy on that security front. To the extent that this assumption was a factor in Numīri's political calculations, it was based on the wrong premises. First, while the student Islamist movement was an important factor in campus politics, it remained a minority element nonetheless. The same applied as well to the ICF in national politics. What Numīri's *carte blanche* gave the Islamists was the opportunity to infiltrate the educational system itself for their own political purposes. Second, co-opting the political support of a doctrinaire movement often came with the baggage of adopting its ideological platform; in Numīri's alliance with the ICF, this also came with the risk of alienating important constituencies not only within his own powerbase (the southerners, the military establishment, and the SSU) but among the traditional parties as well. Sādiq al-Mahdi finally broke with the regime and was incarcerated for his public criticism of the contents of the *shari'a* laws and the circumstances of their application.

It is ironic that when the student-based and intellectually-grounded Republican Brethren movement (*al-Akhwān al-Jamhurūn*) posed an ideological challenge to the Islamists on their own Islamic turf, it was the state power (or rather the ICF manipulation of state power) that brutally suppressed that challenge, not the other way round. Indeed, with the ICF alliance with the regime, support for the Islamists in campus politics eroded rapidly and by 1985, KUSU was firmly in opposition. As the regime's erratic policies resulted in a series of economic and political crises from 1978 onwards, public resentment and resistance mounted and a mood of spontaneous protest began to manifest itself with increasing intensity in student riots and worker strikes across the country.

When Numīri finally realized that the ICF had become a political liability, he cynically cast them overboard. By then it was too late to salvage his tottering regime. The popular uprising of April 1985, reminiscent in many ways of October 1964, was spearheaded by trade unions, professional associations and students – groups that had been working clandestinely to expose the excesses of the regime and challenge its policies through organizing strikes and resistance.

III

Organizing a Shipwreck: The 'Revolution in Higher Education'

Origins of the Strategy: the Fruits of Collaboration

In the euphoria immediately following the April 1985 popular uprising, few paid much attention to the ICF whose leadership had been incarcerated in the last days of Numīri's regime. During the uprising, the Islamists emerged timidly in the fringes of demonstrations but at first the general feeling, at least among their opponents, was that the party had been discredited, perhaps

beyond redemption, by its complicity in, or instigation of, some of the worst excesses of the defunct regime. But the party, now conveniently renamed the National Islamic Front (NIF) took little time in disabusing friend and foe alike of any notion of its demise.

The NIF self-rehabilitation strategy was multipronged: first, taking full advantage of the freedom of the press, the Islamists took the line that if collaboration with the Numīri regime was a crime then all political parties were equally guilty for having collaborated with it at one point or another. Indeed, this argument was carried further to claim that the uprising itself was evidence of popular protest at their exclusion from power. Second, demonstrations and political rallies, in which their student cadres played a leading part, were staged as naked political intimidation during the transitional period and later during the third democracy, to stall any move towards abrogation of the controversial *shari'a* laws. Third, in this strategy the Islamists were aided by their ability to infiltrate the transitional government and later, by shrewd political manoeuvring, to join al-Mahdi's coalition government. Fourth, the NIF fought hard to prevent any initiative to bring the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM) into the mainstream of national politics.

The tactic used to exclude the SPLM was two-fold: the NIF presented itself as the bulwark of the military establishment by organizing mass rallies in support of the army, and at the same time, its media vilified peace advocates as 'secularists', 'fifth columnists', and even 'traitors' as though the SPLM represented a foreign military invasion and not one side in a debilitating civil war. The NIF campaign of whipping up jingoistic hysteria obscured the notion of the Sudanese identity as rooted in its Afro-Arab character and reduced the civil war to the simplistic religious depiction of the Islamic '*dār al-salām*' (house of peace) in the north at war with African unbelievers of '*dār al-harb*' (house of war) in the south. This dwelling on the 'Arab north' versus the 'African south' was even accompanied, as Woodward notes, by "open discussion of the necessity of dividing the Sudan, essentially secession of the larger part, the north".²⁷ When the Islamists' obstructionist policies finally failed to derail the peace process and a peace agreement with the SPLM was imminent under the imitative of the *Khatmīya* patron and DUP leader (hardly a 'secularist' or 'fifth columnist') the NIF used its 'nuclear option' and, through its cadres in the military, brought the whole fragile democratic structure crashing down in ruins.

At first glance, it may seem surprising that the NIF could wield such enormous power in a democratic setting in which it was still a minority party as the last democratic election had shown. After all, only a few years before, the party had been easily and humiliatingly booted out from power-sharing by a weak and isolated Numīri regime and had been associated in the public mind with responsibility for the very policies that brought down that regime.

The answer is not necessarily that the Sudanese politicians and public are prone to having short memories, although an argument that is not entirely implausible could be advanced in support of this proposition. (The popular Sudanese rendering of 'divine forgiveness': '*afa Allahu 'an ma salaf*'; and Sādiq al-Mahdi's mantra, repeated at several stages in his political career: "there is nothing permanent in politics", come nearer to capturing this almost mystical compulsion to let bygones be bygones). While the compromises and mistakes made during the transitional period,

and the weaknesses and squabbles of the political parties during the third democracy, made it easier for the Islamists to flex their political muscles, the revival of the NIF was essentially a self-made affair in which good fortune might have also played a part. Not only did the NIF emerge into the post-Numīri political scene with its structure and financial resources still intact but, more significantly, the changes it had implanted in the political system as well as the tremendous gains that it had made between 1978 and 1985, proved almost impossible to reverse.

The alliance with the Numīri regime provided the Islamists with the opportunity and means to embed their cadres in important and strategic positions in the state and to make inroads into the educational system ('Islamicization of knowledge,'); the economic sector (Islamicization of the banking system); and the legislative sector (the *shari'a* laws). 'Abbās traces the origins of this 'central strategy' to al-Turābi's policy since 1964 based on the political approach to Islamicization from the *top-down* (as opposed to the *bottom-up* educationalist approach of other Islamist movements). The premise of 'Abbās's argument is that political Islam's interest in higher education institutions is not confined to controlling students unions *per se* but transcends that to domination of the institutions themselves, which are seen as battlefields where fierce struggles are waged for the recruitment and the moulding of the minds of future elites.²⁸ The ICF used its position in the regime as well as Saudi funding to penetrate the administrations and student unions of Omdurman Islamic University, the African Islamic Centre ((now Africa International University) and attempted to do the same in the University of Khartoum through the control of certain departments and, where it failed to do so, the creation of new parallel ones. These institutional bases then facilitated infiltration of other sectors such as the use of religion-oriented courses for army officers in the African Islamic Centre to penetrate the military.²⁹

More ominously, the ICF manipulated the pseudo-Islamic system it had helped to create to deal with a more serious student-based intellectual challenge, not from the left this time, but from a rival interpretation of Islam that threatened to expose the nature of its own Islamic pretensions. The inflammatory political discourse and frenzied campaign that preceded the execution of the Islamic thinker Mahmūd Muhammad Taha in 1985, so reminiscent of the discourse and campaign that had preceded the banning of the SCP in 1965, reflected political intolerance and ideological rigidity as divorced from intellectual and political intercourse as it was devoid of basic Islamic notions of human decency. In both the banning and the execution, the challenge to the ICF was largely intellectual: in the first, it was an alternative political vision that ran counter to the interests of the Islamists and traditionalists; and in the second, it was the alternative vision of Islam that threatened the ICF ownership of its interpretation.

Woodward notes that while the ICF establishment of a powerful position in higher education institutions was foreseeable at the time of national reconciliation, the other main development, the emergence of Islamic banking, was less so. "The problem for the Muslim brothers had always been to build a wider support than the intelligentsia, a support their old rival, the Communist Party, had sought through the trade union movement. The answer was to target the petty bourgeoisie, and the means was the establishment of Islamic banks". Woodward argues

that the introduction of this banking system in 1978, with Saudi funding, created “a working example of an important aspect of Islamic social organization...and was able to develop a body of people who could feel that in new opportunities to work in the interest of mammon, they were also serving Allah”.³⁰

Although the alliance with Numīri provided the ICF with the greatest success in its history, it was still an enormously risky strategy as events later proved when Numīri turned against the Islamists and the prospects for the party looked very bleak indeed. Ironically, it was the 1985 popular uprising, spearheaded by the very forces that the ICF had tried to undermine throughout its history that extricated the ICF from this peculiar predicament.

The Higher Educational: Mutually Reinforcing Components

The seizure of power was done through devious deceptions that testified both to the NIF mastery of the intricacies of political intrigue as well as its awareness of its own political limitations. The attempt to make the coup appear as a purely army affair, perhaps even a pro-peace military intervention was a move to pre-empt resistance from within the army or a spontaneous popular reaction, obviously in the realization that a coup by a minority party had less chances of success. The new regime initial hold on power was so tenuous that during the critical early months, elements of opposition sat back waiting for it to self-implode. Indeed, predictions of its imminent demise were as common as their failure to materialize was demoralizing. When resistance was eventually mounted, in limited student protests and from within the army, the regime was by then sufficiently entrenched to deal brutally with it.

One of the early indications of the real nature of the new regime was the exemption of student unions and religious societies from the ban on political parties, trade unions and professional associations on the first day of the coup, apparently on the assumption that the student Islamic movement would be able to dominate the campus platforms and thus provide the regime with the support, or at least the containment of students, it needed to consolidate its power.

Another major indication of where the new regime was heading came with the announcement in December 1989 of the new higher education policy. A carefully staged higher education conference was convened to give the proposed educational policy the appearance of participation and consultation, and after its enthusiastic endorsement of the educational policy, it was officially adopted in March 1990.³¹

The available literature on the educational policy falls into three broad categories: first, the official view which hails the policy as a ‘revolution in higher education’ which indeed it is, given the huge reconfiguration of the education system that it has entailed. The objectives of this drastic transformation are clearly spelt out and leave little room for doubt about the intent and direction of the policy. The second view criticizes not so much the basic fundamentals of the policy as the manner of its hasty implementation and the shortcomings and failures arising from it. The third view places the educational policy within the overall NIF strategy that intentionally aims at the top-down transformation of society and sees it as unfolding exactly as its architects

wanted it to be. The policy is seen as a logical continuation of the project that began during the alliance with the Numīri regime, and which the NIF assumption of exclusive power provided both the means and the authority to give it full expression.

The operative words in the officially stated objectives of the ‘revolution in higher education’ are *Islamicization* and *Arabicization*. Indeed, the objectives in the original declaration in December 1989 read as though they had been lifted from a manual for the activities of a religious or missionary society. It calls for “the Islamicization of knowledge and the intellectual schooling of leadership cadres to be steadfast in their religious beliefs and commitment to their civilization heritage; amendment of higher education acts to reaffirm the indigenous identity of the nation; introduction of Islamic culture and Arabic curricula in all higher education institutions; and immediate Arabicization in institutions with Arabic as the medium of instruction”³².

With these ideological declarations of *intent* come the *means* to make them politically palatable: “establishment of new universities under the slogan of a university in each state (‘wilāya’); doubling of student intake in public universities; and encouragement to establish new private universities and colleges”. The “cancellation of the free accommodation and upkeep system and the imposition of fees on them” was a risky proposition but the promise of the establishment of a national student support fund (al-Sandūq al-Qawmi l’Eāshat al-Tulāb) to replace it seemed to square this particular circle. Lip service was also paid to some worthy educational concepts such as “the encouragement of scientific research and publication and the orientation of study programs towards interest in local environment and the needs of society” without explaining how these can be pursued within the ideological straightjacket already imposed.³³

These principles constituted the guidelines of the ‘revolution in higher education’ which were elaborated in the implementation process in various mechanisms devised to give the policy the appearance of practicality and to ensure that the real objectives were met, such as setting in motion the changes in higher education institutions acts; establishment of the Student Support Fund; and new requirements for admission or graduation (private-tuition, participation in the popular defence forces, and later compulsory national service).

The major and most prevalent criticism of the regime’s ‘revolution in higher education’ is that its architects failed to provide for the human and material resources essential for such a huge undertaking. Sādiq al-Mahdi succinctly, if rather inelegantly, describes the “reckless expansion in higher education” as akin to a “diarrhoea in numbers” at a time of “constipation in resources”. He attributes this approach to the NIF assumption that students constitute its strongest base of support, which he dismisses as “superficial since it is divorced from any objective understanding of why students supported the NIF in specific circumstances”. Al-Mahdi warns that “the essential role of education as a means of inclusiveness and integration in society has become the instrument for divisiveness under an introverted, short-sighted and fanatic minority party”.³⁴

Even some critics felt that some aspects of the educational policy were alienating students and should be rectified if only for reasons of the regime’s self-interest. “The state must be more serious in solving student social problems and become more concerned in helping poor students

meet accommodation and living expenses; this approach, however much it costs, is essential to defuse the feelings of injustice and even hatred that prevails in these deprived communities and which have made them receptive to calls for violence and struggle against the regime”.³⁵

Māmūn Humīda, who as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Khartoum, had enthusiastically presided over the implementation of the educational policy, apparently had second thoughts after his dismissal from his post. “It has become clear that what is meant by the revolution in higher education is the utter destruction of the educational heritage of this nation’s universities that were once famous for their excellence and distinction” he wrote in 1994. Humīda lamented the “gloomy situation” (the brain drain in academic staff, the lack of essential infrastructure, and scarcity of teaching and material resources) that had “rendered meaningless the notion and substance of higher education”. He concluded: “we are left to wonder whether the decision to create new universities was preceded with a revaluation of the universities already established in the last two years or whether the whole matter is simply an exercise in raising empty slogans”.³⁶

Humīda was not the only former Vice-Chancellor to have a change of heart about the revolution in higher education. His predecessor, Mudathir al-Tinqāri was tasked in 1996 by the then Minister of Higher Education, ‘Abd al-Wahāb ‘Abd al-Rahīm to head a committee to “study the academic, financial, and infrastructure of the new universities”. The committee’s report was damning, in effect, amounting to an indictment of the whole educational policy. On the various University Acts, the report recommends wholesale revisions as they “do not take into account the characteristics of each university in terms of structure, specialization, location and social milieu”. On university and college locations, the report suggests the merger of some of these universities to reduce costs, and notes that dispersion of faculties has deprived students of a common campus community and that this could “negatively impact their future relationships in public life”. On administrative and academic structures, the report notes that many of those appointed to leadership positions lack qualifications and experience (some had never worked in a university before) and that appointment of academic staff and free distributions of academic titles and ranks were made in complete disregard of the requirements and procedures governing their award.³⁷

On student intake policy, the report observes that the nationally-based admission policy seems to defeat the philosophy behind the new state-based universities; as these states subsequently fail to meet their 20% quota of local student enrolment, the slots are filled with students from other states. This, in turn, tends to create financial and social difficulties in student relocation and transportation, and to aggravate existent accommodation and upkeep problems. The report expresses concern over the “unsatisfactory performance of the Student Support Fund” and criticizes “the current practice of absolute separation of student accommodation from other academic activities” which it labels “un-educational and wasteful of human and material resources”. It recommends, “in view of the Fund’s extreme importance in the present and future of higher education in the country, the re-evaluation of the relationship between the Fund and the universities and of its role in student accommodation and other social activities”.³⁸

On academic research and programs, the report states that in reality research had been completely ignored in the new universities as laboratories and literature are not only non-existent but “no funding has been allocated and no planning has even been considered” to meet this essential requirement of university education. As for academic programs, the report criticizes the adoption of obsolete courses and the neglect of modern ones (information and communication technology, computer sciences and social welfare studies). It concludes that if this pattern continues, graduates are likely to find themselves with irrelevant qualifications for employment.

The report is most scathing in attributing the alarming loss of qualified academic staff to the conditions of service which it describes “without any reservation as depressing, inferior even humiliating” when compared to the cost of living. The report calls for immediate rectifications of this situation “without any hesitation or foot-dragging: otherwise we will realize, when it is too late, that higher education institutions have become empty shells and that the policies of institutional expansion and increased student intake are nothing more than pipe dreams”.³⁹

While all these criticisms are essentially valid, they miss the essential point, namely that far from suffering from inadequate planning and hasty execution, the policy has all the hallmarks of a strategically conceived and thoughtfully orchestrated blueprint in which the ‘negative’ aspects and the perceived ‘failures’ are part of the desired outcome rather than being unintended consequences. (As though to underline this point, the committee’s report was suppressed, the Minister who had commissioned it was immediately sacked and his predecessor, the architect of the educational policy who had previously presided over its implementation, was reinstated).

The speed with which the policy was put into motion after the seizure of power suggests, first, that it was the top priority in the regime’s agenda and, second, that as such it was conceived and formulated beforehand in anticipation for the very event that made its implementation possible. What is striking about this educational policy is how its various components are synchronized like cogs in a machine working separately but in mutually reinforcing patterns to convert apparently worthy educational goals into the opposite of what they should be. In this sense, its brilliance is only equalled by its Machiavellian nature.

At first instance, the expansion in higher education institutions would seem the kind of policy that any responsible government would seriously consider, and given the availability of resources, even eagerly endorse. There are obviously plausible arguments on both sides of the ‘elitist-versus-mass’ equation in educational philosophy. But ‘massification’ of the type envisaged in the educational policy, clearly indicates that the siphoning of already meagre resources from the old and established universities, ostensibly to help set up the new ones, aimed more at the weakening of the former than an egalitarian distribution of access and opportunity in the latter. Indeed, the expansion in institutions not only fails to meet the basic criterion of any genuine ‘massification’ approach (balancing the quantitative with the qualitative) but the manner in which it has been formulated confirms the suspicion that it was never meant to.

The second component of the policy’s strategy is the corresponding increase of student intake and the related introduction of new admission requirements. On the face of it, there is nothing

unusual about this approach: all higher education institutions in the world constantly aim at increasing intake and there are various criteria for admission. 'Parallel admission' is also not uncommon in some universities, but is governed by requirements and regulations that preclude infringement on equitable opportunity of access. The normal practice is to link the purpose of increased access and admission criteria to the needs of targeted beneficiaries. In the USA, for instance, affirmative action provided not only educational access to previously disadvantaged ethnic minorities but also equal opportunity in employment.

The discrepancy between purposes and beneficiaries is striking in the regime's educational policy. For if the purpose is to provide increased access, the beneficiaries have not been disadvantaged groups or communities. On the contrary, 'private-tuition' admission policies have been at the expense of the more qualified but socially and economically disadvantaged students. Even those who escape the arbitrary and annually shifting line of private tuition encroachment, are still vulnerable to immense pressures as other components of the higher education policy come into play. Other hurdles to surmount before admission were military service in the infamous popular defence forces camps (where enticement, intimidation and indoctrination were crudely employed for recruitment and re-educational purposes) but these have now evolved into the more subtle compulsory national service requirement after graduation.

In the long term, the private-tuition and exemption-categories in admission policies can conceivably alter the social composition of the student body. The so-called 'dollar-admission' policy has opened the gates in higher education, particularly in competitive faculties in prominent universities, to students who received their pre-tertiary education abroad (mostly in the oil-rich Arab countries) and/or whose guardians work there or are members of the *nouveaux riche* class that has sprung in the last two decades. In addition, as Mohamed E. A. El Tom notes, there are other exemption-categories: students whose guardians work in, or are pensioners of, public higher education or research institutions are admitted on the same criteria as private-tuition students but exempted from 50-75% of tuition fees.⁴⁰ This is evidently an undeserved self-serving bias in favour of the regime's bloated educational establishments as it is prejudicial and discriminatory against the deserving poor. But it need not necessarily imply that these students will be, at least in the long term, less committed to the social and political concerns that motivate activism. It does mean, however, that their placement in the prominent higher education institutions has been at the expense of others less socially or financially fortunate. Besides the kind of social friction and class resentment that this will tend to create, it makes a mockery of the proclaimed goal of egalitarian access to, and equitable opportunity in, higher education.

Another component of the educational policy is the encouragement of private higher education institutions. Obviously, such institutions are important in every country as an alternative, often of superior quality, to public education, or in absorbing the surplus of demand which the state is unable to meet. But the approach of the regime's educational policy, ostensibly to increase access opportunities, tends to move in the direction of commercialization of educational institutions not only in the sense of turning them into investment enterprises but also in making

the learning process itself of dubious educational value. The proliferation of these private institutions, and the ambiguity surrounding the criteria used to determine their institutional eligibility, leaves the impression that the regime is more interested in scoring self-serving propaganda points about numbers than in the academic standards of most of these institutions and, still less, the quality of education that students receive in them.

There may also be an insidious motive to this approach in the educational policy. Private institutions in Africa are generally not known to be hospitable to student activism for two related reasons: first, students in the private institutions usually come from the upper socio-economic stratum in society; and, second, these institutions tend to specialize in business-related or other career-oriented disciplines which are less likely to focus attention on activism. As some African scholars noted, “the combination of institutional selection and student self-selection tend to ensure that activism remains muted in private institutions. Where public and private institutions exist, it has been difficult for students to achieve commonality over issues. A divided student body has less impact on the wider socio-political front”.⁴¹

The decision to immediately recall students studying abroad and to absorb them within the reconfigured institutions would have defied comprehension had the real reason for it not been so transparent. The official justification was ostensibly the scarcity of hard currency and the opportunity of local access that the expansion in higher education institutions had created. The real reason seems to be the Islamists’ obsession with what they perceived as the corrosive Western ‘cultural invasion’ of the mind as evidenced and exemplified by their immediate assault on that ‘citadel of secularism’, as Islamists referred to the University of Khartoum. Obviously, the country would not have gone bankrupt had these students been allowed to finish their studies abroad. Some of these returnees were lucky or connected enough to find placement in the already overcrowded and under-resourced science faculties which, incidentally, their initial lack of qualification to join had been the main reason they went to study abroad in the first place.⁴²

Between admission and graduation the most pervasive component of the education policy is the Student Support Fund. Again, as its benign name suggests, similar student support systems are found in almost every country ranging from government-sponsored student loans and grants agencies, to university and institutional scholarships, to corporate funding for career-oriented studies and research. Where the Fund differs from other systems is that it is both a political control-mechanism and a selective-support system, precisely as it was intended to be. As such it fits nicely with the enticement-and-intimidation approach evident in the educational policy as a whole. The scrapping of the student campus accommodation system which the Fund ostensibly came to replace, was itself a two-pronged move, firstly to disperse students from proximity to the campus and thus minimize opportunities for organization and protest; and, second, to make the dispersed students vulnerable and, indeed, dependent on the handouts that the Fund was supposed to provide. The opportunities for recruitment essentially through bribery or exclusion from the government largesse are thus greatly enhanced. Various criticisms of the Fund have been voiced, some of them publicly: the failure to deliver on the promised student housing

projects; the small percentage of student recipients (even when compared with the support provided by the universities themselves); the marginalization of, and lack of coordination with, university authorities in planning and disbursement of funds; and the paucity of funds disbursed to individual students. The Fund support in 2006 was estimated at meeting only 5% of what was needed resulting in increase in student dropout rate. Again the validity of these criticisms seems irrelevant for this is precisely how the system is meant to work. The policy of essentially leaving students to fend for themselves is like organizing a shipwreck to see who can swim.

There was obviously the risk that such a policy could generate a strong student backlash and, indeed, the Fund's performance has been the source of student resentment which often was vented in protests and acts of violence. But from the perspective of the policy planners, these might have seemed containable risks, as they indeed proved to be, and perhaps even useful in channelling student concerns inwards to their own daily problems, instead of outwards to what was happening in the society at large.

This relentless pressure continues after graduation when the vast and overlapping ramifications of higher education keep churning huge numbers of students into an overflowing unemployment market, often with little relevant qualifications or training. Again the enticement-and-intimidation mechanism comes into play: graduates with the right connections, or the right frame of political mind, end up in choice spots in the compulsory national service (or with preferential deferments) and the prospect of lucrative job opportunities, while others have to slog it out often in menial and dispiriting placements with few employment prospects at the end of the tunnel.

The cumulative effect of these various strands of the higher education policies seems to move in two parallel directions: short and long term. The short term effect has been to emasculate student activism through various processes that have at their core a simple operative mechanism: reward those who conform and exclude those who resist. The whole academic climate seems to be permeated with the kind of social strains and financial pressures that militate against the possibilities of effective organization and action. Preoccupied with a myriad of the day-to-day problems students are less likely to become engaged in sustained activism and the sporadic outbursts of protest in the early years of the regime were (with few exceptions) mostly directed against various aspects of the unfolding educational policies as they affected specific universities or even individual faculties or institutes within them. In this sense, they were isolated pockets of resistance and not the broader national issues that had galvanized student activism in the past.

In addition to these distractions and pressures, the long term implications are already evident in the deterioration in the quality of education in general. The introduction of new curricula that inculcates unquestioning compliance and repetition of predetermined answers to complex question (e.g. 'intelligent design' versus Darwinism in evolution theory) has had a suppressive effect on developing critical and creative thinking.⁴³ Firm government control of the secondary school system that feeds university intake has contributed to this general atmosphere of compliance with the *status quo* and conformity to the prevailing conventional wisdom.

The statistical indicators of El Tom's study on the current state of the educational system clearly show that the deterioration in the quality of higher education cannot be isolated from the students' school experience under a repressive value system:

These students' school experience is dominated by a culture of examinations and, as a consequence, is shallow in many respects. The absence of libraries, laboratories, literary and debate societies, and extra-curricular activities; the use of authoritarian methods of teaching by largely poorly motivated teachers and the emphasis on memorization attest to the barrenness of this experience... Students whose characters are so constituted, and whose knowledge base is so narrow, and whose learning habits are anti-intellectual are not adequately equipped to address the challenges of higher education.⁴⁴

The impact of the intertwined concepts of *Islamicization* and *Arabicization* goes beyond its negative implications for the quality of higher education. In the long term, it puts the very identity and unity of the country at stake. It is important, however, to stress that this trend predates the NIF 'revolution in higher education' and can be traced to the educational policies of successive Sudanese governments since independence. In a real sense it reflects the Sudanese rather elusive quest to define their national identity. What the NIF has done is to define this identity and, in the words of the leading NIF educationalist, this definition is as simplistic in its approach as it is problematic in its long term implications: "Arabic is the language of the Quran which is the divine source of all knowledge... then the key to knowledge is Arabic".⁴⁵

An outside observer, Anders Breidlid, analyzes the Islamist dominant discourse in the Sudan as one where power and Islamic theocracy legitimize each other and in which the "homogenizing efforts" of the Islamist discourse constitute an important factor in the Sudanese education system to eradicate difference. The attempts to recognize difference (the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement and the 2005 CPA) have not led to a fundamental negotiation of the consequences of Islamism in the official school system.⁴⁶ Similarly, Lako Tongun, argues that the NIF formulation of *Pax-Arabica* in higher education is "intended to articulate a discourse of identity, which is based on religion rather than ethnicity". He notes that the NIF has "reinvented a new form of legitimization of power, which is the *majoritarianization* of the ruling class through religion (Islam) and language (Arabic), and equally the *minoritarianization* of other sectors of the Sudanese population along the same lines" (emphasis added). Tongun concludes that instead of the divisive language policy of "religious and ethnic chauvinism" that is intolerant of the discourses of difference, the "cultural, ethnic, and religious multiplicities should be viewed as...centrifugal forces for national unity".⁴⁷

Given the country's unfortunate experience with Islamicization and Arabicization policies from General 'Abbūd in 1960 to Numīri in 1983, and the resultant tragic developments in southern Sudan, as well as the current ones in the west and east, the insistence on repeating these failed policies, especially in so far as they affected non-Arabs and non-Muslims, can only be seen, at best, as myopic obsession with cultural chauvinism and, at worst, as deliberate attempts to encourage centripetal tendencies in both the north and south towards secession.

The Macro-Political: Crossroads of Multiple Crises

The priority and urgency which the NIF accorded to control of higher education institutions was demonstrated in the speed with which the new regime embarked to secure it. The first casualty of the onslaught of the new regime was the 1986 University of Khartoum Act which regulated the state/university relationship in a way that preserved university autonomy and academic freedom and restored the right of staff members to elect senior leadership at all university echelons. The targeting of this university was hardly surprising as its liberal and secular culture in particular had always been anathema to the fundamentalists. The new regime made the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research the ultimate authority in higher education thus ending not only university autonomy but also academic freedom. The NIF bid to dominate the universities included the appointment of party personnel to leadership positions and the dismissal of staff members not only for their party or political affiliation but also for holding views on various issues deemed, from the NIF perspective, to be politically, or rather, ideologically incorrect. The same pattern was repeated in the other prominent universities.

Student activism manifested itself in the defeat of the Islamists in the 1991 KUSU elections and in demonstrations and unrest in other institutions. These were largely spontaneous reactions to authoritarian rule but their impact was limited for a number of reasons. First, the strength of the NIF-supported military regime initially sprang from perceptions of its weakness, as paradoxical as this may seem. The regime's tenuous hold on power in the early days might have contributed to wide-spread expectations that it would self-implode, and this uncertainty gave the regime the breathing space to consolidate its power. Second, the regime moved quickly to preclude the emergence of any leadership for revolt through the incarceration of trade union and party leaders; massive purges in all sectors of the civil service; mass detentions and torture in the infamous 'ghost houses'; brutal repression of attempted coups; and other draconian measures restricting life politically, socially and economically.

Third, these policies of purges and harassment forced many potential leaders, especially in the professional associations and political parties, into exile thus splitting the opposition into internal and external elements with little coordination and, more seriously, with each group expecting the other to take the initiative. Fourth, as the educational policy unfolded, student opposition tended to move inwards in reaction to various aspects of the policy that directly affected them. Student activism in recent years seems to be consumed in the struggle to re-establish a union forum, in protests over rigged union elections when these are allowed to take place at all, in often violent objections to the inadequacies, prejudices, and injustices of the Student Support Fund, and in confrontations with university administration over tuition fees and various administrative and academic issues. Finally, the cumulative effects of the negative factors in the educational policy have left an intellectual void in campus life that militated against political engagement. After the flare-up in the fighting in Darfur, the fragmentation of student activism was manifested in two ways: the indifference of the majority of students (or tacit acceptance of the government line) and the re-emergence of student tribal and regional associations, but this time in highly

politicized form and, in typical Sudanese fashion, reflecting the division and inter- and intra-party strife of the armed groups fighting in the region.

At first, the exile-based opposition under the banner of National Democratic Alliance (NDA) represented an impressive array of almost all the major political shades in society. The sense of optimism that this formidable coalition infused turned out to be a false dawn and contributed in no small measure to the complacency and ineffectiveness of the opposition as a whole. The factionalism and squabbles that had plagued party politics since independence re-emerged within this consortium of resistance parties and this weakening of opposition coincided with deft manoeuvrings by the regime to ease its isolation both internally and externally.

A number of developments changed the regime's power structure and seemed to herald the promise of more change. First, the fracture of the NIF into the regime's National Congress (NCP) and al-Turābi's Popular Congress (PCP) parties, at first appeared as a serious chink in the regime's armour and it did, indeed, facilitate the regime's move towards accommodation with former opponents. Second, the regime's rapprochement with the SPLM that, after a series of fits and starts, eventually culminated in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) strengthened the regime's powerbase and legitimacy and, although mutual mistrust and suspicion persisted, so did the sense of the potential of a meaningful new beginning. Third, NDA leaders returned from exile to participate within the political system in a move that was reminiscent of the Umma Party and DUP national reconciliation with Numīri in 1977. These developments were taking place against the backdrop of Sudan's newly found oil wealth which was providing the regime with some powerful international backers and business partnerships with several of the world's major oil companies from China, Malaysia, Sweden, France, Austria and Canada.

By mid-2003, with the civil war in the south on the way to a peaceful resolution, the northern opposition coopted into the political process and radical Islamists discarded from power, the oil-fueled economy booming, and rehabilitation within the international community a distinct prospect, the Darfur crisis exploded to put the NCP regime once again under renewed domestic and international pressures and to threaten to negate the progress so far made. At present the Sudan is at the crossroads of multiple crises. In the current frustration and uncertainty in the national mood over the possible collapse of the CPA and the still unfolding national calamity in Darfur, together with festering low-intensity local conflicts in eastern Sudan and in the transitional areas of Abyei, South Kordofan/Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, the most notable manifestation of student activism in recent years has been the lack of it. It is a sad commentary on the present state of the student movement that while students in universities across the United States and elsewhere become involved, for whatever motivations, in the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, the voice of Sudanese students remains largely muted. It is, indeed, a far cry from the time when pressing national issues galvanized the student movement in all its political hues into the kind of activism that left its imprint on national politics.

IV

Envisaging an Upward Trajectory: The Relevance of the Third Sector

Student Activism: From the Political to the Social

In political science there is an assumption that ‘all politics is local’ in the sense that in democracies the main concern of all politicians, elected or seeking election, is to gauge and appeal to the needs and aspirations of their constituents and to remain attuned to them if they want to win or retain political office. The same is largely true of military dictatorships and authoritarian regimes whether the constituency is the military establishment or the ruling party.

Students have a smaller campus constituency but they are also members in the larger civil society constituency. The decline of the campus constituency has confronted the student movement with a predicament and a challenge. The predicament is that, at present, when almost all student unions in higher education institutions are either banned or controlled by NCP student cadres, campus politics, as well as the bankrupt and ineffectual national party politics, have ceased to have much relevance to student and national concerns and aspirations. The fragmented and emasculated student movement is faced with few options, the most extreme seem to be to turn to violence in frustration or to sink further into indifference and apathy. But if ‘all politics is local’, the same applies to social activity which after all actually defines and shapes the concerns of any political constituency. The challenge is how to reinvigorate activism by going ‘local’ to the roots of the larger constituency of civil society and more specifically within its framework of social activism. Student engagement in local communities is not so much redefining the role of student activism as it is channelling it into the ultimate source of all politics; it is not so much making the local community the students’ constituency as it is making students constituent members of social activism in the community. As the concepts and models of activism discussed above suggest, change comes from collective action at the grassroots and social change hinges on the ability of individual activists to organize collectively.

Such organization can be campus-based but if constraints similar to those facing political activism prove to be equally restrictive, there is no reason why student-based social activism should not be organized out of campus. In this respect, regional and local student associations (al-Rāwābit) would enjoy the advantage of having outside parent associations on which to rely for support, direction, and sustainability (in a relationship similar to that of ideological student groups with their parent political parties). As these student associations are affiliates in student unions, it is conceivable that in the long run the experience, commitment and insights gained in social activism will rub off on union politics thus transforming these unions once again into campus-based centres for social and political activism.

This envisioned transition of focus from the political to the social requires some deconstruction of component elements of relevant terms and concepts to gain insights into their meaning and application. It is important first to emphasize that the move towards social activism need not

imply lack of interest or engagement in political issues. Indeed, social activism can be seen as essentially and intrinsically political. Eric Shragge suggests that at its core community collective action can be seen as the product of the meeting of the personal and the political: “participation in local activities is for the purpose of building opposition” not only in the sense of protest and confrontation but also in “the creation of democratic opportunities through which people can learn about their collective strengths and build social solidarity. In the community, there are a variety of practices that may not seem oppositional, but which do question relations of power, build alternative visions, and shift power to those who usually do not have it”.⁴⁸ In pluralistic societies, working in the community sector is a political opportunity conducive to the emergence of direct participatory democracy where collective action can exert pressure to create responsiveness from different levels of government. This approach is distinctly different from the paternalism associated with political parties, or state social services or charity organizations and also distinguishes the role of the *volunteer* community activist from that of the *state-employed* community worker.

Moreover, the scope of community-related activism is vast enough to allow for various avenues for engagement. The *empowerment* model of communitarian approach “empowers people through their defining and participating in services for their own need” while the *enablement* or action model has traditionally been class-based and uses “conflict and direct action, usually at the local level, to negotiate with power holders over what is often a single issue”. Straddling both empowerment and enablement is the feminist community work model which aims to “improve welfare by collectively challenging the social determinants of women’s inequality, focused at the local, neighbourhood level”.⁴⁹

Social activism takes place within, and as part of, civil society where there are variations in the definition of parameters, scope, components and activities ranging from the “totality of voluntary civic and social organizations and institutions that form the basis of a functioning society as opposed to the force-backed structures of a state” to “all movements, associations of individual citizens, independent from the state, whose aim is to transform policies, standards or social structures through communal efforts at a national or international level”.⁵⁰

Often the terms NGOs and civil society are used interchangeably or referred to by other names such as independent sector, grassroots organizations, private voluntary organizations, self-help organizations and non-state actors. It is clear that while these terms refer to the same thing, each one emphasizes one aspect more relevant to the specific organization than to others. The proliferation of terms may be conceptually distracting and often confusing but it reflects the heterogeneous nature of these groups (religious and secular; more public or private-oriented; community-based, national or international) as well as the multiplicity of their operational and advocacy functions (relief-oriented, development-oriented, service delivery, defending or promoting a specific issue, typically raising awareness, acceptance and knowledge through various means of lobbying and public campaigns). Some of the applications of these terms are problematical and self-contradictory since ‘non-government’, ‘independent’, ‘private’ or ‘non-

profit' seems to be negated in many instances, particularly in the third world, by government, or ruling party funding and control (either illicitly or explicitly) of their own front NGOs.

Civil society and NGOs are collectively and increasingly being viewed as constituting a 'third sector' (perhaps similar to the way the media is described as the 'fourth estate' in democratic societies) in the sense of having vertical and horizontal dimensions in terms of relationships with, and location to, other state sectors. Vertically, the third sector occupies the space between natural society (family) and political society (state) in which a variety of voluntary organizations operate mainly to defend natural society from the abuses or neglect of political society. Horizontally, the third sector occupies the space between the public sector and the private sector and although the boundaries between sectors are often blurred, there are 'grey areas' of transition between them with varying degrees of cooperation and opposition, trust and suspicion, mutuality and divergence of interest. The function of the third sector is to provide services and self-development options and thus mitigate the deficiencies in the public sector and the excesses of the profit-driven private sector.

Student Social Activism: 'Mobilizing the Edges to Transform the Core'

It is this space of the third sector that provides a hospitable environment for student social activism. A large number of civil society actors (both pro-regime and independent) already occupy this local community space and some forms of student activism (mainly through voluntary NGOs) have already flowed into it. The challenge is to organize these isolated group efforts into a collective and independent student-based social activism and to establish an effective and sustainable presence within this third sector.

The first step is for student social activism to learn from the experience of independent or nonpartisan NGOs in terms of organizing, mobilizing and fundraising. The ability of these NGOs to overcome obstacles and constraints is indeed remarkable. Since coming to power, the Islamists have adopted a two-pronged approach to NGOs in line with their overall strategy of control and exclusion. The regime replaced the 1986 Relief and Reconstruction Commission Act with the 1999 Humanitarian Aid Commission Act to regulate voluntary social work from which political activities were excluded. The primary function of this Commission seems to be as a security clearing house of applicants for voluntary work, blocking those who lack the required Islamic *bona fide* credentials, but evidently these restrictions have been somewhat relaxed with the relative liberalization in recent years.

Sāmīa A. al-Naqar provides profiles of the duality of Islamic or pro-regime organizations and 'secular' organizations in terms of registration, structure, funding, and access to targeted groups. Even those nonpartisan organizations that manage to surmount the hurdle of registration face enormous constraints in funding which, in turn, limits accessibility, scope and sustainability of support to targeted groups. The main source of funding is almost exclusively from UN and EU agencies and Western donors in general, and this type of funding is governed by conditions of strict budgeting, and follow-up evaluation and accountability for the disbursement of funds. This conditionality goes a long way to ensure the transparency and integrity of these organizations.

In contrast, Islamic organizations have all the advantages of state support systems ranging from donations of Islamic banks and businesses and the *zakat* coffers to indirect funding through custom and tax exemptions. In addition, regional and international Islamic organizations and charities provide substantial and sustainable and often unaccredited funding. These undeclared and unconditional donations give the recipient organizations unsupervised and unrestrained control over fund disbursement and have thus raised questions over transparency and accountability, particularly in view of the rampant administrative and financial corruption in government institutions. Al-Naqar notes that “while many Islamist and secular organizations have adopted objectives related to women empowerment and child care, most Islamist organizations refrain from engagement in goals related to social type or reproductive health or human rights as these issues have been eschewed by some Islamist leaders”. Similarly, while increasing numbers of secular organizations have been pushing for a culture of peace and democracy, these issues are ignored by Islamist organizations.⁵¹

It is clear that the state of NGOs at present is still far from the ideal conditions that are conducive to attainment of social goals. These conditions mainly include: the development of the legal environment that protects voluntary activity; the emphasis on democracy and transparency as a mechanism of operation in the third sector; the imperative to avoid control by the state, or ideological groups, or political parties, or outside donor organizations and governments; and the consolidation of educational values that encourage participation and sustainability.

Given the enormous pressures and distractions that the ‘revolution in higher education’ has imposed on students, the prevailing mood of apathy and indifference this has engendered, and the deterioration in the quality of education and resultant decrease in student awareness of political and social issues, it is not easy to feel overly optimistic over the prospects of student activism transiting to the even more individually demanding, and more organizationally complex, social activism. But there are intertwining global and domestic forces at work that may make the prospects not only possible but probable and perhaps finally inevitable.

First, the growth of NGOs internationally, regionally and nationally both in advanced countries at the centre and in developing countries at the peripheries and their increasing transnational linkages has raised some questions about the relationship of globalization as a capitalist-intensive process to the proliferation of NGOs. It is debatable whether this proliferation is coincident with globalization policies or whether it is a remedial consequence of their negative impacts. But it is clear that some aspects of globalization have been beneficial to NGOs in two interrelated ways: they have altered the balance of power between the private and public sectors and created “societal-enhancing” or countervailing potential for the third sector especially in advocacy activism. Related to this, the information revolution (‘the democratization of access to knowledge and technology’) has made rights issues (human, labour, democratic, environment, safety) international concerns. It is likely that NGOs will continue to grow in importance and that delivery of public services will progressively incorporate them, thus conceivably bringing their role closer to the policy process.

Second, these advances in the international setting, where the positive agenda of globalization and the international ‘third sector’ organizations seem to coincide (support of political stabilization and social cohesion processes in the peripheries, support of marginalized groups, emphasis on human rights, etc.) have been accompanied, at the regional level, by increasing state acceptance of an increased role for third sector organizations. Indeed, for some years there has been a move towards linkages of national organizations to regional ones and to extend these linkages to international NGOs. The international/regional focus makes it more difficult for national authoritarian regimes to repress initiatives aimed at social organization, as well as providing models and resources for nascent organizing efforts to be initiated and sustained.

Third, developments in the Sudan’s domestic setting have become more favourable to moves towards social activism. Although the CPA has failed to measure up to its own potential and to public expectations, it has encouraged a mood of relative tolerance and relaxation of some repressive measures. Student social activism can fit in this relative liberalization as part of the national debate and effort to address the country’s multiple crises. The huge population dislocations in all parts of the country (over 200,000 killed and more than 2 millions displaced in Darfur alone) are, or should be, impetus and motivation for social activism. The re-emergence and proliferation of regional and ethnic associations can provide the means for such engagement.

Fourth, the existence of independent NGOs can facilitate these processes in a variety of ways. In addition to providing ‘lessons learned’ experience, these NGOs can act as intermediary with donors for nascent student activist groups, or as partners in joint projects. In the formative stage, at least, an activist group can embed within the appropriate NGO depending on the type of social activity or project (some student groups may have already moved in this direction). These established NGOs can provide the anchor linking together various student groups working separately in various projects in different localities or regions. There is no reason, for instance, why ‘Halfa al-Qadīma student association’ in Omdurman Ahalīa University and ‘Bari student association’ in Juba University should not share ideas and expertise on similar activities, or even exchange activists along lines familiar in academic institutions. Not only will such cooperation direct the focus in these associations inwards (as centrifugal forces) instead of outwards (as potentially centripetal forces) but it may, over time, turn them from regional or ethnic self-containment into a collective student-based national umbrella organization. Eventually, when student social activism comes out of age, it is conceivable that the bonds established with NGOs during the formative phase, will evolve into the kind of partnership that had tied student political activism to the trade unions and professional associations in previous struggles.

In the short term, some of these student regional and ethnic associations, already active in community work (mostly during vacations) have the opportunity to engage in social organizing and mobilization to make their efforts more sustainable through raising awareness, particularly among the younger members of the community, and interacting with other student groups in neighbouring communities. Involvement of secondary school students is essential to break the stranglehold of government-controlled organizations in this sector and to enable them to be

community aware and engaged when they move to higher education institutions. Demographic peripheries are a deep source of energy and creativity (witness the traditional but essentially socialist structures inherent in the *nafir* tradition, and the traditional but essentially democratic culture inherent in the notion of tribal elders under the proverbial African tree). Innovation and change critically depend on tapping into such sources of energy and creativity.

Ironically, an important opening and opportunity for student social activism might have been provided by certain aspects of the regime's educational policy. The new universities in the peripheries can bring students more in contact with their localities and make local activism organizationally less complex and motivationally more compelling and rewarding in its returns. In the older and more prominent universities in the centre which have been specially targeted by the educational policy, the financial strains involved in accommodation and transportation and the separation of academic pursuits from other campus activities can still serve useful educational purposes if they bring students closer to the grassroots of society and sharpen their awareness of the conditions in which the large majority of the population live.

Finally, the high rate of unemployment has driven some students to seek graduate studies that are sometimes irrelevant to their academic interests and career prospects, or to waste their talents and capabilities in mundane occupations without any sense of job satisfaction. A Canadian social study suggests that educated people will be progressively attracted to NGOs since "NGOs can provide jobs that can be both personally rewarding and analytically challenging" and estimates that advocacy NGOs probably have a higher-skilled workforce than the average private or public enterprise.⁵² The energy, capabilities and time of these students may be better utilized in channelling them to community engagement projects; and independent NGOs can provide the opportunity to do so, as some of them already do, and enhance training and capacity building through the introduction of some innovative forms of internship programs.

Conclusions

In defining concepts and relating them to empirical referents, critical theory captures the essence of political and social activism in concrete ways: emancipation and the development of possibilities for a better life are ideas at the core of what motivates activism, and the notion of "human beings as the self-creating producers of their own history" provides a note of self-reliance and optimism that should animate every political and social human endeavour. Historically, just as the critical theory critique of the *status quo* and emphasis on social change and emancipation provided the conceptual strands that attracted and, indeed motivated, many elements in the student protest movements in 1960s, these protests, in turn, infused the critical theory project with impetus to generate new theories of social activism. This process provides a unique example in contemporary protest politics of the intertwining of theory and practice in mutually-reinforcing creative dynamics. The expansion of the critical theory project to include such concepts as the theory of communicative action, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, critical race theory and other related theories should provide student social activism with motivation and a wide array of opportunities for creative interaction with local communities.

The decline of student political activism in the Sudan can be viewed within two interrelated contexts: macro-political and higher educational. The macro-political context is not only the object of protest; it also largely determines propensities, orientations, and, crucially, permissible bounds of activism. Three major causal factors are subsumed in the macro-political: the interactions of campus and national politics; the democratic/authoritarian cycles of rule; and the related and underlying legacy of a flawed national political culture. The higher educational encompasses strategies where Islamic theocracy and political power intertwine to legitimize each other and spill over into the educational discourse.

The emergence in the formative years of the student movement of strong leftist and Islamist ideological currents, themselves products of various, albeit conflicting, processes of critical perceptions, contrasted sharply with the split of national politics along sectarian lines. Similarly, while student politics evolved into a highly contested, yet essentially democratic and inclusive process, national politics became mired in parliamentary factionalism. The traditional order complicity in the 1958 military takeover and initial inertia in opposing it, contrasted with the resistance of the student movement that culminated in the 1964 popular uprising.

The genesis of decline in the student movement can be traced to the very success of student activism in being the catalyst of such a dramatic change. The post-1964 period witnessed the gradual erosion of the 'vanguard' nature of student activism as the intrusion of divisive party politics began to undermine the democratic culture of campus politics. The polarization of leftist and Islamist rivalry and the related emergence of intergroup student violence were two aspects of this development. The democratic/authoritarian cycles also affected the role of student activism in a more general way: during authoritarian rule the relative freedom of students from direct coercive state control allowed them to become the face of the opposition; the return to pluralism meant that students were not the only opposition.

The 1969 military regime's momentous impact on national politics and student activism is explicable in terms of its interactions with almost all the forces in the political spectrum. But it was the Islamists who benefited most during the period of national reconciliation by making substantial inroads into the significant educational, economic and legislative sectors in pursuit of their *top-down* Islamicization project. After the regime's fall, and as the country's third attempt at democratic rule once again floundered in factionalism and distracting rhetoric, the Islamists managed to dictate the terms of political discourse and to obstruct any peace initiative that threatened their Islamicization project. The perception of such a threat triggered the military coup that brought them to exclusive power and set in motion their strategies for societal transformation. Foremost among these is the 'revolution in higher education'.

The main criticisms of this educational revolution have centred on the policy failure to provide for the human and material resources essential to meet the proliferation in new institutions and the dramatic increases in student intake. These criticisms, while valid enough, assume that the objective of the educational policy is to *reform* higher education and that these failures are unintended consequences. But the conclusion that comes more readily to mind is that the

underlying intention is to *deform* higher education or, from the perspective of the policy architects, to put it in service of short and long term political agendas and interests. The Islamists had made no secret of this strategy during their 1978/85 partnership in power, and the fact that higher education was at the top of their priorities both then, and immediately after coming into exclusive power, indicates that it was not a policy taken in haste or without due deliberation.

In the short-term, the objective of the policy seems to be two-fold: the weakening of the liberal traditions of the older universities to pre-empt the kind of activism that had been effective in the past; and, secondly, to preclude any organization of student power through dispersal of students nationwide. This strategy has also immediate political dividends in appealing to traditionally marginalized regions by giving them their own 'universities' (regardless of how dubious is the claim to that status). For the same reasons, it will be politically and socially difficult to reverse such decisions when pondering the future of these institutions in the future.

This short-term impact of the various strands of the policy has largely succeeded in containing, or at least limiting, student activism through various processes of enticement-and-intimidation, and in affecting the quality of education by placing it within a repressive anti-intellectual and compliant value system. The social strains and pressures that permeate higher education institutions have placed limitations on effective student organization and activism as well as on intellectual curiosity and critical inquiry. The implications of these trends are already evident not only in the progressive deterioration in the quality of higher education but also in the school system that feeds university intake. Any future educational reform will have to resolve the dilemma of determining which end of the educational spectrum is in more dire need of salvation.

But it is the long term implications of the intertwined concepts of Islamicization and Arabicization, at the core of the higher educational context, that spill over into the macro-political context and, because of their essentially exclusionist nature, place the very identity and unity of the country at stake. This trend, however, predates the NIF 'revolution in higher education' and reflects the Sudanese rather elusive quest to define their national identity. The Islamists' exclusive attempt to define it as Arab/Islamic provides the juncture where the macro-political and higher educational meet to underline basic flaws in the national political culture.

The macro-national and the higher educational also converge in the phenomenon of political violence. The recurrence of civilian and military cycles has infused a culture of violence in the body politic that seems to be manifested in extreme forms of student political activism since the late 1960s, either as student body defensive reaction to state violence, or as student group complicity in state commissioned violence or as both. The resultant polarization of campus politics made for more violence and, as the vicious cycle continued, the fractures in the student movement progressively widened. But in examining political violence, a more insidious source is often overlooked, namely, violence through intentional state omission or failure to act, within the macro-political or the higher educational, and often in both. The higher education policy seems to encompass both aspects of commission and omission: the explicit dismantlement of the

educational system to achieve political ends, and the implicit failure to mitigate the impact of disruptive changes.

The present decline of the student activism confronts the student movement with a predicament and a challenge. When campus politics have ceased to function in any meaningful way, the alternatives need not necessarily be unquestioning and uncritical compliance with the *status quo* or isolated acts of protest violence, or resignation into indifference and apathy. The answer to this predicament can be to channel student activism into local community engagement. If the objective of activism is change then the quest of social change at the grassroots provides a more challenging endeavour and equally more rewarding returns in infusing a sense of social responsibility, intellectual awareness and collective optimism, as well as in opening wider horizons for whatever greater endeavour student activism may undertake in the future.

While the transition to the individually more challenging and organizationally more complex social activism does not make it easy to be overly optimistic over its prospects, the existence of independent NGOs is a facilitating factor as sources of 'lessons learned' experience, especially during the formative stages, as well as anchors linking together various student groups and acting as intermediary with donors or as partners in joint projects. NGOs can act as coordinators for the activities of various regional students associations by encouraging interaction and cooperation in joint projects in indifferent regions. The proliferation and focus of international/regional third sectors makes it more difficult to repress initiatives at social organization at the national level and provides models and resources for nascent organizing efforts to be initiated and sustained.

Similarly, developments in the Sudan since the CPA have tended towards relative tolerance and relaxation of some repressive measures. Student social activism can engage within this relative liberalization as part of the national debate and effort to address the country's multiple crises. The huge population dislocations in all parts of the country are, or should be, not only impetus and motivation for engagement but also areas of pressing social needs in which small-scale social activism can engage at the edges and move towards the core over time.

Certain aspects of the educational policy may have provided opportunities for student social activism to engage in this effort. The new universities in the peripheries bring students more in contact with localities where engagement and outreach are most needed, and also make local activism organizationally less complex and motivationally more compelling. If educational reform in the future is envisioned along the lines of converting some of the currently inadequate new universities in the peripheries into smaller community colleges, as some educationalists rightly suggest, then the reform should also aim at making them as community-based in curricula as they are in name and locality. No body will be better placed to bring about such changes than the socially engaged students themselves, backed by the communities in which they are engaged.

Equally, in the older and more prominent universities in the centre, the separation of students from campus activities can still be instructive if it brings students closer to the grassroots of society and sharpen their awareness of the conditions in which the large majority of the population live. Metaphorically, the residents of the 'ivory tower' have been relocated to the

‘peasant’s hamlet’. But this should not make the ‘relocation’ any less educational or students any less privileged. For having time and resources, however inadequate and limited, to acquire knowledge is still a privilege if such knowledge is used critically. The challenge is whether to use it solely for self-advancement, economically and socially, or harness it also to new ways of critical thinking to confront realities and try to solve problems in different ways.

The American models of social activism provide a variety of models and approaches, some of which may suggest possibilities for student activism to emulate. One type, the service-learning model, is institution-based and requires students in various disciplines to engage in some form of community work in community-related courses as a prerequisite for degree award. This model can be envisioned as part of any future plan to reform higher education. The Rural Extension Program at Ahfad University for Women has been a pioneer in similar community-related service-learning initiatives for years and its experience in this respect, both positive and negative, can certainly provide valuable guidelines to other institutions. Significantly, a notable shortcoming of the Ahfad program is that, for the most part and for various reasons, it has not been successful in generating student interest in out-of-class and after graduation community outreach.⁵³ In a sense, this is surprising as numerous studies in the West have supported the view that women are more likely to be engaged in community care than men. In another sense, it is ironic that the institution pioneering the linkage of education to community needs is a private university with no tradition of student activism or even a student union.

Unlike the service-learning concept, the model type exemplified by the Berkley initiative of encouraging student social activism to “mobilize the edge to transform the core” can be emulated without institutional sponsorship. As this approach is premised on students’ potential for idea-generation, on mobilizing support for turning promising ideas into action, and on making connections across multiple edges to achieve results, NGOs are well placed to provide these necessary connections through their networking expertise and accessibility to donors.

Social activism is essentially voluntary in nature and it has to spring from inner convictions from students individually. But there remains a note of cautious optimism that the same spirit that animated student political activism in the past can never be repressed indefinitely. Some tentative assumptions can be drawn from the educational discourse of the Iranian model in trying to envisage any upward trajectory for student activism in the Sudan. The first one is that student activism, regardless of the nature of the social and political milieu in which it operates, is inherently anti-authoritarian and perhaps more resilient in this respect than is generally assumed. The second and related point is that social engineering based on theocratic and dogmatic interpretations of religion and history, seems to run counter to the logic of human development: societies evolve; they are not transformed overnight. After 30 years of total control of almost all aspects of society, the recent moves of the Iranian leadership to ‘purify’ universities from ‘secular’ and ‘un-Islamic’ influences reflect not so much a renewed commitment to the societal transformation project as an implicit admission of its failure. Finally and for the same reasons, the authoritarian grip on power is not always as firm as opponents fear. Instant means of

communications coupled with the threat of sanctions and the stigma of international isolation make violations of basic human rights, including the right to think critically and creatively, untenable or at least unsustainable in the long term. At the same time, any move towards even limited liberalization creates the climate in which student activism is likely to thrive.

Notes:

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1. Wikipedia, "Political Activism" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_activism. Historically, student movements seemed to spring into existence with the establishment of institutions of learning dating back to the 4th century. Students played an important role in almost every one of the major revolutions of the 19th and 20th centuries". Free Dictionary, "Student activism" <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Student+activism>
2. Wikipedia, "Student activism" http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Student_activism
3. Joseph Katz, "The Student Activists: Rights, Needs, and the Powers of Undergraduates" *New Dimensions in Higher Educations*, Number 30 (undated).
4. Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: reinventing political activism*, (Cambridge University Press 2002) pp. 18-19
5. James Bohman, "Critical Theory", the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Fall 2009 Edition). See also <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/critical-theory>
6. Richard Wyn Jones, *Security, Strategy, and Critical Theory*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, Boulder, Colorado (1999) p.28
7. *Ibid*, p.44
8. *Ibid* p. 55
9. Cited in C. A. Coady, *Morality and Political Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 90
The limitations of the legitimist definition become apparent in defining that most extreme form of political violence: war. Coady argues that "given the power of states, their employment of the sword is more likely to wreak morally objectionable damage, at least in terms of scale, than anything non-state agents can achieve" p. 3
10. *New York Times Magazine*, 27 October 1968) p. 23
11. John Harris, *Violence and Responsibility* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1980) p. 19
12. Steven Lee "Is Poverty Violence?" in Deanne Curtin and Robert Litke (eds.) *Institutional Violence* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999). Cited in Coady, *op.cit*.
13. According to the *New York Times*, since 2005, universities across the USA have divested themselves of endowment assets in companies doing business in Sudan, in response to pressure from students protesting against the violence in the Darfur. "The campaign is...reminiscent of a campaign in the 1980's when student-led groups lobbied 55 universities to remove money from companies affiliated with the South African apartheid regime". *The New York Times*, 27 April 2006. It is arguable whether the 'save Darfur' campaign is an expression of genuine students' concerns or a case of manipulation by politically motivated interests with ulterior motives.
14. There is a consensus among political analysts that the Iran hostage crisis contributed significantly to President Carter's loss of his re-election bid to Ronald Reagan in 1980. The Reagan presidency left profound imprints in American politics in terms of both domestic and foreign policies, and to this day Reaganism remains a potent force in American conservative ideology. The Iran hostage crisis is thus arguably indicative of the potential of student activism in one country, with or without state instigation or complicity, to have repercussions transcending national borders, influencing the political direction of another country, and indeed creating a global crisis that has lasted for more than 30 years.
15. *The New York Times* 5 September 2009.

II

16. “Proportional representation, which governed the KUSU constitution and regulated its political activities between 1957 and 1974, was operative during the period which saw the consolidation of the union as an effective interest/pressure group on the national level manifested in adoption of nationalist stands against USAID, organizing volunteers for the 1956 Suez War and spearheading the October 1964 popular uprising” ‘Abd al-Bāqi ‘Abd al-Qani Bābikr, “KUSU: Past Experience and Future Prospects” (in Arabic) in ‘Awad E. Al-Karsani (ed.) *Seminar to Study the Basis for Re-establishing KUSU* (KUP, 2003) p.35
17. Peter Woodward, *Sudan 1898-1989: the Unstable State*, Lester Crook Academic Publishers (London, 1990) p. 99
18. ‘Awad al-Sīd al-Karsani “The Political Roots of Student Violence in Sudanese Universities” (in Arabic) in Ahmad M. Al-Tom (ed.) *Student Violence in Sudanese Universities: a Collection of Essays* (Khartoum, 2006) p. 41
19. ‘Ali ‘Abdalla Abbās, “the Political and the Ideological Bases of the Orientation and Policies of the National Islamic Front in Higher Education in Sudan” (in Arabic) in Mohamed El Amin Ahmad El Tom (Editor), *Proceedings of the Conference on the Current and Future of Higher Education in Sudan: Selected Papers*, 1-5 August 1998, Cairo, Published by Association of Sudanese Academics. p. 83
20. ‘Abbās, *ibid*, pp. 86-88.
21. Al-Karsani in A. M. al-Tom (ed.) *op.cit.* p. 34-41
22. ‘Abd al-Rahīm Bilāl “Student Violence in Sudanese Universities” (draft paper in Arabic on training in civic education, 13 May 2009)
23. ‘Adlān A. al-Hardlo, “Student Violence” (unpublished notes in Arabic)
24. Mohammed Beshir Hamid, *the Politics of National Reconciliation in the Sudan: The Numaryri Regime and the National Front Opposition* (Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, Washington DC, 1984) p.3
25. *Ibid*, p. 22
26. For more details on national reconciliation see Hamid, *ibid*

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27. Woodward, *op.cit.* p.212
28. ‘Abbās, *op.cit.* p. 73
29. *Ibid.* pp.96-99
30. Woodward, *op.cit.* pp182-183
31. According to Zaki El-Hassan, apart from those attending the conference because of their *ex-officio* positions, the conference was packed by fundamentalist supporters, some of whom had no knowledge of the workings of higher education institutions or their objectives, who helped to skew the deliberations and to create an intimidating atmosphere. Zaki El-Hassan, “Instability in Higher Education in the Sudan: the Effect of Al-Bashir’s Higher Education Policies” *Sudan Alternative Discourses*, Vol. 4, July 2002 African Studies Centre, the University of Pennsylvania.
32. ‘Revolution in Higher Education’ decrees issued by the leadership Council of the National Salvation Revolution, 4 December 1989; cited in *Conference Proceedings, op.cit.* p. 44

33. *Ibid.* p.44
34. Address to the *Cairo Conference*, *ibid.* pp. 21-23
35. ‘Abdalla A. al-Sidīq “Student Violence in Higher Education Institutions” in Karsani *op.cit.* p. 28
36. *Al-Inqaz* newspaper 21 March 1994, cited in *Conference Proceedings*, *op.cit.* pp. 48-50
37. Executive summary of the Ministry of Higher Education report on the state of the new universities; cited in Conference in *Conference Proceedings*, *ibid.* pp.52-54
38. *Ibid* p.57-58
39. *Ibid* p.56
40. Mohamed El Amin Ahmed El Tom, *Higher Education in Sudan: Towards a New Vision for a New Era*, SCER Occasional Monograph Series and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (Sudan Currency Printing Press, 2006) p.33. El-Tom includes another exemption category: “the so-called *dabbabeen* and *mujahideen* who participated on two occasions” in the civil war in the south.
41. Irungu Munene, “Student Activism in African Higher Education” in *African Higher Education* <http://people.coe.edu/manuraw/africanhighereducation/chaptereleven.pdf>
42. According to one educationalist, “the decision to absorb these students was met with stormy protest from the concerned faculties which regarded the admission of these students who had been previously rejected for lack of qualifications as abandonment of academic principles” Su’ād Ibrāhīm ‘Essa, “Higher Education Expansion Policies: the Negatives and Positives” in *Conference Proceedings*, *op.cit.* p. 355
43. A survey in Khartoum University in 2002 found that 35% of student did not know the meaning of ‘proportional representation’; it was hardly surprising that 89% of students preferred the existing free-and-direct election system with which they are familiar. Su’ād Ibrāhīm ‘Essa, “ Towards a New Union for Khartoum University Students” , in Karsani (ed.) *op. cit.* p.80
44. El Tom, *op.cit.* p.56
45. Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Ibrāhīm Ahmad ‘Omar in an interview in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on 27 February, 1998, p.49. Cited in Lako Tongun, “Pax Arabica and Higher Education: A Political Economy of Language Policy in the Sudan” in *Conference Proceedings*, *op.cit.* p. 81
46. Anders Breidlid, “Education in the Sudan: the privileging of an Islamic discourse” *Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education*, Volume 35, Issue 3 September 2005, pages 247 – 263
47. Tongun, *op.cit.* pp.83-84

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48. Eric Shragge, *Activism and Social Change: Lessons for Community and Local Organizing*, (Broadview Press, Toronto, Canada, 2003) p.43
49. See Marie Weil (ed.) *Community Practice: Conceptual Models* The Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY, 1996
50. www.socgen.com/csr/sustainable_development/glossary.html
51. Sāmīa al-Hādi al-Naqar, *Non-Governmental Societies and Political Islam in Sudan*, (Centre of Arab and African Studies, Madbouly Books, Cairo, 2006) (in Arabic), pp.75-79. Al-Naqar estimates that by 2002 there were 420 registered local organizations with most of the recently registered being pro-regime organizations formed to maintain and expand the regime presence in the civil society space in anticipation of the CPA power-sharing arrangement and to increase the regime’s share in funding for post-war rehabilitation expected from international donors. p.70

52. James J. Courchene, “the Third Sector”, Panel Presentation to the Conference on *The New Financial Environment of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations*, School of Policy Studies , Queen’s University, Canada, October 24-25, 2003
53. According to Shadia Naser Eldin Elsayed, the objectives of the Rural Extension Program at Ahfad are four-fold: to expose students to issues of rural life; to improve the quality of women life in rural communities; to practice social research related to rural women; and to train students in development and to encourage them to be agents of change. Elsayed attributes the failure to generate students' interest in out-of-class in community outreach in part to “the origins of most of the students as some are from above average economic class, some from abroad, but the only exception are students from school of REED who engage in out-of-class development work through the Summer Training Attachment (STA) program”, *Email Interview*, 9 November 2009.