SUDAN

Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan: The ‘Khartoum Springs’ of 1964 and 1985, by W. J. Berridge. London: Bloomsbury, 2015. 304 pages. $112.

Reviewed by John O. Voll

The overthrow of an authoritarian military regime by civilian opposition activists is infrequent. The experiences of populist movements during the Arab Spring of 2011 show the difficulties of removing military dictatorships from power. However, in Sudan, in 1964 and 1985, according to W. J. Berridge, “the Sudanese public were able to overhaul two military governments and establish liberal democracies in their place in an era when autocracy was the norm” (p. 215). Sudan since independence has experienced three periods of parliamentary democracy (1956–58, 1964–69, and 1985–89) and three eras of military authoritarianism. In Civil Uprisings in Modern Sudan, Berridge shows how the two civilian revolutions were organized, and how the current Sudanese military regime is a reprise of the old military politics with new strengths. The Sudanese experience becomes an important case study of authoritarianism and popular revolt, relevant for understanding political dynamics in the 21st century as well as in the second half of the 20th.

Following a survey of existing studies, noting the lack of attention given to Sudan by both Africanists and scholars of the Middle East, Berridge provides an analysis of the October Revolution of 1964. One question the author explores is whether the overthrow of the military regime of Ibrahim ‘Abbud was planned or spontaneous. He concludes that while groups were organizing opposition to ‘Abbud, “it was spontaneous events which precipitated his downfall” (p. 14). The author’s conclusion is based on a wide variety of sources, including memoirs and interviews with surviving participants. Berridge’s conclusion that people opposed to ‘Abbud were not planning for his imminent overthrow is supported by conversation records of another scholar who was in Sudan in the months preceding the revolution, talking with people like Babikr ‘Awadallah, a leftist judge described as “one of the heroes of October” (p. 40) and Babikr Karrar, an Islamist participant in the revolution.1

Many of the same organizations and leaders involved in the 1964 revolution participated in the 1985 revolution, as shown in Chapter 2. Although Ja’far Numayri, who came to power in 1969, created a strong security system, in Berridge’s view, he “brought about his own downfall” (p. 63) by repressive policies even against his allies. However, the “resilience of Sudan’s political parties” and the activism of students, professionals, and labor meant that there was not a transition to another military dictatorship (p. 63).

Berridge examines the major elements of Sudanese politics in three chapters. First, the author looks at the politically active organizations, giving special attention to the evolution of the Sudan Communist Party and the history of Islamist organizations (with various names but significant continuity). While these groups reflected the views of much of the educated elite, Berridge notes that the “traditional parties” based on the two major Muslim historic organizations had popular mass support and were the major political forces in times of parliamentary politics. The second major element (discussed in Chapter 4) is the set of groups identified by observers and many in Sudan as the “modern forces”: labor unions, professional associations, and student bodies (p. 95). Berridge warns, however, that it is important not to impose “too rigid a dichotomy between the ‘modern forces’ . . . and the ‘traditional’ forces” (p. 95) because of high levels of relationships between the two groupings. The third major element (examined in Chapter 5) is the military. Berridge describes the Sudanese military in political terms as an internally divided institution reflecting the divisions within the broader Sudanese political elite.

1 Research notes by this reviewer, conversation with Babikr Karrar, March 2, 1964 and conversation with Babikr ‘Awadallah, July 25, 1963.
In both 1964 and 1985, the overthrow of military rule involved short transitional regimes in which the organizations of the “modern forces” and ideological parties were marginalized by the “traditional” parties with their mass support. The dynamics of these two transitions are analyzed in Chapters 6 and 7. In the final chapter, Berridge suggests that the current military regime, which came to power in 1989, is not likely to be overthrown by a third civilian revolution. That regime has suppressed and weakened all of the major actors in the previous revolutions. There is little indication of potentially successful popular protest, although Berridge does not note the possible similarity with the period before the “spontaneous” overthrow of ‘Abbud.

In his conclusion, Berridge notes that a “key theme” in his analysis of Sudanese political change is “the folly of defining anti-regime uprisings in the Islamic world as either ‘secular’ and ‘democratic’ events or ‘religious,’ ‘anti-democratic’ movements driven by political Islam” (p. 216). Many activists in the “modern forces” identified with various types of political Islam. The conceptual dichotomies of modern versus traditional or secular versus religious are misleadingly inaccurate in dealing not just with Sudan but with the Muslim world as a whole.

Comparisons with the events of the Arab Spring frequently come to mind in reading Berridge’s study. One dramatic contrast between the “revolutions” of 2010/11 and those of 1964 and 1985 involves the mechanisms for mobilizing popular demonstrations. The Sudanese revolutions are classic cases of pre-social media revolutions. Berridge simply describes, without comment about this contrast, that in 1964 when a student was shot, igniting the protests, “news of what happened was spread through the capital by taxi drivers, by people returning from the centre informing their neighbors in the suburbs and by gossip in bars, so that citizens from all over Khartoum came to witness the scene at the hospital that evening” (p. 33). Similarly, leaders of the professional associations went to various wedding parties in Khartoum to get signatures for their memorandum of protest (p. 102). Before electronic social media, other social media made it possible to mobilize large numbers of protesters, but the mechanisms were different, reflecting a different technological age.

Berridge’s analysis of the Sudanese revolutions provides significant insights into the political processes of revolution and civilian protest. This book should be an important resource for anyone who wants to go beyond general theories to an understanding of the actual dynamics of secular and religious politics in the Muslim world in both the 20th and the 21st centuries.

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**MODERN HISTORY AND POLITICS**

*British Imperialism and ‘The Tribal Question’: Desert Administration and Nomadic Societies in the Middle East, 1919–1936*, by Robert Fletcher. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 324 pages. £65.

Reviewed by John Fisher

In this interesting, thoroughly researched, and very thought-provoking book, Robert Fletcher explores the phenomenon of “‘the Tribal Question’: an empire-wide debate over the nature of nomadism, the future of arid environments, and the challenges both posed to the perpetuation of British rule” (p. 2). He suggests that imperial historians might benefit from having an understanding of a “‘tribal Frontier of the British Empire’ in their tool kit” (p. 63), in which frontiers are regarded as “integrating factors” rather than “separating factors” (p. 181). It is part of Oxford University Press’s Oxford Historical Monographs series, deriving from doctoral theses.

The core of the book discusses the Syrian Desert, stretching from Iraq to Trans-Jordan to Egypt, and its administration by a number of British officials. However, the discussion is contextualized with reference to allegedly common understandings of tribal policy, and of nomadism, in the Empire more generally. It suggests that, far from supporting the notion of a gradual