

Post-Bashir: the sheikhs and the officers

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By Magdi El Gizouli

October 22, 2012 - The Sudanese Islamic Movement (SIM) held a series of conferences at state and sectorial levels over the past few weeks in preparation for its awaited general convention in November. Ahead of the conferences the Movement announced a rule barring state governors from competing for the leadership of the organisation in their states. Only Osman Mohamed Yusuf Kibir, the governor of North Darfur, distinguished himself by 'accepting' the nomination of the Movement's Shura (Consultative) Council in his state, and was thus announced Secretary General of the SIM in North Darfur for a second term. As governor and chairman of the North Darfur chapter of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) Kibir unites in his person the three h's in NCP/SIM jargon, the hakuma (government), the hizb (party) and the haraka (movement). An envious NCP official from the region told a press conference in Khartoum on Saturday that Kibir's command of the three h's amounted to "religious and moral corruption". Hassan Bargo, in charge of the Chad file in the NCP during the height of the Darfur conflict i.e. a manager of Khartoum's support to Chadian rebels, dismissed the SIM's conferences as mere "window dressing", and called on the leadership of the organisation to allow for a generational shift at the top in order to avert an 'Arab Spring' in Sudan. Hassan Osman Rizig, the Deputy Secretary General of the SIM, said Kibir will eventually be forced to choose between the hakuma and the haraka, and cannot enjoy the pleasure of the power polygamy. Whether Rizig can enforce the constitutional pedantry of the SIM high office in Khartoum on al-Fasher's sultan is the wrong question I suppose. Rather the issue is whether the regime can afford a fracture of fragile power in al-Fasher between the three h's. Like most Sudanese Kibir and Bargo find it hard to grasp the subtle difference between the NCP and the SIM since up the ladder only the jellabiyas change.

The clamour around the November conference nevertheless is not without substance. The incumbent Secretary General of the SIM, Ali Osman Mohamed Taha, also the First Vice President and the Deputy Chairman of the NCP, declared to the conference of the SIM women sector that he is not interested in another term at the helm of the Movement. Time has come for elders like himself, he said, to withdraw to advisory functions and allow a younger generation of leaders to manage the affairs of the SIM. Conveniently enough, the proposed constitution of the Movement sets a two terms limit for election to the office, an exact fit to Taha's occupancy of the post. As Taha, the perennial deputy, announced his intent to slip out of the jellabiya of the SIM's Emir unidentified sources in the NCP told in-house journalists that a consensus was emerging in the party to nominate Taha for presidential office in the 2015 elections, a proposal that the SIM's second in command, Hassan Osman Rizig, did not deny. Rizig, cautious not to step on toes bigger than his, said the NCP general conference was the only platform where such a decision could be met. Meanwhile, Taha's cheerleaders in the Khartoum press went on early campaign, popularizing the notion that the deputy's moment has at last arrived; who else but the loyal Taha deserves the top jellabiya? The immediate drive for the succession stir is the open secret that President Bashir's health is compromised. A spokesman of the Palace in Khartoum said the President had a throat surgery last August in Qatar but was in good health. "All rumours that his health is not good are baseless", affirmed the spokesman without offering further details. Notably, the presidential uncle, al-Tayeb Mustafa, wrote in support of a Bashir exit in 2015. "It is in the interest of the President, after a quarter of a century of rule, to rest in dignity at the end of his current term, away from politics and its whirlwinds", he concluded after listing the immediate duties requiring President Bashir's attention: oversight of the implementation of the Addis Ababa agreements with South Sudan, securing Sudan's borders and bringing an end to the rebellions in South Kordofan, the Blue Nile and Darfur, stabilisation of the political and economic situation in the country in preparation for a new era of good governance and peaceful transition of power. Well, judging by his 1989 coup statement President Bashir and Co had a quarter of a century to do the same.

The Taha cheerleaders, it seems, are consciously ignoring the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) establishment, the 'old Sudan' political party jealously guarding the throne. At President Bashir's side two senior officers have survived the habubs of the NCP-SAF alliance safe from plane crashes and early retirement. These two gentlemen - Bakri Hassan Salih (Minister of Presidential Affairs) and Abd al-Rahim Mohamed Hussein (Minister of Defence) - are unlikely to surrender ultimate authority to the NCP/SIM bureaucracy without at least a fair bargain. If Taha and his captains find it difficult to discipline Mr Kibir into abiding by the SIM's rules then the tanks at the SAF headquarters are surely not going to follow their command whatever the jellabiyas they happen to wear.

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