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Moves Toward Conflict Resolution in Sudan

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Sudan
HEATHER DEEGAN

In the summer of 1998, the Khartoum government and John Garang of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) signed a temporary ceasefire in order that international aid could reach the war-torn areas. Some discussion has also taken place regarding the institution of a new constitution, which would include the political clauses of the 1997 Agreement. Although there is no easy solution to the conflict in Sudan, one aspect seems clear: if there is to be peace within the country, a political settlement must be both achievable and sustainable.

The civil war that has raged in Sudan, apart from a brief respite during the Jaafar Nimeiri period since 1955, is estimated to have cost 1.3 million lives. A Peace Agreement was signed on 21 April 1997, between the Sudanese government, under the leadership of President el-Bashir, and the United Democratic Salvation Front (UDSF), comprising the South Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM), the Union of Sudan African Parties (USAP), the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), the Equatoria Defence Force and the South Sudan Independence Group (SSIG). Although the agreement does not include the government's chief opponents, Colonel John Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), or the leader of the exiled Umma Party, El-Sadiq el-Mahdi, it does outline a number of political issues, which, if resolved, could provide the basis for a move towards a conflict resolution.

Ethnicity and religion are seen as integral factors in the war: a predominantly Arab-African, Muslim North against an animist or Christian black African South. Certainly ethnicity and religion are major contemporary factors, but their origins are historic. The 1962 Missionary Act prevented the spread of Islam to the south of the country and forged a religious tension within the country. By 1983 and with the institution of *sharia* law, tensions were exacerbated. From that time, State Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabriel Roric believes, minority rights became confused with religious rights. Yet it would be erroneous to generalize about the conflict in such terms as 'the North-South Conflict' or 'Islam versus Christianity' or 'Arabism versus Africanism'. In Sudan, the issue of nation formation, regionalism, ethnicity, religion, and economic justice 'have been left to accumulate over time, without being resolved'.¹

The civil war is essentially concerned with two fundamental issues: firstly, the identity of the Sudanese state and secondly, the question of who gains control over the natural resources of the south. Because of the area's reserves of oil, hardwoods and minerals and vast tracts of unexplored land, the economic potential of the south has been seen as the key objectives for all parties. Yet ethnic diversity is complex in Sudan. The 1996 census reported a population of 27 million people. According to an earlier census conducted in 1955/56, the only one that included ethnic origin, there are 19 major ethnic groups. These groups can be further divided into 597 smaller sub-groupings, speaking over 100 different languages. Around 60 per cent of the population are Muslim; 15 per cent are Christian and the remainder adhere to traditional religions. The demographic composition has been altered through years of civil war and ecological disaster, but one of the important aspects of the April 1997 Peace Agreement is that it attempts to address some of these socio-ethnic imbalances through its federal structure.

The Peace Agreement, April 1997

The general principles contained in the peace agreement signed on 21 April 1997, aim to attain a 'just and lasting peace'. The document declares that 'only a sustainable peace based on justice, equality, democracy and free-

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dom can lead to a meaningful development and progress which would assist in the solution of the fundamental problems of the people of Sudan.' Concerning the basic issue of the relationship between religion and the State, the agreement states that Sudan is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious society. Islam is the religion of the majority of the population, and Christianity and the African creeds are followed by a considerable number of citizens. Nevertheless, the basis of rights and duties shall be citizenship, and all Sudanese shall equally share in all aspects of life and political responsibilities.

The status of *sharia* is arguably the most contentious constitutional issue and its repeal has continually been called for by the SPLA as a conditional step if negotiations are to take place between the SPLA and the government. On the crucial issue of *sharia*, the parties to the April agreement decided on a complex formula. Laws of a general nature that were based on general principles common to the states would apply at the national level, provided that the states had the right to enact any complementary federal legislation on matters peculiar to them. In other words, *sharia* would not be abandoned at the national level but it was not to intrude to the governance of the regions.

The terms of the rights and freedoms accorded to every person are far reaching and would not be out of place in a liberal democracy. Yet Hasan Turabi asserts that the emphasis in the Sudanese model of Islam is on 'rights and obligations' in which there is no coercion but equally 'no freedom of will in the Western sense'.

The relationship between religious identity, citizenship, and the State is critical. Particularly significant is the idea of religious freedom based on the principle that affords the individual not only the right to choose for himself or herself, but also the protection against any compulsion. In a sense, this right grants the general population individual freedom. It also represents a commitment on the part of both the State and the organizations within civil society to ensure and enhance political rights. Sudan's political system has organized structures and processes of decision-making. Dr Ghazi Salahuddin Alabani, the Secretary General to the Congress, describes the system as containing the 'bare rudiments of a democratic system'. The Western pluralist model is seen as too divisive but the Sudanese system does involve a range of representatives from trade unions, professional associations, tribal chiefs and so on, who tend to become involved at the state level. Ideas can be individualistic without party discipline but this structure is regarded as more democratic than previous governments with political parties which 'were never representative'.

One cause of conflict within the country has been identified as regional inequity with regard to the distribution of productive assets, and educational health and social services. The Peace Agreement contains a section dealing with wealth sharing, one clause of which states: 'The federal government shall lay down a comprehensive economic and social plan to develop the country in general and to bridge

the gap between the various states in particular, so that within a definite period, a parity in provision of basic needs such as security, employment, water, food, education, health and housing could be reached'.

In order to consolidate economic policies, Sudan's economy is moving towards a free market focus. Hassan Turabi refers to the country's privatizing economy as one which aims to be more efficient. Emphasis is now placed on the productivity of farmers and agricultural improvement, and the government has given the production of food for domestic and regional consumption priority status. Women are encouraged to cultivate their land, grow food and exchange and barter in cooperation stores. As women became more productive in home agricultural pursuits such as growing food, keeping chickens and so on, large-scale acreage can be devoted to growing cash crops which earn foreign currency through exports.

The country, however, faces difficulty in looking towards an expansion of its productive base when previous productivity has been low. The lack of basic commodities such as petrol holds back efficient production. In addition, there have been major problems in gaining foreign investment since the Gulf War and the country's deteriorating relationship with the IMF. Sudan looks to the Middle East, China, and Malaysia to provide external funding, but that may not be quite so readily forthcoming now that the economies of South East Asia are in trouble. More generally, some Sudanese commentators suggest that liberalizing the economy is undesirable and may fuel 'old fears of ethnic exclusion from positions of power and wealth'. 'The government must be cautious in its privatization programme. Otherwise, disposing of commercial enterprises will give undue advantage to capital rich, better positioned and well-established Northern merchants and industrialists whom, rightly or wrongly, non-Northerners in the South, East, and West consider to be responsible for their economic miseries and whom they eye with suspicion and jealousy'.²

Although the Agreement is for an interim period of four years, it can be shortened or lengthened according to the recommendations from the Coordinating Council. The remit of the Council is broad. The Coordinating Council is responsible for supervision, socio-economic planning, confidence building, peace nurturing, policy making and political mobilization. It is accountable to President el-Bashir and provides a link between the government and the Southern States. In order to be viewed as non-partial and impartial, its composition must reflect an appropriate balance between the different parties in the conflict.

The security arrangements during the interim period of the Agreement are particularly important in establishing the basic elements of conflict resolution. The South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF) will remain separate from the National Army and will be stationed in their locations under their command. However, police, prisons, civil defence, and public security in the Southern States will be drawn from the people of the area and the presence of the Sudanese armed forces will be reduced once violence has stopped. A joint Ceasefire Com-

mission is to be established to monitor ceasefire violations and the disengagement of troops in the Southern States.

The Agreement also accedes to the right of the peoples of Southern Sudan to 'determine their political aspirations and pursue their economic, social and cultural development' through the process of a referendum to be held before the end of the interim period. The options contained in the referendum will present a choice between either unity or secession.

Conclusion

The perennial conflict in Sudan has hardly created an environment conducive to the remedying of economic disparities and social injustice. The Peace Agreement of April 1997 is of course, only partial, in that its signatories represent a segment of the range of oppositionists within the country. The central question is how likely is the agreement to result in a measure of success? As Dr Atabani, Secretary General of the National Congress asserts, 'Government is not divine. The government is accountable to the people ultimately'. In a sense, the 1997 Agreement has gone some way towards demonstrating an understanding of the problems confronting different groups within Sudan and in identifying a number of key political aspects, all which could help lessen tensions and offer the possibility of a 'suitable peace' for all people. ♦

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This is a shortened and updated version of the article 'Conflict in Sudan: The Peace Agreement of April 1997', Africa Insight, 27, 3, 1997

Notes

1. Adlan Ahmad Al-Hardallo, 'The quest for a permanent constitution for Sudan' in Hassan M. Salihi (ed.) *Federalism in the Sudan*, Khartoum UP 1995.
2. Atta el-Battahani, 'Ethnicity and economic development in federal Sudan 1989-1994' in *ibid.*