

Self-Determination Conflict Profile

Sudan

By Jim Lobe

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Map of Sudan and surrounding countries.

Foreign Policy In Focus

Self-Determination

Regional Overview

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History

Arabs, mostly from Egypt, gradually achieved dominance over northern and parts of central Sudan between the 13th and the mid-19th centuries. The Suez Canal's opening in 1869 resulted in increased British intervention, followed by a successful Islamic uprising in the 1880s. In 1898-9, a joint British-Egyptian force re-occupied Sudan and established a British-dominated condominium over it. Southern groups, notably the Dinka, the Nuer, and the Azande resisted condominium rule until 1930, separating Sudan into North and South, where authorities banned Arabic and encouraged Christian missionaries and the use of English.

Sudan was re-integrated after World War Two and Britain declared it independent in 1956, despite southern opposition. North-South conflict broke out immediately, intensifying in 1958 after a military coup brought to power a government whose avowed aim was Islamization. It was overthrown in a popular revolt in 1964, ushering in a period of civilian rule ended by another military coup led by Jaafar al-Numeiry in 1969. In 1972, he reached a ceasefire and peace accord with the southern Anya-Nya that guaranteed the South a degree of regional autonomy. In 1983, civil war between Khartoum and the South (Sudan People's Liberation Army, or SPLA, under Col. John Garang) broke out again after Numeiry, working with the Muslim Brotherhood, imposed Shari'a, or Islamic law.

A popular revolt overthrew Numeiry in 1985. Sadiq al-Mahdi, the Umma Party (UP) leader, won elections in 1986. Progress in reaching a peace accord with the SPLA provoked another coup in 1989, which brought to power a military junta dominated by the National Islamic Front (NIF) and led by Gen. Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir. Over the following decade, the government, which held and swept

elections in 1996 and 2000, intensified the war against the SPLA and the Nuba. Externally sponsored negotiations between the parties have made little progress, although in 1997 both sides agreed on a Declaration of Principles (DOP) for any future agreement that would guarantee the right of self-determination, the separation of religion and state, and the holding of a referendum on autonomy or secession in the South.

By 2000, human rights groups were estimating the 17-year death toll at over two million people, mostly in the South, many of them victims of starvation. Millions more have been internally displaced or have fled to neighboring countries. Periodic droughts have worsened the war's impact.

In the past several years, Khartoum, working with companies from Canada, Europe, China, and Malaysia, has succeeded in developing oil resources in the South. Export earnings have bolstered the government's economic position, enabling it to buy more arms for the war. Human rights groups charge it with carrying out a "scorched earth" campaign against populations living near the oil fields.

Main Ethnic Groups

Arab: about 39%, mostly in the North.

Nuba: about 5%, living mostly in the Nuba Mountains of Southern Kordofan in the geographical center of Sudan.

Beja: about 6%, mostly in the North.

Black: about 52%, of which Southerners make up about half, or 25% of total population.

Main Religious Groups

Sunni Muslim: 70%

Indigenous Beliefs: 25%

Christian: 5%

Main Political Groups

National Islamic Front (NIF): Founded by Muslim Brotherhood leaders (particularly Hassan al-Turabi, who, as Numeiry's attorney general, played a key role in introducing Shari'a), the NIF is widely seen as the main political force behind the 1989 military coup. The National Congress, created in early 1999 by President Al-Bashir, is believed to be a front for the NIF. His government remains dominated by NIF members.

National Congress (NC): The governing party since its registration in early 1999, the NC acted as a new umbrella for the NIF, which appeared to split shortly after its registration when the power struggle broke out between Turabi and Bashir, ending in the dissolution of parliament in December, 1999. Turabi's position as NC secretary-general was frozen in May, 2000, while Bashir and the NC swept elections boycotted by the opposition in December.

Popular National Congress (PNC): Created in June 2000 by Hassan al-Turabi, after his expulsion from the NC, the PNC's fortunes and positions are unclear. Turabi was arrested and charged with treason in February 2001 after signing a memorandum of understanding with the SPLM/A in which they called for peaceful resistance to Bashir's government. Aside from opposition to Bashir, no ideological difference with the NC has emerged to date.

United Democratic Salvation Front (USDF): Led by Riek Machar, the USDF is the political wing of the Southern Sudan Defence Force (SSDF), which consists of five of seven southern factions which broke off from the SPLA and signed a peace accord with the NIF in April, 1997.

Opposition Parties

Umma (Nation) Party (UP): The political organization of the Islamic Ansar movement and led by Sadiq Al-Mahdi, who opposed Numeiry during

the 1970s. The UP was the largest party during the last period of parliamentary democracy, when Al-Mahdi was prime minister. Since the 1989 coup, it has been deeply split between forces that have urged engagement with the NIF and those who have strongly opposed its fundamentalist tendencies. Al-Mahdi, who the NIF arrested several times, has been buffeted between the two, sometimes flirting with the government, other times distancing himself from it.

National Democratic Alliance (NDA): Founded in 1992 by a loose coalition of parties, labor unions and personalities opposed to the NIF, the NDA has called for the creation of a transitional government pending approval of a new constitution that would guarantee multiparty democracy, human rights, and religious and ethnic diversity. It has held a series of summits since its creation and in 1996 created a joint military command with the SPLA. Led by the Democratic Unionist Party, the alliance has received U.S. encouragement and political assistance.

Democratic Unionist Party (DUP): Based on the Islamic Khatmiyyah organization, which opposed the Ansar, the DUP has been led by Muhammed Usman Al-Mirghani, who also has chaired the NDA. Like the UP, the DUP has suffered from factionalism, mainly between more secular-minded members and more traditional adherents. Al-Mirghani played a key role in negotiations with the SPLA's Garang in the late 1980s and fled into exile after the 1989 coup. That has not prevented some DUP members from being co-opted into the NIF government.

Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A): Led by John Garang, a Christian Dinka, since its founding in 1983, the SPLA, the dominant southern rebel group, has long demanded self-determination for the southern population although it has active fronts outside the south, notably in the Nuba Mountains in the center of

the country. The SPLA, which has been accused of serious human rights abuses, including the use of food as a weapon, has suffered a series of splits as some of its warlords cooperated with government forces or contested Garang's leadership from time to time. Some of the splits were sparked by ethnic rivalries, notably between Dinka and Nuer forces.

Beja Congress: Led by Imam Taha Ahmed Taha, the Congress is an armed opposition group that forms part of NDA.

External Actors

Over the 18-year war, there have been numerous efforts by external actors, including Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, former President Jimmy Carter, and the U.S. government to bring it to an end. In 1994, the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) formed a mediation committee, consisting of the heads of state of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, and Uganda. IGAD gained Bashir's agreement on the DOP in 1997, but has since made little progress. Its most recent meeting, in June 2001 in Nairobi, reported no progress.

In the past year, Egypt and Libya, considered allies of Khartoum, have floated a vague peace plan of their own which does not address key elements of the DOP.

In September 2001, President George W. Bush announced the appointment of former Senator John Danforth as special envoy on Sudan whose mandate in the first instance will be to determine, in consultation with Washington's European allies, IGAD members, Egypt, as well as the parties themselves, whether a peace agreement can be negotiated. Danforth is expected to make his first trip to the region in November 2001.

The United Nations has been deeply involved in Sudan, primarily in humanitarian activities. It launched an ongoing relief operation called

Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) in 1989. OLS, a consortium of UN agencies and three dozen nongovernmental organizations, supplies food and other humanitarian assistance to both government and rebel-controlled territories but depends on the permission of both sides to operate.

The UN Security Council in 1996 imposed diplomatic and travel sanctions on Sudan for its alleged involvement in a 1995 assassination attempt against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa. At Cairo's initiative, the sanctions were lifted in October 2001.

The U.S. Role

A strong supporter of Numeiry during much of the cold war, Washington has opposed the Bashir government from the outset. Khartoum's human rights record and backing for Iraq during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis were major factors in what has been a steady worsening in relations. Sudan's sheltering of and cooperation with Osama bin Laden (1991-96) and other alleged terrorists earned it a place on the State Department terrorist list. After the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the Clinton administration destroyed a Khartoum pharmaceutical company allegedly linked to bin Laden. Washington claimed at the time that it had evidence—apparently mistaken—that the factory was producing chemical weapons. The Clinton administration also imposed a virtually total trade embargo on Sudan.

In the past two years, Khartoum's prosecution of the war against the South has become a major issue in Congress where an unusual coalition of Christian Right lawmakers and the Congressional Black Caucus have sponsored the Sudan Peace Act (SPA),

which requires stronger action by Washington in both pressuring Khartoum to end the war and in providing support to the NDA and the SPLM. A particularly controversial component of the SPA, which passed the House of Representatives by a large margin last summer, is a provision that would prevent foreign companies involved in developing Sudan's oil resources from selling stock in U.S. capital markets. The administration, which has repeatedly denounced the Bashir government in harsh terms, has strongly opposed capital market sanctions, claiming this would be a bad precedent.

Despite its rhetorical denunciation of Khartoum and its appointment of Danforth as special envoy, the administration has appeared inclined to quietly align itself more with the engagement policy of the European Union (EU). It has praised Khartoum's cooperation with its antiterrorist efforts since the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon and subsequently abstained on (rather than veto) the Security Council vote to lift UN sanctions against Sudan. It has also worked to prevent further action by Congress on the SPA this year.

Proposed Solutions and Evaluation of Prospects

All parties agreed in the mid-1990s to the Declaration of Principles (DOP) negotiated under the IGAD process, and most analysts believe it forms the basis for any realistic prospects for a political solution to the conflict. The DOP includes the following general principles, the specifics of which remain to be negotiated:

- the right of self-determination with national unity understood as a high priority;

- separation of church and state (secularism);
- a system of governance based on multi-party democracy;
- decentralization through a loose federation or confederacy;
- respect for human rights; and
- the holding of a referendum to be held in the south with secession as an option.

Negotiations over these principles have bogged down over Khartoum's insistence on a federal system based in the capital and on whether or not the south should include Southern Kordofan and other areas outside of the core provinces of Bahr el Ghazal, Equatoria, and Upper Nile. While Khartoum agreed in principle to the separation of church and state, its leaders have repeatedly vowed to retain shari'a, most recently in October 2001.

The Egyptian-Libyan Initiative (ELI), in the words of Africa Confidential, is "low on content." It consists of nine points, none of which addresses the relationships between the north and the south and between religion and the state. Some analysts believe it was introduced simply as a counterweight by Sudan's Muslim allies to the IGAD effort.

There appears to be consensus, however, that neither initiative can prosper without a major diplomatic initiative from extraregional states, particularly the United States and Europe. Without such an effort, the war appears likely to continue much as it has over the past 18 years, although some analysts associated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) have said that Khartoum's new oil revenue could tilt the military balance decisively in its favor.

Sources for More Information

“Sudan: Humanitarian Crisis, Peace Talks, Terrorism and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service (CRS), The Library of Congress. This “Issue Brief” is frequently updated.

Middle East Report (quarterly)
http://merip.org/mer/middle_east_report.html

SudanNet
<http://www.sudan.net/>

IRIN-UN Integrated Regional Information Networks
<http://www.reliefweb.int/IRIN/archive/sudan.phtml>

SudanUpdate
<http://www.sudanupdate.org/>

Middle East Times
<http://www.metimes.com/>

Africa Action
<http://www.africaaction.org/>

Amnesty International
<http://www.amnesty.org/>

Human Rights Watch
<http://www.hrw.org/>

Justice Africa
<http://www.justiceafrica.org/>

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom
<http://www.uscirf.gov/>



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