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Middle East History: Sudan

**THE SUDAN COMMUNIST PARTY (THE S.M.N.L.) :**

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**I. THE SUDAN COMMUNIST PARTY (THE S.M.N.L.)**

THE Sudan Communist Party, the S.M.N.L. [[1]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n1) is an offshoot of the Communist movement in Egypt. The first Communist cells were established among Sudanese students in Cairo in 1944; later they became a section of the M.D.L.N. Their organ ( Umdurman)[[2]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n2) belonged to the M.D.L.N.; close contact has been maintained between the two groups to this day.

Sudan is a predominantly agrarian country, and the number of industrial workers is negligible; of its height to nine million inhabitants only 1-2 per cent. are believed to be literate. Nevertheless, in spite of the lack of both a numerous working class and a developed native intelligentsia, Communism has made much progress in the Sudan during the last ten years, and would probably have been seven more successful if the leaders of the movement in Khartoum had been allowed a modicum of independence in their policy. The absence of permanent splits makes the history of Communism in the Sudan easier to follow than in Egypt, and this has probably been the main reason for its spectacular progress.

The Sudanese students who were the core of the S.M.N.L. in Cairo numbered about twenty-five to thirty. But their periodical soon attracted attention 5 among the thousands of Sudanese students in the Egyptian capital. There were not many newspapers and magazines which dealt exclusively with Sudanese affairs. Umdurman, moreover, was not suspect of "Egyptian Imperialism" among them. It stood for the common struggle of the Egyptian and Sudanese peoples, and proposed granting the Sudanese the right of self-determination rather than a merger under the Egyptian crown--the latter solution being the one proposed by all other Egyptian parties, the pro-Sudanese feelings of which were not believed to be altogether altruistic by many Sudanese.

The exaggerated stress given to "Egyptian rights in the Sudan" had, in fact, provoked a negative reaction in Khartoum, where this kind of propaganda encouraged separatist trends. [[3]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n3) Umdurman wrote: "Those who call for unity (without self-determination) in Egypt are not less dangerous than the separatists in the Sudan." [[4]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n4)

**Macroeconomic Conditions and the Pattern of Labor Protests**

Neoclassical arguments assume that workers make decisions about whether or not to halt production based on opportunistic cost-benefit analyses of the likelihood of winning strikes. Downplaying any sense of developing class consciousness, labor market theories hold that strikes are most likely to occur when expected monetary and/or job gains exceed expected losses, conditions usually associated with a tight labor market.[[2]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n2) In contrast, orthodox Marxism, while positing periodic crises which may contribute to workers’ recognition of their common class interest, generally anticipates a fairly linear increase in labor protest, both in frequency and in the numbers of workers involved, as class consciousness develops and solidarity grows.[[3]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n3) Finally, a moral economy perspective would envision a greater number of protests – but not necessarily strikes – when economic conditions are deteriorating, causing workers to feel that elite commitments to them have been violated.

As explained in the Introduction, the sophisticated correlations of macroeconomic indicators with strike behavior performed by scholars of industrialized and democratic countries are not possible in a developing and authoritarian country like Egypt. Consequently, this section makes no attempt at precise correlation between the two. Nevertheless, I believe that the available evidence does suggest that Egyptian workers are most likely to protest when the economy is deteriorating, thus contradicting rational choice predictions and lending support to the moral economy view. There is also some indication that the overall level of protests which occur when real wages are falling is increasing, so that Marxist arguments cannot be ruled out on this basis alone.

**2. EGYPTIAN COMMUNISTS AND THE SUDAN**

In the Sudan, 1946 was the year in which a first "national front" was organized, one in which Communists played a prominent, though not a decisive, part. There had been a small national movement in the Sudan since the early 1920's (the "White Flag"), which received fresh impetus in 1936 when the Alumni Association of Gordon College ( Khartoum) was founded; it later changed its name to the "General Congress of University Graduates." There was a student strike in March, 1946, and a Sudanese delegation was sent later in that year to Cairo. The United Nations started to deal with the Sudanese issue in August, 1947, in response to Egyptian demands. This debate had no tangible results, however, and the constitutional reforms decided upon by the British government in 1948 were boycotted by most political parties in the country.

During this period (1947-48, when the Communist movement in Egypt was united) there were ‎serious differences of opinion in the M.D.L.N. as to the policy to be pursued in the Sudan. Finally a ‎resolution sponsored by Henry Curiel was adopted, which said that Egypt should hold a ‎protectorate over the Sudan under U.N. control until the Sudanese should be ready to exert their ‎right of self-determination. In its political programme after the split of 1950-51, the M.D.L.N. ‎preferred not to take a clear stand, and merely stressed that "we should support the struggle of the ‎Sudanese people against British imperialism, etc., and co-ordinate the fight of the workers, ‎peasants, students, and all [sic] the political organizations in the two countries." ‎

Co-operation between the two groups continued, however, and became even closer after the ‎abolition of martial law in Egypt in January, 1950. Sudanese party members were added to the ‎central committee of M.D.L.N., and Sudanese cadres were sent for training to Egypt. [[5]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n5) ‎

**‎3. THE PARTY LINE‎**

The mainstay of Communist influence in the Sudan, outside the intelligentsia, is the Railway ‎Workers' Union, which has more than 20,000 members. It headed a series of strikes in 1946, one ‎of which lasted for thirty-three days. In March, 1949, a Sudanese Workers' Federation of Trade ‎Unions was founded under the ægis of S.M.N.L., which, according to Communist sources, included ‎sixty-two unions, comprising 180,000 workers. (It is noteworthy that the total number of workers in ‎the Sudan is less than 100,000.) These activities were followed by the proclamation of a general ‎strike in 1950, which, however, did not come off in the end. But it brought Sudanese workers new ‎labour legislation, including the right of free association and the right to strike, and greatly ‎strengthened the prestige of the Federation, which was also behind the police and student strike of ‎‎1950. Communist activities among the peasants were restricted to the Moslem areas, such as ‎Gazīra province, where the party helped organize a strike movement against high taxes in the ‎winter of 1951-52. S.M.N.L. also organized the first congress of a peasant union at Atbara in ‎August, 1952, in an attempt to form units on the Chinese and Indian (Kisan Sabha) pattern. The ‎Sudanese Communists admit, in fact, that "we have learnt from the glorious Chinese Communist ‎Party a lesson which is confirmed by experience in our country. [[6]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n6)‎

There were new large-scale labour conflicts in 1952. In January there was a three-day general ‎strike to reinforce the railway workers' demand for a 75 per cent. increase in pay. In April, 1952, ‎the president of the Federation, Muhammad as-Sayyid Salām, and its first secretary, Sa'īd Fādil, ‎were arrested and brought to trial after refusing to sign a pledge of good behaviour. This again ‎provoked a general strike, and more arrests and a trial against seventeen trade-union leaders in ‎May, 1952. This time the two Federation heads agreed to sign the pledge and were released. [[7]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n7)‎

Propaganda of the Partisans of Peace was comparatively weak in the Sudan. Even Communist ‎sources reported only 10,000 signatures collected for the Stockholm appeal and 25,000 for the ‎Berlin appeal. The National Peace Council, founded in 1950, was later banned by the authorities.‎

In 1952 the main interest shifted to the international scene. After lengthy negotiations between ‎Britain and Egypt (where General Naguīb had come to power), agreement on the future of the ‎Sudan was reached in February, 1953. This pact provided for elections in 1956 in which the ‎citizens of the country would be able to decide for themselves about the future of their country. The ‎first elections (which were not, however, decisive) brought victory to the pro-Egyptian groups; but it ‎would be precipitate to consider the trend of public opinion in 1953 to be a reliable barometer of ‎future events. ‎

The party line on relations with Egypt did not reveal much political acumen. In 1951 the S.M.N.L. ‎had participated, together with a number of non-Communist groups, in the United Front for ‎Sudanese Liberation. Rejecting the draft constitution for Sudan (which followed the Anglo-Egyptian ‎agreement of 1952), the Communists argued that it would retard the "political freedom" they were ‎campaigning for. Naguīb was described by the Communists as the liaison man who was assisting ‎further penetration of U.S. imperialism in the Sudan. But had not the Sudanese Communists given ‎their approval to General Naguīb and his policy as late as November ? But the party had been ‎mistaken, they said; it had not understood the real character of the new Egyptian rulers, who were ‎‎"running dogs of American imperialism." ‎[[8]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm" \l "n8)

But the Cairo government succeeded in enlisting Sudanese public opinion in support of the ‎agreement. The United Front for Sudanese Liberation (U.F.S.L.) broke up, and the Communists, ‎insisting on opposition to the Anglo-Egyptian agreement, were isolated. The Federation of Workers ‎in their annual convention in January, 1953, again called ail parties to unite in the U.F.S.L. and to ‎resist "all imperialist schemes and intrigues." Instead of helping the Communists, this only ‎provoked serious discontent within the ranks of the Federation. For some time it appeared that the ‎Communists in key positions would be ousted and replaced by non-Communist trade unionists. ‎The Communists realized in time, however, that they had over-played their hand and decided to go ‎slow on their stand towards the Cairo agreement rather than lose their positions. The loss of ‎Communist influence at that period was reflected by the results of the elections to the Khartoum ‎University College; this had been a Communist bulwark for some years, but now the Communists ‎failed to get even one out of the ten seats. (The Moslem Brotherhood received nine seats.)

During the second half of 1952 a dissident faction broke away from the S.M.N.L. and established ‎itself as the "Sudanese Democratic Organization." It opposed the dependence of the party on ‎instructions from abroad, and, more particularly, the negative attitude towards the Cairo agreement ‎which had, in its opinion, needlessly antagonized all other groups. But the new faction did not ‎become a serious rival to the S.M.N.L., and in the summer of 1953 a further split occurred in the ‎minority faction when several of its members who sympathized with the National Unity Party ‎‎(formerly Ashigga) were expelled.‎

When the Communists realized that their attempt to attack the Cairo-Sudanese independence pact ‎had misfired, they established a new "progressive" front organization, which took part in the ‎elections with a national and social programme in which everything was promised to everybody. ‎Muhammad as-Sayyid Salām, the president of the Communist "Federation," declared that the ‎trade unions were not political organizations, and that their members were free to vote as they ‎pleased. He advised them, however, to vote for such candidates as would favour national self-‎determination and their social interests, and who would oppose the "new laws restricting freedom, ‎and, above all, the law directed against subversive doctrines."‎[[9]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm" \l "n9)

The Communists (appearing as "Anti-Imperialist Front") were not successful in the 1953 elections, ‎‎‎[[10]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm" \l "n10) and throughout that year there were further attempts to restrict Communist influence within the ‎S.I.U.F.‎

Efforts to stage new political general strikes in July and August were bitterly fought by an ‎independent group, the Socialist Labour Party, which emphasized in its propaganda that Sudanese ‎interests should be put above the tactical exigencies of the international Communist movement.

It would be wrong, however, to regard the temporary setback suffered by the Communists in 1952-‎‎53 as decisive. The S.M.N.L. prevailed in the struggle against its competitors within the trade ‎unions as a result of its superior cohesion and organization, its ties with the Cominform, its training ‎of cadres abroad, etc. Its isolation in 1952-53 was overcome by a better adaptation to the new ‎situation created after the introduction of self-government. In its "immediate programme," published ‎in the spring of 1954, the S.M.N.L. called for the immediate withdrawal of British troops, the ‎amendment of the constitution, and an "anti-imperialist government to carry out liberation and ‎social reform." The issue of self-determination was neatly circumvented by stating that "we stand ‎for united action with the Egyptian people," which, of course, left the question of co-operation with ‎the Egyptian government quite open. S.M.N.L. renewed its overtures to Al Azhari's National ‎Unionists, and a national manifesto for the preservation and development of the constitution, ‎initiated by the S.T.U.F., was supported by the National Unionists. ‎[[11]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm" \l "n11)

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**‎4. RENEWED EFFORTS**

More important, however, than these political manoeuvres were the great efforts made by the ‎Communists to strengthen their position among the intelligentsia and the peasants, and to regain ‎their hold on the workers' organizations; opposition had appeared even in the railwaymen's union, ‎which was the traditional stronghold of the S.M.N.L. These efforts were aided by the dissension of ‎the non-Communist parties, which culminated in the March I riots in 1954, when the followers of Al ‎Mahdi (many of them tribesmen) demonstrated against the new government on the occasion of the ‎convocation of the Sudanese Parliament.

Communist activities among the intelligentsia and the youth (which have been specially marked in ‎the last two years) follow the usual lines: "Front" organizations are established for fellow-travellers-‎‎-such as the National Committee for the Defence of Democratic Rights, Women's Progress Society, ‎or the Sudan Students' Congress. Communist influence is predominant in the Khartoum and ‎Omdurman teachers' associations, and the students' organizations in Kosti, Port Sudan, ‎Omdurman, and Khartoum. Youth festivals are arranged and efforts are made to send big ‎delegations to the meetings of the international front organizations. The only interesting feature in ‎the propaganda of the S.M.N.L, and its satellites is perhaps the distinct pro-Islamic and anti-‎Christian bias in the party press, which complains that "there is no freedom of conscience in the ‎Sudan.""Though the majority of people in the north are Moslems, only Christian missionaries are ‎allowed to proceed to the south and to preach there."Propaganda among the peasants is an ‎important part of Communist activities. The Sudan is the only Middle Eastern country where ‎Communists have succeeded in "organizing" peasants on the ChineseIndian pattern. [[12]](https://www.marxists.org/subject/arab-world/laqueur/index.htm#n12) Out of ‎many local peasant unions a few central peasant unions have been formed: the Nuba Mountain ‎cotton growers (with 20,000 members, according to Communist reports), the Gash peasant union, ‎the Northern Province peasant union, and the Gazīra union (the Gazīra region being the richest ‎agricultural region of the country). The demands of the Communist-dominated unions are, to quote ‎the Ten Point Demands, as follows: ‎

‎1. Land. --The preservation of peasant ownership so that lands do not fall into the hands of big ‎landowners, merchants, and the Sudan government, through (a) resisting confiscation of the land ‎of indebted peasants; and (b) the improvement of agricultural production through co-operation, ‎good farming methods, easy irrigation, etc.‎

‎2. Contracts. --Cancellation of unfavourable contracts between peasants and private water-pump ‎owners; and between the peasants and the government, promoting the interests of the peasants. ‎

‎3. Taxes. --Opposition to new taxes and ail rises in taxation; reductions of old taxes, such as water ‎taxes, land taxes, fruit-tree taxes, palmdate taxes, cattle taxes.‎

‎4. Improvement of Production. --Through introduction of fertilizers and the adoption of modern ‎methods in their use; mechanization of agriculture as far as possible; scientific seed selection, etc.‎

‎5. Crop Marketing. --Supervision of the sale of crops inside and outside the Sudan, the protection ‎of peasants against money-lenders, and the removal of bans on certain agricultural products. [The ‎remaining demands deal with transport (improvement of transport to the cities), housing, the ‎establishment of social clubs, prevention of floods, education, and "removal of government ‎suppression of the peasants," i.e. a weaker central government.] ‎

The demands of the Northern District union do not differ irt substance from the demands of the rest. ‎It is of some interest to note that Gazīra is the most developed agricultural region of Sudan (and ‎perhaps of the whole Nile Valley); it was nationalized in 1950 and its 26,000 peasants are not ‎allowed to cultivate more than about thirty acres each-there are no big feudal landowners among ‎them. This regulation was introduced in order to prevent the emergence of an agricultural ‎proletariat on one hand and the growth of big latifundia on the other. What should be noted, ‎therefore, is that the peasants of Al Gazīra are far better off materially than those in the rest of the ‎country, and that their strikes and protest demonstrations are directed against the government ‎rather than against any exploiting class. The Communists are appearing here as the spokesmen of ‎sredniaks (middling peasants) and even kulaks, but it is, of course, completely irrelevant to ‎mention that these peasants would lose their land in a popular democracy (which is the official ‎programme of the S.M.N.L. since the spring of 1954). This the peasants cannot possibly know. At ‎the present time the peasants regard the Communists as the main champions of their cause. The ‎latter are ready to exploit any source of conflict in a non-Communist regime, and the peasant ‎movement serves them as a powerful political weapon. ‎

S.M.N.L. has made some inroads into the Sudanese defence forces, the country's small army. ‎There has been no party progress worth mentioning in the south, though attempts in that region ‎have been made. The Communists oppose the separatist trends of the south, and try to explain to ‎the southern tribes that they need not be afraid of domination by the north. ‎

The further growth of Communism in the Sudan depends mainly on the ability of the new ‎government in Khartoum to cope with its tasks, and the ability of the non-Communist parties to ‎establish mass organizations and not to let their differences of opinion paralyse the development of ‎the country as a whole. Basically the economic situation and the social structure of the Sudan are ‎far sounder than those of Egypt. But, as a result of clever leadership, hard work, devotion, a ‎knowledge of the basic principles of political organization, and a strong will to power, the 1500 ‎Sudanese Communists have succeeded in infiltrating into many key positions. The other Sudanese ‎parties have been deficient in most of these qualities.‎

**Notes**

1. The Sudan Movement for National Liberation (the French initials are M.S.L.N.)

2. ‎ Its name was subsequently changed to Common Struggle.‎

3. Galãl ad-Dĩn al Hamamsi, What Is Happening in the Sudan? (in Arabic; Cairo, 1945). The ‎Communist line is given in Asad Halĩm, Qadiyyat Sudãn (The Sudan Question), Cairo, 1946. For ‎the subsequent period, see Qãsim Amĩn, The Sudan Agreement in the Balance ( Khartoum, 1953). ‎Qãsim Amĩn, a Communist chief, is a leader of the railwaymen's executive board.

4. Umdurmãn, Jan. 1, 1946.‎

5. ‎ Zakki Murãd, a young Sudanese lawyer, had permanently settled in the Egyptian capital and ‎apparently represented the S.M.N.L. interests there.‎

6. Allies for Freedom ( London, 1954).‎

7. Al Misri, May 13, 1952. Sa'ĩd Fãdil was replaced as general secretary by Ash-Shãft Ahmad Ash-‎Shaikh at the annual session of the Federation in January, 1953 ( Al Ahrãm, Jan. 15, 1953). The ‎real leader of the Federation (and the S.M.N.L.) is believed to be A. M. Bashir, who was in Europe ‎in 1952-53.‎

8. For a correction of the original Communist line for the support of Naguĩb, see the S.M.N.L. ‎‎"Manifesto" in Arabic ( Khartoum), Apr., 1953. ‎

9. Al Ahrãm, Nov. 1, 1953. According to this law, promulgated in October, 1953, Communist (and ‎Fascist) activity was made an offence punishable by one year in prison. Among the Communist ‎organizations listed, all the major "fronts" were included.

10. One Communist candidate was returned for one of the five seats reserved for university graduates. ‎The secretary-general of the group is Ahmad Sulaimãn, a lawyer; its organ is As-Sahrã.‎

11. Back in 1947-48 Al Azhari was attacked as a "fascist" by the Communists. Cf. Al Gamãhĩr, Nov. 23, ‎‎1947' "Isma'ĩl al Azhari has joined the fascist front of Misr al Fatah and the Moslem Brotherhood." ‎But meanwhile both Misr al Fatah and the Moslem Brotherhood became the allies of the ‎Communists in the National Front.

12. For the first Northern Province peasant congress in Atbara, cf. Al Gabha ( Khartoum), August, I9 ‎‎52). A summary of the proceedings of the Congress and the "Ten Point Demands" is contained in ‎Sudan Review, bulletin 5, a mimeographed Communist news-sheet in English. The issue, as a ‎whole, has been reviewed from an official Communist point of view in "The Peasant Movement in ‎Sudan" in For a Lasting Peace, For a People's Democracy (the Cominform journal), July 3, 1953. ‎The executive of the Gazira union was originally in the hands of Independents, but was infiltrated ‎by the Communists in 1952-53.‎