

December 5, 1990

SUDAN

Bullets Aren't the Seeds of Life

The Detention of Mahjoub Sherif, Poet and Teacher

Mahjoub Mohamed Sherif is a teacher and poet. He is well-known in Sudan as "The People's Poet", because he writes his poems in colloquial Sudanese Arabic and in an accessible style, and because he writes about a mixture of themes - politics and everyday life, and stories for children - that speak to the experience of the ordinary people. He has also been active in the Sudan Communist Party. Mahjoub is aged 41 years, and is married with two daughters.

Mahjoub was arrested on 20 September 1989 and is held in Port Sudan prison. He has not been charged. It is believed that he is being held because of his left-wing and secularist views, which are in strong opposition to the Islamic fundamentalist nature of the current military government headed by Lt-Gen Omar al Bashir, which seized power in a coup d'etat in June 1989. The government holds about 300 other political detainees.

Mahjoub is a teacher in Omdurman, el Hara "10" primary school. He is a graduate of Shendi Teacher Training College, and has been a primary school teacher for most of his career.

Mahjoub's wife, Amina al Gizouli, is also a teacher. She was dismissed from her job after the June 1989 coup and now works for Khartoum University Press. Her brother Kamal al Gizouli is a lawyer and a member of the Bar Association, who was also detained after the coup, and remains in prison without charge. Their eldest daughter, Mariam, is nine.

Mahjoub is a member of the Sudanese Communist Party. He was detained on three previous occasions. The first was during 1971-3, following an abortive coup mounted against then-President Nimeiri by the Communists. The second occasion was during 1977-78. Mahjoub was arrested while on honeymoon on the Red Sea coast and spent 18 months in prison. He was detained for a third time during 1979-81. During these spells in prison he was held in Kober, Shalla and Port Sudan prisons. While in prison he continued to write poetry. On his arrest in 1971 he was dismissed from his teaching post, and was reinstated only in 1978. He was dismissed again in 1981 and reinstated again after the popular uprising which overthrew President Nimeiri in April 1985. In 1986 he stood as a candidate for the Democratic Alliance (associated with the Communists) in Omdurman al Thawra constituency but was defeated.

Mahjoub is well-known for his poetry, and is popularly known as "The People's Poet". One of the main themes of his writing is the struggle for freedom and democracy in Sudan, especially the two popular uprisings of 1964 and 1985, which overthrew military regimes and restored democracy. Another theme is the longing for peace in the country, and an end to the war in the South. He has also written love poems and songs for children. His songs have been performed by well-known Sudanese singers.

Political detainees have said that the poetry of Mahjoub Sherif was one of the main things that inspired them and gave them hope while they were in prison. The following description was given by a detainee held with Mahjoub:

In October 1971 we were collected together in what later became known as the Justice Court of Kober Prison - the place where Mahmoud Mohamed Taha* was hanged - we were living in tents. There was no fixed building so they had provided tents for us. There was some sort of discussion among the detainees who had very low spirits at that time - we used to call them the "depression club" - saying that the Sudanese people are no longer the same people that we knew during October,** and that nothing will happen. Mahjoub and I were going round these tents talking to the depressed detainees. After a minute Mahjoub stopped and turned to me and told me a poem he had composed while we were walking.

He said: our people will be patient for a while, but not for so long. The really important thing is to respect the will of the people.

That poem really changed everything. Fortunately Mohamed Werdi, the singer,

* The leader of the Republican Brothers party, executed by President Nimeiri for alleged apostasy in January 1985.

** The Popular Uprising of October 1964 which overthrew the military government of General Abboud and reinstated democratic rule.

was there in the prison with us. He made it into a song. That changed the whole atmosphere of the prison and a whole new feeling of hope and determination prevailed instead of the one of pessimism that had gone before.

The second occasion was in January 1972. We were removed to Darfur, and 22 of us, including Mahjoub, were sent to Shalla [prison]. Me and 21 others went to Zalingei [prison]. After two or three months three of us were sent back to Shalla for medical treatment. We found the atmosphere in Shalla completely different from in Zalingei. The reason was that on the first day, Mahjoub had composed a poem. This said "they send us to Shalla but they are not able to degrade us. We are still powerful and we are still able to resist." There was a worker from the Post Office there who made it into a song, so they were able to sing it. So they were more cheerful - more cheerful than us in Zalingei.

Mahjoub, with his poems, gives to the prisoners will and hope.

Mahjoub has published two collections: *Songs for Love and Revolution* and *Children and Soldiers*, as well as *Poems for Children* and *Stories for Children*. His poetry is known for translating popular slogans and demands into poetic language. He often uses colloquial Sudanese Arabic for his poems, not classical or Koranic Arabic.

We include below a selection of a few of Mahjoub Sherif's poems. The first, "Buffoon", concerns a despotic ruler frantically clinging to power.

BUFFOON

Hey ... buffoon,
cling,
beware falling apart,
beware and be all alert
and lend your ears to every move
and look as well to your shadow
and when the leaves rustle
seclude yourself
keep still
it is so dangerous
you buffoon
.....
.....
Fire on everything, bullet everything
every word uttered
every breeze passing without

your permission
Mr Buffoon

.....
.....

Teach the sparrows,
the village lanterns,
the towns' windows
and all stalks to report to
You

Make the ants infiltrate,
and join the securitat
ask the rain drops
to write its reports
You buffoon

KHARTOUM

Here she comes, Khartoum
awake, awakening and ever-sleepless
boiling, turmoiling and anguish
angry she comes,
Khartoum,
storms of dust and heat.

THE LOVER

And I remember your worries,
of when the wounds will heal,
of when the country be healed,
of when the sky will shine again,
and would beloved Khartoum laugh again?
your worries are bonding pains we share
and in which we've merged, more intimate;
your worries give me zeal.

** ** *

** ** *

And we are two who share griefs of the people,
and I swear dearest
if you humiliate and forget me,
to forgive you,
for if I betray the revolution,
and I surrender and lower my sword,
come with meeked-eyes,
your eyes should not meet mine
and warmly welcome me
shed no tears on me

BORN ARE THE BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN

Born are the beautiful children, hour by hour
with brightest eyes,
and loving hearts you have bestowed upon
fatherland, they will come,
for bullets aren't the seeds of life.

AND WE HAVE OVERCOME

And we have overcome,
resilient tonight,
tonight tougher,
as well tonight,
we're well,
despite the tears and fears,
we've overcome

LEAVE ME HANDCUFFED

Leave me handcuffed in your prisons,
forget me detained in your cells,
for I fight for a better future,
I fight for our kids who will come

and these marvelous people
I fight for a humane life

.....
revolution is my destiny
in my short life-time,
long live freedom.

Mahjoub's work has not been published in English. These are unofficial translations by Africa Watch which attempt to give some flavor of his poetry.

Recommendations for Action:

Please write urgent appeals to the Sudanese authorities listed below, calling for the government to release Mahjoub Sherif and all other political detainees unconditionally.

Please address appeals to:

His Excellency Lt-Gen Omar Hassan al Bashir
Head of State, Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief
Army Headquarters
Khartoum
Sudan

His Excellency Mr. Abdalla Ahmed Abdalla
Ambassador
Embassy of the Republic of Sudan
2210 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20008

His Excellency Mr el Rashid Abu Shama
Ambassador
Embassy of the Republic of Sudan
3 Cleveland Row
St James's
London SW1A 1DD

Previous Africa Watch Publications on Sudan:

Report

Denying "The Honor of Living", Sudan: A Human Rights Disaster. March 1990. 170 pages, obtainable from Africa Watch, price \$10.

News from Africa Watch, recent newsletters, price \$2 each.

Sudan: The Forgotten War in Darfur Flares Again (April 6, 1990).

Sudan: Threat to Women's Rights from Fundamentalist Regime (April 6, 1990).

Sudan: Officers Executed and Doctor Tortured to Death (April 26, 1990).

Sudan: Lest they be Forgotten . . . Letters from Shalla Prison (May 8, 1990).

Sudan: Information Suppressed: Curbs on the Press and Attacks on Journalists and Academics (August 30, 1990).

Sudan: Nationwide Famine: Culpable Negligence in the Management of Food Security, War, and the Use of Food as a Political Weapon (November 9, 1990) (Price \$5).

Africa Watch is a non-governmental organization created in May 1988 to monitor human rights practices in Africa and to promote respect for internationally recognized standards. Its Executive Director is Rakiya Omaar; its Research Director Richard Carver; Alex de Waal is Research Consultant; Janet Fleischman and Karen Sorensen are Research Associates, and Ben Penglase and Jo Graham are associates.

Africa Watch is part of Human Rights Watch, an organization that also comprises Americas Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch and Middle East Watch. The Chairman of Human Rights Watch is Robert L Bernstein and the Vice-Chairman is Adrian DeWind. Aryeh Neier is Executive Director of Human Rights Watch, the Deputy Director is Kenneth Roth, Holly Burkhalter is Washington Director, and Susan Osnos is Press Director.

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