

The Implications of the JEM Attack on Omdurman

Introduction

1. The dust has not settled after the fighting in Omdurman on 10 May. The full implications of the attempt to capture the national capital will only become clear in the weeks ahead. Nonetheless it is clear that the attack will have immense reverberations in Sudanese and regional politics. The game has changed.
2. At the time of writing, the rebels have withdrawn from Omdurman and the government is in control of most of the city. But there are JEM units at large in Kordofan which may have other targets in mind, possibly including al Obeid and locations in the Northern State such as Dongola or the Kajbar or Meroe dams.
3. The attack appears to have been a joint exercise by JEM and the Government of Chad. The two leaders—Khalil Ibrahim and Idriss Deby—have become increasingly close and Deby's denials do not carry credibility. Sudan is now at war with Chad. A third internal partner within the PCP or army is probable though unspecified and unconfirmed.
4. The Sudan government and especially its security leaders have been embarrassed and humiliated by the attack. The al Bashir government is a national security regime and its failure to prevent the attack will undermine its credibility. The security leadership will pay a price in the months ahead. But it is probable that internal reckoning will wait until the government has regained its internal confidence with decisive military action. There is much fighting to be done and in the meantime international leverage is modest.
5. The repercussions of the assault will continue for weeks and months. We have reason to fear a human rights crackdown in Khartoum targeted at the PCP, suspected internal allies of the rebels, and Zaghawas. The associated suspension of civil liberties will have adverse implications for CPA implementation and democratization. We are already seeing a disturbing polarizing of popular responses to the attack with disturbing implications for social peace in Khartoum. We can expect an escalation of hostilities in Chad. Meanwhile the Darfur peace process is dead and hostilities in Darfur may intensify. The assault may have had the intent and outcome of igniting violence and instability in Kordofan, the Northern State and areas of central and eastern Sudan which are host to large Darfurian migrant populations.
6. The attack has dramatically demonstrated the limited capacity of the UN missions in Sudan and Chad to fulfill their mandates when the protagonists are determined to pursue their war aims by force of arms. The UNMIS and UNAMID troops are spectators and MINURCAT/EUFOR may yet become dragged into the conflict. The UN is advised to focus on its political role, seeking a resolution between Sudan and Chad and stabilizing the CPA.

JEM and Its Allies

7. The assault on the national capital was a joint JEM-Chad government operation. It was bold if not foolhardy. Either Khalil Ibrahim was delusional, believing its own propaganda that the GoS was sufficiently weak that it would collapse under a sharp military blow, or he expected an internal uprising or military coup that failed to materialize or was blocked. There is much speculation as to the identity of the third partner in this enterprise but suspicion falls upon the PCP and elements within SAF.
8. The aim of the attack was taking power. It appears to have been an attempted putsch on the model of the 1976 National Front invasion which was launched from Libya and almost succeeded in capturing Omdurman before it was repulsed.
9. JEM's calculation may also have been that by humiliating the government and dramatically demonstrating its weakness, it would change the national political equation, encouraging the various provincial opposition forces to rise up and join it in bringing down the regime. Some Darfurian rebel leaders have been threatening for the last two years to bring the war to the cities 'to give the Arabs a taste of their own medicine.' The revolutionary logic of the Black Book (JEM's foundational document) is that Sudan is divided along racial lines and it is necessary for the non-Arab majority to rise up for the ruling elite to be overturned. This logic undoubtedly chimes with one strand of popular sentiment across Sudan. JEM's public statements that it supports the CPA and wants it faithfully implemented are best read as a tactic to obtain support from Southerners, rather than a true change of heart.
10. The attack also serves two additional purposes in terms of JEM's political positioning and gestures. First, JEM is changing the terms of the political debate from a focus on Darfur to a focus on Sudan. Khalil is fighting for N'djamena and Khartoum. For him, Darfur is merely what lies in-between. Second, JEM wants to establish itself as the sole recognized armed movement in western Sudan. It has refused to join any peace talks that include the other movements (which it dismisses as irrelevant), insists that it also represents Kordofan, and wants to address national issues.
11. Likely motives for Chad to support the attack include retaliation for the February assault on N'djamena, and forcing the Sudan Government to withdraw support for the Chadian rebels, either by compelling it to negotiate or by creating such internal instability that it no longer has the means to carry out such support. Idriss Deby's political style is to take the offensive and fight to win.
12. The big unanswered question is the third partner in this enterprise, namely extent to which JEM had cells within the capital and its links with the Popular Congress Party and other Islamists and elements within the Sudan Armed Forces. The arrest of Hassan al Turabi and senior members of the PCP was predictable and is not necessarily indicative of their involvement in the assault. Anecdotal observations of the fighting in Omdurman suggest that some SAF troops joined the attackers but it is unclear whether this is true,

and if so whether it was at the level of NCOs or below or whether there was a coordinated effort at a coup by senior officers.

13. Despite rumours to the contrary, it appears that JEM acted alone among the Darfur armed groups. The leaders of SLA-Unity, who have cooperated with JEM in some offensive operations in the last year, do not appear to have been involved.

14. Much of JEM's senior leadership was in the field involved in the operation. If it turns into a military debacle then JEM may be destroyed as a political-military organization.

The Sudan Government

15. The Sudan government failed to stop the attack on its capital despite evidence that a major rebel attack was afoot at least a week in advance. Many are already asking questions as to how such a large rebel force was able to cross Darfur and Kordofan without being stopped, and why the capital was so poorly defended. It should be noted that the desert style of warfare adopted by JEM is suited to the semi-arid terrain it crossed at high speed (traveling at night) and it is extremely difficult for conventional forces to defend against this kind of attack, as the Libyans (in 1987) and successive Chadian governments (1990, 2006, 2008) have discovered to their cost. Air power is the only effective weapon against such tactics. Nonetheless, the Sudan government is founded on national security and its standing among the population at large has suffered on account of this reverse.

16. It is instructive that Omdurman and the bridges were defended by specialist security forces rather than SAF. The offensive was halted by the national security service and the central reserve police, the latter which possesses tanks and helicopters comparable to regular forces.

17. It is likely that there will be a reckoning within the security services in the months ahead as the blame for the security failure is allocated. We can expect a vigorous internal debate within the highest echelons of the ruling party and security leadership. However, this debate and settling of accounts will occur only when the government has restored its confidence in its security and its pride. It has already ruled out peace talks with JEM and has de facto declared war on Chad.

18. Removing the remnants of the attacking force from Omdurman is only the first stage in this operation. We can expect to see roundups of suspected sympathizers in major cities. This has begun with the PCP leadership and may widen to other groups including the Zaghawa as a tribe. We can expect to see stepped up military and security activities across JEM's zone of operations and the mobilization of security and paramilitary forces in major towns and cities. At the time of writing (12 May) it appears that the army is having some success in hunting down and destroying JEM columns.

19. It is only when the NCP/Security leadership has both established its confidence/sense of pride and has resolved its internal issues that we can expect it to become a significant

partner in implementation of the CPA and other commitments it has made to the SPLM and to the international community. This rupture of normal political processes might consume several months.

20. The SPLM leadership responded to the crisis with a clear declaration of support for the GoNU. FVP Salva Kiir, who was acting President in the absence (in Saudi Arabia) of President Bashir, made the requisite call for support. This reflects the SPLM leader's reading that the JEM agenda is antithetical to the process of democratization and above all it is opposed to the Southerners' exercise of their right of self-determination. (This too is redolent of 1976 when the Minister of Information, Bona Malwal, a Southerner, rallied support for Nimeiri.)

Other Political Forces

21. Popular attitudes in Sudan towards the attack are polarized. Many Southerners and other marginalized people are openly relishing the fact that the war has been brought to Khartoum and the ruling elites are feeling the impact of the war for the first time. They enjoyed the visible fear shown by government spokesmen and the disarray of the ruling party and security services. Some militants from the South and elsewhere are admiring JEM's audacity and wondering if they should have been part of a wider insurrection and attack.

22. Long-time residents of Khartoum and the riverain regions take the opposite view, regarding the attack as a reckless venture into a part of Sudan that deserves to be left in peace. Khartoum has long been an island of safety and prosperity. The leadership of the northern political opposition has (with the exception of the PCP) rallied to the government. Many members of the provincial elites have also opposed the attack, fearful of the bloodletting that would ensue if the attack were indeed to become a signal to widespread insurrection.

23. This polarization of the social-political terrain, along the lines of division identified in the Black Book, may have been the intent of the JEM leadership. It is possible that a government crackdown may intensify this division, fulfilling JEM's vision. It is also possible that a range of political figures, from the SPLM leaders to the Umma Party and some of the Darfurian opposition, will combine to calm tensions. Much depends on whether the conflict intensifies or whether the security services are able to put a rapid end to JEM's insurgency.

24. The Darfurians are divided in response to the attack. Some SLA leaders have condemned it. For example, many SLA-Unity leaders have long opposed any extension of the war beyond Darfur. It is possible that one immediate outcome will be an intensification of conflict in North Darfur, as GoS forces try to block JEM's movement and supply and to punish the groups seen as its supporters. There may also be a contrary effect of Darfurian opposition leaders rallying in opposition to JEM, with nascent anti-Zaghawa alliances turning into joint exercises in ethnic cleansing Zaghawa communities carried out by Arabs and non-Arabs.

25. Minni Minawi faces the challenge of representing the Zaghawa within government and ensuring that they do not face collective stigmatization and punishment. This is a steep challenge for a man who has not shown great political adroitness.

26. JEM's attack could prove incendiary in Kordofan where it has been working hard to develop a support base. A government crackdown in the towns of Kordofan might just generate the armed conflict it aims to prevent. However, the Kordofan opposition—some of which has been preparing for the option of armed rebellion—has dissociated itself from JEM's actions. (This is the position of the Kordofan Alliance for Development.) Dismay at the implications of JEM's attack may have the effect of dissuading Kordofani groups from taking up arms. There is an opportunity for rapid work with Kordofan's civil society groups to dampen the threat of violent.

27. Other towns across northern Sudan should not be overlooked. Gedaref and Wad Medani (for example) contain significant Darfurian populations and, away from the limelight, there are possibilities of violence.

Implications for Human Rights and Democratization

28. The GoS has the pretext it needs for any repressive and anti-democratic activities now and in the months ahead. Without doubt there will be a crackdown on suspected supporters of JEM. Targets will include the PCP, Darfurians within the army, and Zaghawas. Security will not be taking any chances. Every lead will be followed and the prisons, police stations and security centres will fill up. This will not be pretty. Units undertaking field operations may not take prisoners. (This has already occurred on at least one occasion: a reported incident in which all 45 JEM members were killed, smacks of extrajudicial execution of PoWs.) Zealous security officers in provincial towns may be the worst offenders.

29. The attack jeopardizes the social peace that has characterized Khartoum. There is a possibility of pogroms against groups identified as threats to the city and its residents.

30. The response to the attack will entail the suspension of many civil liberties including those necessary for the preparation and conduct of a fair electoral process. This will pose challenges for the process of the CPA and democratization. Salva Kiir has already signaled his awareness of the implications of the attack.

31. Navigating the dilemmas of legitimate national security concerns versus faithful implementation of the CPA poses difficult questions for the partners in the GoNU and the international community. Insisting on the strict and scheduled implementation of CPA provisions at this stage is to invite rejection or non-cooperation by the GoS. Abandonment of the CPA implementation schedule is to give a green light to retrogression to a security state. It should be noted that the NCP and SPLM leaderships, for their different reasons, may cooperate with one another in slowing down aspects of democratization.

Implications for Armed Conflict

32. Sudan is now at war with Chad. Both parties will take the offensive in the coming months. The best opportunity for a peace process between Khartoum and N'djamena has been missed. Vigorous diplomatic action to prevent a further escalation of hostilities is urgent, and the Dakar Contact Group (Libya, Senegal, Gabon, Congo Republic and Eritrea, tasked with overseeing the rapprochement between the two governments) should raise the issue to summit level at once. For a summit to deliver, international partners would need to put serious pressure on the two governments. In addition, international troop deployments prevent border crossings in each direction should be considered, acknowledging the extreme difficulty of such an operation.

33. The international community has remarkably little leverage over Khartoum in such a situation. The failure of international engagement to restrain JEM means that international credibility is low. Khartoum will be asking, why have UN sanctions against JEM been ineffective and why have the Special Envoys' peace initiatives been unable to prevent JEM from undertaking this offensive. Under current conditions the GoS will ignore anything but the most constructive or sympathetic interventions (such as military assistance, such as it is reportedly receiving from Egypt) or the most severe threats. Anything else will be contemptuously ignored, until such time as regime survival is assured and a policy consensus has emerged within the ruling group.

34. Measures to pressure President Deby have also been notable for their ineffectiveness as his strategy of brinkmanship has repeatedly won the day. The international community has more cards to play with Chad but serious pressure would require measures that the international community has been unwilling to contemplate to date, for example giving MINURCAT/EUFOR a mandate that allowed it to engage with the political opposition and negotiate a ceasefire, withdrawing or restricting French military cooperation with N'djamena, or freezing oil revenue payments.

35. The Darfur peace process no longer exists. Neither of the key belligerents—JEM and the GoS—has either interest or intent in pursuing it. If a peace process were pursued today with the willing partners its sole possible impact would be to corral the other Darfur armed movements into agreement with the GoS on the latter's terms, as part of an anti-JEM alliance, which would run the danger of being an anti-Zaghawa coalition.

36. Darfur will be the locus of fighting and aerial bombardment as the GoS seeks to block JEM's supply routes and possible bases and mobilizes for new offensives in Chad.

37. Other parts of Northern Sudan are also in danger of serious violence. Kordofan is already a tinderbox and the GoS will probably seek to mobilize the tribes as militia to prevent further incursions. Further arming the Arab tribes could easily have unintended consequences especially for relations with the Nuba. The Northern State is also a potential locus of violence if JEM forces do indeed reach targets there. Migrant Darfurian

populations in Gezira and Gedaref should not be overlooked, where real or imagined JEM cells could be the target of repression, away from international scrutiny.

Implications for the UN

38. The three UN peace support operations—UNMIS, UNAMID and MINURCAT/EUFOR—have all been bystanders to the recent events. There is no indication that they will play anything other than a minor role in the next round of events.

39. The UN must pay attention to the dangers of becoming unwittingly embroiled in the war and/or making things worse. We are likely to see severe human rights abuses which will lead some international activist organizations to shout ‘genocide’. They may demand that the peace operations act as General Dallaire says he would have liked to do in Kigali in 1994, with coercive and pre-emptive military action. It will indeed be tempting to ask, what is the international community doing spending \$3bn or more on international troops in Sudan and additional funds in Chad if it cannot prevent the widespread arrest of civilians and other violence with civilian casualties. But to respond to the siren calls for commensurate actions would lead either to empty symbolism or becoming entangled in a hybrid civil-international war with incalculable consequences.

40. At this moment, clarity of goals and capabilities is needed. The crisis is political and requires a political response. The twin centres of gravity remain Sudan’s relations with Chad and the CPA. Each requires a political response with clear goals in mind linked to political strategies based on realistically achievable goals. The UN itself can provide analysis to the Security Council members. Several Security Council members have leverage, including the U.S., France and China, but all should be aware of their limited capabilities at this stage.

41. The three peace support operations may be able to do sufficient small-scale civilian protection activities to keep up appearances but these should be clearly (if discreetly) envisaged as face-saving activities.

12 May 2008