

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

BRIEFING

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Overview

Sudan remains in the unenviable position of suffering a war that is achieving nothing other than destruction and loss of life. The positions of the principal parties on most of the substantive issues have converged significantly, but the modalities for bringing about successful negotiations have yet to be established. Each of the principal parties remains severely handicapped by internal weaknesses, that make it difficult for them to make bold steps towards an agreement without splitting their constituencies. In these circumstances, the easy option is to continue the conflict. But slowly the logic of settlement is gaining ground. The shift in the regional politics of the Horn, subsequent to Ethiopia's ascendancy over Eritrea, is likely to weaken those in the opposition who are dedicated to a military solution at all costs.

As for some months, the main international challenge for peace in Sudan is the unification of the mediation framework.

Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Eastern Front

The eruption of the Ethio-Eritrean war on 12 May and the defeat of Eritrean forces on the Badime-Barentu front in the following week had a dramatic impact on the war in eastern Sudan. Suddenly the lines of supply and rear bases of the NDA forces in the east were severely threatened. The situation was not helped by a reported armed standoff between SPLA units (which had been withdrawn from the front a month earlier and were stationed near Haicota in western Eritrea) and advancing Ethiopian army units. Following this, some SPLA units withdrew to a location north of Kassala, while some others withdrew to Keren. Redolent of the incidents in 1991, when SPLA forces continued to fight on the side of the defeated Dergue against the victorious EPRDF for two months after the former Ethiopian government had surrendered, this incident has soured SPLA-Ethiopian relations.

For the most part, the northern NDA parties remained neutral in the Ethio-Eritrean war. However, under severe pressure from their hosts, some NDA members in Asmara made pro-Eritrean statements, while others in Cairo called upon Ethiopia to withdraw from Eritrean territory (they had not earlier called for an Eritrean withdrawal from Ethiopian territory). While Ethiopia-NDA relations are not (yet) seriously damaged, the potential for Ethiopia taking strong action against the NDA forces that use its territory cannot be ruled out.

The Ethio-Eritrean war has not led to the worst-case scenario (for the NDA) of the complete collapse of the eastern front. This is partly because the weakness of the Sudan Government has prevented it from taking full advantage of the disorientation of the NDA forces there. The NDA still controls areas around Telkuk and Hamush Koreb, north of

Kassala. However, the Ethio-Eritrean war has seriously weakened those in the NDA who advocate a military solution, and it may cause further internal disarray in the NDA at a time when it can least afford it.

The humanitarian impact on eastern Sudan has grabbed the headlines with a sudden inflow of refugees into Kassala and its environs. This will necessitate an international humanitarian response including UNHCR, ICRC and a range of NGOs. It may also necessitate some formal or informal coordination between the Sudanese government and its Eritrean and Ethiopian counterparts on refugees and IDPs in this area.

Ethiopia's Options

Ethiopia's ascendancy in the Eritrean war opens the possibility of new alignments in the region.

One of Ethiopia's principal foreign policy problems in pursuing the war with Eritrea was the possible antagonistic reaction in the Arab world, which is instinctively pro-Eritrean and anti-Ethiopian. Ethiopia's long term perception of Egypt as its main strategic threat also colours Ethiopian policy in the Nile Basin. The main factor preventing Arab (specifically Libyan and Egyptian) diplomatic engagement in support of Eritrea was the neutrality of Sudan. Ethiopia therefore owes a diplomatic debt to Sudan, which is acting as its bridge to the Arab world.

In early June, Ethiopia wrote to the UN Security Council asking for the sanctions against Sudan, imposed in the wake of the June 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, to be reconsidered, on the grounds that circumstances had changed. Ethiopia (along with Egypt) brought the case to the Security Council, so their request carries weight.

It is probable that, as soon as the Eritrean war is settled, Ethiopia will be backing, with greater or lesser energy, a peaceful settlement in Sudan. One of Ethiopia's concerns will be that a north-north reconciliation under the LEI will leave Arab countries with a controlling stake in Khartoum, with a continuing war in the South, so that the conflict in Sudan is reduced to an Arab-African war, with international dimensions. If Ethiopia is left out of settlement, or worse, seen to be associated with a failed IGAD process, then Ethiopia's nightmare of an Arab-African confrontation across the Horn, with Ethiopia encircled by states aligned with Egypt, will come a step closer. How exactly these concerns play themselves out remains to be seen. Much will depend on the endgame in the war with Eritrea and the attitude of Egypt.

Bashir: the Internal Struggle Continues

President Bashir survived the critical week after the last showdown with Turabi in early May. But this still unresolved conflict remains his primary threat. His basic plan is to hang on until October when the elections will, he hopes, provide new legitimacy. In the meantime he hopes to gain international (especially Arab) legitimacy by reconciliation with the NDA leadership.

Bashir may have the executive, at national and regional level, on his side, but it is unclear whether he can actually use this executive to deliver any serious action against Turabi. This is not 1971, when President Nimeiri could use the army to crack down on his Communist former allies, and then seek new coalitions to rebuild his power base. In those days the army was a national institution and an independent power base. The same held for the civil service. Today, neither are independent, and it would be exceptionally difficult for

Bashir to use the army and security services against Turabi and his followers. More likely than a violent conflict is the simple paralysis of the system as army officers, party leaders and government officials simply find ways of not carrying out their orders. At all times, the level of efficiency and discipline in the Sudanese executive (military and civilian) when carrying out difficult orders is uncertain. This has allowed many unpopular measures to be quietly subverted by apathy during the last ten years. It may yet save the Islamists from an internal civil war—but at the cost of a government paralysed from top to bottom.

There are credible reports that the Government is considering amending the party law to allow for two parties with the same name. This would open the way for a National Congress-Turabi and a National Congress-Bashir. It would be a way of Bashir defusing the immediate threat posed by Turabi, at the cost of allowing him to organise politically, by touring the provinces and organising an election campaign. There are reports that Turabi is in the process of creating a party which would exploit this opportunity. Bashir's move is a recognition of the reality of power in Sudan today.

Bashir has formally written to NDA Chairman Mulana Mohamed Osman al Mirghani proposing a national dialogue conference. The significance of this is not the proposal, which has been on the table for almost a year under the LEI, but the readiness of Bashir to write directly to the NDA Chairman.

Subsequently there have been many indications of Sudan Government impatience with the slow response of the NDA to its peace overtures. In a significant interview in early June, foreign minister Mustafa Osman Ismail said that the government had agreed to most of the NDA's proposals—and indeed that the LEI was an opposition (Umma) proposal. He even said that if the NDA was proposing a merger of the LEI and IGAD, they should come with a specific proposal, to which the government could react. He also pointed out that the Umma Party had been active and cooperative in the peace process, and could not be expected to remain without enjoying a share of power indefinitely.

The leaders of the Sudan Government peace committee (such as Nafie Ali Nafie) appear to be content to allow the IGAD process to die of neglect. Their analysis at the moment appears to be that the SPLA is being overtaken by events; that it is internally more divided than ever and that it is unable to set the peace agenda with the Egyptians and Libyans. The Government is therefore hoping that postponing progress at IGAD will not only kill off the IGAD initiative completely, but also leave the SPLA as a minor player both internally and internationally. This is a miscalculation.

Turabi: Down but not Out

Turabi's failure to strike back after Bashir's action against him early May appears as—for him—a missed opportunity. But Turabi cannot be ruled out. Does his current low-key strategy reflect weakness or patience? One cannot be sure.

Turabi is not afraid of going to prison, or even of instigating some levels of violence to save himself and his cause. This remains a fight to the political death, but it has more rounds to go.

The regional dimension to the intra-NIF split will emerge in the longer term as an important factor. Bashir's supporters are primarily from the north and centre, Turabi's from the west. The ideological factor seems to be becoming less important than the regional or ethnic. A 'Black Book' has been produced and circulated in Khartoum, that claims to reveal the extent of Northern Riverain domination of the Sudanese state and the systematic exclusion of westerners (from Kordofan and Darfur). Most of its focus is the post-1989 period. The statistics it produces are impressive.

The Black Book appears to be the work of westerners within the NIF. It goes so far as to name Daud Bolad as a martyr. Bolad was a Darfurian and a former NIF student leader and coordinator of the NIF in Darfur during 1985-7. He later defected to the SPLA, and led the doomed SPLA incursion into Darfur in 1991, was captured by government forces and then disappeared.

In late May and June a group of international Islamist leaders and scholars attempted a mediation between Bashir and Turabi. Following a public call for reconciliation and restraint signed by an impressive list of over 90 international Islamist public figures, Dr Yousif Gardawi from Qatar attempted a mediation. This did not succeed. But it will have reduced the possibility of an armed confrontation in Khartoum.

One factor to be noted is the history of the NIF management of dissension within its ranks. In many regards the NIF is akin to a Leninist vanguard party. But its treatment of dissent is completely different from leftwing movements, which tend to purge dissidents, using violence and defamation. The NIF has never publicly attacked its dissenters and very rarely used violence against them (Bolad is an exception). On the contrary, it usually maintains personal relations and keeps a line of communication open in the hope that it can entice its wayward member back to the fold. This is a reason for optimism that bloodshed in Khartoum will be avoided. But it is also a warning that Turabi's failure to strike in a violent manner in May does not mean he is a spent force.

Whither the SPLM?

16 May is SPLA Day: the anniversary of the launching of the rebellion. In recent years the celebrations have been modest, but this year the anniversary passed with little comment from the leadership. Dr Garang made a speech in which he praised the successes of the SPLA in the last year. He said, 'On the military side, we continue to retain and maintain the initiative. Over the last 12 months we have successfully defended all our military gains in all the fronts, in both South and North. We have not lost any territory to the enemy, while we have added substantially to the liberated areas, especially in the Eastern Sudan.'

However, writing for a different audience—this time Cairo's semi-official newspaper *Al Ahram*'s 17 May edition, Garang chose not to mention the anniversary at all, and nor did he repeat his claims of military victories in the East to an audience that might have been well-informed about the recent loss of Garora. However the SPLA C-in-C felt obliged to rebut allegations of dependence on outsiders: 'Where accusations about American hegemony are concerned, they are refuted by facts. The SPLM never mortgaged its will to anyone, and it does not say one thing in Cairo and another in Asmara, Washington or Pretoria. The SPLM wants a new Sudan, a just peace and a voluntary unity. It does not make sense that we should have been fighting for nearly two decades to achieve the goals of others.'

The reason for the low-key celebration is undoubtedly that May 2000 marks the 17th anniversary, indicating that this war has lasted longer than its predecessor—something the SPLA leadership vowed it would never allow to happen.

Financial and logistical pressure on the SPLM is growing. Its former backers, including Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda and Zimbabwe, are all tied up in their own conflicts. Nigeria's financial support has visible strings attached, which Garang is reluctant to accept. In early May, Dr John Garang led a large SPLM delegation to Abuja, which left empty-handed. The SPLM leadership has appealed to the Arab world for understanding. Practically speaking it is concerned with finances.

The SPLM canceled its participation in the May round of IGAD talks, to the dismay of its remaining friends. The Kenyans were not happy. Bona Malwal has alleged that Garang

has now thrown his lot in with the Egyptians, abandoning self-determination in the hope of a share in a deal based on national unity.

NDA: Hope is Still Alive

There is a strong sense that events are slipping beyond the NDA's grasp. Substantive work and progress during the last six months at the Leadership Council and the Committee for the Comprehensive Political Solution is not translating into an effective, coordinated high-level political initiative. The top level of leadership appears to be acting with minimal consultation with the NDA's institutions.

Despite the best efforts of leading members of the NDA's second rank, the Alliance simply cannot act in a coherent manner. The three leading members of the Committee for the Comprehensive Political Solution each face big obstacles in doing their work. The Chair, Gen. Abdel Rahman Saeed, is in Asmara. At first, his visit to IGAD in Nairobi was postponed at the request of the SPLM. This postponement was not unrelated to the fact that the position presented by the SPLM was completely at odds with SPLM commitments to the NDA in the Asmara Agreement. Subsequently, Gen. Saeed has been unable to travel because he is facing difficulties with obtaining a new passport. He is also persona non grata in Egypt. The deputy, Nhial Deng Nhial, also acts as SPLM Foreign Secretary. During early June, he was awaited in Cairo for talks with the Libyans and Egyptians, but could not be located, because he had been assigned on SPLM duties in east Africa. The third committee member, Abdel Aziz Dafallah, faces internal difficulties within his own party SAF, several of whose leading members are opposed to any negotiations towards a settlement at this time. There has even been a move to suspend Dafallah from his position within SAF—a move which would split the movement were it to go ahead.

The Umma Party remains the most active element in the opposition. There are indications that the Umma Party is still committed to the success of the LEI as a precondition for joining any government with President Bashir.

The Chairman of the NDA, Mulana Mohamed Osman al Mirghani, has been invited to meet with President Ghaddafi of Libya. He has expanded this invitation, so that an NDA Leadership Council meeting is planned in Tripoli for approx. 17 June, to be followed by a meeting with the Libyan leadership. The agenda is simply the LEI and the NDA's commitment to it.

No date has yet been fixed for the NDA Congress, postponed from Asmara in June. There is disagreement as to whether the NDA leadership should first make its peace proposals, and then seek endorsement from the Congress, or vice versa. Although dates in July have been suggested, the organisational apparatus necessary for a Congress remains weak.

LEI and IGAD

The lack of a single, universally accepted framework for negotiation remains one of the biggest stumbling blocks to a settlement. In these circumstances, both IGAD and the LEI remain merely spoilers for each other, while individuals and individual parties become frustrated and make their unilateral deals with Khartoum—an outcome recognised by all as the worst-case outcome.

The 'revitalised' IGAD is now one year old. Under the terms of the IGAD partners' assistance to the IGAD Sudan Peace Secretariat, there should be a review of progress. As the

progress has been rather disappointing, it is likely that there will be slackening of enthusiasm for continuing to fund IGAD, which will then suffer further decline.

For the NDA, the merger of IGAD and the LEI is the preferred option. The basic idea is that the IGAD DoP should be adopted by the LEI and utilised as the agenda for the settlement and the national reconciliation and constitutional conference.

The SPLM has changed its position on the merger of the LEI and IGAD. Formerly it was insisting that the initiative for merging the talks should come from the mediators themselves (this was asking the impossible). Now it has adopted the view, more widely accepted among the NDA parties, that the NDA Committee for the Comprehensive Political Solution should take the initiative on this. As a result we can hope to see members of this Committee visiting Nairobi with a view to proposing a joint meeting of the NDA Committee, the IGAD Secretariat for Peace in Sudan and a representative of the LEI (which has yet to form a secretariat). The SPLM precondition for supporting that is that the consolidated initiative should adopt the IGAD Declaration of Principles, in line with the NDA resolutions made in Kampala in December 1999. This is in line with the broader NDA position.

However, the Chairman's 16 May speech (aimed primarily at a Southern audience) described IGAD as 'Track 1' and coordination with the NDA as 'Track 2' in the peace process. Clarity is a scarce commodity when it comes to SPLM statements.

The NDA has presented its position on the merger of IGAD and the LEI to the Libyans and Egyptians. The delegation was led by Nhial Deng. Next, the NDA Committee is due to visit Nairobi, Kampala and Addis Ababa with the same request. The Libyan and Egyptian foreign ministers have traveled to Khartoum and are due to meet with the NDA again in mid-June.

The most likely scenario is a partial north-north reconciliation under the auspices of the LEI, based on the failure of IGAD and the inability of the NDA to engineer a merger of IGAD and the LEI. Such a settlement might include or exclude the SPLM. In all cases it would be incomplete. The parties would also lack a certain confidence in the settlement in the absence of clear endorsement from the U.S., which would give rise to fears that international assistance would not be forthcoming, or that the diplomatic isolation of Sudan would not be ended quickly. Clear international—i.e. U.S. and European—backing to a peace process will be an important factor in its success.

Conclusion

The main actors in the current political process in Sudan are the Sudanese parties. The peace process suffers from a lack of strong leadership. The NDA is well-placed to fill this gap, should it act decisively. For example, it could forward an immediate formula along the following lines:

1. A meeting between the GoS and NDA peace committees.
2. A comprehensive ceasefire, tied to a period of negotiations (say three months).
3. A mutual end to hostilities in the media.

Internationally, the Libyans and Egyptians, and—potentially—the Ethiopians, have the initiative. Other external parties currently have little leverage. Their short term strategies should focus on:

1. Creating an international consensus around the unification of the LEI and IGAD, thereby lending the credibility and support of the IGAD Partners to a comprehensive settlement.
2. Providing logistical and financial support to the NDA secretariats and parties. The priority should be the NDA Peace Secretariat.