Local Government and decentralization in the Sudan

M. W. NORRIS
University of Birmingham

SUMMARY

The establishment of an effective local government system has been imperative in the Sudan both on account of the vast scale of the country and the decentralization policies of successive governments. District councils were initially established in 1951 following the Marshall Report, but were by stages superseded as budgetary authorities, and reduced to unimportance by the People's Local Government System in 1971, which vested responsibility in Councils at the Provincial level. The subsequent difficulties experienced by this system indicate the value of the District, now renamed Area, as a level for a multipurpose local authority in the Sudan, and explain the reemphasis of this level in the 1981 Local Government Act.

This article summarizes the experience leading up to the 1981 Act, and examines the extent to which the new legislation offers an effective structure. The finance of local government, a recurrent problem in the Sudan, emerges as a critical issue, together with the future role of the Provincial Commissioner.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND DECENTRALIZATION IN THE SUDAN—A RETURN TO THE AREA (DISTRICT) COUNCILS

In 1980 new Regional governments were created in the Sudan to achieve the objectives of decentralization. The reasons behind this measure have been fully described by Dr. Alassam in the preceding issue of this journal (Alassam, 1983). An Act of 1981 has prescribed a revised structure for local government that is intended to give further impetus to decentralization. The purpose of this article is to describe this new initiative in establishing decentralized government at the level of the Area, and to place this development in the context of earlier attempts at achieving greater decentralization in government.

Local government, and moves to achieve decentralization in the Sudan, have been considered in previous articles and books. A comprehensive summary of the situation at the time of his recommendations in 1948 was made by Dr. A. H. Marshall, published in 1949. Dr. Gaafar Bakheit wrote prolifically leading to and including the 1971 reforms, in 1969, 1971 and 1972. The collection of papers edited by Howell in 1974 summarizes the early experience of the People's Local Government System, and the survey by Davey, Glentworth, Khalifa and Idris of local government in South Darfur in 1976 gives a detailed record of the practice in one province. Padalla's doctoral thesis in 1979 presents a sharp critique of the
system as a whole. The most recent discussion was that by Rondinelli (1981) which comments on limitations in the decentralization policy as seen in 1980 after the passage of the Regional Government Act and before the local government reforms of 1981. Rondinelli argued that effective decentralization in Sudanese conditions requires political commitment, clearly defined policies and procedures, adequate financial resources and administrative capacity, and appropriate physical and organizational infrastructure. The first, despite the President's personal initiative, has not been secured in government as a whole, and the remainder have been lacking. This article will suggest that at least the 1981 Act provides a more appropriate structure, and incorporates changes that reflect the experience of the people's local government system. The article will also identify many problem areas that remain unresolved.

In order to help with an understanding of the developments discussed, I will start with a summary of those relating to government at this subnational level between 1951 and 1971. This period includes the establishment of Town and District Councils in 1951 and the establishment in 1960 of Provincial Authorities, thus creating a two-tier structure of government District Councils and Provincial Authorities.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT DEVELOPMENT PRIOR TO 1969

Invited to advise the Sudan Government in 1948 by the then controlling British authorities, Dr. A. H. Marshall, Borough Treasurer of Coventry, made a detailed examination of the developing local government structure, and recommended the formation of Town and Rural District Councils. He rejected a pyramid structure of authorities that had been officially urged in 1946, and influenced the government away from a copy of the British two-tier structure which might otherwise have been adopted. Marshall's confidence in the District lay in the value of an uncompromised multipurpose authority, large enough to carry out primary local services, yet sufficiently small to permit local participation in a meaningful sense. He made provision for smaller units which were none the less not basic to his programme. He also accepted the continuing role and influence of traditional leaders—the so-called Native Administration—though recommending their gradual exclusion from the management of the new authorities. His approach was pragmatic and incremental.

District Councils, established in 1951, were supported by locally collected revenue sources, recurrent and capital central grants, were staffed by some locally recruited personnel though with seconded staff from central cadres in the more senior posts, and were supervised after 1954 by a special Ministry for Local Government. Overall responsibility for internal management was borne by the cadre of generalists. Considerable functions were transferred to these councils by amendment to their warrants as local capacity increased, and this included primary education in all but the three most southern Provinces. Independence in 1956 did not disrupt this development, and by 1960 over sixty councils had acquired full corporate status with a substantial range of powers. The appropriateness of this structure was confirmed by the Abu Rannat Commission in 1960, whose concern was primarily the duplication of work between the local authorities and deconcentrated government agencies, and the overall lack of co-ordination within
the Provinces. Although receiving official support, the local authorities were by this
time operating with declining effectiveness. Rapid localization of the central civil
service had deprived the councils of much experienced and sympathetic tutelage. In
addition, public demands for services far outstripped resources, so leaving the
authorities underfinanced. These weaknesses in local government resulted in public
expectations being diverted from the councils to the centre, and this tendency was
encouraged by the characteristics of national politics in which numerous personality
oriented parties competed for support by making extravagant claims (Fadlalla,
1979, pp. 26–27).

In 1960 the Military Government of General Abboud passed the Provincial
Authorities Act as a specific response to the difficulties which had prompted the
appointment of the Abu Rannat Commission (Republic of the Sudan, 1961). The
aim was to create a structure through which the different departments of Central
Government and local institutions operating in the provinces could be
co-ordinated. The Act established for each Province a Provincial Council and a
Provincial Authority, the former being in some respects an upper tier local
authority, but including in its 40 strong membership the chief departmental heads
within the province. The authority was an executive organ of the Council
constituting a provincial team. The Chairman of the Council, the Government
Representative, was appointed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.
Province Councils were granted their own sources of revenue and a supplementary
block grant. The structure only survived in its full form until 1964 when the regime
of General Abboud was superseded. It had, nevertheless, established the Province
as a local authority area, with its own revenue sources. Furthermore, by including
public servants as full members of the Council an important change was made in the
internal management, which differed markedly from that recommended by
Marshall or from British precedents.

These changes were both established and developed with a novel force following
the seizure of power by Major General Gaafar El Nimeiri and the army in 1969.
Until this date District and Town Councils continued in operation, maintained
public services, and in some cases operated with an inconspicuous but dogged
competence, whatever their shortcomings as democratic bodies.

Between 1951 and 1969 the concept of an elective local government system was
fully established, with authorities collecting their own revenue and employing at
least some of their staff. Traditional leaders continued to carry out important
functions, and indeed dominated many of the rural authorities. Marshall’s
conception had nevertheless been significantly changed by the two-tier structure. It
had furthermore been more seriously compromised by the declining capacity of the
authorities, especially in terms of financial viability and the increasing importance
of nominated and official members of council, leaving the District Councils
increasingly vulnerable.

THE PEOPLE’S LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEM

Implementing the philosophy of the May Revolution, the Army attempted from the
outset to overhaul the local government structure and develop the Province as the
primary unit through which to achieve decentralization. Earlier developments were
dismissed as too 'limited' in conception; the government's aim was to bring the revolution to grass-roots level and promote an ambitious programme of social change. Section 11(1) of the Local Government Act placed on the Provincial Council responsibility for 'political enlightenment, people's mobilisation, economic and social development and consolidation of national unity in accordance with the objectives of the May Socialist Revolution'.

The designer and advocate of the new system was Dr. Gaffar Bakheit, the Minister for Local Government, who had formerly been an administrator and a prominent academic in Khartoum University. Gaffar's primary objectives were to reverse the process of centralization to the capital, to eliminate the conception of local as distinct from central government that Marshall had assumed, and likewise to blur the distinction between political leadership and the public service, emphasized by the alleged 'neutrality' of the latter. Above all he had the aim of encouraging the widest public participation in government, bringing government activity to the most accessible levels, multiplying opportunities for council membership, and at the same time changing the balance of involvement. He strengthened the role of women, excluded the influence of conservatives, and ensured that the predominant impact was made by progressive groups favourable to the objectives of the Revolution and of the regime. This political purpose was specific, and, by its implications, dictated the character of the decentralization to be attempted.

The structure imposed consisted of a pyramid of over 5000 councils. At the lowest level were Neighbourhood, Market Area, Industrial Area, Village and Camp Councils. Rural and Town Councils, and above these Area Councils, were intermediate levels, and at the apex were the Provincial Councils. Informally held elections at the lowest levels decided membership of this level of council, and influenced those higher up as the base councils tended to operate as electoral colleges. Candidates required the support of activist groups—the functional and popular organizations such as village development committees and youth organizations. A fixed 25 per cent membership of women was required in all but the Market Area Councils. A restricted number of officials were full members of the appropriate lower tier councils and of the Provincial Council. Within the hierarchy of authorities the former District and Town Councils had a right to request action, but lacked independent financial and staff resources. They were dependent on what the Province councils were prepared to allocate, which, as shown in a study of Southern Darfur (Davey et al., 1976), was exceedingly limited. In practice this negated twenty years' experience in building up these councils as useful functioning units, which at least in most urban areas were basic to the management of urban infrastructural services.

Consistent with its declared commitment to decentralization from the central government, the National Government placed increasing responsibilities upon the Provincial Councils, thus in a measure centralizing authority from the lower levels. These Provincial Councils were deemed at the same time sufficiently large to plan and promote development schemes to supplement those of the state corporations and companies. The Provincial Councils were encouraged to take a lead in public business, and the richest—Gezira and Kassala—set up transport and warehousing enterprises. Parallel with the development of the Provincial Councils (and following criticism from a Select Committee of the National Assembly), a
considerable number of national Ministries were dissolved, or their functions reduced, between 1977 and 1979. As a result, Provinces assumed responsibility for the administration of police, prisons and fire brigades in addition to many supply and natural resources services. The Ministry of Local Government was itself a casualty of these changes. Its co-ordinating functions were transferred to a Bureau in the Presidential Office, since 1980 styled the Chamber of Decentralized Government Affairs. In 1979 the President himself assumed that status of ‘Patron of Local Government’ in confirmation of the high priority he personally gave to the decentralization programme.

Revenue to support the expanding responsibilities of the Provincial Governments was offered in the form of funds derived from massive deficit financing. The assumption was that the Provincial Council budgets formed the basis of the national budget, a relationship confirmed by Presidential recognition in Decree 41/79. The transfer of central funds to the Provincial governments rose from 25.7 million LS in 1969/70 to 127 million LS in 1979/80 (Ministry of Finance, 1980, p. 196), an apparently impressive reflection of the decentralization of financial resources, notwithstanding rapid inflation. Percentage and unit grants used in the past, and formal block grants were discarded as a means of financing Provincial Governments on the grounds that such arrangements implied a dichotomy between central and local governments, whereas it was fundamental to Dr Gaafar’s approach to regard the whole public sector as integrated.

By 1979 the control of most public services with which the citizen made contact had been decentralized to the Provincial Councils, their continuation and development in principle ensured by the National Government’s unquantified commitment. Popular participation was encouraged at all levels, and popular control secured by the hierarchy of councils, the large Provincial Council of some 120 members, and the executive role of the Provincial Commissioner. As Provincial Secretary of the ruling and only recognized party, the Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU), head of the public service in the Province and ex-officio chairman of the Provincial Council, this political appointee of ministerial rank was expected to co-ordinate the official, political and popular resources of the Province in the public interest.

PROBLEMS OF THE 1971 SYSTEM

The People’s Local Government as a grand design was well conceived by Dr. Gaafar, and he explained it with lucidity and persistence. Initially the plan was implemented with enthusiasm. Although precedents for certain aspects of the structure can be readily traced in the earlier Provincial Councils and in comparative Yugoslavian practice, the conception as a whole was original, most particularly in its application to Sudanese conditions, and in its aspirations for the public at large. Gaafar did not merely aim to improve public management. His objective was no less than to change Sudanese society, including the public service which he accused of detachment and elitism. Defects of the system lay in the very scale and comprehensiveness of the programme, which presented problems in translating a design into functioning institutions on the ground, and also in the inability of government to provide resources of money and management skill to keep pace with the expectations aroused.
An obvious contrast between the approaches to decentralization adopted in 1951 and 1971, lies in the informed incrementalism of the former and the immediate idealism of the latter. As Rondinelli wrote 'authority was devolved from the central ministries to the provinces en masse, and the differing capacities of Provincial Councils and commissioners to perform their functions were never assessed. It was simply assumed that capacity for development planning and management existed, or that it could expand as functions were devolved (1981, p. 614). Roles between officials and non-officials were changed, staff were transferred wholesale, especially after 1977, and institutions were established in accordance with an overall design without local understanding or requisite resources. Changes were imposed, using a public service that was demoralized as a result of very rapid expansion and fifteen years of political manipulation. In any case the service was hardly suited by its norms to introduce the change in the rapid way required. The problem of building effective institutions was increased by the pressure for further change and reorganization as a result of the reappraisals urged by the Assembly Committee in 1976 and the First National Congress on People's Local Government in 1978. Difficulties present might have been offset in a context of ample resources and developmental opportunity, but the reverse was the case.

The Sudanese economy is narrowly based on the production of high quality cotton, grown mainly in the Central Region and subject to severe international fluctuations in demand and price. Local sources of revenue are inelastic, and imposed on a mainly poor population. Local sources include taxes on 'rain fed' land (ushur), tax on irrigated land, animal tax, date tree tax, rates on urban property and a so-called development tax in the south. None of these in practice is calculated in an informed or graduated manner, rates are kept very low and the last is in practice a poll tax. Collection of rural sources in the pre-revolutionary period depended on the knowledge and influence of traditional heads, the omdas and sheikhs in the north and chiefs in the south—and both omdas and chiefs were abolished or compromised after 1969. Collection of local sources—especially animal tax—accordingly fell, creating an increasing dependence on the support of the Ministry of Finance. In 1979/80 the relationship of local revenue to central grant was 23 per cent to 77 per cent in the Southern Region, and 29 per cent to 71 per cent in the other Provinces collectively (Ministry of Finance, 1979, p. 2). In Northern Province grant accounted for 90 per cent of the total.

This relationship would have been less important if the allocations from central government had been calculable and dependable. In theory, as explained, the Provincial budgets were regarded as basic to the national. In practice liberal expenditure could not be entertained. Far from increasing local initiative and dependence, the convention adopted compelled the Provinces to submit budget bids which were in stages reduced by Ministry of Finance officials to accord with national resources and other strongly competitive priorities such as security, defence and the demands of the parastatals. This process barely concealed a very drastic form of central control, supported by the powers of tutelage conferred on the Ministry of Finance by Decree No. 4/75. The constraint of this control was increased by the fact that even approved budgets could not be implemented because of cash flow difficulties. Much of the time of Provincial Commissioners was spent lobbying for resources, an activity made necessary as a result of the abolition of the Ministry of Local Government, since the services of the latter as a useful
intermediary was lost. The effects of inadequate resources were most acutely felt at the lower levels, most especially at the Area and Town levels where projects were most likely to be carried out. Certainly in the south the evidence is conclusive that the Regional Government delegated responsibility to the Provinces without commensurate resources (Ministry of Regional Administration, Police and Prisons, 1981, p. 32).

A most serious aspect of these arrangements was that the Provincial Councils, and hence those below, lacked any clear perception of the resources on which to plan or base priorities. Salaries were an initial obligation, isolated in Chapter 1 of the budget. These were steadily enhanced by the transfer of staff to the Provinces, and the support services related to them were subject to proportionate contraction. By 1978 salaries constituted 72.24 per cent of provincial expenditure outside the Southern Region, (Ibrahim Mohamed Ibrahim, 1982, p. 81), where in actual terms the percentage was higher. The Area and Town Councils had little security even in the cash collected from local sources, as the Provincial Commissioner (being Treasurer of the superior body) was entitled to withdraw their funds. Council members found themselves with an illusion of power, but without command of the means. Not surprisingly, more enterprising Provinces concentrated on what promised to be income earning undertakings, though few of these have in fact proved profitable.

Difficulties arising from shortage of finance extended equally to the availability of skilled staff. This placed a great responsibility on the cadre of generalists, the local government inspectors, and imposed a demoralizing burden on the specialists, particularly on those located outside the Province Headquarters. All were seconded civil servants with divided loyalties between the Provinces and their ministries. The task of the generalists was particularly difficult to execute well. First, most of the councils they assisted had no budget in their own right, approval of expenditure and release of funds having to be obtained from separate departments in the Provincial Council (Mohammed Uthman Khaleefa, 1980, pp. 48–50). Secondly, their relationships with the Councils were delicate. The councillors' and officers' roles, established on British precedents in 1951, were merged in the People's Local Government system. The seconded officials were full members of Council, working with a majority of non-officials whose influence through committees could extend to the detail of management. Confusion was considerable (Ali Abdallah Mohamed Alhamem, 1980, pp. 33–36), with councillors occasionally usurping strictly official functions such as conducting the sale of public land, and the rivalry of generalists with specialists was often worked out in council meetings. Established official hierarchies were not respected in the new environment. Furthermore, the relationship of the lower tier authorities, and particularly of their official executives, to their equivalent officials of the Sudanese Socialist Union was unclear and caused trouble. Although the latter had the responsibility for motivating the public, the temptation to direct projects and involve themselves in the control of scarce commodities, such as allocating sugar and petrol, was very strong.

In theory the co-ordinating and controlling force that should have resolved these problems lay in the office of the Provincial Commissioner, described as the 'symbol of the collective leadership of the Executive Council' (National Conference for the Development of Local Government, 1971, p. 24). In practice the powers of the
Commissioner led in many Provinces to an extreme and inefficient centralization, overburdening the office itself and creating serious bottlenecks. This was not surprising, and would seem an almost inevitable consequence of the Commissioner's position. As the personal nominee of the President every Commissioner had to be concerned about his reputation in Khartoum. As provincial head of the public service he directly controlled a strong deconcentrated force, representing 'decentralization' in a purely geographical sense. As Provincial Secretary of the SSU, he was a key figure in the national ruling party. As Chairman and Treasurer of the Council he directly controlled the local authority. Many Commissioners carried out their functions through the seven man central committee of the Council, and were able, under the 1971 Act, to veto decisions of the full Council with which they disagreed.

The development of a highly personalized style of management was to some extent justified. The management of a Province (of some 100,000 square miles in area) through the medium of a complex of under-resourced subordinate councils was daunting. Scarcity demanded hard choices, and ineffective councils had to be ignored in the interests of action. Yet without any internal control there was nothing but the Commissioner's prudence to limit his involvement. There is abundant evidence that some Commissioners became deeply and disastrously involved in the distribution of commodities and other benefits to individuals, to an extent that the public regarded the Commissioner alone as the government (Badal, 1982, pp.78–79).

Some measures were taken to meet these difficulties. The Commissioner's veto was reduced to a suspension requiring ratification. The Provinces were increased in number from nine to eighteen so reducing their scale. In 1979, recognizing the excessive burden on the Commissioner, a Deputy Commissioner and a first Assistant were appointed at the instigation of the National Conference. These measures, however, reflected the gravity of the problems rather than resolving them. The dilemma was to achieve an effective decentralization at a tolerable cost to the centre politically, financially, and in administrative performance.

A further source of concern from the 1971–81 experience was the reality of public participation, though the evidence is unclear. The system created great opportunities for involvement in council work, most particularly for women. There was none the less confusion as to what level of participation was appropriate. The former district councils were recognized; the others were unfamiliar. Khaleefa (Mohamed Uthman Khaleefa, 1980, pp. 43–44) claimed that the sheer number of councils bewildered intended candidates, especially as success at the higher tier frequently depended on success at the lower. As a consequence many good candidates did not come forward, leaving the field to opportunists. The exclusion of these connected with the Native Administration in effect excluded their families and relatives also (Farouk Bushra Abdelgadir, 1981, p. 52). The response of women outside the urban areas was disappointing. Rural Councils contained too many school teachers or women whose attendance was entirely formalistic. The system undoubtedly created awareness, and some councils operated enthusiastically. But in the main, particularly in the south, the system failed to operate as Dr. Gaafar had intended. Despite the continued bias in favour of progressive forces, far too many councils represented the influence of local merchants. Widespread concern over participation and the quality of council
members, as reflected in the Report of the Select Committee of the Assembly, the Administrative Officers' Union 7th Congress, and the First National Congress, is indicative of the disquiet which led to an amendment in the Local Government Act in 1979, permitting the President or his representative to appoint 10 per cent of the members on the basis of talent.

The People's Local Government System was in no way recognized as a failure, and the sustained public investigations and reappraisals reflect the commitment to it and the determination to make it succeed. It was none the less recognized that the structure demanded radical modification, one for which the creation of Regions afforded an appropriate opportunity.

THE 1981 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT

The 1981 Local Government Act is most constructively interpreted as a positive response to this experience. It abolishes the People's Provincial Executive Councils, transferring their property and obligations to the Regional Executive Authority. Many of the functions of the councils are, however, transferred to the Area Councils to be established by the Regions, including primary and intermediate education; public health including dispensaries; economic development including planning; roads, drainage and water supplies; agricultural and veterinary extension work; culture and sports; social affairs and self-help schemes; labour in the regulation of employment; licensing, price and commodity control; and the maintenance of public order.

The composition of the new councils is less precisely defined than in the previous Act. The functional organizations are to be represented and the Regional Executive Authority is to ensure a 'reasonable' representation of women. Provision is made for 10 per cent of the council to be appointed on the basis of 'talent'. The larger councils established on this basis, such as Omdurman, have a membership of fifty, thirty five being elected members, ten from the Alliance of the People's Working Forces, and five nominees. The councils in the Southern Region consist of thirty members only, but with similar proportions. Overall the nation has been divided into some eighty councils, twenty five of which are in the Southern Region. The map of this Region illustrates clearly the impact of this decentralization, the Provincial boundaries being those of the former six Provincial Executive Councils (Figure 1). The Area Councils can establish lower tiers of councils in accordance with the 1971 pattern, delegating functions at their discretion.

The internal management of the councils, though not closely defined, reverts to older precedents, the executive being divorced from the council, and the Council Chairman envisaged as having special responsibility. The seconded generalist becomes the Chief Executive, with the Chairman as leader of council. How such organizations will evolve and what conventions will develop, it is premature to predict. The Act makes no provision for the displacement of a Chairman once elected, nor does it afford guidance as to how conflict between the Chief Executive and Council is to be satisfactorily resolved. There is none the less an obvious desire for stability even at some cost in democratic ideals.

The role of the Provincial Commissioner has been radically redefined. He is now primarily responsible for security in the Province; and thus with supervising police,
Figure 1. Local Government Area Councils 1982 Southern Region. Legend: ■ Urban Area Council HQ; ▲ Rural Area Council HQ; ● People's Rural Council HQ; ——— International Boundary; —— Regional Boundary; ——— Provincial Boundary; ——— Area Council Boundary; — People’s Rural Council Boundary; Note: Boundaries of most People's Rural Councils are not known. Where boundaries are known they are indicated on the map. Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources Planning Department Land Use and Physical Planning Unit, Juba Sudan.

A. Bahr El Ghazal

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prisons and fire brigades, and for supervising also seconded public servants in the Province, most particularly the council executives. This last responsibility was, in November 1982, given added importance by the decentralization to the Regions of the whole generalist cadre, removing all staff functions from the Chamber for Decentralized Government Affairs. It is likely that a similar policy will be adopted for senior professional and technical officers. The right of inspection of Councils lies with Regional Ministries, but the Commissioner has powers to investigate, report and 'revise'. The implications of revision are not set out in the Act. The Commissioner's role would appear from the Law to be more appropriate to a public servant than to a political appointee, yet this is a superficial assessment. It takes no account of the vital political role taken by the Commissioner as Provincial Secretary of the SSU, nor of the right vested in the Regional Executive Authority to delegate additional powers to him under Section 10(e) of the Act. An important power struggle is in practice taking place to resolve the uncertainties left by legislation. Though no longer Chairmen of Councils nor council finance controllers the Provincial Commissioners can still exercise an effective indirect rule if the Regional Government has neither the resources nor the will to prevent them. Moreover the Commissioners are not alone. The Assistant Commissioners, the former departmental controllers in the Provincial Councils, are equally interested in retaining a strong Provincial bureaucracy.

The financial basis is fundamentally unchanged, although Regional grants to the Councils are envisaged. There is, none the less, no formula for the allocation of these grants, or precise guidance as to the extent to which functions are to be decentralized from the Region. The Act provides a broad framework, permitting considerable Regional discretion and variation. Yet a resolute and informed settlement of financial distribution is crucial to successfully implementing the Act. So far this has not been approached, as is well described by Malik (1982, pp. 92–103) in the case of the Southern Region.

It is, of course, too early to draw conclusions about the outcome. President Nimeiri's overt commitment to decentralization remains, internationally declared in the Sudan's hosting of the 1981 United Nations Conference on Decentralization. The efforts to achieve decentralization of responsibility are real, both from the Central Government to the Regional level and from the Regions to the Areas. It is how resources are to be allocated that is still unclear.

The best scenario envisages a broad delegation of powers to the Regions, backed by financial and staffing resources. According to this scenario the Regions will, in turn, by the disciplined allocation of revenue and staff, ensure that a major development impact is made at the Area Council level. In support of this there is articulate public service support for the long established Area, which may, it is hoped, combine functional efficiency as a catchment are for most public services, with an acceptable democratic focus. In practice, however, democratic participation may be sacrificed, since the priority given to management effectiveness can hardly be doubted at this point.

An alternative scenario is that, with the establishment of Regions, the centre will abdicate responsibility for particular functions. It will escape from the demands of rural development and of basic public services. At the same time central government may conserve the major share of public revenue, deploying it for specific goals to be achieved by public corporations. So compromised, the Regions
would themselves frustrate the Area Councils passing on the burdens, and leaving
the Regional tier as little more than a parasitic bureaucracy. This would be a
disastrous outcome and an ironical conclusion to Dr. Gafar’s aims. Yet as Badal
has shown (1979, Chap. 3), the Southern Region has drifted dangerously close to
such a state, posing a warning to the programme as a whole.

As idealism has given place to pragmatism, and revolutionary politics to the
politics of survival, so the credibility of Nimeiri’s government and strategy is
increasingly at stake. After ten years of experience both their integrity, and the
relevance of the People’s Local Government System, will be judged—predictably if
unreasonably—on the short term effectiveness of Regionalism and the
reconstituted Area Councils. If the councils are perceived to be no more than
instruments for exhorting the public to self help, and securing the employment of
officials for regulatory functions, widespread scepticism will be confirmed. If, in
contrast, they are perceived to assume a local leadership with the capacity to act
responsively and responsibly, their newly acquired role could have more than a
local significance.

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