

# PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

## BRIEFING

MAY 2000

### Overview

The political dynamic in Sudan has entered a new phase, with a fight to the death between Bashir and Turabi. This time, it seems, there can be no compromise in Khartoum. If the conflict turns violent—as Turabi has threatened—then an entirely new scenario unfolds, with the prospect of a level of bloodshed and destabilisation wholly new to Sudan. If Bashir wins, he will be totally preoccupied with eliminating Turabi’s power base, probably in an extremely repressive way. This will make the IGAD peace process a minor sideshow, while the Libyan-Egyptian Initiative will become an adjunct to his power strategy. Should Turabi win—and this scenario cannot be ruled out, given his surprisingly extensive support in the armed forces—then a wholly new strategy for international engagement with Sudan is called for. A continuing stalemate or paralysis will mean a continuing power vacuum.

Unfortunately this crisis has occurred at a time when the weakness of the NDA and SPLM is such that they are mere spectators to the central drama. Both are becoming more divided. The situation is extremely dangerous and unpredictable.

### Bashir vs Turabi

In early May, the ongoing power struggle between President Bashir and Dr Hassan al Turabi took another turn, leading almost to a coup d’etat and violence on the streets of Khartoum. The situation remains unresolved at the time of writing (10 May).

#### *Bashir’s Move*

A reconciliation meeting between Turabi and Bashir was scheduled for 4 May. This was boycotted by Turabi, who meanwhile had been making extensive contacts in the army. On the day of the meeting, Turabi called for both Bashir and he himself to resign their positions in the interests of the party and the nation. This was a clear call for a military takeover. Commentators in Khartoum described ‘the atmosphere of a coup’. But Bashir struck first, suspending Turabi from his post as Secretary General of the National Congress, and recalling him from Port Sudan where he was visiting. All the offices of the party have been closed.

But Turabi has not been arrested—not even placed under house arrest, merely ‘confined to his residence’—and is still free to speak to the media and to hold rallies near his house. Bashir meanwhile does not appear in public. This indicates that Bashir is worried about what may happen if he really takes the resolute measures he has been threatening. Bashir has promised to replace Turabi in the coming months, but the action of ‘suspending’ Turabi rather than dismissing him outright smacks of weakness of resolve or uncertainty of power.

In one sense, this is no more than the action that Bashir should logically have taken in December when he imposed the state of emergency. Bashir has simply waited for five months to complete his move. But the delay indicates more than indecision on Bashir’s part. It also indicates weakness, both of Bashir’s control over the army—the number of pro-Turabi officers removed on 4-5 May was strikingly high—and the Islamist movement. Vice President Ali Osman Mohamed Taha is widely seen as Bashir’s most important ally in this power struggle, and in fact is seen by some as the prime mover against Turabi. Ali Osman’s dilemma is that he is not a military man, and therefore using the army to crush his political rival is an inherently risky strategy. By dismantling the National Congress, Ali Osman is participating in the militarisation of politics and the undermining of his own actual and potential power base. As Ali Osman’s following among the rank and file of the party is less than Turabi’s, he is forced to move very carefully.

### *Bashir’s Options*

Bashir and Ali Osman do not appear to have a programme beyond opposing Turabi. They are articulating no vision of peace, democracy or human rights. They are popular on the streets simply because they oppose Turabi: their support is wide but not deep. Turabi, on the other hand, has a well-organised and highly-motivated set of cadres, including many who would die for him.

Bashir’s main ally is Egypt. It is possible that in extreme circumstances he may even call for an Egyptian military intervention to save his government.

The most likely immediate outcome is the entrenchment of the security officers at the heart of power and a big setback to the civilianisation of politics in Khartoum. Turabi has been able to portray himself, effectively and with some credibility, as the voice of civilian politics, and a victim of the military. It is ironic that Turabi’s confidence in his control of the party apparatus was the foundation of his readiness to move towards a civilianised, elected government. Bashir and Ali Osman, lacking that party infrastructure, will be much more reluctant to move in that direction.

Assuming they are not removed in a coup, for the foreseeable future, Bashir and Ali Osman are likely to be almost wholly preoccupied with their struggle against Turabi. Any negotiation with the NDA or SPLM is wholly secondary to this. The prospects for the Sudan Government taking IGAD seriously in the immediate future are slender. It is also virtually certain that Bashir will try to proceed with the planned Presidential elections without making any concessions to the Umma Party or the NDA more widely. The Libyan-Egyptian Initiative has therefore also suffered a setback in its attempt to forge broad reconciliation. (But the LEI has other options, see below.)

In important respects, the *promise* of peace and reconciliation is a greater asset to Bashir and Ali Osman than its realisation. While the power struggle continues, Bashir and Ali Osman are likely to be averse to taking any risks or making any concessions, either towards civilian

politics or peace in the South. Seriously negotiating peace depends upon consolidated power in Khartoum. Any moves they make are likely to be those endorsed by Egypt.

### *Turabi's Options*

By 7 May, Turabi was appearing ascendant. He was able to defy Bashir's pronouncements. He appeared in public with armed guards. Most important, significant elements of the army rallied to his side, among them the key Islamist military forces of the *Dababiin*. This came as a shock to Bashir.

Turabi has stopped short of calling for a Jihad against Bashir—but only just. He has accused the President of betraying Islam and being an agent of the West and its stooges (meaning Egypt). He has 'dismissed' Bashir from the party. There are strong indications that Turabi is still contemplating an armed *intifada* against the government. It is also possible that if he is arrested, then some of his hardline and committed cadres will take terrorist action, akin to that by the FIS in Algeria.

### *Prospects*

The prospects for reconciliation or mediation are dim. Previous Arab mediators (UAE, Qatar) were earlier rebuffed. Both sides have said that no reconciliation through dialogue is possible. Few would be willing to enter this dangerous territory.

It is possible, that with Egyptian support, Bashir and Ali Osman may prevail. But it seems unlikely at the present time that they would be able to eliminate Turabi altogether. Their opportunities for doing so were missed.

The possibility of Turabi emerging victorious cannot be ruled out. He may be able to marshal sufficient military and civilian forces to compel Bashir and Ali Osman to capitulate. The prospect of President Hassan al Turabi then beckons, which puts all hopes for a peaceful settlement back to square one. Egypt for one would be implacably opposed.

If the conflict in Khartoum turns violent then all existing peace scenarios are history. Both the IGAD and LEI will become redundant. All alliances will be open to question; the only issue will be who can take and hold power, and by what means.

The situation can continue in stalemate for a while, as each side contemplates its next move. This effectively paralyses the government, creating a vacuum of power. Only the security operatives relish this, as it gives them a free hand.

Among the opposition, the sole figure who is not an impotent spectator as these scenarios unfold is Sadiq el Mahdi. He has the constituency and the leadership skills to enter the fray, should he choose to do so. But his intervention could have unpredictable consequences.

## **Garang vs Bona Malwal**

The fissures within the Southern movement have been opened to an unprecedented degree with an article by Bona Malwal in the *Sudan Democratic Gazette* in which he attacks Col. John Garang on a wide range of counts. While some will question the motive, timing and credentials

of this attack, there is no doubt that the substantive points raised are important, and deal with issues of wide concern to Southerners. There are echoes here of the article in the June 1991 issue of the *Gazette*, 'Issues the SPLA can no longer ignore.' That article raised concerns about the centralisation and militarisation of the movement and its intolerance of dissent, forwarding much the same critique that was made by dissident commanders when they launched the attempted coup against Garang in August 1991 that split the movement.

Bona Malwal's article will be a serious blow to the standing of John Garang. The rift cannot be reconciled. Even those who will dispute the motives or the accuracy of the attack cannot fail to see that it has wounded its target. It will legitimise criticism of Garang among even the core of SPLA supporters, many of whom are doubtful about the prospects for the Movement. Some of the charges are not new, especially Garang's unreadiness to negotiate for peace. Others are more serious to the SPLA's standing, for example the doubts cast on the C-in-C's military competence and priorities, and the accusation of greed and corruption.

The spark for the confrontation was a decision by the SPLA Chairman to ensure that the SRRA took exclusive control of slave redemption programmes implemented by Christian Solidarity International and Christian Solidarity Worldwide. As a spin-off of this, the SPLA decided that Bona Malwal (and others) who had been travelling to Southern Sudan under the auspices of CSI/CSW could now only do so as individuals directly authorised by the SRRA.

This decision is part of a wider pattern. Informed sources indicate that since late 1999, the SPLM has been aiming to centralise all relief, development and civil society activity under the SRRA. The confrontation with the international NGOs over the Memorandum of Understanding would appear to be a manifestation of this. Some attribute to the SPLM Chairman a belief that the United States will back his authority with resources. He is believed to be utilising funds provided by some donor programmes to fund the SRRA offices and other units attached to the governors, in order to implement this policy.

One of the implications of the deepening disarray within the SPLM is that the Chairman's primary and overriding concern is to keep his own position intact, dealing with internal adversaries. This does not provide him with a strong platform on which to negotiate for peace. In fact, to the contrary, the continuing war is his strongest card to play in dealing with those internal threats.

## **NDA on the Sidelines**

The NDA is unable to respond to the crisis in Khartoum. At such a moment, it could potentially take advantage of the disarray in Khartoum by taking either a military or a political offensive. It has proved capable of neither. On the contrary, despite the SPLA's statements about the military option in the East, SPLA troops have been withdrawn from the front lines close to the Eritrean border. The NDA leadership is far too divided to develop a coherent response to the Khartoum crisis: they do not even have a centralised operations room for coordinating information. The main NDA reaction is to wait and see what happens, hoping that when the dust settles in Khartoum, both Bashir and Turabi will have been destroyed. Some are even rejoicing in the crisis.

The Umma gamble of returning its cadres to Khartoum has not paid off yet, but it is too early to pass a verdict on it. Sadiq el Mahdi has positioned himself as a potential player in the Khartoum drama. Meanwhile there are serious signs that the DUP will hedge its bets with a

partial return to Khartoum. Days before the Khartoum crisis broke, Ahmed al Mirghani, brother of the NDA Chairman, was reported to be consulting on his planned return to Sudan.

## **IGAD**

Rather than converging, the parties have in fact been moving further apart at IGAD. In the April talks, the Sudan Government presented a position based almost entirely on the 1997 Khartoum Agreement with Riek Machar. This was a set backward from previous positions presented at IGAD and wholly unacceptable to the SPLM. Meanwhile, the SPLM position for ‘self-administration’ has several interesting aspects to it:

1. It combines a proposal for interim arrangements with a proposal for self-administration. In fact, it makes self-determination virtually redundant. Once the interim arrangements have been put in place, there will be a strong, centralised authority in the Southern Confederal State which can continue indefinitely.
2. It is the loosest form of association compatible with supposed unity. The Confederal States take on almost every sovereign right including: constitution, law, defence, international relations, currency, economic affairs, citizenship. The common institutions (the ‘Supreme Authority’ and related bodies) have weaker powers than those belonging to, for example, the East African Community or the Economic Community of West African States.
3. The attached map is the ‘Greater South’ map first presented in November 1997, including Abyei, Southern Kordofan and Southern Blue Nile, as well as parts of White Nile, in the Southern Confederal State. Contrary to some indications given previously, the SPLM position was that the Northern areas attached to the South are to be regarded as fully and completely part of the South, rather than being entitled to a settlement in their own right.
4. Contrary to the SPLM undertakings at NDA meetings in December 1999 and March 2000, the NDA was not in any way consulted in drawing up this proposal. In fact the members of the Committee for the Comprehensive Political Solution were wholly in the dark about this proposal even after the unsuccessful conclusion of the April IGAD talks.

When the NDA learned of this proposal, criticism of the SPLM intensified, and Sadiq el Mahdi’s stand gained credibility.

Surprisingly, the SPLM canceled the fourth meeting of the Political Committee, scheduled for 17 May, citing Government bad faith as indicated by the ongoing aerial bombardment of Southern Sudan. The rationale behind this decision has puzzled participants and observers and it is a welcome boost for a beleaguered President Bashir.

## **Libyan-Egyptian Initiative**

The NDA Committee for the Comprehensive Political Solution has been trying to institutionalise the LEI, but finding it very difficult.

1. The CCPS is not sufficiently high level to have much credibility with Libya and Egypt. And the chairmanship of Gen Abdel Rahman Saeed is seen by Egypt as a snub, because Gen Abdel Rahman is persona non grata in Egypt following the 1999 pipeline attacks.
2. None of the three key opposition figures—Sadiq el Mahdi, Mulana Mohamed Osman al Mirgani and Dr John Garang—are ready to institutionalise the process.
3. The Libyans and Egyptians are keen to avoid any declaration of principles or liaison with IGAD.

Nonetheless the LEI will move ahead, with a number of possible options open. It has received a boost from Garang's statements in Cairo, which supported the LEI (calling for coordination with IGAD leading ultimately to a single peace process). Sadiq el Mahdi has much invested in the LEI, and Mulana Mohamed Osman is unlikely to want to antagonise the Egyptians, who have already expressed some disappointment with his lack of speed in moving on their initiative.

Most importantly, Egypt is the key backer of President Bashir, and will be using all its influence in Khartoum and the Arab world to try to strengthen his position. The recent events in Khartoum change the power calculus, and diminish the importance of those unable to mobilise a constituency in Khartoum. No options for Libyan and Egyptian engagement in Khartoum can be ruled out at present.

## **Conclusion**

Khartoum rests at a knife-edge. The conflict between Bashir and Turabi has reached a point at which one has to emerge the outright winner, but each has a sufficient power base to destabilise the other. The victor will therefore be forced, almost certainly, to engage in very ruthless and perhaps very bloody repression. In this context, the IGAD peace process becomes an irrelevance, while the LEI can play a role primarily as a means of Bashir trying to guarantee his ascendancy. Strong leadership from the NDA could theoretically tip the balance in Khartoum and simultaneously help move Sudan towards a comprehensive settlement—but no such leadership is in evidence. The prospects for peace are therefore darker than at any time for many years.