

Industrial relations
and the political process

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Ahmed Hassan El Jack

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Research Series

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Ahmed Hassan El Jack

Associate Professor in Management,
Department of Business Administration,
University of Khartoum

Chris Leggett

Associate Professor in Organisational Behaviour,
Department of Business Administration,
University of Khartoum

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INTRODUCTION

The conceptual framework

More than twenty years ago, Fawzi lamented the lack of attention devoted to the study of labour in the Sudan.¹ Since his initiative at that time the study of industrial relations in the Sudan has achieved both academic respectability and practical importance.² In almost all cases industrial relations has been chronicled against a background of changing political forces and institutions so that, for example, trade unions are studied in terms of their leaders' and members' reactions to this or that particular regime. There is no reason why, in this study of the interaction of industrial relations and the political process, we should abandon the same approach. However, we shall not pursue it to the extent of disguising the continuity of industrial relations which if not independent of political leaders and their policies, are often autonomous. An obvious advantage of identifying the political changes is the comparison it makes possible with other studies, such as Damachi's on industrial relations and development in Ghana.³

While we recognise the need to up date the recorded history of industrial relations in the Sudan and especially recognise the appropriateness of regarding the period of 1971-73 as something of a watershed in Sudanese industrial relations history, it is not our intention to represent labour, or capital for that matter merely as the respondent to different regimes' approaches to industrial relations problems. The labour movement has been active in the political process and labour, employers and government have not acted independently of the traditional sectarian groupings in Sudanese society. This leads us to seek trends, patterns and underlying causes.

Ever mindful of the comparative purpose of this study we have not significantly deviated from a basic system approach. Nevertheless, our commitment does not extend to excluding radical interpretations of our analyses of the interaction between political initiatives and institutionalised industrial relations. The phenomena of politics and industrial relations, in particular labour, can only adequately be understood within the context of economic underdevelopment perceived in structural terms. Further, it is necessary to recognise that the role of government is determined partly by the nature of, and the distribution of power within and without the country.⁴ Neither do we view our system as a model of the status quo! For us the historical dimension will not be simply an introduction as, in any case, formal industrial relations only began in 1946⁵ and, despite a significant change after 1971⁶, the system has been a continuously dynamic one.

Simply our system consists of inputs, processes and outputs with each being subjected to political influence through degrees and types of government intervention. Thus, since 1971, the Sudanese political leadership has sought to rationalise the inputs of the existing institutions and organisations of industrial relations and has continued to attempt to extend its control over the system by directing changes in the processes - particularly by legislating the methods of dispute settlement, the carrying out of a national job evaluation and the use of minimum wage orders. The outputs of the system may be evaluated in relation to the political and economic objective of the political leadership, i.e. socio-economic development and political control and stability. Such evaluation provides criteria for making comparisons with the state of industrial relations under different regimes in the Sudan and with industrial relations under various regimes and elites in other underdeveloped countries.⁷

Ideology is part of our system in that we are concerned with the changing perceptions of the different 'actors' in the appropriate roles of the established and the new institutions of industrial relations. Of particular interest here is the displacement of the labour movement's overt idealism by pragmatic administrative trade unionism.⁸

The institutional framework

Trade unionism in the Sudan established a reputation for independence at its foundation when, after the Second World War, the railway workers of Atbara resisted the British colonial administration's policy of establishing joint consultative arrangements, either to hold off the advent of trade unionism or as preliminary stage in its development, and achieved effective recognition of their Workers Affairs Association (WAA). Until the reforms implemented by the present government, the relationship between government and the trade unions had been a turbulent one with only rare interludes of detente. Characteristically radical in political outlook, the trade union leaders, through the federal organisation of the trade union hierarchy, found themselves harassed by both conservative-autocratic and conservative-democratic governments.

Despite political persecution - or perhaps because of it - and in spite of the weaknesses of its structure, the Sudanese trade union movement was generally recognised outside the Sudan as one of the best organised in Africa. Operating within a legal framework based on British legislation, experience and colonial policy, the trade unions relied on the threat of industrial action rather than protracted collective bargaining to achieve their aims. The private sector was largely fragmented into a multiplicity of small company unions while, in the public sector,

one or two large and militant unions tended to dominate the whole movement through the Sudan Workers' Trade Union Federation (SWTUF). From 1951 to 1971 the number of trade unions increased from 86 organising 37,793 employees to 546 organising 281,607 employees.⁹

If small trade unions proliferated, employers' associations, due to the mercantilist orientation of Sudanese business, were of little importance until the late 1960s when the establishment of a manufacturers' and a consultative association reflected the growing awareness of the importance of institutionalised industrial relations. Rather it has been the steady development of the Department of Labour which has represented the stable element in the growth of the industrial relations system. Currently the Department operates from within the larger Ministry of Public Service and Administrative Reform and is headed by a Commissioner of Labour who, together with the presidentially appointed Registrar-General of Trade Unions, implements the comprehensive trade union and disputes legislation made by the present regime and intended to be more than just an extension of the previous British-type legal framework.

One further actor officially included in the system is the Sudan Socialist Union (SSU), the one legal political party. It is charged with the responsibility, among other, of exhorting and encouraging the other conventional actors to develop the system and its arrangements within the ideological framework of the 1969 May Revolution which brought the present regime into power.

This then is the official institutional framework of the system, but recognition must be made of many other elements before we can begin to understand how it functions. For instance, there is the sensitivity of politicians and officials to the influence of international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and of trade union leaders to Arab and African regional trade union organisations. Cultural factors, such as sectarianism, ethnicity and religion, are important in several ways and there are a host of informal but regular practices which are integral to the system although not always acknowledged as such.

Industrial relations

We wish to enter a note on alternative theoretical perspectives at this point although we do not intend to proselytise any perspective here. In the development of academic industrial relations in the industrial West there has arisen, in recent years a debate between those who advocate a systems framework for analysis and these who react to this framework claiming it to be inherently conservative and serving, intentionally or otherwise,

to regulate and maintain, as well as justify, a set of institutional arrangements which perpetuate inequality and unfairness in view-conflict relationships. This latter radical approach sees conflict as intrinsic to unfair socio-economic arrangements and that industrial relations, as a subject for analysis, has to be broader than the study of institutions and what is regarded as the reification of organisations. Adherents to the radical perspective lament the depersonalisation of industrial relations, the emphasis on functionalism and the bureaucratisation - with its accompanying careerism and opportunism - of the system. The radicals are not an homogenous group, as no more are the defenders of the systems approach, but generally they would include in the subject aspects which are conventionally demarked from it by the boundaries of disciplines like sociology, psychology and political science, i.e. they are concerned about the whole man in productive employment for wages in an economic system and not just with the narrow focus on institutional arrangements for the regulation of conflict over wages and other employment conditions.

We are aware that any model of industrial relations must be a simplification and, possibly, a distortion of reality. Therefore, as we have already said, we analyse industrial relations in the Sudan as a system but with the qualification that this is only a convenient conceptual tool and is intended without prejudice to alternative approaches. Indeed we recognise the necessity of considering the Sudan as an underdeveloped country and believe that to arrive at an acceptable explanation of its political, economic and social systems, and for these explanations to be of value for comparative purposes, the structural nature of that underdevelopment has to be understood - an understanding which is currently being worked on by largely radical development economists and sociologists.¹⁰

One of the difficulties of arriving at a realistic analysis of industrial relations in underdeveloped countries is that many of the teachers, researchers and 'experts' themselves were trained in the Western industrial countries and may have internalised the values and perspectives prevailing in industrial relations there. Where they are not expatriates, often of the former colonial power, they are Western-educated indigenes with some commitment to applying the outlooks conditioned by the sources of their education. We, the authors of this study, are not exceptions to this pattern but hope that our awareness of it permits us to be more open-minded about the industrial relations phenomena we describe and analyse than were we unaware of it.¹¹

Let us see, very broadly, how the alternative perspectives might affect our interpretation of industrial relations events in the Sudan. From a systems point of view we would see the various governments of colonial administrators, elected parliamentarians, conservative-military and radical-military

faced with the task of managing and developing the economy, securing legitimacy and maintaining law and order. Apart from the colonial administrators, each government inherited the institutional and legal regulation of industrial relations and made such modifications of these as were deemed necessary to achieve their objectives and that were within their power to make. Whatever governs the motivation of the particular government to intervene, and to what extent and quality the intervention, it is an actor in the system interacting with the institutionalised other actors, even where it suppresses them. Because the systems approach has its origins in a pluralist conception of society,¹² systems orientated observers might claim that excessive government intervention leads to the malfunctioning of the system so that it could either be destroyed or reassert itself by its destruction of the naive actors. Such a view might be applied to the overthrow of the anti-trade union Abboud regime in 1964. Systems writers, such as Kerr et al,¹³ have tried to show how different industrialising elites impart varying characteristics to the industrial relations systems in their countries and such a model can usefully, but not uncritically, be applied to the Sudan where political power has changed hands among elites who, to a recognisable extent, fit the categorisations of colonial administrators, middle class, nationalist leaders and revolutionary intellectuals. We say 'but not uncritically' because these categories are complicated by the particular Sudanese situation and an elite with a particular commitment on coming to power may change its outlook after the experience of the reality of that power. In the Sudan this change, since independence, seems always to have been rightwards and towards greater control of industrial relations and, in particular, of trade unions, which have been the most effective retainers of radical dissent.

In applying a radical perspective to industrial relations in the Sudan, concentration would have to be on the fundamental conflicts of interest among the actors and on their relative power positions. Appeals for harmony, co-operation and the national interest would have to be examined in the light of who stands to gain or lose from modifications to, or reforms of, the system. Such an approach does not rule out the possibility of alliances between otherwise opposed groupings but it is not likely to see those alliances as enduring beyond the achievement of the common objective. Thus the popular overthrow of the Abboud government in 1964, in which the labour movement played so important a part, produced an alliance of workers and bourgeoisie - and other groups - to reestablish parliamentary government and other 'freedoms'. However, the subsequent governments and the labour leaders soon found themselves bitterly opposed as the former sought greater control and the latter sought to improve the lot of the wage-worker. Governments of all underdeveloped countries seek, in one way or another, to control trade unions in order to try and

achieve economic objectives¹⁴ and the governments of the Sudan have not been exceptional in this: the early alliance between labour leaders and the present regime ended in bloodshed and reprisals out of which has resulted a less volatile trade union leadership, more orientated to administrative than to protest type trade unionism.

Industrial relations and the political process

Right from the beginning of active trade unionism in the Sudan, in 1946, the interrelationship between industrial relations and the political process has been a close one. An atmosphere conducive to the development of workers' aspirations to freedom of association and the right to negotiate on a representative basis was partly a product of the colonial administrator's requirements for the war effort. While the initiative for the establishment of joint consultative councils came from the government, the reaction to them and the demands for a proper trade union by the workers resulted in confrontation with the colonial authorities as government rather than with management as employer. At the same time nationalist leaders, with their own various and varying political aspirations for the Sudan, became publicly involved and acted as conciliators during the conflict. The realities of political independence and the problems of economic dependence have provided the context for subsequent interaction and confrontation. We shall endeavour to analyse and evaluate the interaction, identify the determinants of its nature and assess the impact of the changes that have taken place in the Sudan - social, political and economic. In this way we hope to arrive at a study of the present and longest period of consistent government policy on industrial relations in a way which may lead to the development of comparative criteria. Unless there is strong evidence to suggest otherwise, we shall assume that the organisations and institutions are pursuing, however effectively, their ostensive purposes, i.e. that they are attempting to do what their leaders say they are trying to do. That is not to say that a more questioning inquiry of a sociological or social anthropological type would not be of value - it would - but for the present we are constrained to a more limited perspective.

Since the publication of Kerr et al's Industrialism and industrial man¹⁵ the need for the development of a unified theory of industrial relations in underdeveloped countries has been apparent. Recently Kassalow has emphasised the importance of broader studies to complement the increasing number of one-country monographs and has examined trends in Third World trade union development up to the 1970s in the light of Galenson's predictions of a decade earlier.¹⁶ The understanding of the nature of industrial relations in the Western industrial world has

been given a boost by the provision of theoretical perspectives which have complemented the more traditional empirical studies. Merely transferring those perspectives, which are antithetical anyway, is not sufficient for a satisfactory analysis of industrial relations in the Third World but a parallel development of appropriate criteria would certainly be in order.

Structure and sources of the study

We shall proceed to chronicle the main industrial relations events before and after political independence. These events will be set against the main changes in political leadership that have taken place. Having presented an account of the political context, we shall examine those aspects of the socio-economic environment which are relevant to industrial relations and the political process. Following this we shall apply a systems model to identify and analyse the inputs, the process and the outputs, having regard to the process as being the interaction of industrial relations with politics. Our outputs, then, will constitute the characteristics of industrial relations in the Sudan. Finally, in so far as we are able to, we shall endeavour to suggest some trends for the future.

The information upon which this study is based has three main sources. First, there are existing studies made by academic researchers, in particular of the labour movement, over the years: those sources are cited in the notes. Second, where possible, we have obtained relevant official and semi-official documents and statistics from the appropriate organisations and individual persons. For example, trade union membership figures from the Registrar-General's Office. Third, we conducted semi-structured interviews with Department of Labour officials, political cadres of the SSU, trade union leaders, managers from both public and private sectors of industry, and with officials and representatives of the employers' associations. Without exception the interviewees were candid and willing to co-operate and, although they were often keen to add their opinions of the subjects we were discussing, the interpretation of the data in this study must be our responsibility.