

Press in Sudan: From Colonial Control to Post- Independence Dictatorships

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Abstract

This article explores the emergence of the first newspapers in Sudan, spanning from the colonial era to the post-independence period. It examines the political climate in which the press developed and was controlled—both under colonial rule and during the military dictatorships that governed the country more frequently than elected governments. The analysis traces how early newspapers, initiated by foreign communities, inspired the creation of native Sudanese publications in terms of language, staffing, ownership, and readership. The article highlights how the press, despite suffering under both colonial and dictatorial regimes, endeavored to foster enlightened public opinion. It served as a platform for nationalist figures to emerge, paving the way for a new generation of thinkers and politicians. Additionally, it explores the significant influence of Egypt on Sudanese journalism and politics, both through the press and by shaping its evolution. The study also reviews the restrictive laws enacted by the colonial administration and successive national regimes, which imposed censorship and arbitrary measures against journalists. Technical and financial challenges that hindered the growth of the Sudanese press are also discussed, including issues such as widespread illiteracy, poverty, limited access to official news, and barriers to developing a local printing industry. Finally, the article identifies the most repressive regime of the post-independence era as the Islamist military government led by Hassan Al-Turabi and Omar Al-Bashir (1989–2019), which epitomized the suppression of press freedoms.

Key words: Press, Sudan, British Colonialism, Egyptian Impact, Military Dictatorship, Censorship.

Introduction

This research aims to explore the development of the press in Sudan under challenging conditions during British colonial rule and the military dictatorships of the post-independence era. It examines the technical and financial challenges that hindered the press's growth in both periods. To trace the evolution of Sudanese journalism, this study adopts descriptive and historical methods. It provides a detailed account of the state of the press under colonial rule and national governments while tracing its historical development from the early 20th century to the post-independence era. The research focuses on three topics: the emergence and development of the press in Sudan: an over view; the challenges faced by the press in Sudan: technical and financial problems and government control and censorship; and press control under the national (military) regimes.

A substantial body of literature has examined the historical development of the press in Sudan. The primary focus of this article, however, is to analyze the role of the press and the mechanisms employed by various governments in Sudan to control it. In Sudan, as in many developing countries, the evolution of the press is intrinsically linked to the broader history of national development. More than political constitutions, economic progress statistics, or displays of national unity, the state of a country's newspapers reveals the level of civilization it has reached.¹

The press has historically served as a vital channel for Egypt's intellectual and political influence on Sudan. Although accessible only to a small educated minority at the beginning of the 20th century, it was "imbued with revolutionary ideas and rhetoric of the most subversive nature in a colonial environment,"² and played a pivotal role in enlightening the Sudanese populace. The regular influx of newspapers from Egypt into Sudan—paradoxically permitted by the British authorities—combined with the contributions of Syrians and other foreign communities, laid the groundwork for the emergence of a Sudanese press.

First: The emergence and Development of the Press in Sudan: An Overview

The first newspaper to appear in the Sudan was Dongola News, published in English in 1879. With the establishment of Anglo-Egyptian rule, the government introduced the Sudan Gazette in 1899. In 1903 Al-Sudan, a fortnightly publication, was issued by Dr. Faris Nimir and Company,

¹ Francis Williams, *the Dangerous State*, Longman, 1957.

² Abdeen, Hassan, *Early Sudanese Nationalism* (1919 – 1925). Khartoum: Khartoum University Press, 1985, p. 13.

an affiliate of the Egyptian, Al-Muqattam. In 1911 the Greek community issued Raiyd Al-Sudan under the editorship of Abdul-Rahman Glaylat, a Syrian writer who was succeeded by Husayn Sherif in 1917. Sherif later spearheaded the publication of Hadarat Al-Sudan in 1919. This newspaper was pro-British and was financed by the Greek community. Moreover, Raiyd Al-Sudan launched its English version—the Sudan Herald—in 1911, focusing on business matters.

Regarding English-language newspapers in Sudan, the first was Dongola News, which appeared in 1879. It was followed by the Sudan Gazette in 1898, primarily a government bulletin used to disseminate official decisions and declarations issued by the colonial administration. In the 1940s, the weekly Sudan Star was introduced but had a short lifespan. It was replaced in 1954 by the Morning News, launched by Bashir Muhammed Sa'eed. Subsequently, The Sudan Times was established in 1955 by Al-Tigani Abdul-Haleem. In June 1960, the Sudan Daily was launched by the Department of Information under the Ministry of Culture and Information, with Hassan Muhammed Zein serving as editor-in-chief. All of these publications were issued in tabloid format.

The weekly Sudan Star came into existence in 1940s but did not last for long. The Morning News replaced it in 1954 by Bashir Muhammad Sa'eed. Then the Sudan Times in 1955 published by al-Tigani Abdul-Haleem. In June 1960 the Sudan Daily was published by the Department of Information of the Ministry of Culture and Information with Hassan Muhammad Zein as editor-in-chief. All these papers were in tabloid form.

Although these newspapers were initially established by foreign communities, they played a pivotal role in inspiring the emergence of native Sudanese publications in terms of language, staffing, ownership, and readership. The launch of Al-Sudan on September 23, 1903, for instance, was "officially hailed as a landmark in the history of Sudan as a whole." It laid the foundation for press production and journalistic techniques in the county.³ In 1919, *Al-Sudan* was succeeded by *Hadarat al-Sudan*, a weekly publication owned by the three prominent religious leaders—Sayyid Ali Al-Mirghani, Sayyid Abdul-Rahman Al-Mahdi, and Sayyid Al-Shareif Al-Hindi—with Husayn Sherief as editor-in-chief. However, its editorial policy was "dictated by the government," which used the names of these revered figures as a façade to legitimize colonial order."⁴

³ Mahjoub Abdul-Malik Babiker. *Press and Politics in the Sudan*. Khartoum University Graduate College Publications, No. 14, 1985, p. 23.

⁴ Ibid, p. 24.

Despite its limitations, *Hadarat Al-Sudan* played a significant role in "forming enlightened public opinion."⁵ It also provided a platform for the first generation of Sudanese poets and writers, including Shaykh Al-Banna, Ahmad Muhammad Salih, and Tawfiq Salih Gibril, among others, to make their debut. However, the conservative nature of *Hadarat Al-Sudan* left it unable to compete with the more nationalist-oriented papers that emerged in the 1930s. As a result, it ceased publication in 1938. Prior to the 1930s, the Sudanese press was primarily literary rather than political, reflecting the restricted political environment where politics was not an openly practiced profession. This was largely due to the oppressive measures imposed by the colonial authorities following the 1924 revolt. Moreover, in 1930, Sayyid Muhammad Abbas Abu Al-Rish launched *Al-Nahda (The Renaissance)*, a publication that became a platform for many prominent figures, including Muhammad Ahmed Mahjoub, Dr. Abdul-Halim Muhammad, Dr. Abu Shama, and Muhammad 'Ashri Sidiq. Shortly after, *Miraat Al-Sudan (The Mirror of Sudan)*, edited briefly by Sulayman Kisha, followed the trajectory of *Al-Nahda*.

On September 23, 1930, the Press Ordinance was promulgated, introducing a new set of laws to regulate the publication of newspapers. Subsequently, on June 2, 1934, Arafat Muhammad Abdullah launched *Al-Fajr* magazine. This publication had a profound intellectual impact on Sudan's political evolution during British rule. Notably, *Al-Fajr* is regarded as "the first quality magazine in the literary and political history of Sudan."⁶ Several prominent nationalist figures emerged from the *Al-Fajr* circle. Among them were Muhammad Ahmed Mahjoub, who later served as Foreign Minister and twice held the office of Prime Minister, and Arafat Muhammad Abdullah, who passed away before Sudan gained independence. Additionally, Abdul-Halim Muhammad, who became a member of the five-man Presidential Committee formed after the October 1964 Revolution; Ismail Atabani, founder of the *Al-Rai Al-'Am (Public Opinion)* daily; and Ahmed Yousif Hashim, who became the proprietor of *Al-Sudan Al-Jadid (The New Sudan)*. *Al-Fajr* was owned and published by Arafat Muhammad Abdullah, who became associated with the Hashmab group. His magazine garnered support from individuals in the other two major groups and succeeded in establishing itself as "the leading publication of the Sudanese intelligentsia." It was a product of reform-minded young, educated men with a clear mission and vision, who expressed their dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in Sudanese society."⁷

⁵ Mahjoub Mohammad Salih, *The Sudanese Press*. Sudan Notes and Records, Vol. XLVI, 1965, p. 2.

⁶ Mahjoub Abdul-Malik, op. cit., p. 29.

⁷ Mohammad Omer Bashir, *Revolution and Nationalism in the Sudan*

Al-Fajr was initially launched as a literary magazine; however, within a year, it became deeply involved in politics. This shift in its editorial policy was accompanied by the translation of its editorials into English, aimed at making the magazine's voice heard within the English-speaking community, particularly the British in Sudan. Additionally, the move showcased the magazine's ability to communicate in fluent English language.⁸

The magazine served as an ideological forum, which was particularly needed after the demise of *Hadarat As-Sudan*, leaving the intelligentsia without a voice. Even when the Graduates' Congress was established, with its own publication (*Al-Motamar*), the organization—believed to represent the powerless, moderate, and westernized elite—became polarized. It split into two factions: the militant Ashiqqa and the moderate Ansar. The Ashiqqa faction went on to form the Ashiqqa Party in 1943, while the Ansar faction established the Umma Party in 1944.

When the Ashiqqa Party emerged, *Al-Motamar* became its official forum. In 1945, the Civil Secretary rejected an application to transform it into a daily newspaper. Moreover, the paper, which had to compete with several daily publications, was hindered by limited financial resources and eventually ceased publication. "Its editorial policy was controlled by the Congress' Committee of Fifteen, and the journalists working on it had to implement the Congress' policy."⁹ Even Ahmed Khayr, who had initiated the idea of the Congress, considered *Al-Motamar* ineffective, lifeless, poorly edited, and not a true reflection of the Congress' opinions in any meaningful way.

Nevertheless, *Al-Motamar*, by circulating over 3,000 copies, "contributed to political articulation and recruitment." It was also considered a "progressive magazine that provided a platform for the development of the intellectual movement in Sudan."¹⁰ Among its contributors were Hassan Al-Tayyib Babiker (who later became a communist leader) and Al-Tigani Al-Tayyib Babiker (also a communist).

⁸ *Al-Fajr* (magazine) was owned and published by 'Arafat Muhammad 'Abdullah. 'He came from a Coptic family but his father embraced Islam under the Mahdiyya and he was therefore brought up as a Muslim. He graduated from Gordon Memorial College in 1916 and took up a clerical post in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs in Khartoum until 1924. He was deeply involved in the political upheaval of that year and escaped to Cairo where he was mistakenly arrested and kept in prison for seven months, being suspected of involvement in the assassination of Sir Lee Stack. But he was released when the real assassins were caught. He went to Sinai and then to Jeddah. He returned to Sudan in 1931 and he joined the Hashmab group.

⁹ Mahjoub Abdul-Malik, op. cit., p. 36.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 36.

In the 1940s, a handful of dailies emerged, accompanied by the rise of political parties. While detailing the various papers from the 1940s and 1950s is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that a new generation of thinkers and politicians emerged from the press. Notable figures included Mekki Shibaika, Muhammad Oshman Mirghani, Hammad Tawfiq, Dr. Abdul-Halim Muhammad, Ahmed Yousif Hashim, Khidr Hamad, Jamal Muhammad Ahmed, Yahia Al-Fadli, Ahmed Al-Sayyid Al-Fil, and Muhammad 'Amir Beshir (Forawi). These individuals were the leaders of the new enlightened young Sudanese generation.

There was a reciprocal relationship between political evolution and the press, with each influencing and nourishing the other. Politics and politicians required a platform to propagate their political ideas and programs, while the press depended on financial support. Consequently, the Sayyids, despite being political rivals, also competed for ownership of the press.

Sayyid Abdul-Rahman Al-Mahdi was the first to establish a "relatively successful daily paper in Sudan." He owned *Al-Nil* and *Al-Umma* dailies and had a stake in the non-daily *Al-Sudan Al-Jadid* (The New Sudan) by Ahmed Yousif Hashim.¹¹ He also attempted to control the only provincial weekly, *Kordofan*, by Al-Fatih Al-Nur, but was unsuccessful.

Al-Nil daily began publication in August 1935, shortly after *Al-Fajr* transitioned into a political magazine. "The appearance of *Al-Nil* marks the beginning of a new era in the history of journalism in Sudan ... [and] of press development under colonialism."¹² *Al-Nil* achieved a remarkable circulation of 2,500 copies, becoming the only vernacular daily at the time. After *Hadarat Al-Sudan* ceased publication in 1938, *Al-Nil* became the primary platform for government notices and advertisements. Despite running at a loss for three years, the paper continued thanks to personal contributions. In 1945, Sayyid Abdul-Rahman Al-Mahdi purchased most of the shares from non-Sudanese shareholders. Some shares were also sold to Al-Sheriff Yousif Al-Hindi and Hassan Abul-Ela.

With the demise of *Hadarat Al-Sudan*, the British administration in Sudan shifted to using *Al-Nil* as a propaganda medium, particularly during the Second World War, subscribing to about 400 copies. However, it was often viewed as a "sectarian paper" that primarily served the interests of its owners and editors.¹³ Despite this, *Al-Nil* gained widespread popularity, much of the credit

¹¹ Ibid. p. 37.

¹² Ibid. p. 38.

¹³ *Al-Fajr*, 1935

for which is attributed to Ahmed Yousif Hashim.¹⁴ In terms of domestic politics, *Al-Nil* became a major supporter of the Congress, serving its cause more effectively than *Al-Motamar*. However, after the split of the Congress, *Al-Nil* ceased its support and adopted a distinct ideological stance, defending the political and economic interests of Abdul-Rahman Al-Mahdi. Al-Mahdi launched his second daily, *Al-Umma*, on June 16, 1944, seven months before the Umma Party officially emerged in February 1945. *Al-Umma* became the party's official organ, reflecting its pro-British, anti-Egyptian politics.

The first editor-in-chief of *Al-Umma* was Yousif Mustafa Al-Tinay, an architect who graduated from Gordon Memorial College in 1930. Al-Tinay was selected due to his intellectual background and journalistic experience. He had contributed to *Al-Nahda* and worked on the editorial staff of *Al-Fajr*. His political views aligned with those of the Umma Party. With the launch of *Al-Umma*, the party now had two dailies: *Al-Nil*, which was aimed at appealing to the Ansar, and *Al-Umma*, which served the party's broader interests.

On the other hand, the Mahdist Foundation (*Dairat Al-Mahdi*) became a shareholder in *Al-Sudan Al-Jadid*, a newspaper owned by Ahmed Yousif Hashim. While still serving as the editor of *Al-Nil*, Hashim launched his own illustrated weekly in December 1943, which he later transformed into a daily in 1946. He was significantly influenced by the design and layout of the more advanced Egyptian press, which inspired his approach. It was somewhat surprising that Hashim, previously aligned with the pro-independence movement, shifted towards supporting pro-unity views. This change may partly be attributed to the impact of the Egyptian press on him. Overall, *Al-Sudan Al-Jadid* was ideologically."¹⁵ Ahmed Youssef continued publishing his paper until his death in June 1958.

It is important to note that the idea of the Umma Party was shaped and crystallized through the press. It originated with *Hadarat* in the 1920s, which adopted the slogan "Sudan for the Sudanese." This idea then developed through *Al-Fajr* and eventually came to full fruition in *Al-Nil* and *Al-Umma* dailies.

Outside Khartoum, Al-Fatih Al-Nur launched *Kordofan*, a newspaper based in Al-Obayyid, the capital of the Kordofan region (now North Kordofan state), which first appeared in November 1945. Initially a joint venture between Al-Fatih Al-Nur (d. 2000) and Abdullah Rajab (owner

¹⁴ Mahjoub Abdul-Malik Babiker, op. cit., p. 44.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 48.

and editor of *Al-Saraha*, which debuted in 1950), *Kordofan* faced numerous challenges but continued as a fortnightly for two years. It later became a weekly for five years and eventually a bi-weekly until it was nationalized, along with other private papers, in August 1970. *Kordofan* was highly critical of British colonial rule in Sudan and called for Sudanese unity in the fight for independence. This strong stance contributed to its growing circulation, which increased from 500 copies in 1945 to 1,800 in 1947 and 2,000 in 1958—a remarkable achievement for a provincial newspaper.

In response to his rival Al-Mahdi's establishment of a daily, Ali al-Mirghani launched *Sawt Al-Sudan* ("The Voice of Sudan") in May 1940. This marked the deepening rivalry between the two powerful sectarian leaders, a conflict that was vividly reflected in the press. "Hostile press campaigns were inevitable due to the antagonistic attitudes of the two sectarian leaders."¹⁶ *Sawt Al-Sudan* was owned and published by the Al-Salam Printing Press Company Limited, with shareholders including Sayyid Ali al-Mirghani, Ahmed Suwar al-Dahab (a prominent Omdurman merchant), Dirdiri Muhammad Uthman (a district judge), Ahmed al-Sayyid al-Fil (former Mufti), Omar Ishaq, and others. The paper was conceived as a Mirghanist organ to counter the Mahdist propaganda in *Al-Nil*, which did not welcome the new paper. Muhammad 'Ashri Al-Sidiq was appointed as Editor-in-Chief.

By 1941, *Sawt Al-Sudan* faced financial difficulties, leading to reductions in both its size and staff salaries. As a result, Muhammad 'Ashri Al-Sidiq resigned from his position as Editor-in-Chief. On January 1, 1942, Ismail Al-Atabani was appointed as the new editor, but he too resigned in February 1945. The paper ultimately could not withstand the competition with *Al-Umma*. In response to its financial struggles, Al-Mirghani sought to align *Sawt Al-Sudan* with the Al-Ashiqqa Party (established in 1943), which advocated for an independent government in union with Egypt.

Sawt Al-Sudan was widely popular during its time, reflecting Al-Mirghani's economic and political interests. It stood out for its strong anti-British stance, especially when *Al-Rai al-'Am* daily was launched in March 1945. *Al-Rai al-'Am* became the mouthpiece of the Unionist Party, which was founded in 1944, and adopted a moderate anti-Umma political position. The paper's owner, Ismail Al-Atabani, was a key figure in the establishment of the Unionist Party. Prior to

¹⁶ Abdul-Malik, p. 51.

founding *Al-Rai al-'Am*, Al-Atabani had been involved with *Sawt Al-Sudan* and later, after five years, set up his own printing press.¹⁷

In addition to *Al-Rai al-'Am*, the major newspapers throughout the 1960s included *Al-Ayam*, founded by Beshir Muhammad Saeed in 1953, and *Al-Sahafa*, established by Abdul-Rahman Mukhtar in 1961. However, all these papers were nationalized by the military regime of General Nimairi in 1970. *Al-Rai al-'Am* was revived later when the one-party (Islamic) military regime of Omar Al-Bashir permitted the publication of independent, non-governmental press under the Press Act of 1999, which was amended in 2009.

Between 1956 and 1958, there were no state-owned newspapers. However, several bulletins were issued by ministries and government departments, alongside cultural magazines such as *Al-Biyan* (1947), *Al-Riadha wal-Cinema* (1948) by Ibrahim al-Maghrabi, *Huna Omdurman*, *Al-Telegraph* weekly (1948) by Salih 'Urabi, *Al-Mustaqbal* (official monthly, 1951) issued in Juba, *Al-Nass* weekly (1954), *Al-Manar* (monthly, 1955) by Suaad al-Fatih al-Badawi, *Al-Akhbar* weekly (1955) edited by Rahmi Muhammad Sulayman, *Sawt Al-Maraa* (Voice of Women) in 1955 edited by Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, *Al-Fikr* monthly (1955) by al-Rasheed Nayil, *Al-Sabah Al-Jadid* (1956) by Hussayn Mansour, *Miraat Al-Sudan* monthly by Sulayman Kisha, *Al-Qafila* monthly (1956) by Haja Kashif, *Anba Al-Sudan* (The Sudan News, August 1956) by Yahia Muhammad Abdul-Gadir (which called for independence and national unity). In August 1956, the National Unionist Party launched *Al-Nida* weekly, edited by Abdul-Majid Abu Hassabu. In September 1956, the Muslim Brothers published their paper, edited by Sadiq Abdullah Abdul-Majid, which ceased in December 1958. *Al-Zaman* paper emerged in January 1958 under the editorship of Abdul-Aziz Hasan. In 1960, *Al-Risala*, an independent paper focusing on economic issues from an Islamic perspective, was launched, with Abdullah Muhammad Ahmed as editor. *Al-Hayat* weekly was also published in 1957 by Bashir Muhammad Saeed and Mahjoub Muhammad Salih.¹⁸

In addition to these publications, several private (ahliyya) news agencies emerged in the 1950s, with support from the government. These included: *Wakalat Al-Sahafa Al-Sudaniyya* (the Sudanese Press Agency) by Muhammad Ahmed Omer, *Wakalat Al-Akhbar Al-Efriqiyyah* (the

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 51.

¹⁸ Abdul-Malik, op. cit. p. 51.

African News Agency) by Abdul-Rahman Mukhtar, *Wakalat Al-Anba Al-Sudaniyyah* (the Sudan News Agency) by Abdul-Kareem Al-Mahdi, and *Wakalat Anba Al-Khartoum*.

During Abboud's military regime, the government launched *Al-Thawra* (The Revolution) daily, the first Sudanese newspaper published in broadsheet format. It began on August 13, 1960, under the Ministry of Information and Labour. The first editor-in-chief was Abdullah Rajab, followed by Gayli Ahmed Omer and later Muhammad Fadlallah. *Al-Thawra* was aligned with the policies and objectives of Abboud's regime. Meanwhile, *Al-Sahafa*, a daily newspaper founded by Abdul-Rahman Mukhtar in July 1961, faced legal challenges. It was suspended in 1963 by court order and fined. Although it resumed publication, it was suspended again in 1964 for two weeks after being charged, along with other papers, with high treason.¹⁹

The 1960s saw the emergence of several new newspapers and magazines, both partisan and official. Among them were *Al-Jamaheer* (The Mass), the organ of the Democratic Unionist Party, first published in 1960; *Akhbar Al-Esbou'a* (The Weekly News), a leftist publication edited by Awad Al-Birair in 1963; *Majallat Al-Khartoum* (Khartoum Magazine), a literary publication issued by the Ministry of Information in 1964; *Majallat Al-Qalam* (The Pen), a literary magazine edited by Hassan Najila in 1964; *Al-Mithaq Al-Islami* (The Islamic Charter), the organ of the Muslim Brotherhood, launched in 1966; *Al-Adwa* (The Lights), a political paper by Muhammad al-Hassan Ahmad, also in 1966; and *Al-Quawat Al-Musallaha* (The Armed Forces), a military publication launched in 1970 by the regime of Colonel Ja'afar Muhammad Nimairi, who took power in May 1969.

Second: The Challenges Faced by the Press in the Pre-Independence Era

1. Financial and Legal/Political Problems

The development of the press in Sudan during its formative phase was hindered by significant financial and technical challenges. These issues were largely symptomatic of the broader underdevelopment common to most emerging nations at the time. While a comprehensive exploration of these problems is beyond the scope of this study, a general overview is relevant. The financial instability of many publications made them heavily dependent on external support, limiting their sustainability. Similarly, political constraints, including restrictive colonial laws

¹⁹ Ibid.

and censorship, further obstructed the press's ability to operate freely and serve as an effective platform for public discourse.

Since its emergence in the early 20th century, the Sudanese press has faced significant challenges rooted in widespread poverty. Broadly speaking, the difficulties confronting the vernacular press in Sudan mirrored those of other developing nations. These included low literacy rates, limited purchasing power, inadequate and underdeveloped transportation and communication systems, poor-quality printing technology, and a lack of trained journalists.

One of the primary obstacles to the development of the press in Sudan, particularly during the colonial period, stemmed from the state of the printing industry, which was initially dominated by foreign companies. By 1942, four major printing presses operated in the country: McCorquodale & Co., the Printing and Publishing Company of *Al-Nil* Newspaper (owned by Sayyid Abdul-Rahman Al-Mahdi), Al-Salam Printing Press of Sawt Al-Sudan (owned by Sayyid Ali Al-Mirghani), and Mandil's Printing Press.

McCorquodale & Co., a British concern functioning as the government press, was the most efficient printing establishment in Sudan during the colonial period. The company held 75% of the government's printing contracts, while the remaining 25% was distributed among other printing presses, which were deemed incapable of handling official printing demands. This arrangement effectively gave McCorquodale a near-monopoly on Sudan's printing industry, particularly since the government was the largest customer for printing and binding services. Despite persistent criticism, notably in articles published by *Al-Nil* newspaper, McCorquodale maintained its privileged position as a British venture under government protection.

Established in Khartoum before 1930, McCorquodale's contract with the government began that year and was automatically renewed annually after its expiration in March 1941. In 1949, journalist Ahmed Yousif Hashim brought the issue of the company's monopoly to the Legislative Assembly. Anticipating the contract's expiration in 1952, he proposed a motion demanding that all future contracts be opened for public tender.²⁰ However, it was not until June 1954 that the situation began to change, when nine printing presses from the three major towns petitioned the Minister of the Interior to review the monopoly and allow fair competition for government printing orders.

²⁰ Mahjoub, p. 61.

Financial challenges have long been recognized as a major determinant of the rise and fall of newspapers and magazines in Sudan. The press's vulnerabilities were deeply tied to the overall fragility of the Sudanese economy, particularly the private sector. During the British colonial administration—and even in the post-independence era—the public sector held a dominant position. The government served as both the primary employer and the main source of advertising revenue. Consequently, the survival of any publication was heavily reliant on securing government advertisements. As noted, “The papers which were able to survive until the nationalization of the press in 1970 were those which were in regular receipt of official advertisements.”²¹

The government imposed specific conditions for newspapers to qualify for official advertisements. First, a publication needed to operate for at least six months from its inception. Second, it was required to reach a minimum circulation of 3,000 copies. However, exceptions to the circulation requirement were granted to certain papers, such as *Kordofan* and English-language publications, likely due to their limited target audience. Among the non-Arabic papers, *The Sudan Star*, launched in early January 1943, stood out. It survived by absorbing advertisements previously allocated to *The Sudan Herald*, which suffered as a result. Another example was the Greek-language newspaper *Sudan News*, which debuted on April 24, 1943.

By June 1943, the eligibility criteria for official advertisements underwent significant changes. The process was centralized under the authority of the Director of the Stores and Ordinance Department in Khartoum. Newspapers included in this arrangement were *The Sudan Star*, *Al-Rai Al-'Am*, *The Sudan Herald*, *Sudan News*, *Al-Nil*, and *Sawt Al-Sudan*. Notably, *Al-Rai Al-'Am*, which debuted in March 1945, began receiving official advertisements in October of the same year. *Al-Umma* was added to the list in 1946, followed by *Kordofan* a year later.

By late 1951, following a revision of the official advertisement policy, certain papers were designated as eligible for government advertising. These included *The Sudan Star*, *Al-Rai Al-'Am*, *Al-Sudan Al-Jadid*, *Al-Gezira* newspaper and *Kordofan* magazine.²²

Al-Gezira newspaper, established in 1950 by the Social Department of the Gezira Board, was a social and cultural publication aimed at supporting agricultural extension and community development within the Gezira Scheme. It played a significant role in promoting rural

²¹ Ibid. p. 62.

²² Note No. 20 from the British Administration's Financial Secretary, 1951.

development, literacy, health, and social welfare. Similarly, Kordofan newspaper, a regional publication covering the Western states of Sudan, made substantial contributions to community development until its nationalization in 1970. Under the government-owned Al-Sahafa Printing and Publishing House, it championed causes such as combating tribalism, supporting the cooperative movement, and advocating for the rights of the peasants in the Nuba Mountains, who succeeded in forming their own Ittihad (Union). The paper also promoted environmental sustainability through initiatives like the "Festival of the Tree" (Eid al-Shajarah), called for rural electrification, addressed water supply issues, and advocated for the establishment of Kordofan University—a goal realized three decades later.

The third challenge confronting the press in Sudan was the lack of access to official news. The dissemination of government-related information through the media often unsettled British officials in Sudan, leading to the imposition of stringent secrecy measures. This created significant obstacles for the press in obtaining accurate and timely news. The Sudanese vernacular press frequently criticized this "plague of secrecy." For instance, in 1938, the prominent daily *Al-Nil* articulated the issue, stating:

This paper tried now and then, to draw the attention of the government to certain mistakes, which are made by its departments. Before writing on a subject, we try to get the true facts from an official source, but usually fail, either because no reply is given, or because the department concerned publishes an official communiqué which comes too late, at a time when the information has lost its interest...²³

In response to this campaign, the government established a proper system of departmental information officers in 1942. However, in practice, the press officers were never able to provide journalists with the news they wanted, nor could they compel the press to publish what the government desired. As a result, the government directed that more non-confidential news be made available to the public. The duty of the Information Officer was as following:

1. To prepare, subject to the approval of the head of the department, and transmit to the Press Office notes on any departmental activity or event of general public interest.
2. To monitor the vernacular press on behalf of the head of the department and report to him immediately any comments or criticisms as soon as they appear.

²³ *Al-Nil*, Feb.6, 1938

3. To interview representatives of the press, draft an explanatory note to be handed to them, and ensure it aligns with the directions from the head of the department regarding the extent to which questions should be answered.

This was followed by the appointment of departmental information officers. However, the new system proved to be flawed, as the information officers were subordinate civil servants who were unable to release information to the press without the consent of their respective superiors. After three months, the system proved unworkable. In January 1942, the first press conference was held, but it proved demoralizing for journalists, who were informed that, from then on, they would have to seek confirmation of news by telephone.²⁴

These instructions coincided with a government rebuff to a congressional memorandum in April 1942. This sharp reaction may have been prompted by the political crisis at the time. The British administration continued the old practices of censorship and disinformation through bureaucratic channels, under the pretext of secrecy and confidentiality. Even when the Advisory Council for Northern Sudan was inaugurated in May 1944, journalists were denied access to the proceedings and were instead briefed on deliberations through an official summary that did not reflect the views of individual members.

The issue of whether or not the press should be admitted to the Council was thoroughly discussed by its members. The majority favored admission, while some opposed it. Ultimately, press admission to the Council was approved, but not without conditions. A sub-committee, composed of Abdullah Khalil (Chairman), Mekki Abbas (Secretary), Dr. Ali Badri, Mirghani Hamza, Muhammad Ali Shawqi, and Hamid al-Sayyid, proposed the following conditions:

Editors should not publish in their papers on the same day on which the discussions took place anything other than a general description of what happened in the council. The description includes the time of the meeting of the council, the members who attended, what subjects were discussed, and the kind of decision taken and the amount of opposition or otherwise which the propositions met. But such a description should not include the names of members and should not report what they said nor should it include any comments or criticism... Editors can publish on the next day the deliberations of the council as reported by them and they are at liberty to comment

²⁴ Mahjoub Abdul-Malik Babiker, *op. cit.* p. 67.

on them and criticize them as they wish on condition that the official record, which will be sent to the press by the information officer, be published in the same issue.²⁵

The journalists accepted these conditions, though they did so without fully agreeing to them.

2. Government Control and Censorship

The British Administration sought to control the press through various means – namely technical by the monopoly of printing industry, and advertising as well as subscriptions. This was at the time the British sought to link the Sudanese elite to its western culture and values.

This British trend was part of a broader policy that Britain adopted toward the Middle East, Africa, and its former colonies worldwide. The economic relations and trade links with Commonwealth states exemplify this policy. In Sudan, in particular, the cultural ties were reflected in institutions such as the British Council, which was established in several major towns. Additionally, the government paid significant attention to the English language, which was officially adopted as the second language. English also served as the medium of instruction in secondary schools until the late 1960s and at the university level for three decades afterward.

Through English, the educated Sudanese were deeply connected to Western culture and lifestyle. The effendiyyah class (government employees) in Sudan often imitated the English in their mannerisms and even incorporated English terms into their Arabic speech. As a result, mastering the English language became synonymous with being modernized or westernized. Since the early generations under British rule, Sudanese people were known for their proficiency in English compared to other British colonies. Edward Atiyyah captured this general impression when he was surprised by Moawiya Nur's exceptional cultural standards:

“A slight pleasant-looking boy of eighteen in the final year, called Moawiya Nur. He attracted my attention from the first day by quoting from Shaw and Anatole France. I thought he was trying to show off a little superficial knowledge, but to my surprise I found when I probed him that knowledge was deep and that behind it lay a shrewd and critical understanding ... Moawiya was the first Sudanese to make real contact with the spirit of the west. In English literature this North African Arab boy, who had never crossed the frontiers of Sudan ... found his spiritual home.²⁶

²⁵ Muddathir 'Abd Al-Rahim, *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan*. Oxford Studies in African Affairs (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1969), p. 147

²⁶ Edward Atiyya, *An Arab Tell His Story: A Study in Loyalties*, John Murray, London, 1964, p. 143.

Moreover, this proficiency in English was later acknowledged by another British official. When the Sudan question was brought before the Security Council in 1947, Ismail al-Azhari headed a Sudanese delegation to Lake Success. Miss Margery Perham, Director of the Oxford University Institute of Colonial Studies, was so impressed by the Sudanese delegates that she titled her article "The Sudan Emerges into Nationhood" and remarked, "There were certain dark and fine-looking men in Lake Success, speaking excellent English... who claimed to represent the Sudanese nation and decide its destiny."²⁷ The print media and modern printing were introduced by the Condominium government at the beginning of the 20th century as part of the modernization process needed for the administration of the new regime."²⁸ The press served a dual purpose: it supported the colonial government's systems while also inspiring a nationalist, secular spirit that challenged both colonial rule and the entrenched traditional structure of the country. As such, the press and mass media became central to the historical struggle between traditionalism and modernization in Sudan. Both the colonial government and traditional elites were aware of the media's significance and sought to manipulate and control it. While the colonial government introduced modern media, the traditionalists initiated the first purely Sudanese paper for political purposes.²⁹

Moreover, manipulation and control have since then not been limited to the use or abuse of the mass media in professional terms; they have also involved subjecting the media to government control through legal means. This has positioned the media at the center of the power struggle in post-independence Sudan, where those in control of political power ensure they manipulate the media, either through ownership or legal regulations.³⁰ Generally, the British government sought to control the media through various means: (i) laws (or press acts) that regulate published material; (ii) ownership and license; (iii) denying officials from writing in the press, (iv) and Censorship.

²⁷ L. A. Fabumi, *The Sudan in Anglo-Egyptian Relations*, Greenwood Press Publishers, 1973, pp. 330 - 331.

²⁸ Mahjoub, (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁹ Mahjoub (1985), *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

(i) Sudanese press laws were introduced relatively late, after the emergence of non-governmental publications, which began in 1903. The Sudanese government did not directly involve itself in the press business, apart from the Sudan Gazette, until after independence.³¹

A draft law to control the press was prepared in 1912 but was shelved, as the press was either government-owned or operated by non-Sudanese individuals, such as the Sudan Herald, owned and published by two Greek nationals, and the Sudan Times, introduced and owned by Syrians. The draft law was also postponed due to the outbreak of the First World War. It wasn't until 1930 that the government deemed it necessary to issue a law regulating the production and importation of publications. However, the period following the appearance of the first Sudanese newspaper, along with the cross-border influence of the Egyptian press, proved fruitful in providing essential training for Sudanese as printers, publishers, and journalists. This period also allowed for the development of a local vernacular press in the 1920s and the establishment of a readership base, with the effects of the new medium gradually taking root."³² This coincided with a relative improvement in the economic situation.

The various press laws issued in Sudan since then can be briefly listed as:

1. The Press Ordinance, 1930.
2. The Press Regulation, 1931.
3. The Press (Amendment) Ordinance, 1947.
4. The Press (Amendment) Ordinance, 1948.
5. The Press Ordinance (Amendment) Act, 1959.
6. The Press (Amendment) Regulations, 1965.
7. The Press Act, 1973.

Several other press acts followed thereafter but are beyond the historical scope of this study which ends by the demise of the May regime in 1985.

Some of these laws were accompanied by regulations issued by an executive agency of the government or by a press council, as was the case under certain national governments. These regulations organized the enforcement of the press law and the procedures for monitoring the performance of the press. Before 1930, the government took arbitrary administrative measures to regulate the press. The spirit of these measures continued to influence the press law of the

³¹ Ibid., p. 6

³² Abdul-Malik, op. cit., p. 61.

1930s, although "the fact that a press law was issued signifies an important development in the state of the press, both as a local product and as an import."³³

The laws—and the regulations accompanying them—set conditions for authorizing the publication and importation of printed material. Although the motives behind these laws differed under each political regime, the underlying political initiative behind the press laws remained largely consistent. For the colonial government, the primary motive behind controlling the importation of printed materials was to counter the Egyptian nationalist movement that emerged after the 1919 Egyptian Revolution.³⁴

Nevertheless, the initiative to impose political controls over the importation of printed materials continues to this day, as does the initiative to regulate publishing. However, the motive behind each initiative varies depending on its specific purpose.³⁵

The successive regimes after independence have imposed their perspectives and policies on the press and media through institutional laws, which address specific media institutions or mass communication activities. The rules of common law, as reflected in the penal code and various branches of civil law, preceded these institutional communication laws. These common laws also focused on regulating the press and media, aiming to control their excesses within an overarching framework that defines the rights and obligations of society.³⁶

(ii) Regarding licensing and ownership, licensing in advance of publication is considered the highest form of restraining publications. It goes beyond the commonly known prior restraints, which limit the publication of certain materials subject to disputes between the publisher and a counterclaimant who holds a conflicting right to publish the materials. The body authorized to grant the license is usually a state agency, which may withhold or withdraw it. To ensure this restraining mechanism functions effectively, governments typically assign an agency to oversee the process.³⁷ In Sudan, the creation of such a government agency dates back to the 1948 press law amendment, which was a landmark development. This agency replaced the Civil Secretary's office and, to some extent, represented the elected Sudanese Journalists Association.

³³ Mahjoub (1999), *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6

³⁵ Larry Barker, *Communication*, Prentice Hall Inc. New Jersey, 1981: p.277

³⁶ Mahjoub, *op. cit.*, p. 90

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96

In the first two decades of the 20th century, the government controlled the press through subsidies, subscriptions, advertising, and other facilities, along with extra-legal measures. The 1973 law, in particular, imposed exclusive state ownership of the press.

(iii) A third method of control imposed by the state on the media is prior restraint or censorship, in addition to denying officials the right to write in the press. This includes prohibitions, deletions of publications, and restrictions on the circulation of information and messages. This control is typically entrusted to a judicial mechanism, but in some countries, it is also handled by agencies or other non-judicial bodies. The government often claims that restraint is necessary to protect society. However, in many Third World countries, this pretext is often used to further the government's own agenda, rather than to safeguard societal values and stability. Motivated by political interests, the British government in Sudan sought to limit the press's influence on politics, promulgating legislation in 1937 that banned government officials from participating in politics or writing for the press.

The authority for restraint is vested not in a court of law, but in an administrative body affiliated with the government. This raises concerns about the potential for government bias, as the agency may be influenced by political motives and show prejudice against opponents.

Another tool used by the colonial rule in Sudan to control the press and public opinion was a two-fold mechanism: censorship and the prohibition of government officials from writing for the press. This method was extensively employed during the 1930s and 1940s in Sudan.

In 1931 regulations issued under the press Ordinance of 1930 stipulated that:

“Every editor of a newspaper shall, if required by the Civil Secretary, submit either the whole issue or such part thereof as the Civil Secretary may direct to the Controller Public Security Intelligence for censorship before publication, and shall conform to the instructions of the Controller Public Security Intelligence as to the publication of otherwise of any item.”³⁸

Until 1935, censorship of the local press was extremely repressive. The papers most affected were *Al-Nil* and *Sawt Al-Sudan*, both of which were officially labeled as pro-Egyptian propagandists. "Censorship was applied to political ideas that did not conform to government

³⁸ *Sudan Govt. Gazette*, March 1931, No. 543

policy."³⁹ Any articles related to Anglo-Egyptian relations or similar topics were banned. Censorship also extended to anti-British and anti-Western articles, as well as those advocating for an English mandate for Sudan and a future under the Colonial Office."⁴⁰

Most of the censored articles were of a political nature or related to politics in one way or another. For instance, in June 1929, the censor (Willis of the Intelligence Department) suppressed an article that urged the government to have more confidence in its intelligence services and suggested that:

- a- The creation of a native representative body ... to lead public opinion, social reform and be an intermediary channel between the government and the people.
- b- The freedom of the press be granted.
- c- Government policy should be more democratic less monopolistic and less confidential, and directed towards 'the Sudan for the Sudanese'.
- d- Education is given further impetus, both scientifically and professionally.

It was around these suppressed ideas that future Sudanese politics were to evolve.⁴¹ Hussein Sheriff was the first Sudanese journalist to call for press freedom. In 1942, most of the articles censored were related to the Graduate Congress. When the government rejected the Congress' memorandum, it suppressed all articles concerning the Government-Congress crisis. Some examples include:

1. An article by 'Abdul-Rahman 'Abdullah, a teacher at Gordon Memorial College, scheduled to be published in *Sawt Al-Sudan* on 11 March 1942. In this article, he described the sermons delivered in mosques on Fridays as dull and monotonous, suggesting that the Congress should write these speeches and deliver them to the mosques.
2. An article written by Ahmed Muhammad Khair, titled '*The Congress and the Expression of the National Feeling*', which was intended to be published in *Al-Motamar* in March 1942. The writer argued that the Congress was the true representative of the people at large.

³⁹Abdul-Malik, op. cit., p. 80

⁴⁰ *Sudan Intelligence*, 1936

⁴¹ Abdul-Malik, op. cit., p. 101

3. An article by Muhammad Ahmed Bashir (Forawi), intended for publication in *Al-Mutamar* on 7 March 1942. This article attempted to find a compromise between the Congress and the Indian Congress.
4. Another suppressed article was written by ‘Abdullahi ‘Abdul-Rahman Nugdallah for *Al-Nil*, scheduled to be published on 29 June 1942. In this article, he viewed the Congress as a form of neo-Mahdism, destined to lead the nation by reviving its national spirit.

There were also many radical views that never made it to the public through the press. In addition, in April 1938, the British administration introduced further amendments to the 1930 Press Ordinance, implementing additional administrative regulations aimed at banning government officials from contributing political articles to the press.⁴² The press viewed these measures as oppressive and damaging to press freedom, and they bitterly criticized these controlling mechanisms. They particularly condemned the Press Ordinance of 1930, along with the subsequent amendments, which granted the Civil Secretary discretionary powers to revoke a newspaper's license. As *Al-Nil* described it in early January 1937, this effectively meant that Sudan was under the yoke of martial law. A few months later, *Hadarat* published an article by its acting editor, Ismail al-Azhari, criticizing the government's decision to bar government bureaucrats from writing for the press.⁴³

Third: Press Control under the National (Military) Regimes

The freedom of the press has become a controversial issue, particularly in the Third World, with two schools of thought emerging: one group believes that press freedom does not exist under government control, while another defends the position that, in a society undergoing transition and focused on nation-building and large-scale development programs, private ownership of the press becomes irrelevant—a luxury in a context where opposition to the government is not permitted. In this view, the press is given some latitude to criticize the bureaucracy's practices, but not the regime itself. Under such conditions, the press may effectively become a government mouthpiece.

⁴² Sudan Monthly Intelligence, July 1936

⁴³ *Hadarat Al-Sudan*, 19.7.1937

It appears that the government under the May regime (led by Gen. Nimeiri from 1969 to 1985) adhered to the logic of the second group, which views press freedom as irrelevant in a transitional society engaged in the difficult task of nation-building. However, this stance contradicts the principle of press freedom, which is a key tenet of democracy. In reality, Nimeiri's May regime was a dictatorship that implemented a policy of nationalization, which included the banning of private press outlets. Only two state-owned newspapers were allowed to operate, serving as organs for the ruling party, the Sudan Socialist Union, modeled after Nasser's "Arab Socialist Union."

The most oppressive and repressive regime came in 1989.⁴⁴ The Islamists' regime, which used the army to establish an authoritarian system, banned all papers as well as political parties. Partly following in the footsteps of Nimeiri, the militant Islamists' regime (1989–2019) permitted only two state-owned newspapers to operate, alongside the government-run Radio and Television Corporation and the Sudan News Agency (SUNA).

Under al-Bashir's Military-Islamist regime, the government regularly used censorship and repression to control the media. On one occasion, in mid-February 2014, 14 daily political newspapers were confiscated and prevented from circulating that day by the security organ. In another instance, on 25 May 2015, nine newspapers were confiscated for publishing news that revealed incidents of sexual harassment involving kindergarten and elementary school students. Furthermore, in mid-November to December 2016, nine papers were suspended for three weeks, with no specific reason given for the action.⁴⁵

The Military-Islamist Regime (MIR) under General Omar al-Bashir was known for its severe control over the media, using arbitrary censorship as a tool to suppress dissent and limit freedom of expression. This censorship often involved removing or altering specific content, such as deleting paragraphs, articles, columns, or even entire pieces of news. A security agent was

⁴⁴ For more details on how the Gen. al-Bashir's Islamist Regime in Sudan was "the most oppressive and repressive" see: Abdu Mukhtar Musa, *Popular Uprisings in Sudan: Revolutionary Processes intercepted*. Los Angeles, CA, USA, *Advances in Politics and Society*, Vol. 5. No. 1. Dec. 16, 2021; see also: Abdu Mukhtar Musa, "*Darfur from State Crisis to Super powers Clash*" (391pp. 2009), Doha (Qatar): Al-Jazeera Studies Centre, in Arabic). See also: Abdu Mukhtar Musa, *The Islamic Movement in Power in Sudan* (an evaluation): "*al-majalla al-Arabiya Lil-iloum al-Siaysiyah*" (The Arab Journal for political science), co-published by the Arab Association for Political Science and the Centre for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, No.26, Fall of 2010. See also: Abdu Mukhtar Musa "*The Reality of the Islamic Movement and the Future of Democracy in Sudan*", a journal article published in *majallat al-mustaqbal al-Arabi* (Arab Future magazine), Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, No. 441, November 2015.

⁴⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.net>, 25.5.2015

assigned to each media institution to review the contents of newspapers overnight before they could be circulated, ensuring that any material critical of the government was banned. Additionally, the regime took direct actions against journalists, such as ordering them to stop writing or denying them the ability to travel. Opponent journalists or columnists were sometimes denied exit visas or even forced to return from the airport.⁴⁶ For instance, on 25 March 2016, prominent journalist Fayssal Muhammad Salih—who would later serve as Sudan's Minister of Information during the transitional government—was prevented from traveling abroad, and security forces at the airport confiscated his passport.⁴⁷

Moreover, under Al-Bashir's Military-Islamist Regime (MIR), arbitrary measures were applied against all forms of freedom. Laws were enacted to suppress freedom of speech and the media. The Press and Publications Act was issued in 1996, followed by another in 1999. It was further amended in 2009 to impose additional restrictions on the media. Additionally, a 'National Council of Press and Publications' was established in 1999, with its head appointed by the President of the Republic — clearly to ensure adherence to the policies of the ruling party (the National Congress Party), the political arm of the Islamic movement, as was the case with all other public institutions under this totalitarian regime.

Authoritarian measures were also extended to magazines and books. Censorship and control were not limited to domestic media but also applied to imported print and electronic media. A dedicated committee was assigned to scrutinize both print and electronic material. Additionally, it was common for some books to be confiscated during the Khartoum International Book Fair, and certain books were outright banned from entering Sudan.⁴⁸

According to the Press Act, any journalist is eligible to run for the election of the Council of Press if they are officially registered in the Council's records (after passing the prescribed examination) and have at least 15 years of experience in the field. However, not all 21 members of the Council are elected; 7 members are nominated by the President of the Republic. Even those elected members typically come from state-owned media institutions and, by definition, are pro-government. This system was rooted in the policy of exclusion adopted by the Islamist

⁴⁶ www.ajanet.me, 11.4.2012

⁴⁷ *Al-Sayha* daily paper, Khartoum: 26.3.2016

⁴⁸ *Al-Sayah*, 2.11.2016

government, which aimed to remove those who were not members of the Islamic movement or loyal to the regime. This policy, known as "Al-Tamkeen" (meaning 'empowerment'), was a strategy to depose non-Islamists and replace them with loyal Islamists.⁴⁹

Consequently, the bureaucracy became dominated by Islamists, regardless of qualifications or competence. Allegiance, loyalty, and confidence took precedence over objective criteria. This policy of "politicization" extended to all other institutions, including public sector companies, the military, security forces, the police, and the attorney general's office.

Actually, when the Act was issued in 1996 and 1999, there were no independent newspapers or media institutions—everything was state-owned and state-run. Moreover, the President of the Republic served as the 'patron' of the Council (Article 4 – 3),⁵⁰ ensuring the government's tight control over the Council. This structure made it clear that no freedoms would be guaranteed under such a system. The Act was specifically designed to tighten the grip on the public under an authoritarian regime.

It is important to note that the Islamist military regime issued a press Act in 1996, as mentioned earlier, followed by another Act in 1999. This was amended in 2001, 2004, and 2009. However, these amendments did not bring substantial changes, as the partly-nominated Council continued to oversee the mass media, set restrictions on publications, and issue licenses (Article 6 – A), with the President still serving as the patron. The existence of such a Council, which had the authority to impose sanctions on newspapers or file suits against journalists and writers, directly contradicts democratic values and fundamental freedoms—principles that are integral to human rights.

All the Acts issued under the MIR included many provisions concerning the operations of media institutions, which, in the final analysis, served to restrict freedoms. These laws were designed to create an environment of intimidation, establishing strict boundaries and obstacles for the functioning of mass communication. In democratic systems, it is generally acknowledged that such councils or ministries of culture and information (or communication) do not exist. These bureaucratic institutions are typically used as tools by dictatorships and authoritarian regimes to

⁴⁹ Author's own observations (participant: the author worked as a journalist for ten years before joining the university teaching staff.)

⁵⁰ *Al-sharq* Laws Network, 2021

control the media, manipulate public discourse, impose their ideology, and silence opposition. Sudan serves as a prime example of such non-democratic systems and authoritarian practices.

The Islamist regime was repressive due to its use of force (through the police and security forces) against civil opponents; oppressive in maintaining authoritarian policies for three decades; and suppressive by banning independent and private press, along with implementing arbitrary measures against critics.

Conclusion

It is notable that most of the press laws in Sudan were not issued during the short-lived democratic regimes. Instead, they were enacted either by the colonial administration or by the military regimes. Beginning with the Press Ordinance of September 23, 1930, issued by the colonial administration, subsequent press laws were issued in 1965 (the only exception, enacted by a non-military transitional regime), followed by laws in 1973, 1993, 1996, 1999, and amendments in 2001, 2004, and 2009.

Thus, it can be argued that the control over the press and the arbitrary measures imposed by the post-independence military regimes were not less severe than those of the colonial rulers. This is especially true considering that the military regimes ruled for over half a century of Sudan's independent history, compared to only nine years of democratic governments (55 years of military rule out of 65 years of independence), with two years of transitional governments (1964-65 and 1985-86).

It is apparent that the press in Sudan has endured significant hardships under both colonial rule and in the post-independence era, which has been more dominated by military dictatorships than by the brief democratic intervals of the short-lived elected partisan regimes. Despite facing repression and arbitrary measures, the press in Sudan has managed to play a considerable socio-cultural role in society, enlightening public opinion and contributing to the development of the nationalist movement. In the post-independence era, the press also played a significant political role in fostering political participation, developing political socialization, and enhancing political culture.

The article recommends that the media – both print and electronic – should resume its socio-cultural role more effectively, regardless of the level of freedom available under shifting political systems. This role is crucial for the press as a vital instrument in democratization. The focus should be on socio-cultural issues rather than purely political coverage. Good leaders emerge from a well-developed society, and the press, as part of civil society, is a powerful tool for building a sustainable democracy. It is high time that the press takes the lead in constructing the 'infrastructure' for proper democratic transformation, particularly in light of the persistent challenges that hinder Sudan's smooth democratic transition.

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