

# **PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN SUDAN**

## **BRIEFING**

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### **Overview**

Prospects for peace in Sudan have received a serious setback in recent weeks, with the apparent resolution of the internal power struggle in Khartoum in favour of Dr Hassan al Turabi. Meanwhile, the NDA is in more disarray than ever before, and the SPLA has not been able to take the political initiative.

In the short term there are no realistic prospects for peace. While some may be contemplating an elite deal that involves Turabi, Sadiq el Mahdi and Dr John Garang as main players, this seems both unlikely and unworkable. Instead, the best option is to prevail with the current strategy of incremental advances at IGAD, in the hope that the underlying weaknesses of the Sudan Government will force it to make concessions and ultimately concede a workable agreement.

### **Turabi's Ascendancy**

Dr Hassan al Turabi has emerged the victor of the internal power struggles in Khartoum. He has triumphed over the more pragmatic generals, including President Omer al Bashir, and succeeded in concentrating an unprecedented degree of power in his own hands. Dr Turabi is now Secretary General of the National Congress, which is the ruling party. As such he has the power to appoint the cabinet. Meanwhile the President is reduced largely to the role of a figurehead, without any influence over real policymaking or political appointments. The only substantive concession that Turabi has made to Bashir is that the latter will be the sole candidate of the National Congress for President in the next elections (scheduled for 2002). Hence Dr Turabi has real executive power.

Turabi is also Speaker of the National Assembly, and hence in control of the organisation of the legislative timetable. Formally speaking, his powers are akin to a British Prime Minister with an invincible majority in parliament. In reality, of course, Sudan has none of the checks and balances that make British democracy function.

The National Congress party is now all-powerful. Its immediate challenge is to secure its position in the army and security forces. The main opposition to Turabi's dominance came from a group of generals and security officers, and there has been much speculation in recent months about whether these officers were about to launch a palace coup—or had even tried to do so.

Now, this speculation is largely academic, because the opportunity for such a coup, if it ever existed, has probably passed.

We can expect to see a number of prominent figures in the Sudan Government taking more minor roles in the coming months. Gen. Bashir will continue as President but will be spokesman for a regime in which he wields no real power. Other security officers such as Ghazi Salah el Din and Nafie Ali Nafie will be less prominent. Ali Osman Mohamed Taha will be less powerful.

## **Can Turabi Prevail?**

Turabi's ascendancy does not of course resolve the fundamental problems facing the Sudan Government. It is bankrupt, and even oil revenues will not solve this problem. It has little popular support. It cannot win on the battlefield. It remains internationally isolated. Relations with Eritrea have not improved as expected, with the breakdown of joint security talks. There are still major obstacles to a normalisation of relations with Egypt.

Turabi will presumably gamble on achieving reconciliation with conservative members of the NDA especially Sadiq el Mahdi, in order to achieve some legitimacy especially in the Arab world. However, although the splits in the NDA are now more visible than ever before (see below), it is far from certain that Turabi would be able to achieve this reconciliation. The outstanding issues for agreement are still very complex, and Sadiq and DUP leader Mohamed Osman al Mirghani would be unable to return to Khartoum without the support of substantial sections of their constituencies.

In the immediate future, as Turabi savours his success, the solidity of the regime is not in question. But as time passes, its grip on power is more questionable. Alliances may shift, and developments in Khartoum are unpredictable. It is possible that Turabi's success may be short-lived. That, however, will depend on the skill of the opposition at political mobilisation.

## **Will the NDA Split?**

The NDA was conspicuously unable to take advantage of the divisions within the Sudan Government in the first eight months of 1999. Now they remain very disunited. This is illustrated by the responses to the 19 September raid on the oil pipeline near Atbara.

The raid was a major setback to the Sudan Government. Potentially it was a huge card in the hands of the NDA, to press for a better deal in the Libyan-mediated peace talks, as well as a blow to Khartoum's hopes for oil revenue income. The Sudan Government predictably condemned the attack. The Egyptians appeared ready to sympathise with Khartoum and asked two prominent NDA military leaders (Gen Abdel Rahman Saeed, head of the Legitimate Command, and Brig Abdel Aziz Khalid, head of SAF) to leave Egypt at once. Remarkably, however, Sadiq el Mahdi then apologised for the attack, and agreed with the leader of the DUP, Mawlana Mohamed Osman al Mirghani, to hold an NDA meeting in Cairo. The alternative proposal, for an NDA meeting in Kampala, Uganda, did not materialise.

These developments give much support to those who believe that the conservative NDA leaders (Sadiq and Mirghani) are ready to deal directly with Turabi, and leave the other elements

of the NDA out in the cold. However, if either of the senior NDA leaders were to unilaterally return to Khartoum, they would risk dividing their own parties.

The major imponderable question in the opposition is the capacity of the internal opposition. In recent months the internal forces have shown resilience, courage and political skill. Their task in the immediate future will be more difficult, but the situation in Khartoum remains inherently unpredictable.

These developments also give encouragement to the hardline external opposition view that the government cannot be trusted and the only option is intensified armed struggle. In the short term this interpretation may be justified. But it would be unfortunate if continued struggle is not combined with creative and constructive political engagement, laying down terms for a settlement and a transition to democracy and peace, and building a coalition and a political (as opposed to military) strategy for achieving that.

## **Options for the Southerners**

In the current situation, one might expect that the SPLA leadership—the veterans of opposition, without whom no deal can be made—might take the political initiative. Unfortunately, the SPLA is reacting to events rather than leading them. This is an established pattern.

Developments in Khartoum and with the NDA have left the SPLA in a very difficult position. Since the activation of the NDA in 1994, the SPLA leadership has concentrated on building close links with the leaderships of the Umma and DUP. It has neglected the smaller parties, including those representing the marginalised constituencies, despite the fact that these parties (Beja Congress, SAF, SFDA) have greater strategic interests in common with the SPLA. Now, when the identity of interests between these parties and the SPLA is clear, there is much work to be done to repair relations, and it is too late to build a strong coalition.

In the last five years, the SPLA leadership has also failed to clarify its position on self-determination for the South. It has taken a variety of positions that are in fact contradictory (the Asmara Declaration, the Cairo Declaration, the confederal proposal, the inclusion of the Nuba Mountains and southern Blue Nile in ‘New Sudan’). Throughout, however, the constituency of the SPLA remains the South and the Nuba Mountains, and to a lesser degree, Southern Blue Nile.

The SPLA leadership has also consistently inflated the prospects of the military option. Repeatedly, the leadership has promised victories, and has held out the prospect of massive outside support. Recently, US Congressional resolutions and statements from the State Department have been interpreted as meaning that the US is coming to the rescue of the SPLA. There is already some scepticism about SPLA promises. Should US intervention fail to occur, then Southern popular impatience with prolonged war can only increase.

The SPLA leadership’s strongest card, when it comes to stalling on self-determination, is the Nuba. During 1999, the Nuba leadership, inside and outside the SPLA, has been active in consulting the Nuba constituency and seeking opinions about possible settlements to the conflict. These opinions appear to converge on a view that sees the situation of the Nuba as separate from, but parallel to, the situation of the South. There is no significant Nuba support for the Nuba to be part of a ‘greater South’ entity; rather, the Nuba are seeking autonomy within a united Sudan.

The SPLA leadership is now finding that it must rely on its core constituency: the Southerners. A wide spectrum of Southerners is demanding that the SPLA clarify its position on self-determination.

The basic problem for the SPLA is that, although its basic goals are still remote and its political justification for fighting is as great as ever, its capacity to wage war has not increased and is not likely to do so. Can the South sustain protracted war any longer? It is remarkable how much suffering the Southern Sudanese have been able to withstand, but the social fabric of the South has been massively damaged by the war, and it is unlikely that the SPLA has the capability to mobilise enough to inflict a decisive defeat on the government forces.

The SPLA needs to develop its detailed programme for settlement of the war, including the implementation of self-determination, interim arrangements, economic rehabilitation, etc., and to build a wide constituency of support among Southerners across the board in support of these proposals. The revised structure for the IGAD peace talks provides a framework in which the SPLA can develop its positions.

## **Prospects for Peace**

The current scenario, with a hardline government and a deeply divided opposition, does not augur well for peace.

The peace process exists because of the political calculations of the Sudan Government and the various opposition leaders that their interests are served by engaging in a peace process—or in some cases, that their interests would be damaged by withdrawing (or being seen to withdraw) from an existing peace process. There is virtually no goodwill and very little trust between the parties. In fact, goodwill and trust are dwindling rather than increasing.

Considerations of realpolitik indicate that the most likely peace scenario at present consists of a high-level deal between Turabi and the conservative NDA leadership, followed by a reluctant accommodation with the SPLA. Such a deal would not be supported by Eritrea or Ethiopia, and would not be internally stable, because it would exclude substantial parts of the NDA.

In this situation, the only viable strategy—the least worst option—is to continue to push for incremental progress at IGAD, while doing the utmost to mitigate the human suffering caused by the war.

A strategy to support the peace process therefore depends on exerting pressure on the parties. No opportunity should be lost to hammer home the message that Sudan cannot afford to continue the war, and that a settlement must involve representation of all forces and a democratic constitution. Condemnation of one side may be justified, but any condemnations should be presented in such a way that the other side cannot take this as an endorsement of their war effort.

The new structure of the IGAD talks provides an opportunity for pressing for concrete concessions from the government. This also requires the SPLA to do some hard work in developing its detailed positions.

The Sudan Government needs to make more concessions than the opposition. It has been able to escape confronting the issues up to now because of the weakness of the opposition negotiating strategy and opposition disunity. Opposition scepticism towards the government is justified, and is manifest in continuing armed struggle and refusal to contemplate a ceasefire

unless the main political issues are settled. External facilitators should recognise this and help ensure that the Sudan Government faces the necessary issues.