

President Bashir: throat politics

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By Magdi El Gizouli

November 11, 2012 - It is a sign of the times that the principal political question occupying the 'political club' in Khartoum these days, in government and opposition, is whether the swelling excised out of President Bashir's throat is benign or malignant. The President's brother, Abdalla al-Bashir, himself a physician, told reporters that the results of the pathological examination of the presidential sample revealed a benign tumour while opponents on the blogosphere quoted 'informed medical sources' saying that the President surely has a cancer.

The condition besetting the President silenced him to a considerable degree, quite a calamity for a political leader whose main distinguishing mark from his allies and contenders in the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) is his throat mechanics so to speak. The President, unlike many of the PhDs-laden NCP high guard, is capable of projecting himself as a man of the people. He is known for his bellicose and inflammatory speeches, often followed by a round of dance and stick waving in the grand styles of Sudanese riverain patriarchy, theatricalised of course to serve the purposes of state power. Over time, the President's public performances have become a distinct genre of entertainment. Crowds are truly disappointed when for any particular reason he fails to drift from the script of his speeches or does not allot time for the show thereafter. The Minister of Defence, Abd al-Rahim Mohamed Hussein, began recently to emulate the President's moves but has proved a much poorer speaker and a terrible dancer. Vice President Ali Osman Mohamed Taha, although he tries, is quite lame when addressing masses. Unlike President Bashir, who quickly shifts to colloquial Sudanese Arabic after the first few lines of religious jargon, Taha has failed to unlearn the classical Arabic that cadres of the National Islamic Front (NIF) insist on as evidence of their Islamic credentials following Hassan al-Turabi's example. As an orator Taha sounds more like the provincial school headmasters of (old) Sudan whom people might respect but do not identify with. In that regard, Taha's argumentation skills are only demonstrable behind closed doors, his strengths being a mastery of organization and bureaucratic intrigue acquired through years of experience stretching back to the time when he sat in Nimayri's parliament, the People's Council, following the 'national reconciliation' of 1977.

Speculations about President Bashir's health status fuelled a latent controversy over succession in the hallways of Khartoum power. The press toyed with the issue, various candidates were identified and Taha-cheerleaders went on the campaign, but only for a brief spell. The security authorities eventually barred newspapers from reporting on the presidential throat apart from the official statements released by the President's press office, and pre-publication censorship was re-instituted to ensure compliance. The fuss inside the NCP however was too loud to control. The deputy speaker of parliament, Hajo Gasm al-Seed, told reporters that that it was high time for the ruling party to name a successor for President Bashir. The NCP's Amin Hassan Omer, usually disciplined when it comes to in-house disputes, told the Saudi al-Sharq al-Awsat that Taha was the most likely candidate to replace Bashir. When it became clear though that the President's throat might not be the focus of 'malignancy' it was thought to be, the more cautious swiftly reversed the signs. Ahmed Abd al-Rahman, an elder of the Islamic Movement and the NCP, suggested that the President continue in office for another term, and additionally assume the leadership of the Islamic Movement. The Movement, he stated, should dissolve its separate structures and fuse totally in the NCP under the command of President Bashir. Ahmed Abd al-Rahman said this proposal had the backing of Nafie Ali Nafie and others in the party. Amin Hassan Omer, in a TV interview broadcast this Sunday, fudged words when asked to address the succession controversy. He delivered however an interesting statistic. Over five million people in total, he said, attended the grass roots conferences of the NCP in 2011, while just over five hundred thousand attended the Islamic Movement's conferences. Amin steered clear of the 'younger' Islamic Movement and NCP 'dissidents', the memoranda writers of the past few months, a constituency he had sought to appease with a series of critical articles proposing a generational shift in the ruling party.

Django, reckoned the NCP nomenclatura, still has the grit in him to strike again. The question, I suppose, is who will fetch the canes.

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