

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

BRIEFING

JANUARY 2001

Overview

The elections held in December have not resolved the major issues facing President Bashir. His internal problems remain as pressing as ever. Attempts at reconciliation have not yet achieved the results hoped for by the Government, but the pressure and momentum for it remain strong. The Umma Party is tantalising the Government with the prospect of an agreement, but none has yet been made.

None of the peace processes have marked any developments, as the major parties await the implications of the elections in Sudan, the new U.S. administration, and the Ethio-Eritrea peace agreement.

Both the Government and the SPLA are gearing up for major military confrontation during the dry season that is now underway. With the Government mobilising very high levels of resources for the war, it is possible that the coming months will see important developments on the warfront in the South. Both sides appear to be counting on the other splitting or collapsing.

Achieving peace is becoming more difficult, not less. A comprehensive peace agreement remains a possibility while the NDA remains intact. But should the NDA split, as is possible, then North-North reconciliation will proceed, leaving the SPLA isolated as the sole significant external opposition, and forcing it to adopt an exclusively Southern agenda. For these reasons, it is important that pressure towards peace is exerted now, without delay.

The Elections and Aftermath

As expected, President Omer al Bashir decisively won the presidential election with a reported 86% of the vote. Former President Jaafar Nimeiri was second with just under 10%. The entire election was marked by apathy and disinterest among the Sudanese populace. The absence of any serious opposition has left the President without the convincing legitimacy and security for which he had hoped. The fact of the election and Bashir's victory is much less important than how the election is now interpreted in Khartoum, Cairo and elsewhere, and what steps President Bashir takes now. Among the indicators of an incomplete victory for Bashir are the following:

1. The Security Act has been amended and toughened. Previously, detention by the security forces was permitted for one month, after which it had to be extended by judiciary order. Now, a detainee can be held for three months, and the period can be extended without judicial review.

2. On 3 January, the State of Emergency was extended. Had the elections placed Bashir in the commanding position he anticipated, this and the amendment to the Security Act would not have been necessary.
3. On 5 January, security forces raided a meeting held by Hassan al Turabi and Ali el Haj, arresting sixty members of Turabi's party (not including the leader) on the grounds on owning illegal weapons. The arrests indicate the seriousness with which the Government continues to take the threat of Turabi's group; their readiness to take repressive actions against them; and the possibility of armed confrontation between the two Islamist groups.
4. The five internal NDA leaders and two of their lawyers arrested in early December remain in detention. The seven were detained as part of the crackdown following the Kassala raid. They were meeting with an American diplomat who was then expelled from the country.
5. Restrictions on opposition leaders meeting foreign diplomats have been established.

In addition, prior to the crackdown on Turabi's group, there were also indications of tension between President Bashir and Vice President Ali Osman Mohamed Taha. Ali Osman and his group are less ready to make compromises with the Northern opposition in pursuit of reconciliation. Given the confrontation with Turabi, however, it is unlikely that any such internal disagreements will surface publicly in the immediate future.

The Umma Position

Sadiq el Mahdi returned to Khartoum as promised to a tumultuous reception. At minimum two million people turned out in Khartoum and Omdurman to meet him. It was a dramatic display of the continuing loyalty of Umma Party supporters, and a marked contrast to the numbers who could be expected to give their public backing to Bashir or Turabi. Sadiq is confident that he still has the popular base to win a free election, and the turnout in Khartoum can only have reinforced this belief.

Some elements within the Umma Party, led by Mubarak al Fadl al Mahdi, have made it clear that they prefer to strike a deal with the Government and join a government of national reconciliation. Many of the Umma-aligned businessmen are sympathetic to this view. However, the wing of the Umma Party that has remained in Khartoum throughout the last ten years is opposed to this. Prominent among these are Dr Musa Adam Madibbu, Abdel Rahman Nugudallah and Bakri Adil. Sadiq el Mahdi is holding the ring between these two viewpoints. Sadiq himself is unlikely to take a personal position in a government unless he has been elected to it, but that does not rule out his approving others joining the government.

Sadiq issued an Eid message that gives a clue to his strategy. He called for peace and democracy, addressing himself to both Southern and Northern opposition leaders. He has condemned the NDA for the military attack on Kassala, and singled out the SPLA leader for alleged intransigence on peace. But he has also said that the Government is not serious about peace. Meanwhile, he says, dialogue with the Government will continue.

The NDA

The NDA continues to move painfully slowly. The alliance between NDA Chairman Mulana Mohamed Osman al Mirghani and SPLA C-in-C Dr John Garang remains the foundation of the NDA and the external opposition: while this remains intact, there are prospects of a comprehensive settlement. Should the alliance fracture, then there is no chance of an overall settlement.

Mulana al Mirghani is under considerable pressure from inside his own party to follow Sadiq el Mahdi and return to Khartoum. He has sent his brother Ahmed to Khartoum. Many of the DUP financiers and merchants are pressing for his return. But—in parallel to the case of the Umma—the senior DUP politicians who have remained in Khartoum during the last ten years are pressing for a comprehensive agreement as a prerequisite for a return. Mulana al Mirghani is trying hard to reconcile these conflicting constituencies. This has led to him distancing himself from the Kassala raid. He has said that it is not in the interests of the Sudanese people for fighting to occur in Eastern Sudan, and that it should stop.

Mulana al Mirghani's approach is not assisted by the painfully slow progress of the NDA in formulating its positions on key issues relating to peace. The NDA's progress towards full and active engagement with the various peace initiatives has been hampered by continuing lack of funds. The committees dealing with the constitution, interim arrangements and decentralisation have not met since the September Congress in Massawa.

More on the Kassala Raid and its Implications

As more details emerge about the NDA raid on Kassala, its implications are becoming more complex. Some important aspects of the raid include the following:

1. The attack was virtually the sole work of the SPLA. Other NDA forces were informed only at very short notice. Some forces that participated in the raid were not aware of the target until the attack was underway. Others were not involved at all. This contributed to some of the shortcomings of the attack, which could have achieved much more if available intelligence within all the NDA parties had been fully utilised.
2. The attack is being used for propaganda value by the most militant elements in the NDA, which are least keen on peaceful accommodation. Meanwhile, other elements within the NDA are sounding notably more pacific. Prominent among these is the DUP, including NDA Chairman Mulana Mohamed Osman al Mirghani.
3. NDA claims about the lack of Eritrean involvement in planning and executing the raid appear to be well-founded.
4. The level of repression and violence against the Southern and Nuba population in Eastern Sudan continues to escalate. Attacks and killings have spread from Kassala itself (especially the areas of Wau Naar and Kadugli) to Khasm el Girba and Gedaref, where there are substantial numbers of labourers from these areas.

The Call for Southern Unity

A number of Southern leaders led by a group calling itself Concerned Southerners, are calling for Southern unity. Prominent among them Bona Malwal and Abel Alier. With the real prospect of North-North reconciliation, the need for Southern unity is becoming greater than ever. There is a likely scenario in which North-North reconciliation proceeds, leading to the isolation of the SPLA as the sole remaining armed opposition, along with its enforced withdrawal from Eastern Sudan (as Eritrea would be unlikely to support an SPLA presence in its territory if the NDA were to fall apart). This would present the SPLA with a stark choice. Should it continue to fight for a secular, united 'New Sudan' in isolation from the Northern parties in the NDA? (It might have the symbolic participation of SAF in such an enterprise, but the SPLA would be essentially alone.) Or should it adopt a specifically Southern agenda? (This would strengthen the hand of Southern separatists within the Movement.)

This scenario has strengthened calls for a Southern forum in which a Southern consensus can be created. Such a consensus would almost certainly focus on the modalities for implementing self-determination for the South. To date, any moves in this direction have not been supported by the SPLM, on the grounds that it is a national movement and should not be seen to represent the South only, or primarily. However, this has resulted in the SPLM, which in fact is the military representative for the majority of the South, failing to articulate an agenda that corresponds with the demands of most Southerners. Increasingly, non-SPLM Southern leaders are feeling that it will be necessary to develop and articulate a consensus agenda for the South, either together with the SPLM, or without it. This consensus should then be the basis for internal reconciliation in the South.

A second impulse for this process arises because many are sceptical about how far the grassroots reconciliation sponsored by the New Sudan Council of Churches can go, without an overarching shared political agenda. Grassroots reconciliation remains vulnerable to the agendas of political leaders without such a consensus. This is illustrated by the court-martialling of ten commanders by Commander Peter Gadet. Those court-martialled include commanders aligned with other Nuer leaders including Paulino Matiep and Riek Machar.

Peace Initiatives

Nothing substantial has happened on any of the peace initiatives. The IGAD process has remained quiescent.

Progress on the Asmara Initiative and the joint Libyan-Egyptian Initiative has been slow. The Egyptians have been awaiting the outcome of the elections, anticipating that Bashir would use his victory to remove the remnants of Hassan al Turabi's followers.

Algerian President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika made a visit to Khartoum. This visit is symbolic of the increasing acceptance of Sudan in the Arab world, among countries that have formerly been very hostile to Khartoum's Islamist programme. President Bashir was clearly anticipating that the Algerians would take a role in the peace process. However, President Bouteflika handled the issue with his usual diplomatic skill, by reiterating his support for the existing joint Libyan-Egyptian Initiative and the IGAD process. Fresh from success in the Ethio-Eritrean peace negotiations, there is an outside chance that Algeria could play a role in a unified forum that brings together both regional initiatives.

Regional Dimensions

Most regional developments are moving in favour of the Sudan Government and to the disadvantage of the opposition.

The IGAD Summit in late November was preoccupied primarily with the issue of the re-admission of Somalia and the status of President Abdikassim Salat. Sudan is actively backing the new Somali administration, and Islamic philanthropic agencies that have been active in Sudan are increasingly active in Somalia too.

These links are likely to arouse the suspicions of the Ethiopian Government, which has been facing attempts at destabilisation from Islamist groups based in eastern Ethiopia. However, it is unlikely that Ethiopia will return to its pre-1998 policy of backing the armed opposition in Sudan. The rapid development of the oil industry in Sudan has created a permanent Ethiopian economic interest in Sudan. Sudanese oil supplies were critical in keeping Ethiopia fuelled during the summer of 2000, at critical periods during the war with Ethiopia. Sudan and Ethiopia have signed agreements providing Sudanese oil to Ethiopia on a long-term basis. In addition, oil reserves in Ethiopian territory in Gambela lie close to the Sudanese border and can in fact be exploited more cheaply and easily by drilling on the Sudanese side of the border. Hence any tensions between Khartoum and Addis Ababa are likely to be settled by diplomatic means, at least while current policies continue. (Military action against Islamists in eastern Ethiopia and Somalia is however very likely.)

The Eritrean Government remains committed to a normalisation of relations with Sudan. Some leading figures in Asmara have indicated that they were unhappy with the belligerence of the NDA over Kassala, and have suggested that the attack implied that the NDA was 'not serious' about peace.

The Ugandan parliament has passed a motion calling on President Museveni to cease support for the SPLA. This is unlikely to have any immediate effect because of the personal commitment of Museveni and senior figures in the government in Kampala. However, the SPLA would be well-advised to take the motion seriously. It indicates that the SPLA has failed to mobilise Ugandan public opinion behind its struggle, despite a spontaneous sympathy among Ugandans for the Southern Sudanese cause. In the context of the Ugandan elections in April, it shows that the SPLA needs to be careful and strategic in its approach to its presence in Uganda, rather than simply taking Ugandan support for granted.

The Battlefield

It is becoming abundantly clear that substantial amounts of oil revenue have been provided for military expenditure, greatly increasing the government's capacity to wage war. Meanwhile, securing the oilfields has become the overriding military aim of the Sudan Government. This has far-reaching ramifications for the war in the South and adjoining areas.

- In the Nuba Mountains, the Government has registered major successes in the Shatt-Kululu area in recent weeks. It is unprecedented for the army to achieve these gains so early in the dry season. This is an ominous augur for the coming months, during which time it is certain

that the Government will switch its attention to the SPLA's heartlands, attempting to divide the SPLA territory into isolated blocs and cut off air access from the South. This has occurred while the UN relief operation to the Nuba Mountains has been suspended. The Government strategy is presumably that it will have captured the airstrips by the time it gives the UN the go-ahead to resume its operations, which will mean that the Government can exercise effective control over all the relief supplies. The new SPLM Governor, Abdel Aziz al Hilu, is expected in the region soon. He will face a challenge in terms of organising the SPLA forces to retain their territory.

- In the South, the Government has a series of targets. The first to consolidate control of the Bentiu oilfields, where resistance is led by Cdr Peter Gadet. A second target is northern Bahr el Ghazal, where the Government will aim to reverse its setbacks of last year and extend its control. The first attacks are likely to be on Gogrial, and then Tonj and, should they succeed in capturing these towns, Rumbek. The SPLA will face a major challenge in repulsing a large-scale mechanised attack on this axis. Government intentions have been signalled by recent attempts to ban OLS flights from using Mapel, the airstrip near Rumbek.
- It is probable that the Government will continue to use aerial bombardment against civilian targets. This has proved an effective weapon against civilian morale in the South, preventing the normalisation of life in SPLM-controlled areas. Khartoum's intentions were signalled by a remark by the Foreign Minister, Mustafa Ismail, on 3 January, in which he said that the airforce would not be deterred by the SPLM using civilians as a 'human shield'.
- The Government is also likely to intensify the pressure on OLS and humanitarian agencies, by limiting flights. The closure of Mapel to OLS is an ominous sign. The aim is clearly to use hunger as a weapon, to demoralise the civilian population and encourage them to flee. The World Food Programme is already warning that 3.2 million people are at risk of hunger in Sudan.

The possibility of the Government achieving substantial military gains, or at the minimum achieving sufficient success to believe that military victory is possible, cannot be ruled out.

Possibilities for New U.S. Policy

What is the new Administration in Washington DC going to mean for Sudan? At present it is far too early to say, but it is certain that the individuals in the Clinton Administration who were most committed to a hardline policy against Khartoum will be gone. There are several possible alternatives for what may happen next:

1. The new Secretary of State will see Sudan as too complex and intractable to be a foreign policy priority, particularly in view of the crisis over Israel-Palestine and the need for keeping Egypt as a strategic ally. In these circumstances, the U.S. would be likely just to continue humanitarian aid, while giving lukewarm support to initiatives sponsored by the IGAD Partners' Forum.

2. The new Administration may 'give' the Sudan brief to the religious right, as part of an implicit deal that keeps the religious right quiet on more strategically important countries such as China and Saudi Arabia. This would result in the U.S. providing nominal assistance to the SPLA (perhaps \$10m per year), keeping the international debate focussed on slavery and religious discrimination. The \$10m assistance to the SPLA would be enough to keep the SPLA intact and fighting but would not 'level the playing field' (additional military resources that could be mobilised by the government are in the hundreds of millions), let alone enable the SPLA to gain a military advantage. The war would thus continue, to the advantage of the Sudan Government and at the cost of continued suffering among the people of Sudan.
3. It is not impossible that the new Administration may seek to support an energetic peace process in Sudan. This would be possible only in the context of initiatives already underway by the IPF.

Conclusion

Time is against peace in Sudan. Both parties, and especially the Sudan Government, are confident that military developments will work in their favour. The internal problems of both Government and opposition also make it more difficult for either of them to make decisive steps towards peace. Meanwhile, there are various scenarios over the coming months that would make it far more difficult to achieve a comprehensive peace:

- A split in the NDA.
- A major crisis in the Government.
- A significant military victory by either side in the South. Especially, a major territorial advance by Government forces would become a serious obstacle to seriousness about peace.

Any of the above would harden the positions of the parties. As a result, immediate and serious pressure on the parties to move towards sustained and sincere peace negotiations is important. The earlier this can be achieved the better: delay will make the peace process more difficult.

Two other developments will be important to any serious move towards peace:

1. Immediate moves towards respect for human rights by the Government, including the release of political detainees, halt to reprisals against Southerners and Nuba in Eastern Sudan, suspension of the State of Emergency and the abrogation of the Security Act.
2. Promotion of greater South-South dialogue around a range of political issues. The ongoing intra-Nuer conflict does not augur well for peace. Existing efforts for grassroots reconciliation should be augmented by higher-level political discussions.