

Prospects for Peace in Sudan

Briefing: June 2009

Overview

1. The central challenge facing Sudan is the exercise of self-determination in southern Sudan. The default scenario is violent contest over the partition leading to major disaster. A decision on whether and how to proceed with self-determination must be made soon.
2. The Sudanese problem may be insoluble. The NCP has neither the time nor resources to settle the problem on its own terms (which would entail a “buy in” solution) and has neither the capacity nor the will to make the concessions necessary to achieve a credible consensus with its adversaries. The SPLM is too weak and divided to be able to handle self-determination. The Darfurians have no incentive to come to an agreement with a government that they believe is about to implode. At present, the Chad/Zaghawa issue lacks a workable solution.
3. There are three major policy options: delay, effort to address the issues (in whatever sequence or prioritization) and preparing for the worst. “CPA implementation” is not a policy.
4. The customary Sudanese manner of dealing with such issues is delay, in the hope that the contradictions will resolve themselves in due course. Delay is not an easy option given the international investment in the CPA timetable and the time-limited legitimacy of the current arrangements among southerners. Delay would be credible only in the context of credible efforts to resolve the outstanding issues.
5. Effort to resolve the key issues requires prioritization. Should effort focus on the centre of gravity of the Sudanese problem (self-determination), turning to the resolution of secondary issues (Darfur, southern governance) thereafter? Or should the secondary issues be tackled first, thereby clarifying the central question of unity or separation? Or should there be a doubled effort to crack all the issues at once? Whatever decision is taken, it should be guided by the realities that (a) international engagement can only influence Sudanese outcomes at the margin and (b) Sudanese political processes are severely constrained.
6. The possibility of a worst-case outcome remains the most probable. Anticipatory crisis management is required.
7. A U.S.-A.U. partnership is the sine qua non for any effective international engagement.

The Challenge of 2011

8. The central challenge facing Sudan is the exercise of self-determination in southern Sudan. The timing and options are detailed in the CPA. If it goes ahead the outcome of the vote is not in doubt: Sudan will be partitioned. Success demands that the exercise is legitimate, consensual and orderly. The political conditions are not propitious for fulfilling these requirements.

9. State partition is a difficult option in the best of times, and Sudan is far from the best of times. A formidable amount of political business needs to be transacted in the limited time available. Three quarters of the way from the CPA signature to the referendum, less than half of the political business is complete. Huge issues lie ahead which are intrinsically complex and can distract from the core question. These issues include economic crisis, elections and the formation of a new government, the three areas, the ICC, humanitarian access in Darfur. The informal political business is equally important. This centres upon a compact among the elites of north and south to identify their core common interests and work to sustain them.

10. At current rates of political bargaining success on both formal political process and elite compact cannot be achieved. However it is possible that the imminence of catastrophe will concentrate political minds and accelerate political bargaining such that a new dispensation can be achieved at the requisite moment.

11. Currently “CPA implementation” is fetishized by the SPLM/GoSS and internationals, which like to pretend that implementation of the CPA will resolve Sudan’s problems. For many secondary CPA provisions, such as security arrangements, fiscal arrangements, border demarcation, etc., this is a fair approach. But in reality, *implementation of the core CPA provision—self-determination—is the problem*. The referendum on self-determination is an alien process in the Sudanese political tradition: it is a deadline bound non-negotiable all-or-nothing exercise in popular sovereignty. By contrast, Sudanese politics is characterized by delay, recursive negotiation, indeterminacy and elite bargaining. But until there is an alternative to the referendum, it is in the parties’ interests to focus on the manageable secondary issues and avoid the unmanageable central one.

12. The default scenario is violent contest over the partition of the country, with conflict within the south, in the transitional areas (especially the Nuba Mountains) and in any other part of the country which is not at peace (e.g. Darfur). The outcome in the south could be a new state which can only sustain itself with indefinite political and financial commitment from its neighbours and the international community. In the north it could be the political annihilation of SPLM constituencies and an embittered part-nation unable to reconcile or move towards democracy. The risks of a regionalized armed conflict should also not be overlooked.

13. There are three major policy directions: (a) delay, (b) increased effort to address the issues (in whatever sequence or prioritization) and (c) preparing for the worst.

The Challenges of 2009-10

14. The NCP's preferred option is a "buy in" solution in which the material interests of provincial elites, including the SPLM, converge on the status quo. Achieving this demands time and resources to cut the necessary bargains. During the recent boom years, the NCP and security chiefs had the capacity to purchase loyalty across the whole spectrum of provincial elites. However, it had not proceeded far with this policy. With the fiscal crunch, the level of provincial violence has risen as some provincial elites (and their armed followers) consider themselves underpaid. In response NCP has reverted to an ad hoc policy of concentrating resources on problem areas in fire brigade style. At best this will contain some of the upsurges in violence: the option of an inclusive political compact that encompasses all the elites is now more remote.

15. During the boom years, the SPLM/GoSS dispensed immense amounts of patronage within the south. However, the SPLM/GoSS was less careful in its finances than the NCP, making its governance of southern Sudan more fragile. Approximately three quarters of the \$8 bn in GoSS finance over the last four years remains to be accounted for. The SPLM/GoSS has now run very short of money. The immediate outcomes have been an upsurge in rural violence by armed units which are no longer paid and the deepening of internal fissures within the SPLM/GoSS.

16. The fiscal crunch has weakened the SPLM/GoSS more than it has weakened the NCP. But the NCP's preferred buy-in solution is not in immediate prospect. The SPLM/GoSS strategy had the effect of inflating the price of loyalty demanded by southern provincial elites to an unsustainable level: the resources needed to contain the current governance crisis in the south exceed those available. Northern constituents also have first claim on NCP patrimony. The NCP prefers to run southern Sudan on the cheap. The likely outcome is that both NCP and SPLM/GoSS will selectively rent the allegiance of specific armed groups, each playing divide-and-rule.

17. Some NCP leaders recognize that the party needs to make major political concessions in order to achieve credible substantive agreements with its adversaries across the country. However, they face major problems. Many in the NCP leadership are deeply sceptical about making any concessions, anticipating that the government's enemies (domestic and international) will simply take advantage and not reciprocate. Others are focused on the material benefits of the status quo and internal factional competition. Equally importantly, both civil and military institutions have become dysfunctional so that a command issued from the top needs to be negotiated at every stage of the hierarchy. Vast effort is needed to implement a policy and there is a hefty discount rate on every instruction issued. Most NCP operatives quickly revert to purchasing patch-up solutions rather than trying to reform the institutions.

18. The SPLM is too weak and divided to be able to handle self-determination. In the south, the SPLM has a large but ill-organized constituency. In the north, it has several ethnic constituencies (notably the Nuba and Blue Nile) and has a party structure that, albeit small, is better organized than in the south. The northern sector of SPLM knows

that southern separatism spells political oblivion (as Pres. Bashir has recently made clear). The northern sector possesses a political veto over SPLM decision-making. The southern sector of SPLM knows that the longer it fails to come out in support of separation, the more popular support will leach towards openly separatist parties which will challenge it in important constituencies. Meanwhile the GoSS mis-handling of administration and finances has made a new state in Juba less attractive. These internal problems reflect the historical development of the SPLM as an army rather than a political movement, and its manifesto commitment to a united, secular Sudan with self-determination as only a fall-back option. The implication is that the SPLM cannot navigate the issue of self-determination: faced with making a decision on supporting unity or separation it will split or implode.

19. In Darfur, the SLM has failed to make the transition from an armed uprising to a political movement. It depends upon rents derived from international attention and lacks the political infrastructure to unite and move towards an agreement. If the SLM leaders do join a peace process they may find that the “negotiation rents” they obtain through participation are more rewarding than the anticipated gains of a share in power. Meanwhile Darfur has been isolated in Sudan’s national political processes and the SLM is unprepared for participation in elections or national debates. Finally, its leaders have no incentive to come to an agreement with a Government of National Unity that they believe cannot survive.

20. JEM has become the vanguard for a Zaghawa elite that has political (security and commercial) interests in Chad, CAR, Libya and Sudan. JEM has made a huge gamble, that it can seize a stake in state power commensurate with its ambitions. Zaghawa hold on N’djamena and Bangui is insecure and these state centres are too small in any case. The Zaghawa could not hold Darfur in the face of hostility from Arab and Fur, and even a unified Darfur region is too small for it. The Chad, CAR and Darfur crises can only be resolved when the political interests of the Zaghawa elite are settled, and that requires a compact between the Zaghawa elite and the NCP and its associated riverain commercial elite.

The Option of Delay

21. The customary Sudanese manner of dealing with complicated issues is delay, in the hope that the contradictions will resolve themselves over the course of time. Today, the items on the formal and informal Sudanese political agenda are too many and too complex to be resolved given the existing capacity of the political system to process issues. July 2009 marks the three-quarter point between the CPA (January 2005) and the scheduled date of the referendum (January 2011). Less than half of the necessary political business has been done, both in terms of reaching formal benchmarks and in terms of informal political bargains. The political system is not speeding up.

22. Delay in the referendum is not an easy option given the international investment in the CPA timetable and the fact that the legitimacy of the SPLM GoSS among southerners depends on delivering on self-determination. Delay would be credible only if proposed

by the SPLM/GoSS in the context of credible efforts to resolve the outstanding issues. The SPLM/GoSS will pay a high price for proposing delay and will need to be compensated.

23. It might be possible to engineer a rapid acceleration of the political process, using an intensive bargaining process among the principals in the context of the elections, currently scheduled for 2010. This would depend upon the readiness of the NCP and SPLM to reach agreements on the key issues under time pressure. It would require a small and closed forum and a skilled, well-briefed and energetic mediator with the full backing of Africa and the U.S. Even under optimal circumstances this would be a gamble, but the option warrants careful exploration.

Prioritization and Sequencing

24. The sequencing of tackling Sudan's political problems poses a dilemma. Should effort focus on the centre of gravity of the Sudanese problem (self-determination), and then turn to the resolution of secondary issues (Darfur, southern governance)? The principal difficulty with this approach is that at present there is no strong leadership on among either party prepared to make the strategic choices necessary to resolve the issue. The framing of the question as "implementing the CPA," as though the completion of the agreement would represent a solution to Sudan's national crisis, runs the risk of allowing all parties to avoid dealing with the fundamental issue. It would take either a concerted international effort (jointly led by Africa and the U.S.) to allow the parties to revisit the CPA, or a political crisis. A single-minded focus on this issue runs the risk that, in the time it takes to move towards a resolution, other crises will derail the effort.

25. An alternative is to tackle the secondary issues first, beginning with Darfur, thereby clearing the way to grapple with the central question. The danger of this is that the Darfur issue is sufficiently complicated, and the stakeholders (domestic and international) sufficiently disorganized or contradictory, that no outcome will be delivered in the time available. In addition, if the Darfur issue remains unresolved when the major national questions (elections, self-determination) rear their heads, both sets of issues could become intractable. Despite the illogic and the hazards, however, international politics has determined that Darfur should be tackled first.

26. Numerous tactical issues arise in seeking to resolve the Darfur crisis rapidly, including the role of Chad (and hence France), the stalled Doha process, the inadequacies of the armed movements, the need for Darfur Arab representation, etc. The movements, especially JEM, do not have any interests in a resolution before it is clear how the national issues will be settled. A key question will be deadlines. In the past, deadlines have not worked, but the Darfur crisis cannot be allowed to drag on in such a way that it jeopardizes national political processes. All experience and analysis indicates that the Darfur crisis cannot be settled given the current configuration, and that a process of realignment will take months if not years.

27. Whatever decision is taken, it should be guided by the reality that international engagement can only influence Sudanese outcomes at the margin. The resources deployable by the domestic political actors are far greater than those that can be effectively used by the internationals, and they are used with greater skill. Another reality is that the space for possible outcomes is tightly constrained. Sudanese political processes are subject to severe limitations, including the existence of issues on which no agreement is possible, and constraints on the implementation of governmental decisions.

28. For reasons related to international, especially U.S. politics, Darfur has become the priority issue for international engagement in Sudan. Efforts to reorder the priorities towards the north-south issue have not yet succeeded. If this prioritization prevails then the international preference to delay or abandon self-determination has already been made by default. Under the shadow of an uncompleted Darfur initiative, which consumes most international energy, the prospects of a legitimate, orderly and consensual exercise in self-determination are remote indeed.

Preparing for the Worst

29. The most probable outcome of the next two years is a contested and disorderly partition of Sudan, while the Darfur conflict remains unresolved and new armed conflict occurs in south Kordofan. Vocal opinion in north America and Europe will demand policies that take the moral high ground and punish Khartoum while responding to humanitarian needs. The AU PSC response will contain a sound political analysis but will be too late.

30. Anticipatory crisis management is required. Diplomatic efforts which have focused on steps towards achieving the best (CPA implementation) should also be directed towards preparing for the worst. The focus should be on facilitating elite compacts within Sudan to sustain dialogue and establish basic mechanisms for articulating common interests. This should also include identifying warning signs of the parties making ready for armed conflict and preparing the required political and peacekeeping responses ahead of time.

International Constraints and Options

31. A restored relationship of mutual confidence between Khartoum and Washington DC is essential if there is to be any progress. A bilateral agreement between Sudan and the U.S. is the prerequisite for any workable agreements on domestic issues including revisiting the CPA and peace in Darfur.

32. International advocacy on Sudan has had several unfortunate side effects. One is that some leaders in the SPLM and Darfur believe that the U.S. is capable, and ought to be ready, to guarantee solutions to their problems, including providing the necessary guarantees for an independent south Sudan. A second is that these parties prefer to negotiate with Khartoum through the intermediary of Washington DC rather than directly, an approach that cannot lead to sustainable outcomes. One of the challenges for

U.S. policy is to downgrade the expectations of Sudanese domestic actors and to serve as a facilitator of a domestically-driven negotiation process instead of negotiating simultaneously U.S. bilateral interests and serving as a proxy for weak national opposition parties. A third is that U.S. policy is pushed towards taking on too many secondary issues and trying to micromanage.

33. Britain, France and the UN have become less significant due to their failure to surmount the policy challenge posed by the ICC. France has also found itself entrapped by a dead end policy on Chad. China and Russia have limited influence.

34. The African Union has positioned itself as the principal multilateral intermediary with the Sudan Government. Its weaknesses are well known. Its strength is its capacity to analyze and function politically and to grasp the overall problem of Sudan, correctly identifying the priorities and risks. Africa knows it will pay a high price for errors made in international policy towards Sudan. This places the AU as the essential partner in facilitating international engagement.

Implications

35. The single most important question for Sudan is whether the referendum on self-determination should proceed. This question must be answered soon. Either decision bears considerable costs and risks. The process of coming to the decision is nearly as important as the decision itself: it must be a Sudanese-led process.

36. If the answer is “yes” to the referendum, then workable mechanisms of state partition must be engineered without delay. At present, “CPA implementation” is locking the Sudanese political process into an elaborate and cumbersome set of mechanisms which, while providing agreed mechanisms to address important problems, is not sufficiently speedy or effective to resolve the basic issue. At some point in the near future, an elite compact must be hammered out to ensure that the process of partition meets minimum requirements of legitimacy, consent and orderliness. Neighbouring countries will need to be involved. Huge effort will also need to be invested in governance structures in southern Sudan.

37. If the answer is “yes” then new approaches will be needed to tackle the Darfur crisis. To date, no serious thought has been given to the implications of trying to resolve the Darfur conflict in the shadow of partition.

38. If the answer is “no” or “delay” then major political capital must be invested, by the U.S., Africa and the SPLM/GoSS in legitimizing the abandonment of a major commitment. Given that the decision must be made by the SPLM/GoSS, which will pay the price, this is where effort must be invested. The most propitious moment should be identified for making the decision.

39. If the answer is “no” or “delay” then there is time and opportunity to address the other major issues facing Sudan, including Darfur, democratization, governance of the south

and the transitional areas, national reconciliation and healing. These issues are sufficiently complicated to consume political effort for some years.

40. If, for circumstantial political reasons, the U.S. and A.U. have decided that the resolution of Darfur is the priority, then a mechanism must be found for delaying the national elections and delaying or abandoning the referendum.