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Situation Report

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Looking East: The politics of peacemaking in the Beja region of Sudan

At the end of 2006, and even as the conflict in Sudan's western region of Darfur intensified once more, another area of instability came under the spotlight – much-neglected eastern Sudan. While the term "marginalised" has often been applied to southern Sudan and latterly Darfur, reflecting their alienation from the centre of national affairs, development and services, it is especially relevant in the case of the Beja region of eastern Sudan. This brings into question not only the effectiveness and viability of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement reached between Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in the South as a means to address broader Sudanese issues, but the very mechanisms of Sudanese diplomacy and the ability to challenge rather than reinforce the principal 'entrepreneurs of violence'.

On 16 October 2006, the Government of Sudan signed yet another peace agreement, the third in the space of two years. In effect this meant that three regions of the Sudan – south, west and east – under separate conditions, have entered into power sharing, wealth sharing and security arrangements with the governing National Congress Party (NCP) based in Khartoum. Although, superficially, this might be seen to herald the transformation of the Sudanese political landscape on an incremental basis, in fact it has narrowed the political arena by reinforcing the primacy of the ruling party as the key partner in each of the peace agreements, allowing the NCP to bypass the nationwide development of accountable oppositional politics. The Darfurian tragedy continues to dominate the Sudanese scene, but even this region's sufferings have to be placed in the context provided by an analysis of the implications of a piecemeal approach to conflict resolution in the Sudan.

The October peace agreement in the East coincided with growing international pressure on Khartoum to end the violence in Darfur, which, in itself, contributed to delays in the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with the South. But concentrating on the technical inter-linkages between the various peace agreements may lead us to overlook the ways in which the compartmentalisation of opposition and power through the numerous agreements have tended to close rather than expand the democratic space in the Sudan. This is particularly the case in the East, an area where gross malnutrition (at rates higher than those in Darfur), lack of access to basic services, widespread unemployment and illiteracy are at their worst. The following commentary discusses the Eastern Peace Agreement with a view to understanding its relationship to other putative transitions in the

country. It argues that such a regionalised approach to peacemaking bodes ill for the sustainability of peace in the country, and is unlikely to address the need for accountable and responsive government in Sudan.

Setting the context

Eastern Sudan is made up of three states – Red Sea, Kassala and Al-Gedaref, with a total population of some 3,750,000. Increasingly the people of Eastern Sudan, particularly the youth, have been migrating to the urban areas of Port Sudan, which is now home to about 90 percent of the overall urban population in the region. Beja pastorialists and agro–pastorialists, who use the common TuBedawye language, historically have occupied this region but it is also the home of Rashaida Bedouin, who migrated from the northern Arabian Peninsula in the 19th Century. The two groups form the major ethnic components of the Eastern region and have regulated their relationship with each other using traditional authorities and customs. The political and environmental landscape was disrupted, however, as a result of British colonial policy, which saw an eradication of indigenous authority in favour of what was then termed "Native administration", and the conversion of large areas of communal pasture and water into areas of economic expansion under cotton cultivation. Given that the physical environment of the region is largely arid and desert-like, the disruption of key access points for the communities was a seminal moment in fracturing the relations between major ethnic groups, and also between the governed of the East and the governors based in Khartoum. The post-independence trajectory was little different and formed the basis for resistance to elite driven politics. The privatisation of large parts of the Sudanese economy beginning in the 1980s, paralleled with the mechanisation of key areas of economic activity on the east like Port Sudan, has added to the material divide between those at the centre and on the margins of Sudan.

Most importantly, Port Sudan is strategically crucial to the Sudanese economy because it is the country's only outlet to the sea and, most significantly, for its oil exports. The region is also the site of some increasingly lucrative gold mines. These factors, however, have led the government simply to deploy more security and militia groups to police the areas of interest rather than take an interest in providing administration and services. Eastern Sudan provides a clear example of the intersection of micro-level conflict, such as those over resources and land, and the politics of regime security.

Entrenching the National Congress Party

Certainly, much has been made of the fact that the Sudanese ruling party, the National Congress Party lacks substantive legitimacy with the ordinary populace outside of those involved in the oil and security sectors. However, this must be qualified by an understanding of how the "Islamist" agenda has been manipulated as a popular form of mobilisation. In order to make this link it should not be forgotten that the National Islamic Front (NIF) – which formed the basis for the Congress Party – exploited the weaknesses of the Sadiq Al Mahdi regime to great effect when it seized power in a coup in 1989. The NIF had been able to build upon and maximise a rural support base by partnering with the leftist Jaffer Nimeiri regime which enjoyed a good following in the countryside. It was this partnering with already established political entities that allowed "access" to the citizenry. Moreover, the increasing frustration that people had with the family dominated political landscape in the form of the Mahdi and Mirghani families gave the NIF a sympathetic sounding board. In its early formation the NIF was seen to offer an opportunity to rise above the neo-patrimonialism that had characterised Sudanese politics since independence. Thus, support from Darfur itself formed a significant part of the NIF constituency until recently.

But the continued rise of the NIF was not due principally to the popularity of the Movement but to its ability to entrench itself in the key sectors of the economy, particularly in the resource and security sectors. As Khalid Mansour has noted, "by the mid-1980's the NIF had grown to become the richest politico-religious organization in Africa with investments under different guises in the Bahamas, Malaysia and Switzerland and a bevy of secret accounts in those and other countries."[2] Since the 1980s there has been an increased expansion of

links between big business interests in the oil sector, party membership and the national security apparatus. As Einas Ahmed has noted in her assessment of the implementation of the Wealth Sharing Protocol of the CPA,

> (state entities) hold shares in different multinational consortiums in Sudan (and) some of them act as the local agents for foreign companies. They also maintain tight, almost organic relations, with the Sudanese private sector operating in the domain of petroleum. In fact, the interchangeability of the personnel between the two sectors is very frequent and explains largely the overlapping of interests within this exclusive milieu. In addition, the Ministry of Energy and Mining (MEM) tends to concentrate as much as possible the authority in the hands of very few individuals who accumulate functions in these various public entities.[3]

And it is between this oil lobby and an emerging anti-unity populist faction that the current factionalism within the NCP is likely to be exacerbated.

Rebels

Although the Beja Congress, a political party formed by intellectuals from the Beja community, was created as far back as 1953, the most recent alliance of the Beja and the Rashaida came about in 2005 when they formed the Eastern Front – joining the Beja Congress and the military based Rashaida Free Lions. The relationship was formalised into the Eastern Front after the January 2005 Port Sudan strikes, which saw large-scale protests by dock workers and other civilians against the discrimination of the Beja people in local and national government. Security forces were soon deployed to the region and the situation claimed some twenty lives in ensuing clashes.

As mentioned before, most of the discontent from the marginalised people has come about as a result of inequitable distribution of attention and resources, which traditionally have been concentrated in Khartoum and dominated by the two main political ruling families. The Eastern Sudan's affiliation to the traditional family based Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Osman Mirghani has been severely strained and currently lacks legitimacy with the disaffected youth of Eastern Sudan. The Beja Congress, like the Darfurian rebels, was never really interested in self-determination as it saw itself inevitably as a part of the Sudan regardless of political isolation, and have actually engaged with the DUP through alliances which have failed to reap any significant rewards for the region. Sara Pantuliano makes this point in her report on causes and consequences of underdevelopment in the Sudan arguing that the Beja Congress's "central demand seems to focus on the establishment of a genuine federal system with true devolution of powers to the regions and fair representation of all political forces at the local and national levels within a united Sudan."[4]

Other analysts have also noted that the Beja's grievances are multi-layered and indeed inextricably linked to the continuous degradation of access to livelihoods in the region. The centralisation of authority together with continued displacement of people through drought and the border conflicts with Eritrea and Ethiopia have added to the instability of politics in the region.

The Rashaida have experienced similar levels of disenfranchisement, but their predominantly Bedouin lifestyle has not emphasised the need for education and their main concerns centre upon rights of access to pasture for their cattle and camel herds. But the Rashaida's relationship to the Khartoum regime is distinctly nuanced from that of the Beja in terms of their affiliation to the Gulf states, and indeed their support for Kuwait during the first Gulf War in contrast to the NIF's support for Iraq has underpinned there disjuncture with the ruling regime. Since the formation of an independent Eritrea they have been supported by the authorities in Asmara largely as a consequence of the extended kinship networks that straddle across Eastern Sudan, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

While the Beja's support is relatively widespread, cutting across rural and urban areas, the Rashaida Free Lions are divided on their approach to the Khartoum

regime. At this moment it would seem that the youth who are most severely affected by the limited opportunities in the East are more sympathetic to the military strategy of the Free Lions. They are generally in disagreement with tribal elders and affiliates of the former dominant Democratic Unionist Party on how to engage with the NCP. Nonetheless the Beja Congress and the Rashaida Lions have formed a political alliance together with a handful of smaller tribes in order to unify the movements now called the Eastern Front. Pantuliano also argues that the formation of the Front is also an "attempt by the Beja Congress and the Rashaida Free Lions to de-ethnicise their political agenda and appeal to other communities in Eastern Sudan."[5] As previously suggested, this alliance may speak less to the political homogeneity or unity of the rebel groups than to a perceived need for a strategic partnership for the short-term.

Additionally, this grouping of the two Eastern political interests also represents a fracturing of relations with the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) of the South, which together with the two groups and a smattering of other smaller parties formed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 1989. However, since the signing of the CPA, the SPLM are now part of the Government of National Unity in the National Assembly in addition to being the main authority in the autonomous Southern Sudan. It is here that we may begin to understand the dynamic of co-opting opposition into an elite compact that continues to stunt participatory democracy in Sudan. By moving into government, and following the death of Dr John Garang, the SPLM are clearly focused on securing the southern constituency for the upcoming 2011 referendum and are far less interested in championing the cause of other marginalised around the country. Indeed the Darfur rebels drew inspiration from the SPLM, and some of them also formed part of the NDA, but given the current tensions between the SPLM and the ruling National Congress Party over the question of wealth sharing, the SPLM are unlikely to support a full and broadened peace process in Darfur that will impact upon the delivery on the CPA.

Land and political organisation

One of the key underlying tensions in the current military and political environment in Eastern Sudan relate to questions about access to, and ownership of, land. Indeed, it is clear that the micro-level of conflict based on resource allocation has been infused into the macro-level problem of centralised authority to a point where there cannot be a clear distinction between "local" and "national" grievances. Importantly, there is a recurring theme in all of Sudan's conflict-affected regions centring upon the challenge of establishing clear land tenure rights, particularly because of the constant movement of people through displacement and also the politicisation of ethnicity in recent times that has affected inter-communal relations. In the case of Eastern Sudan the right to own land has been afforded only to people affiliated to a Nazir, the highest rank of tribal authority. However the Rashaida do not have a Nazir as their nomadic lifestyle did not pin down territory that defined their social organisation. As such the Rashaida have always been "guests" on Beja territory, and afforded rights to water and pasture through this arrangement.

While the Beja's lineage system is based on land, they have developed flexible mechanisms together with other pastoral groups to deal with the "complexity and variability of their eco-system and to recover from droughts and outbreaks of famine."[6] Included in these strategies, as Pantuliano highlights, is the development of a multi-resource economy where livestock-keeping is complemented with migrant work in the urban areas of Port Sudan. Thus, there has been a considerable understanding of the need to "diversify" the Eastern Sudan micro-economy in order to cope with the constantly changing environmental and social conditions in the region. The traditional system of land management, however, was undermined by the onset of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium, which saw the expansion of cotton cultivation schemes on land used as pasture reserves by the Beja. It is thus the limitations imposed upon access to pasturage and the consequent impact on livelihoods that first galvanised Beja intellectuals in 1953.

Throughout this long history of engaging with the Sudanese political processes, the Congress's grievances largely remain the same. It is also significant to note

that the BNC's strength as a party historically has been based on its ability to make alliances with traditional authorities, which, has also had the effect of limiting its transformation ideals. Leadership of the Congress has also been weak, with internal divisions impacting on their ability to act with a cohesive strategy or political vision. They have been less involved in military training and armed struggle — aspects of resistance that have been adopted by the Rashaida Free Lions.

The Rashaida Free Lions were formed during the latter part of the 1990s and are a more militant grouping compared to the Beja Congress. And while the Rashaida's protests are also aimed to highlight under-development in the region they are generally believed to be wealthy by Sudanese standards because of their livestock. Culturally, the Rashaida stand apart from the Beja largely because they are relatively new to the region and tend to identify themselves with the Gulf region rather than as Sudanese. Both the Rashaida and the Beja Congress have received support from Eritrea for their opposition to Khartoum over time. This aspect of cross-border loyalties and support has been characteristic of politics in the Horn and has made it impossible to focus on conflict areas in isolation. Indeed it can be argued that the protracted conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea impact directly upon politics in Eastern Sudan. This is because both Ethiopia and Eritrea have attempted to make alliances with Khartoum for their own national interests. This has impacted on the support levels for opposition movements at various times.

The Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement

The Eastern talks were undertaken principally by representatives of the Government of Sudan, the Eastern Front and, importantly, the Government of Eritrea. The latter's involvement in the talks initially met with suspicion, as relations between Asmara and Khartoum frequently have been strained, not least because of the general ambience of tolerance that exists between Ethiopia and Sudan. Indeed, although it was unlikely that Eritrea could play the role of "honest broker", judging from their experience in Darfur which has cross-border implications, it was increasingly understood that any talks that sought to marginalise Eritrea would be doomed to fail. The SPLM were also a part of the process but this time sitting at the opposite side of the table as a new member of government. Vice President Salva Kiir, Foreign Minister Lam Akol and leader of the SPLM in parliament, Yasir Arman, formed the main SPLM contingent. However, the involvement of the former rebel movement and member of the NDA was downplayed. It is also interesting to note that compared to the Naivasha and Abuja negotiations, the Eastern Front talks went off without too many delays, essentially because this was the only forum through which a settlement of some kind could be reached. In addition the loss of military support from the SPLM as a consequence of the CPA limited the NDA's room for manoeuvre.

Key highlights of the Agreement

The Eastern Sudan Agreement is composed of six parts: Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Issues; Comprehensive Ceasefire and Security Arrangements, Consultative Conference on Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement; Implementation Modalities and Timeline; and General Provisions;

- The three states of the Eastern Sudan shall set up an Eastern Sudan States' Coordinating Council to enhance coordination and cooperation among them. The Council shall be composed of 15 members
- The GoS shall convene, by the end of 2007, a nationwide conference to revisit the administrative structure of the country. Representatives of the executive and legislative branches of the National Government, representatives of the executive and legislative branches of the States, representatives of political parties, civil society groups and relevant experts shall participate in the nationwide conference; The GoS shall accept and implement the recommendations of the conference.
- Upon the signing of this Agreement, the President shall appoint an Assistant to the President from a list of nominees provided by the Eastern Front.
- The Assistant shall be a member of, *inter alia*, the National Council of Ministers, the National Security Council and the National Planning Council and shall participate in their deliberations and decision-making.

- In addition to the Assistant, the President shall also appoint from a list of nominees provided by the Eastern Front, one advisor to the President.
- The two posts of Cabinet Minister and one post of State Minister currently held by Eastern Sudanese shall continue to be held by Eastern Sudanese.
- One additional post of State Minister shall be allocated to nominees of the Eastern Sudan Front.
- Eastern Sudanese shall be adequately represented in the Constitutional Court, the National Supreme Court and other National Courts, as well as in the National Judicial Service Commission.
- The use of local languages shall be encouraged at the primarily level and the media to promote literacy and education in Eastern Sudan.

- Ten seats in the legislatures of each of the three Eastern Sudan states shall be allocated to nominees of the Eastern Sudan Front.
- The Eastern Sudan Reconstruction and Development Fund shall serve as a principal organ in the planning, monitoring and follow up of the reconstruction and development program. The program does not incorporate national development projects that are undertaken by the national government in Eastern Sudan.
- In addition to the share of the Eastern Sudan in the FFAMC transfers, the national government shall allocate an amount equivalent to USD 100 million as seed money for ESRDF in 2007; and an amount of not less than USD 125 million per annum for the years 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011.
- Undertake to ensure that no militia forces or other armed groups exist in Eastern Sudan apart from SAF.

- The GOS shall make positions available to Eastern Sudan combatants based on its rank structure.
- The Parties shall jointly convene a Consultative Conference on the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (CCESPA)

Conclusion

As Sudan continues to make headlines because of continuing violence it is clear that the piecemeal approach to conflict in Sudan is not sustainable. Each of the regional agreements signed since 2005 cannot be implemented on an equal basis. Indeed the primacy of the CPA overshadows other regional processes, despite the initial intentions of the respective drafters. Certainly it has entrenched the National Congress Party as the key political actor in the current landscape. While the CPA, DPA and EPA may offer marginalised Sudanese a few seats at the table during this current 'transition' period they hardly affect the 'dinner party' itself. And while cognisance should be taken of the particularities of each micro-region particularly as they relate to the role of traditional authorities and the conflict over scarce resources, there should also be an awareness of the ways in which each of the Peace Agreements have institutionalised a regional approach to politics, limiting to a large extent the aspirations of an alternative national Sudanese approach to the conflicts.

Another aspect of the EPA that may raise concern is the lack of international guarantors for the implementation of the Agreement itself. The fact that the Agreement's only international interlocutor was Eritrea, a country that has actively been a part of the conflict in the East in the past, initially sounded some alarm bells among observers. However, it can also be said that the conflict in the East is different to that of the other regions simply because there has not been the same level of armed violence and hence what is actually crucial is the 'buy-in' of the Eritrean authorities more than that of any other actor. This together with the international focus on Darfur may have the indirect impact of getting the process moving outside the purview of the international community.

Ultimately, the success of the Eastern Front Agreement lies in the extent to which it will bring tangible socio-economic development to the region. Should the Agreement remain at the level of deal making and the co-opting of elites, be they rebel elites or professional politicians, it is likely that this strategic region of the country may lose all faith in diplomacy.

1 Mariam Bibi Jooma is a researcher on the Sudan with the Africa Security Analysis Programme at the Institute for Security Studies.
2 K Mansour, *War and Peace in Sudan*, Kegan Paul, London, 2003, p 207.
3 E Ahmed, The Implementation of the CPA Wealth Sharing Agreement: The Oil Issue and Transition Process in Sudan, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, April 2006, p 6.
4 S Pantuliano,Comprehensive Peace? Causes and consequences of underdevelopment and instability in Eastern Sudan, Institute of Development Studies, NGO Paper September 2005, Dar es Salaam, p 6.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, p 12.