

The Independent Student Congress

A Historical Background

Introduction: the ISC

In the mid 1970s, a new political surge emerged among Sudanese university students within the Sudan and abroad. It developed from a spreading trend of neutrality among students who conceived of themselves as *independent* of any political affiliation. However, it was so positive and assertive it was clear that neutrality was not the right emblem for it. Eventually it gave birth to a non-neutral movement that began rapidly mustering the forces of apolitical masses of students and organizing them into provisional political nucleuses all over the Sudan and abroad as well. By 1979, the Independent Student Congress came into being in three main universities, Khartoum, Omdurman Islamic, and al Gezira universities, with other universities following suit.

The new student political movement immediately embarked on crafting their own intellectual discourse. It was clear that they wanted to distinguish themselves from both leftist and rightist orientation. Not adhering either to Islam or socialism, they opted to what they termed as '*Sudanese heritage*', expressing their orientation as to draw their thought from within rather than from without (dubbing both social and Islamist orientations, which were represented in the Communists and Pan Arabists and the Muslim Brothers respectively, as of foreign origin). They boldly and clearly declared their unshakable commitment to democracy. To accompany the allegiance of the masses of neutral students, they advocated steering the student trade unions to mainly serve the needs of the students rather than politicizing them like what the Muslim Brothers used to do. And finally they raised the banner that they are the healthy alternative for both the left and right, and furthermore to the traditional sectarian parties, the Umma (the Ansar Sect) and the Democratic Unionist (the Khatmiyya Sect).

In 1979, just one year after its birth in Khartoum University, the biggest and most influential university in Sudanese politics, the ICS successfully managed to muster a coalition of political organizations that stood against the Muslim Brothers who were leading the Khartoum University Student Union (KUSU) since their reconciliation with the May regime in 1977. The main objective of that coalition was to amend the constitution to make it proportionate. However, this objective was not achieved as the coalition could not complete their term in office due to the violent confrontation mounted against them by the Muslim Brothers as a result of which the university was closed.

The big breakthrough of the ICS was in al Gezira University where they enjoyed the support of the student majority. This made them solely lead the Gezira University Student Union (GUSU) for years to come. Likewise, the ISC gained momentum in Omdurman Islamic University. By 1981, the ISC succeeded in leading a coalition of political organizations upon which they seized

the student union. By 1982, the ISC spread in all universities at home (Juba University and Khartoum Polytechnic) with the exception of Cairo University Branch which did not accommodate the ISC until after 1986. The spread of the ISC crossed the border to Sudanese undergraduate students studying in the universities of Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Pakistan, India, former Soviet Union and the social bloc in general, and Britain. In 1982, the ISC convened its first central meeting for its all chapters, within the Sudan and abroad. This meeting was held in the premises of the Faculty of veterinary Sciences, Khartoum University. This event took place in June, four months (i.e. January) after the series of demonstration broke out in many Sudanese cities in protest of the raising the prices of food stuff (the Sugar Demonstrations of 1982), which soured and rocketed to the extent that the welfare of the lower classes was sharply compromised. The May regime reacted aggressively to these demonstrations, opening fire and killing over 40 people. It was the ISC that initiated these demonstrations, starting from Khartoum University; it lost its first martyr, Abdul Hamid Sa'id Othman. This incident had tremendous impact on the movement as they faced the grave consequences of standing up against the ruling regime; however, it hardened them and made them feel mature.

By 1983, it became clear that the ISC was building up its popularity once again with the upcoming elections set as the principal objective (it already had al Gezira student union). In Khartoum University it again succeeded in mustering a coalition that toppled the Muslim Brothers in 1984; the ISC had both offices of the president of the union executive committee and the president of the 40 member Council (it alone had 20 of its total 40 seats whereas only 4 seats were allocated each political organization of the coalition) a matter that clearly shows the power and popularity it enjoyed. In Omdurman Islamic University, they did the same, having only the office of the 30 member Council. In Khartoum Polytechnic they were also having the leading role in such a coalition. With the three main universities (Khartoum, Omdurman & al Gezira) at their hands, the ISC embarked on the political agitation that eventually lead to the revolution of April, 1985. Two months to the revolution, the executive committee of KUSU and many members of the 40 Council were arrested upon which the university was closed. This left the ISC with only al Gezira and Omdurman Islamic universities, with the latter pushed forward to play the leading role of Khartoum University. A proposal for taking to the streets was lodged by the ISC to the executive committee but was failed when the union president (from Umma Party) used his power of casting vote. The ISC turned to the 30 member Council, which was the supreme power of the union; there it passed only when the president of the council (from ISC) used his power of casting vote. On 27th, one day after little demonstrations went off in Khartoum streets, the students of Omdurman Islamic University took to the street under the leadership of the ISC whose speak corners were clamouring high, calling for students to go out to the streets. On April the 6th, the May regime fell to the revolution; that same day, the masses under the ISC leadership stormed Cooper prison to free their detained leaders. At the gate of the prison, using the loudspeaker of a prison officer, a leading figure of ISC (Muhammad Jalal Hashim) presented the freed president of KUSU (Omar al Digeir) to address the masses.

The ISC & the National Congress Party (aka the Sudanese Congress Party)

Immediately after the turmoil of the revolution of April subsided, both the ISC students and graduates began thinking seriously to form their own political party. They were getting frustrated as the major role they played in the revolution was not recognized by the big political forces. No one wanted to recognize that, a matter that could have led to a meteoric rise of the new movement of which the Sudanese public did not have the slightest idea. Until then the notion of *independency*, which was fast developing among the movement into a complex philosophical concept, was confused with *neutrality* and passiveness among the Sudanese public and intellectual as well. The ISC wanted to vindicate themselves; they were naïve and full of euphoria as that was their first generation of graduates. However, they were sure that they had what others lacked: zeal and audacity. The problem was that very few numbers of them were qualified age-wise to stand for elections (i.e. they were mostly below 30 years old). It became clear that they needed urgent injection of a senior age group. They were then known with the short name of Congress of Independents, which accommodated both graduates and undergraduates. As they went shopping for such an age group, many such groups were stalking them. Eventually the Congress of Independents was approached by a certain political group called *the Free Patriots* (aka Free Nationalists). Formed months before the revolution by professionals of university medical and humanitarian staff, many of them did have lectured the ISC leaders in their studentship. This relation paved the way to a progressive rapport between the two groups.

Finally the intensive meetings of a whole year gave birth to a new party. Understandably its name was coined in a way that will recognize its parent organizations, i.e. the ISC and the Free Nationalists (FN). In 1986 the National Congress Party (NCP) was founded without being inclusive with regard to the Graduate affiliates of the Independent Congress (GIC). Due to practicality and pragmatism, the developing infant of thought that was being nursed by many GIC could not be accommodated by the NCP. The paradox was that the elderly leaders (the FN) of the newly established party were not prepared either psychologically or intellectually to be mentored by the young generation of the GIC; most of those refrained from joining NCP. However, there were no hard feelings between those who joined the NCP and those who refrained from doing so due to their reservations. At last the movement of Independent Congress (students and graduates as well) had their own political apparatus even though there was no consensus about it.

The NCP and ISC did significant activity in the short lived democracy (1986-1989); they mustered major demonstrations in protest of the rocketing prices of essential food stuff, sugar in particular (the Sugar Demonstrations of 1989). These demonstrations brought the demise of the coalition government of accordance (*al wifaaq* government that included Umma Party and the National Islamic Front). As a direct consequence of the fall of that government, the NIF headed steadily to implement the military coup of al Bashir. In 1989, just two months before the coup d'état plotted by the National Islamic Front (NIF), the NCP issued the programme of National

Salvation. In that programme, starting with the slogan ‘*Sudan: to be or not to be*’, the NCP warned of two things in particular: the spread of war and the possibility of a military coup. On 30th, June 1989 the coup d’état of Umar al Bashir took place bearing the name of ‘the National Salvation Revolution’. This caused confusion among the movement of the Congress of Independents (in both sectors of graduates and students) and among other political parties. Later it was revealed that that was a tactic of obscurantism by the NIF to disguise their unwelcomed coup; it was known to the political parties that the NCP had significant and strong connections among the army officers who admired the new and young movement. Years later, in 1998, the coup d’état plotters will be more audacious and usurp the name ‘National Congress Party’ (NCP).

Both the CIS and the NCP were active in the political mobilization against the military regime of al Bashir. The infamous Ghost Houses hosted the leading echelon of the party in the aftermath of the strike lead by the medicine doctors’ union trade that took place in the fall of 1989. However, the ISC received the brunt of the security offensives all through the first years of the military regime. By that time, most of the political leaders escaped the country, with many of them heading either to Ethiopia, Eritrea or Egypt join efforts with the Sudan People Liberation Movement (SPLM). That was the moment when the NCP began thinking of mustering its army officers’ connection to mount military struggle. The negotiations and contacts took almost two years, from mid 1992s to mid 1994s. By the fall of 1994, the Sudanese Alliance Forces (SAF) came into being, with brigadier A. Aziz Khalid as its Chairman; it came as a coalition of small political organizations with the NCP as the biggest among them. However, a conservative trend within the NCP declined joining SAF; they preferred to maintain their civic struggle through the party. Again, there were no hard feelings and cooperation and coordination between the two bodies went smoothly. In fact the NCP literally served as a civilian arm of SAF with the latter also serving as a military arm for the former. This allowed the fresh graduates of the ISC to sneak to the front in Ethiopia and Eritrea to join the ranks of SAF.

This made the ISC a direct target for the security organs inside the Sudan. It began receiving a series of offensives that lead by the turn of the century to its sharp decline. This tempted SAF to mount a dissension among ISC to make it change its name from ‘Independent Student Congress’ to ‘Alliance Forces Students’. This caused a little turmoil as the zeal that characterizes the affiliates of the movement showed up. A new surge initiated by the graduates of the movement put things back in order. This is the only case of fall-out that took place between the two sisterly organizations. At the present, the ISC is booming while the Alliance Forces Students is more or less a dormant movement.

In 1998 the NCP (Opposition), as it came to be known to distinguish it from the NCP (Ruling Party), was compelled to give its original name to the ruling party as its anti government activities were causing more confusion than mobilization. This surrender of name took place with much sense of grievance and grudge. The substitute name of ‘the Sudanese Congress Party’ (SCP) was officially adopted. However, this move has given the SCP new stamina for opposition

work. That same year witnessed intensive contacts and meeting to form a platform of active opposition. A coalition of small parties and groups lead by the SCP was formed; that is JAD (*jabhat al quwa al diimuqraatiyya*- The Democratic Forces Front), headed by the founding father, late Justice Abdul Majid Imam. It pushed the oppositional work a little bit with no breakthrough however; it only survived the turn of the century due to the ineffectiveness and ineptitude of the little and small parties and groups that joined SCP. Big parties declined any invitation made by SCP to join efforts; it was not good for them to recognize this small but hyperactive party least it gains popularity a matter deemed to affect them negatively.

The SPLM, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the ISC and SCP

By 2002 the Sudanese Alliance Forces began to disintegrate due to the paradoxes embedded deep into its structure. The formidable struggle CV of SPLM overshadowed it. Furthermore, significant number of the intellectual leaders of Independent Congress (IC, i.e. including students and graduates) were never in good terms of thought with SAF as the latter portrayed itself as a northerner counterpart of SPLM which was taken for granted as a Southern movement. With SAF falling in disarray, its members of IC affiliates flocked to the SPLM.

By that time, it was long since the SPLM had abandoned its Marxist discourse of Centre vs. Margin. By 1996 it was so difficult to differentiate between the intellectual discourse of SPLM and that of the IC. In fact, by 1986, the ISC had developed its own intellectual discourse centering on the key concept of *independency*. This discourse is characterized by being culturalistic, neither materialistic nor idealistic. It draws its premises from culture as a complex that comprises all components of social life, material as well as spiritual. Within this frame of thought, the ISC had its own culturalistic approach to Margin vs. Centre as cultural paradigms of identity. This is the view that SAF kept advocating through its propaganda with the affiliates of ISC putting all their effort to propagate their discourse. The discourse was very attractive as it touched directly on the grievances resulting from the identity split between Africanism vs. Arabism and the systematic intimidation of African identity by Islamo-Arab ideology. SPLM shifted to this discourse by 1995 as it proved to be more effective than its Marxist discourse. The fall of the Socialist bloc expedited this change of ideology.

The disintegration of SAF went in line with the intellectual identification between SPLM and ISC. By 2002, negotiations took place so as to merge SAF and SPLM into one political organization. However, by 2003, it was clear that SAF was not going to survive to complete the merge. This drastic development of disintegration urged the majority of SAF to join SPLM, leaving behind the echelon of leadership. With SAF quitting the stage, it was convenient for the SCP to step in and start building good and strong rapport with SPLM. The affiliates of ISC who joined SPLM helped much in lubricating this close-come between the two political organizations.

In 2005 SPLM signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with the government of the Sudan under the leadership of President Umar al Bashir. The civilian transformation of SPLM witnessed noticeable migration from the affiliates of the ISC to SPLM. Their joining of the SPLM has neither changed their ideological discourse nor weakened their bond to their mother student organization or its sisterly political party of Sudanese Congress (SCP). This helped bringing the two bodies (SPLM & SCP) closer to each other more than ever. The elections of 2010 were a convenient even to show this closeness and solidarity.

In March 2006, the SCP mounted a series of demonstration in protest of the rocketing of prices (the Sugar Demonstrations of 2006). The regime reacted with tough measures, arresting tens of the ISC students and many leaders of SCP, including the Chairman Ibrahim al Shaikh.

In the 2011 Referendum, the Southerners had voted with sliding majority for the independence of heir part of the country thus putting their brethren in the north in an unenvied situation. This has almost jeopardized the discourse of New Sudan initiated by the late Dr. John Garang, the founding leader of SPLM/A. This has taken place with SPLM in the north divided officially into three bodies, i.e. the North Sector, the Southern Kordufan Sector, and the Blue Nile Sector. Efforts are being exerted so as to amalgamate these three bodies into one integral body. Along with these efforts, negotiations between SCP and SPLM have already started so as to launch the big move that is the unification of marginalized forces. The last five years, with their full preoccupation in daily politics, had had negative effect on the student organization of SPLM, a matter that lead it to diminish. On the other side, the same five years have given boost to the ISC which has not only spread in all Sudanese university, but furthermore the ISC has come out as th only student political organization that enjoys what can be described as the most intellectually appealing discourse. This puts the ISC in the position of the vanguard of the coalition under negotiation between SCP and SPLM.

The ISC & SCP and Cultural Activity

The movement of the Independents (MI) as represented in both the student organization and the party has paid much attention to intellectual and cultural activities. It was characterized right from the beginning by its high intellectuality. In 1999, the founding father of SCP (aka NCP) Justice Abdul Majid Imam passed away. He was mourned by all free movements in the Sudan in tribute to his role in the October Revolution (1964) when he gave his explicit orders to the army not to open fire on the peaceful demonstrations. In 2000 the Abdul Majid Imam Cultural Centre was founded by the SCP. It served as the hub of cultural activities in Khartoum, with many of its activities implemented in rural areas. Understandably, the centre was a direct of intimidation by the security organs. Its activities were banned regularly and its belongings confiscated more than once. Eventually it was suspended for the time being due to financial problems.