

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

BRIEFING

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Overview

Prospects for peace in Sudan are currently looking rather dim. The resolution of the internal power struggle in Khartoum in favour of Dr Hassan al Turabi puts the possibility of real progress at IGAD into serious doubt. The disarray in the NDA shows no sign of lessening and the SPLM seems unable to take the political initiative. The visit of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to the region may have clarified the US position, but it has not made that position any more likely to succeed.

However, there are processes at work that may in the longer term help to resolve the impasse. First, the internal implications of the ascendancy of Turabi are unknown. While he and his supporters may be in office, their real power over events in Khartoum is untested. Second, the Southern political constituency is belatedly becoming well-organised. The Mukono Conference and declaration are a landmark in the emergence of a consensus on both basic issues and practical steps among all Southern forces. Third, Sudan has not managed to break out of its regional and international isolation, nor to resolve its enormous economic difficulties.

Turabi's Ascendancy and its Implications

For the first eight months of 1999, internal divisions within Khartoum encouraged leading figures in the government to seek external allies. While Gen. Bashir and his group warmed to the IGAD process, Dr Turabi approached Sadiq el Mahdi. With the opposition unable to capitalise on the splits in Khartoum, the NDA itself became more split than ever over how to respond to the government's overtures. And in September, Dr Hassan al Turabi emerged the victor of the internal power struggles in Khartoum. As Secretary General of the National Congress and Speaker of the National Assembly, Turabi has gathered an unprecedented degree of power in his own hands. He appoints the cabinet and sets the legislative agenda—and because his party has no real opposition, this gives him as much formal power as he could wish. Turabi's push to create the position of an executive Prime Minister marginalises the Presidency even further. General Bashir's consolation prize is that he will be the only National Congress candidate for the Presidency in 2002—little more than a figurehead position.

However, Bashir's power has not vanished entirely. Turabi still needs the army and security forces. While the army no longer exists as a politically independent entity, Gen. Bashir

and his group still have standing among many officers. Bashir's continuing influence is witnessed by the fact that the composition of the High Committee for Peace—entrusted with dialogue with the opposition—contains chiefly Bashir supporters. But whether or not Bashir would be able to deliver any deal negotiated by his supporters is an open question.

The differences between Turabi and Bashir should not conceal their common interests. Notably, neither is ready to agree to a separation of religion and the state.

The resolution of the internal power struggle in Khartoum will in itself strengthen the government. But it cannot resolve the major problems the government faces, and his triumph also creates new problems for the regime.

- The Sudan Government is bankrupt. Oil revenues of up to \$300m per year will provide a little ready cash but will not solve the fundamental economic problem.
- The regime lacks popular support and legitimacy. If Turabi succeeds in bringing Sadiq el Mahdi back to Khartoum then it will obtain some of the electoral legitimacy that it lacks. But it is unlikely that Sadiq el Mahdi will be ready to extend this legitimacy to Turabi without achieving some major concessions. Presently, internal reform (the implementation of the provisions of the 1999 Constitution that provide for multiple parties) has stalled. The internal opposition remains mobilised to undermine the regime inside Khartoum.
- The Sudan armed forces cannot win on the battlefield. The exhaustion and demoralisation of the armed forces was one of the reasons why security officers within the regime were anxious for a peace deal. Turabi will not be able to reinvigorate the armed forces, even with new supplies of armaments.
- Their hopes for exploiting the Ethio-Eritrean conflict have not materialised, as both governments have maintained support to the NDA and have remained deeply suspicious of Khartoum. Joint Eritrea-Sudan security talks broke down in September and there is renewed tension along their common border.

Internationally, Turabi's greatest strength is the improved relations with Egypt—manifest by the Egyptians' expulsions of the NDA's Brig. Abdel Aziz Khalid and Gen. Abdel Rahman Saeed. But substantial differences with Egypt remain which will have to be resolved if Egypt is to come with serious support for Khartoum. Libya's engagement in Sudan on terms favourable to Turabi cannot be taken for granted. The Libyan Foreign Ministry will only want to pursue a Sudanese peace initiative if it is reasonably comprehensive and has some hopes of success.

Turabi is also benefitting from the incoherence of US policy, or to be more precise, the incoherence of US policy statements. Strong and even bellicose statements by the US Congress on the issue of slavery have benefitted Turabi's relations with the Arab world and with the conservative elements in the NDA, all of whom are very sensitive to the slight on Arab identity consequent on the slavery allegations, and all of whom fear US support for a separate South Sudan. Madeleine Albright's statements in support of the NDA and longstanding US policy in favour of a united Sudan are given less prominence than Congressional resolutions and oped articles that may in fact carry far less real weight. For Turabi, these benefits will probably be short term.

Bashir's continuing influence over the peace negotiations opens up the possibility that he may try to outflank both Turabi and the external opposition with bold moves towards peace. We should not rule out the possibility that the High Committee for Peace may try to break the deadlock at IGAD by, for example, proposing a specific date for a referendum on self-

determination for the South. More widely, both Bashir and Turabi know that their positions are tenable only if they succeed in making some rapprochement with the external opposition.

The NDA in Disarray

Does the NDA have a strategy for taking power? And a strategy for using what power it may succeed in gaining? Most evidence seems to point towards an Alliance disabled by its internal divisions, which can only cooperate when it is forced to do so by pressure of adverse circumstances. But the Alliance should be seen, not as a front but as a diverse set of forces with very different methods. Sometimes this enables it to function more effectively than a single organisation could.

The NDA has missed a series of historic opportunities. In 1996 and 1997 it could have taken advantage of the support offered by Ethiopia and Eritrea to humble the government, and in 1998-99 it could have exploited the Sudan Government's internal disarray to press home its advantage. The 1995 Asmara Declaration, supposedly the minimum programme of the whole opposition, could have been the starting point for developing further detailed programmes. In fact, even the Asmara Declaration seems to be under question. Statements such as the Cairo Declaration and the SPLM position on confederation presented to IGAD contradict the Asmara Declaration rather than building upon it. Some suspect that the planned NDA meeting in Kampala will be an occasion for a further declaration that will undermine Asmara.

The NDA is not set up to function as a political movement. It has no centralised information system. Meetings are infrequent. The long-promised NDA conference on interim arrangements has yet to be held. Splits within the NDA leadership are increasingly in the open, especially after the Geneva meeting between Turabi and Sadiq el Mahdi. There is no common front even on basic issues such as where to meet. For example, some of the NDA leadership was ready to meet in Cairo even after the expulsions of Gen. Saeed and Brig. Khalid. Such events fuel speculation that the more conservative NDA leaders are ready to do a separate deal with the Sudan Government.

These differences reflect profound differences of policy and aim. Despite the formal NDA commitment to the separation between state and religion and the recognition of the right of self-determination for Southern Sudan, there are clear indications that senior leaders within the NDA—specifically within the Umma and DUP—would prefer to keep an association between Islam and the Sudanese state and are happy to accept self-determination only if it automatically leads to unity. The readiness of these leaders to distance themselves from a clear commitment to these principles is encouraged by the failure of the SPLM to take a firm stand on the Asmara Declaration itself.

Other forces within the NDA argue that the only option is continued war. They are ready to jettison those who are talking to the government and continue the armed struggle for a new Sudan nonetheless. They argue, why should we abort the struggle just when our enemies are beginning to crumble? (This argument loses some credence because, at every stage in the war since 1983, there have been some who made this case, and there has been no victory yet.)

An alternative view of the NDA would recognise its diversity of aim and method as one of its strengths. Northern Sudan is not well-suited to guerrilla war for numerous reasons, and the best prospects for the NDA achieving power may lie in exploiting political opportunities inside Sudan, combined with external pressure, rather than a liberation struggle. If the NDA can exploit

the political weaknesses of the government by mobilising its constituencies within Sudan and effect a change of government that way, it will be less painful and more effective than an armed overthrow. Under this analysis, the apparent disarray in the NDA reflects a working through of political processes and a division of labour between the different components in the alliance.

Currently, the interpretation of the NDA that sees it as weak and divided seems to be more accurate. But it is too early to write off the NDA. There are those in the leadership who are trying to conduct a balancing act, maintaining some unity and keeping up relations with all the forces in the region. Also it is important not to underestimate the resilience of the NDA parties' constituencies inside Sudan, and not to underestimate the tactical political skills of the party leaders.

What should be done to invigorate the NDA so it can play a constructive role? The NDA owes the Sudanese people, and the friends of Sudan, a clear and detailed commitment to a political programme, including a strategy for peace and thereafter.

The Southern Dilemma

The SPLA/M is now facing the consequences of its political strategy over recent years, which has left it ill-prepared to deal with the current situation.

1. The SPLA/M has cultivated selective alliances within the NDA, targeting the Umma and DUP and neglecting the smaller parties that represented the marginalised constituencies, despite the fact that these parties (e.g. Beja Congress, SAF, SFDA) have greater strategic interests in common with the SPLA. The merits of that strategy are clear: the Umma and DUP were the parties that most needed encouragement to stay in the NDA. However, now, when the coalition between the SPLA/M and Umma/DUP is under question, and when the identity of interests between these smaller parties and the SPLA/M is clear, there is much work to be done to repair relations, and it is too late to build a strong coalition.
2. The SPLA/M leadership has consistently failed to clarify its position on self-determination for the South. While this has helped it to retain its unity of command between the South and the Nuba Mountains/Southern Blue Nile, it has raised suspicions among many Southerners about the leadership's ultimate intentions. One of the reasons for this has been that the SPLA/M is supposedly waiting for the Sudan Government to clarify its position on religion and the state, which according to the IGAD DoP is a prior question to self-determination. But many Southerners are becoming adamant that the question of self-determination should not await a resolution of the religion and the state question.
3. The SPLA/M has not been successful in mobilising a broad front of Southern Sudanese in favour of the basic interests of the South (since 1992 centered on the demand for self-determination). There are many reasons for this. Primarily, the SPLA/M has not tried to do so. The leadership has not cast its agenda as primarily Southern but instead as national, and it has not sought to cooperate with Southerners except those within its own ranks.
4. The SPLA/M leadership has repeatedly exaggerated the prospects for the military option, usually on the basis of promises of outside support. Dr Garang's recent meeting with Mrs Albright seems to be cast in the same light for internal consumption, although this was not in fact the outcome of the meeting. On the ground, there are doubts that the SPLA/M is capable of inflicting a decisive military defeat on the government.

The divisions within the NDA are leaving the SPLA/M isolated, forcing the leadership to face the reality that it must consult with its core constituency in the South. Meanwhile, many Southerners are feeling that their interests are not represented at a leadership level.

The lack of political preparedness of the SPLA/M means that, should the Sudan Government make a credible commitment to implementing self-determination, then the SPLA/M may not be in a position to make a constructive response. Such a failure would disappoint many Southerners. The SPLA/M leadership has also failed to rule out alternative proposals for the South that may circumvent self-determination, such as confederation, keeping alive the hopes of unionists in both government and in NDA leadership.

In recent months, civilian Southern leaders have begun to organise to represent their interests and those of their constituents. This process began in April when the former Vice President and Southern Sudanese elder, Abel Alier, floated his own peace proposal. His proposal was then put in the hands of the Union of Sudan African Parties (USAP), the grouping that represented the Southern parties in the last parliament (1986-9). A series of consultations in Europe was followed up by a USAP conference in Mukono, Uganda, in late October. At this meeting, USAP affirmed its continued membership of the NDA, its commitment to the Asmara Declaration and to the IGAD Declaration of Principles, and detailed its position on self-determination, interim arrangements, referendum law, etc. It bypassed the issue of religion and the state and moved directly to tackling self-determination. SPLM observers were present and supported the final statement.

A group of concerned Southerners from both inside and outside Sudan, including Bona Malwal of the Sudan Democratic Gazette, has also proposed a round-table conference for all Southern political forces. At a meeting in Geneva in early November, this proposal became more concrete. But it will not be easy for a broad consensus among Southerners outside to be translated into an effective, institutionalised political movement.

Currently, the SPLA/M leadership has responded positively to these developments. In due course this could enable the SPLA/M to collaborate with other Southern forces in presenting a strong and detailed position to IGAD, which represents a Southern consensus viewpoint. Should the SPLA/M follow this course, in the medium term, therefore the prospects for peace are likely to be strengthened.

The Nuba Dilemma

The SPLA/M's strongest reason for remaining ambiguous on the question of self-determination is the position of the Nuba (and by extension Southern Blue Nile). There is a substantial Nuba contingent within the SPLA and the SPLA controls a substantial part of the Nuba Mountains. The SPLA fears that accepting self-determination for Southern Sudan only would leave the Nuba SPLA exposed and at the mercy of Khartoum, and that accepting a different package for the Nuba would jeopardise the unity of command within the SPLA. These are valid fears. But several considerations suggest that the SPLA would be well-advised to seek a separate peace track for the Nuba and Southern Blue Nile:

- The Nuba are not Southerners, and any attempt to incorporate the Nuba within a ‘greater South’ would encounter opposition from both Nuba and Southerners, not to mention other northern forces (including the Arab groups that inhabit large areas of South Kordofan).
- As well as the Nuba in the SPLA, there are other Nuba political constituencies. Most of these are not well-organised at present, but there is an articulate alternative viewpoint (represented in the NAFIR newsletter) that argues for a separate but parallel deal for the Nuba, involving ‘internal self-determination’, i.e. autonomy.
- Many Southerners, eager for self-determination for the South, are beginning to suspect that the Nuba may be an obstacle to their hopes. If the SPLA leadership is seen to be sacrificing Southern aspiration for the Nuba there is the potential for dispute between the two constituencies.

Much of the discussion on peace in Sudan has treated the Nuba as a footnote, implicitly believing that if a deal is done in the South, then the Nuba will follow automatically. This is a mistake: the Nuba SPLA have the capacity to resist, and continued fighting in the centre of the country would destabilise any peace deal.

The international community has taken its first steps towards reassuring the Nuba, with the June 1999 OLS assessment mission to the SPLA-held areas, followed by a larger second mission in September. The expectations of a UN humanitarian programme now need to be met, as the first step towards establishing some UN credibility among the Nuba, which can be the basis for facilitating the search for a settlement.

Prospects for Peace

There are no serious immediate prospects for peace. The Sudan Government wants peace in the abstract, but its actual offers for peace are extremely modest. The NDA is fundamentally divided about the kind of peace that it wants. The revitalised IGAD process has yet to be tested (and every month of delay creates greater questions about its credibility, despite the US’s public affirmation of its importance). The Libyan-Egyptian initiative has a high degree of credibility among many NDA leaders and the internal opposition, but it is not currently making serious progress. This initiative is not dead, and should the IGAD process delay any further, or collapse, then it will be reinvigorated. While the northern parties within the NDA remain suspicious of the SPLA agenda, they will help keep the Libyan-Egyptian initiative alive as their own guarantee.

In the longer term, however, the outlines of a workable peace are as clear as they were a year ago. No peace will be possible without a very clear and specific commitment to self-determination for the South, and Southerners are becoming organised to demand this. The prospects for democratisation in Khartoum have suffered a serious reverse, but the struggle is far from resolved.

The immediate obvious steps for those concerned with peace in Sudan are clear: continue to push the IGAD peace process. This entails:

- Using pressure to try to keep Khartoum at the IGAD negotiating table;
- Encouraging the SPLA/M to develop detailed proposals to (at the minimum) challenge the government and (at the maximum) develop consensus on various modalities for achieving self-determination;

- Seek means whereby the northern parties at the NDA can also have a stake in the IGAD process and sign up to the IGAD Declaration of Principles;
- Seek a means whereby both Egypt and Libya can have an input into the IGAD process and have their interests represented there. (The involvement of Libya will not be popular in Washington, but it would be unfortunate if Libyan engagement were vetoed for that reason.)
- Translate the effort that has already been put into revitalising IGAD into an effective engagement with the parties themselves. The IGAD process badly needs a success, just to gain some credibility with the Sudanese public and the Libyans and Egyptians. It also needs a roadmap for how it is to proceed in the coming months.

The greatest danger to peace at the moment is that the Sudan Government will abandon IGAD (as it did in 1994), persuaded that it can cut a deal with the Umma and DUP leaderships with Egyptian or perhaps Libyan mediation, and then try to deal with a weakened and isolated SPLA. The IGAD partners do not seem to have a contingency plan for how to deal with that eventuality. But it would be foolish to ignore this possibility entirely.